The friendship of two remarkable women

Marjon van Royen

The Night of the Scream

The Night of the Scream is the absorbing account of a friendship between two women of very different classes and cultures. When Marjon van Royen arrives in Mexico City to take up a new job as correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad*, she has just spent four years covering the Balkan wars and thinks she can handle Mexico. Instead she finds herself wandering through a labyrinth of silent macho males and life-sized talking puppets, courteous robbers and corrupt policemen. She cannot penetrate the silence that dominates this Latin American country, where the only opportunity to let off steam seems to be the annual 'day of the scream'.

Marjon feels utterly at sea until she meets Sandra, a young Native Indian cook from the Central Highlands living in a shanty town on the outskirts of Mexico City. Sandra says things no one else wants or dares to say. Illiterate, penniless, but remarkably wise and humorous, Sandra becomes Marjon's guide, her storyteller, and eventually her best and only friend.

When their shack is burned down by local Mafiosi, Sandra and her daughters come to live with Marjon. She shares Sandra's trials – the kidnap of her youngest daughter, the rape of her eldest, police violence and jail – and her joys: Sandra's laughter, her optimism and determination, and the surreal incidents that typify life in Mexico. Living with Sandra gives Marjon van Royen a unique insight into the daily lives of Mexico's have-nots, lives invisible to other correspondents, whose objectivity keeps them aloof from the people and cultures they describe.

Mexican life, Van Royen discovers, is full of unexpected injustices, especially for women like Sandra, part of the heavily exploited workforce on which the economy depends. In Mexico you don't complain, you shut up and hope things won't get worse. Sandra teaches her to adapt, 'to accept that losing is inevitable in this country', until the night of the scream, when a woman is raped on their own front porch. It is a night that changes everything, including the relationship between Marjon and Sandra.

Her friendship with Sandra forces Van Royen to confront her own illusions and mistakes, including her sense of herself as an untouchable *gringa*. She pays the price for her refusal to conform when she is deported by the Mexican authorities, at first losing Sandra too but later finding her again. Their friendship is restored. Different as they are, both women prove to be real survivors.

Marjon van Royen worked as a journalist and foreign correspondent for the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad*, covering Italy, the Balkans, Mexico and Latin America, and later for Dutch radio. Her first book, *Italy on a Monday* (1998), sold over 50,000 copies. She now lives in Rio de Janeiro, where she is working on a third book, this time about Brazil.

The tremendous commitment with which Van Royen describes a country, placing her own life on the line, is so convincing and so contagious that I can only bow my head in humility.
VRIJ NEDERLAND

She describes the ghosts that haunt her with great verve, as if they were characters in a novel, in some senses larger than life. She is in full command of the crafts of literary writing.
DE VOLKSKRANT

A shocking, enlightening and funny book you'd devour in one go – if you didn't have to put it down from time to time in astonishment or dismay.
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RIGHTS
Nijgh en Van Ditmar
PO Box 3879
NL - 1001 AR Amsterdam
TEL. +31 20 55 11 262
FAX +31 20 55 11 227
E-MAIL rights@querido.nl
www.boekboek.nl *or*
www.uitgeverijnijghenvanditmar.nl

Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature
Singel 464
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL. 31 20 620 62 61
FAX +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

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Translated by Alexandra de Vries

Introduction
Diary of an illiterate

She had just learned to write, and did so with her tongue between her teeth. One finger hovering over the keys of an old typewriter, searching. The shack she lived in lit by a single candle. Her youngest daughter lay asleep on the bed, while her eldest stared wide eyed into the night. It smelled of petroleum, wooden planks and dirt. The thin dust of the nearby chalk mine made its way through the cracks, forming a grey layer on the hotplate and the earthen floor.

The night was dark; there was no moon. Dogs howled in the distance and from the shack next door came the muffled sounds of a family going to bed, water splashing, blankets being spread out on the floor. Then silence, except for the distant coughing of a toddler. Here inside was only the sound of tapping on the typewriter keys.

Suddenly the typing stopped. Outside on the sandytrack footsteps approached, men in boots. The footsteps lingered briefly in front of the shack. Then they carried on.

Again the slow tapping of the keys.

“If you ever want to reach the future you need to overcome threats,” Sandra wrote that night in her diary. “You have to do up your shoelaces, plant your feet firmly and continue, without weakening, the moment the fight begins.” She leaned back and looked at her fifteen-year-old daughter. “Besides fastening your shoes, you must also fasten your heart.”

“Heart,“ asked Sandra. “*Corazón*, that is, with a z?”.

The typewriter was magic to her. There she would sit, her finger hovering, searching for words in another language. She typed in Spanish, a language as foreign to her as it was to me. “My sister would laugh so hard at me if she knew what I was doing,” said Sandra with her shy giggle. Not because her sister wanted to keep speaking the Indian Náhuatl language. Imagine that! That was “dialect”, best kept hidden. No, what was embarrassing was having to search for the words.

It had taken Sandra a long time. She had learned, like the other eighty-five million Mexicans, not to speak. Don't show yourself, don't show anything, that is the highest form of honour. "A Mexican goes through life as if he has permanent road rash," wrote Nobel prizewinner Octavio Paz about his compatriots. "Words, and even the suspicion of words, mount an unforgivable attack on his sensitivity."

I had certainly experienced this. In Mexico people barricade themselves behind their silence, their maddening formality. *Disculpe la moléstia*, forgive me for bothering you, is the opening to every conversation, whether it is the broom salesman ringing your doorbell for the tenth time, or the young woman at telephone-directory enquiries. *Disculpe la moléstia*, is also how you speak to those who are there to be "bothered". *Su servidor*, your servant, is the inevitable response, even when people don't mean it. "It is unfathomable distrust, and an obsessive urge to demean which rules relationships," writes Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

That night Sandra broke her solitude, the formality, the age-old silence. She no longer cared. Concentrating, she hit the keys of the old Triumph that I had given her. She built words, then sentences, in her shack without a front door, where only a few hours early the threat had entered.

"*Disculpe la moléstia,*" the men said as they tore away the plastic sheet covering the entrance, setting foot in her little house, in their leather boots. They pointed to Sandra's youngest daughter and spoke about her "future". Sandra had to understand, the men said, that it was for her own good: "We don't like people who are *conflictive.*" It was best for her to cooperate. "Tomorrow night," the men said, fixing their stare on the child before they walked out of the shack.

Sandra understood. She had to pay. A thousand pesos, about eight US dollars, to be delivered to the men by tomorrow night. Otherwise her youngest was at risk. *Compañeros*, comrades, the men called themselves. These were not unknown thugs, they were the political leaders of the slum where Sandra lived. Their group had occupied this piece of land on the edge of the city a few years before. On the windswept plain below the chalk mine they helped the poorest build their shacks.

Not for nothing were they called Pancho Villa, after the fat-bellied hero of the 1911 Mexican Revolution.

Why should they threaten the only thing that was dear to Sandra? Why should they extort what she didn't have, an amount the equivalent of four weeks' work, four hours' commuting, ten hours' cooking a day? The men called it "protection". What did it matter? What is the purpose of words in a country where words have no meaning, where to submit and be submitted to are the natural order of things? Sandra knew. But I got angry. I would talk to them. I would find the words that would convince them, that was how I was brought up. Reason wins – it was an article of faith for me.

There they stood, their faces blank, leaning against the barbed-wire fence. *Su servidor*, they said. I used no formalities. I talked and yelled, rudely. Until I was thrown off the property.

Sandra had to laugh. That was the night she decided to say "no". Even if it was only for a while. "No," not like me, without respect for the Mexican rashness**.** Her 'no' was said with a smile, even as she refused to pay the men their money. "In this life you suffer much oppression," she wrote in her diary. "You can't run away. That is why you need to dig your heels firmly into the soil. Because everywhere you go there is soil."

That is how our friendship came to be. A connection that would determine my entire life. Because under my new Mexican house was soil too. Tons of soil, of which I understood little. The same soil upon which Sandra's slum was built, upon which the entire city with its twenty-two million people below the smog, tried to coexist. It was the bottom of a fairytale lake where once the indigenous city of Tenochtitlán had stood, a magical city of floating islands, canoes and gardens. A city destroyed by the Spanish, the lake sucked empty. And on the dusty lake bottom that remained grew a new metropolis, my new home.

But what did I know about it? What did I understand of the sensitivities, the insecurity, the ever-present past? "Of course it is the fault of the woman," said the guide at the anthropological museum in Mexico City where I began to try to

understand. He was talking about Malinche, the Indian slave of the Spanish conquistador Cortés. She was his mistress and his translator. A "traitor," said the guide.

Five hundred years ago Malinche gave birth to Mexico's first mixed-race child, which is how the history of a people born from the womb of raped women began. A creation story that still bothered the guide of the most famous anthropological museum in the world. To him the burden of his mixed blood was still the fault of that one woman.

"But Malinche was a slave," I object. "She was subjugated and raped by a conquistador."

The man didn't seem to hear. He stood there, shoulders hunched: "It is the fault of all women who let themselves be raped."

"A kind of Italy, I think, but more extreme," I told my Dutch friends as I packed my boxes for a new job. I had lived in Italy for eight years. Nepotism, corruption, insanity and opera. There I learned that your position in society is not necessarily related to your skills; a government does not necessarily serve its people; and love has nothing to do with the next day. I had learned, suffered and enjoyed myself. The endless meals, the emptiness of things, the ever-present eroticism.

Now here I was, in Mexico City, posted to a new job in a new world. Finally I would once again be allowed to write about insanity, backroom deals, courage and despair, seduction and betrayal – on a continent where people still have something to win.

I looked around me, but the first thing I heard was the silence. Where was the extrovert chatter at café tables? The quick touches, the glances, the game of looking and being seen?

I started to suspect that I may have been a little off. This was not Italy, not the unbridled Latino culture that I had imagined. Not for men, nor for women. "Realize that you are a gringa," said the first Mexican woman whom I dared ask why no

women were to be seen in the bars. “We do things the way we do them. And that is none of your business,” she said.

So I took a step back and tried to figure out the country. There was still no talking. No noise, no crying, no laughing out loud or yelling. Some people would, with a friendly gesture, accept an invitation for a visit. But they would never show up. Interviews would get bogged down in superficial formulas, and I couldn’t even get through to the people I considered my acquaintances. What was happening to me? Where was the radar that had always guided me in a strange environment? I became insecure, got cut off from the land around me and I, too, wandered lost through the Mexican labyrinth of solitude.

Until I met Sandra, that boisterously talking Indian from the slums on the edge of the city. Her cheeky eyes, the long black plait down her back. “If the president – who has stolen billions – is not ashamed to invite people to his palace,” she said, “then I – who have never stolen a thing – shouldn’t be ashamed to receive an honest person in my hovel.” The neighbours watched our unfolding friendship with wary eyes. The well-educated Dutch gringa and the semi-illiterate Indígina. What did those two see in each other?

I admit, even looking at us was a sight. Two women, one tall and Dutch, the other short and Indian, her plait swinging at the level of my breasts. I owned a computer, a fax and an answering machine; she had never once made a phone call. She believed in saints – a different one for each occasion – and I didn’t even believe in God. And yet we grew closer. And finally, without really being aware of it, we became a walking provocation in a country where roles are still as firmly set as the stones of the Aztec temples. “How dare you address your Madame as ‘you’, Sandra was told off, as we cheerfully walked across the market. “Sorry, but you can’t enter with your maid,” was the word as we wanted to sit down in a small café to eat.

“When you reply to an insult, always stand further away,” Sandra whispered in my ear. ”Because people who bark always think that other people bite.” Sometimes she would talk back, sometimes she remained silent.

That's how Sandra taught me how to read. She educated me in the codes, the customs and also in the lies in this country of twisted manners. She had the courage to speak where none of her compatriots dared or wanted to. She became my guide and my storyteller: the stories about the village that she came from, her survival in the big city. These are the stories of millions of Sandras in this part of the world, whose voices are silenced as soon as they are raised. Those who are doomed to lose.

Sandra lost too. Not long after the night of her typewritten words, she was run out of the district by the compañeros. Sandra and her daughters came to live with me.

And that's how our existence became symbiotically interwoven. We were each other's survival, in a country where the only revolution there ever was had taken place more than eighty years before. An uprising betrayed and then embedded in a system which is called the "institutionalized revolution".

Meanwhile I was travelling. I got to know other nooks and crannies of Latin America, other people, other insanities. Other "revolutions" too.

But I always returned home in the end, to Sandra and her two daughters, to our bitter-sweet woman's world in Mexico City. I listened to Sandra's comments, laughed at her jokes and got caught up in the same spiral of helplessness as she had. So this is her story and mine. Two women, two worlds. Each in her own way illiterate.

4. Sandra

The sun hangs low. A soft wind blows the dust around in small circles. Right below a half dug-out mountain of chalk sits a collection of small shacks, a white-dusted neighbourhood that looks magical in the orange sunlight. Cackling chickens. Chattering children's voices. It feels like a village on the edge of the city.

Ciudades Perdidas, lost cities they are called: an endless sea of shacks that wash up against the city in ever wider and newer circles. Each year half a million people make their way from the countryside to the city. And each year an equal number of babies is born in this former City of the Aztecs. There's no zoning, no urban planning, no policy to encourage controlled city expansion. People simply squat on a piece of land and build their shacks of wood and corrugated tin.

There is no electricity, no water, no sewage. Yet a group of huts quickly becomes a community. As soon as there is some money, wires get connected, brick walls go up, a road is built. The temporary becomes eternal, and so the city expands, relentlessly.

More than 2 million people live here on Mexico City's east side on illegally occupied land. "Parachutists" are what the squatters are called, as if they've somehow fallen out of the sky.

I walk around, a bit lost. Beside a barrel, women are doing their laundry. They splash their clothes in the water and scrub them clean on a washboard of corrugated iron. I listen to their cheerful voices, their squeals of laughter. I approach them hesitantly. I feel clumsy and white, even more conspicious than usual.

Children play about their feet. You can't make out which child belongs to whom. The women exude a sense of togetherness, a bond that shows itself in the glares they cast my way.

"Is this neighbourhood part of *El Porvenir*?" I ask hesitantly. The slums have comforting names: *Las Maravillas* – the miracles; or *El Porvenir* – the future.

"No," says a small Indian women, stepping away from the group. It is then that I first get to know her laugh, a kind of giggle, like a little girl's. She throws back her

plait and wipes hair off her face. “This neighbourhood is called *La Polvorilla*, the Dust Heap,” she says and holds up her white-dusted skirt. ”Not hard to remember, right?”

The other women laugh behind their hands. Sandra looks me straight in the eye and offers a friendly smile. She doesn’t ask what a *gringa* like me is doing here. She doesn’t pay attention to my pale skin. She holds out her hand, as if this happens all the time, and says, “Hello, my name is Sandra, and yours?”

Dust and sun. Coffee and bread. In this slum, I am overcome by a completely unexpected sense of relief. Sandra has turned two empty paint cans upside down and placed them in front of her wood and tin shack. Her oldest daughter walks in and out, pouring us cups of coffee and putting out slices of bread.

We have been sitting here for hours now, chatting about everything and nothing. About the unexpected turns that life sometimes takes. Sandra tells me about her decision to move to the Dust Heap. “I always thought my dream of owning my own home was kind of like a flea dreaming of buying a dog,” she says, giggling. Then she heard from her friends that there was still room on this parcel of land, and six months ago she took a chance. She picked up her two daughters, left her rented room behind, and came here to build her shack. Sandra points to the mountains behind the chalk mine that glow red in the evening sun. “I have bought a nice dog,” she says.

I look at her face bathed in the soft evening light. Strong features, set in the seemingly naive face of a girl. She’s no older than thirty, I guess, yet she radiates a strange kind of wisdom.

“But my dog has fleas,” she continues. “You didn’t see them, when you walked onto the property, those men over by the building with the sign ‘forbidden to residents’?” Those are her “fleas”, she says. The *compañeros* of ‘The People’s Front Pancho Villa’.

I had read something about them in the paper. The People’s Front is a political group, linked to the PRI, which organizes land occupations for the poor. They lead the fight for land claims, provide basic services, and help people to build their communities. Right?

Laughing, Sandra shakes her head. “They’re just in charge here.”

The comrades speak many beautiful words, she says. It’s the voice of the people that counts here, the *compañeros* say. “But if you are the people,” laughs Sandra, “you’ve got a problem.” They say they are a people’s front which helps the poor, but in reality they only help themselves.

Why do they do that?

“Well,” says Sandra, “Some angels hide monsters, like some names disguise lies.” I look at her, amazed. She uses a language that I have never heard before. New sayings, unusual images and comparisons roll off her tongue as if she has a wordsmith inside. Where did she get it? How did she learn it? Where does this simple Indian woman get her unusual clarity? For the first time since I arrived in Mexico, I hear someone call a spade a spade.

We drink even more coffee, and then lemonade. I don’t want to leave yet. I am enchanted by this woman. I want to stay with her and ask her things, normal, everyday things. Things that bother me, that I have to solve on my own, such as the pounding of the disco, or the story of my landlady. “Why does that woman have to lie about having been to Amsterdam?” I ask her.

Sandra laughs so hard, she almost falls off her paint can. “But everyone here tells lies,” she says, wiping tears from her eyes. “Believe me, truth is the only fish that doesn’t swim.” It’s not about whether *La Teacher* ever really went to Amsterdam, says Sandra, “it’s about her wanting to show you that she’s someone who can.”

In her own colourful way she explains how Mexico is a country of pretences, a country with rigidly defined social classes, where symbols are more important than reality. “Everyone is born naked,” she says. “Then people are dressed. But those clothes are so important here that they divide people into categories. That’s why you are not allowed to remind someone that underneath those clothes he is as naked as the day he was born. Believe me, you should never, ever remind anyone of that.”

“So it was silly of me to ask *La Teacher* why she had lied?” I ask.

Sandra tilts her head back and whistles between her teeth. “You are a strange *gringa*,” she says.

"And you are a strange *Mexicana*."

"And yet both born naked," she laughs heartily.

Night falls over the slum. Candles and kerosene lamps are lit in the shacks. Outside, people wrap themselves in ponchos. Sandra gives me one too. For the first time in months I feel warm, on the inside. Only now as I sit here on a paint can do I realize how lonely I was.

"Spend the night with us," says Sandra as the lights around us slowly go down. I object. I hadn't wanted to force her into showing hospitality. Yet my feet felt so heavy, I hadn't wanted to get up; I just kept putting off the bus ride back to my regular life. Now I realize that I have stayed too long. Have I made her uncomfortable?

"No really," I say to Sandra. "I'll just call a taxi."

She looks at me, amused. "How will you do that?"

I look round. Of course. There are no phones here. And I don't have a mobile yet. It would probably be out of range here anyway. Not to mention whether a taxi would drive to a district like this in the dark.

"I feel I've obligated you," I say.

"Good," says Sandra, cheerfully pushing me inside her shack.

A table with a candle and a large wooden bed, and not much more. Quietly, Sandra walks in behind me. Her daughter Gabi sits at the table doing her homework with her baby sister in her lap.

As soon as Sandra enters, the baby opens her eyes and starts to cry. Sandra takes her from Gabi and starts walking around the shack. She shushes the baby and tries desperately to pry a strand of her hair out of the baby's clenched fist.

"It's always the same," smiles Gabi. "My sister only wants my mother. But when she has her, she exploits her." I look at Gabi. She has calm, sharp eyes, and a gorgeous even-featured light-brown face. I think she is fourteen or fifteen. But, like her mother, she looks wise beyond her age.

Gabi goes back to her books. She quickly finishes a sum on a piece of paper and underlines something in her textbook. She is totally concentrated on her studies, her shiny black hair tied back in a ponytail.

"She is going to be a professor someday," says Sandra nodding towards her oldest daughter, "always studying."

With the baby on her hip, Sandra stirs a large pot of beans bubbling on a low calor gas fire. Expertly she tastes, then turns the flame down low. "Now they have to come," says Sandra.

"Who?" I ask.

"The *comadres*," says Sandra. 'Godmother', I know, is a word frequently used in Mexico to refer to a neighbour or a friend. Sandra tells me that two of her neighbours will spend the night with her. Their shacks are not completely finished and their husbands aren't home tonight because they are working. "Then it's better that they sleep with me," says Sandra.

"And you," I ask. "Do you have a husband?"

Sandra giggles. "One for the daytime, but not for the night time," she says. But before she can go on, the house suddenly fills with women and children. One woman as round as a cannonball plops down on the bed. "He's cleaned me out," she sighs, "again."

"Your own fault," another neighbour chirps in. "You shouldn't cheat on your husband."

"I don't cheat on him. I only have drinks with the old guy," yells the fat woman.

"But he's eighty!"

"So what? He pays for my drinks. Does my husband ever pay me anything? Does he ever spend money on the children? No. He sits in the bar with his friends and leaves my children out in the cold."

Smiling, Sandra joins the arguing women. "Let me introduce you," she says, pointing to the fat woman on the bed. "This is my *comadre* Yolanda." We shake hands. I notice a welt on her face.

"Yolanda is a good Mexican woman," Sandra grins. "Her husband doesn't allow her to work. And he doesn't give her a penny. Yet she lets him beat her. 'Honey, do you prefer to beat me now or after dinner?' she asks him every night, like a good Mexican wife.

Sulking, Yolanda gets up and takes the pot off the stove. "Not everyone can be a saint like Sandra," she says.

Silently, she fills the plates. The children dig hungrily into the beans. Gabi puts her books in a pile and pours lemonade into plastic cups. For a while there's only the sound of chewing mouths.

After a while Yolanda starts in. "Listen, why don't we pay the *companeros*, Sandra? I'll ask my sister for some money and try to pry some pesos from my old guy. I am willing to take a beating over that. But then at least this land will be ours."

The second neighbour agrees, nodding intently. "Please let's, Sandra."

All eyes are on her as Sandra calmly continues eating. When she is finished, she tosses back her plait and says, "You can pay as far as I am concerned." She looks at each woman in turn. "Everyone can pay, as far as I am concerned. But you're being robbed and I don't let myself get robbed. This land does not belong to any so-called Señor Garcia, as sure as my name is Sandra Romero."

The *comadres* play nervously with their forks.

"Have you ever seen *Señor* Garcia?" Sandra continues. "Do you think he exists?" She shakes her head. "Good, feed your money to the hyena. Soon you'll be crying. Then you'll be walking around with the word *chingada* on your forehead."

Moments later I help Sandra wash the plates outside. "What's the story about this Garcia?" I ask.

Sandra dunks a plate in the water barrel. "The c*ompañeros* claim that this land belongs to a so-called *Señor* José Garcia," she explains. "They say they have made a deal with him to buy the land. Now everyone has to pay the *compañeros* 2000 pesos by the end of the month. Then, the *compañeros* demand that all eight hundred families who live here pay another 1000 pesos (about 120 euros) a month for the next 30 months, until they eventually become owners of the land."

But Sandra thinks that the land belongs to the municipality. According to her, this Garcia has been made-up by the *compañeros* as a scam.

"Then why do the *comadres* want to pay?" I ask her.

"Because they are afraid," she says as she splashes a pot in the water. "Everyone is afraid."

"Of what?"

"The *companeros,* of course."

She points around her, to the metres-high hedge of barbed wire that surrounds the slum. It is lit by bright floodlights.

Now I notice how the gate at the entrance is closed and guarded by a few men. Nobody can go in our out. "It looks like a camp," I say.

Sandra nods. "The *compañeros* say it's for our protection." Then she places a wet hand on my arm. "Quiet," she motions.

Four men approach in the dark, marching like jail guards between the shacks. As soon as they see us by the water barrel, they change direction and come towards us.

Sandra introduces me. "*Compañeros*, this is a friend," she says calmly. "She is spending the night with me."

The men look me over from head to toe. The biggest one opens his mouth to say something but Sandra beats him to it. "I will report it when she leaves," she says, turning round and stacking the washed plates with a clatter. For a moment the men stand around undecided. Then they continue with their round.

"What a laugh," giggles Sandra when they are out of earshot. "They don't know what to make of it, someone like you here on their land!"

We lie in Sandra's wooden bed that night pressed head to toe; the women alternating lengthwise, the children stacked across. I can't move a muscle, but I feel as snug as a chocolate in a box. "Misery comes from the outside," said Sandra before we went to sleep. Then she gave me a short, piercing stare. "Life is too short, you know, to feed pain from the inside."

Quietly, I listen to the sounds of the night. The calm breathing of the women, the sleeping children on top of me. There lies Sandra. I haven't felt this safe in a long time.

5. Powder Keg

Since I met Sandra, *La Polvorilla* has been like a magnet. I'm there at least once a week. First I go to the restaurant where Sandra works, a few neighbourhoods away from where I live. From a stool in the kitchen I watch her culinary skills, lifting the lids with flair, stirring, tasting and sampling with a concentrated frown. I see how the young kitchen assistant looks at her – with a mixture of respect and desire. Even the grumpy old boss, a wrinkled bulldog with a penguin walk, throws her surreptitious glances. "Aren't you too tired?" he enquires as she scrubs the stoves at the end of her shift.

"You want to clean them?" she fires back. She doesn't like people sucking up. Chuckling, she walks through the kitchen with her cloth, as the old boss turns away indignantly.

At last her shift ends, and we head to *La Polvorilla*. A bus, a metro, and then two *pesero*-buses, the small buses that used to cost one peso. To work in this city is to travel. Distances stretch for hours, endless hours of rattling in cars and *peseros*.

"Did you know that the kitchen assistant has a thing for you?" I sit with my knees pulled up under my chin in the packed van. Sandra fumbles with plastic bags of leftovers she has taken from the kitchen. For a moment it seems she hasn't heard my question. Then shyly, she says, "But I am married to Gabi's father."

"Why do you always call him 'Gabi's father', not 'my husband'?" I ask. "What kind of person is he?" "Normal," says Sandra.

"But why do you never talk about him?"

Sandra shrugs. "There's nothing to say. He is just Gabi's father."

"Is he also baby Wendy's father?" I press on.

Sandra turns her head to the window. I see she is blushing. "He said, well, you know... that he had done something about it." Her hands flutter clumsily in the air. She starts to laugh. "So then came Wendy." Of course, the kitchen assistant seems like a nice man. Before him there was another one, even nicer. He used to fool around with her in the kitchen. That was three years before. One day he asked if she

wanted to go out with him. “Gabi said that I should,” she tells me dreamily. She shifts the bags in her lap. “It was during the period that Gabi’s father was away. But I never went.”

“He was away?”

“Yes, in the United States, with another woman. He only came back eighteen months ago.”

“How long was he gone for?”

“Fourteen years.”

I’m stunned. “And you were faithful to him all that time?”

Sandra grins. “What an idiot, eh.”

We sit on her wooden bed again. Gabi is still at the table, doing her homework by candlelight. After crying for a long time, little Wendy has finally fallen asleep. Sandra rocks the child in her arms. There is a strange noise outside.

“Frogs,” says Sandra. The same noise she used to hear in her village.

“Frogs and rats,” she says. “In our village the rats would always croak along.” Once a rat crawled into her hair, when she was asleep, she remembers. Rats could simply walk in, her parents’ house had no walls. “A kind of roof on stilts,” says Sandra. The rat had crawled deep, deep inside her hair. She started awake and felt the animal trapped in her hair. She shook her head wildly but the rat would not get out.

“I screamed and screamed.” But her father wasn’t there that night, he was away on one of his periodic trips. “He traded cows.” So she woke her mother with her screams.

“She got very angry and yelled that I was a *chillona*, a cry baby. She slapped me and went back to sleep. But that rat was still in my hair.”

Sandra laughs. She had always wanted to leave those rats, she says. Her brother – her “good” brother – was far away at boarding school. He only came back to the village during holidays. Four days’ walk, on his lame foot. He was the only one of

Sandra's brothers and sisters who was allowed to go to school. Because of his lame foot he couldn't make himself useful on the farm.

Her brother was as skinny as her pinky, says Sandra pointing at her little finger. He was also darker than the other children, as is she. "They used to call us *negritos*, blackies," she says.

But he was the brother that she loved the most. He taught her what she now knows, and everyone in the village respected him. "Even my mother, who respected nobody, respected him." When he was there, you could hear her say "Yeah, Yeah, you are right." She never said that otherwise. And when he was there, she wouldn't hit us. "She listened to him as if she feared holy Jesus in person," says Sandra, imitating the crucifixion and her terrified mother in turn.

"My brother said you had to love animals. He taught me that everyone has a soul. Animals too. If he saw a sick horse or donkey he would take it in, treat it as if it were his own child. My mother didn't dare to say anything. Sometimes our house was one big zoo. He taught the children in the village that chickens feel pain when you throw stones at them, just like people. He taught that people who are black have the same souls as people who are white. The same pain, the same soul. All the same. I asked him about the rats. And he said rats too, Sandrita, rats have souls too. Finally he helped me leave the village. He said that it would be good for me to leave. He always helped me, my brother."

I look at Sandra and listen to the way she tells the story. She doesn't tell it straight out, but roundabout. Not chronologically but in circles that take shape around the details. She accompanies her story with facial expressions and gestures, as if in a one-woman play where even inanimate objects gain a voice. That's how she unrolls her story, the story of how she fled the village.

"I walked and walked. At night I kept walking," she says. "I was afraid they would catch up with me. I had been walking for two days then. Sometimes Gabi would weigh heavily on my back. She was already a year old. But I was used to walking. Where we live there are only mountains. No roads. So everything was done on foot."

In the flickering candle light, I start to picture that young Sandra. A fourteen year-old girl from a remote Indian village in the mountains of Veracrúz. All alone, with a small bundle of clothing and her baby wrapped on her back, walking through the mountains. She has decided to run away. It is night time. She is still afraid of rats. She is on her way barefoot to a world she has never seen before, a language she doesn't understand, people she doesn't know. But she has to leave. There is no other way. And so she walks on and on.

"My father was a good man," Sandra opens the next circle. "He never beat me. Never. When he was around he would always defend me from my mother. He would say, 'You shouldn't hit her so hard. Sandra is my daughter too.' But her father had problems. He drank and wound up in debt to the rich man of the village. Then he drank more, and fell even deeper in debt. One day my father called me to him. He said, 'Sandrita, you know how much I love you. Now you have to help out. Because if you help out, our family will be able to live in peace.'"

She expands her circle. The rich man to whom her father owed money had a son. A twenty-seven year old son, still unmarried. She didn't know him, that son. He lived further away in the mountains. "My father said, 'You marry him'."

"And you, what did you say?" I ask her.

Sandra is silent.

"Couldn't you say no?"

Sandra shrugs. "I didn't know him."

So that's how Sandra was married off when she was thirteen; sold by her family for a case of beer.

"Really," she laughs. "With the beer thrown in my father's debts had been settled."

She can't remember much about her wedding day, only that her father was very happy. Her mother was very happy too, which wasn't so normal. "She's usually a sourpuss, so sour that you could pickle her in her own juice," says Sandra. "She always said, 'You,' pointing a finger, 'you spread the plague behind every door you walk through. *Tú crees*, Can you imagine?"

But that day Sandra left her father and mother and her village to walk through the door of that unknown man in the mountains. He had a small, isolated house, a day-and-a half's walk from the village.

She remembers the weeks of the honeymoon well. Sandra thought he was beautiful, she tells me blushing, and manly. She was proud that she had helped her family, and was now the wife of this man. "He did all the things to me that a man does to a woman," she tells me. "At first, anyway."

Until she became pregnant with Gabi, and suddenly the honeymoon was over. She noticed that this man was quite different from her beloved brother: this man did not have the same ideas on "soul" and equality. No love and respect for all that lives. He would leave her alone in the small house for weeks on end, and when he came home drunk he would beat her.

Sandra hesitates, then says. "But the hardest for me was his nature."

I look at her, puzzled. "His nature?"

"The nature of a man," she blushes. "Every woman he would meet, you know, his nature would grow..."

Sandra clenches her jaws. She doesn't want to continue.

"That bus," she says, again grabbing a detail around which to spin her story. Sandra wraps her arms around her knees.

After a few days' walking she arrived in the small town of Tamazunchale. For the first time in her life she saw cars, shops, people, and buses. Sandra spoke only *Náhuatl*. The child on her back was hungry, she herself was hungry. Chaos, noise. Where should she go?

Someone who spoke her language showed her the bus. The bus to Mexico City. That's what she has to board, the man said. That growling, rattling colossus on wheels.

She bought a ticket and sat down. When the bus finally started to move, she was startled. Not because of the speed but because of the heat against the soles of her feet. The floor of the bus got hotter and hotter. From the engine, she knows now. But things were different then. "It felt like fire," says Sandra. "I was afraid that my feet

would melt and stick to the floor, and I would never be able to get up. Never be able to get off."

Sandra gets out of bed in her long white nightgown. The story is over for the time being. I'll have to curb my curiosity. How is it that her man is back again? How does Sandra see him now, why is he never around?

I see how Sandra tip-toes over to Gabi, who has fallen asleep on her books. Carefully, Sandra pulls them out from under her head, and covers her daughter with a blanket. "Maybe she'll want to study some more later," says Sandra. "She is so stubborn. She has a real stiff neck."

I remember Gabi telling me last week that she wants to be an engineer. Shyly, she showed me her report card. Tens for maths and physics, a nine for chemistry, and another ten for biology. She obviously has a gift for the sciences. Eyes sparkling, Gabi told me about her plans: in one more year she will be done with school, then she will go to university. She wants to study hydrology. "It seems great to build bridges and dykes."

I look at the sleeping girl at the table. She is now the same age as Sandra was when she left her village barefoot. Is it possible to jump from peasant to engineer in one generation?

Sandra has no doubts. "I never had many opportunities," she says before we fall asleep. "But Gabi will be able to do whatever she wants."

It is Saturday afternoon, time for the afternoon *mitin*: the mandatory meeting during which the *compañeros* test the compliancy of the residents of *La Polvorilla*. A stage has been built on a sandy plain between the huts. Nothing more than a few crates put together, covered over with a red cloth.

At Sandra's the *comadres* are getting ready. They have bright blue booklets that say "People's Front Francisco Villa." C*omadre* Yolanda shows me her booklet, laughing. She is extraordinarily cheerful today because her husband has finally come home with money.

"At the end of the *mitin* you need to get a signature proving you were there," she points to the booklet. She turns the pages. "And here they write what chores you have to carry out." Yolanda counts on her fingers: dig ditches, patrol. "And participate in demonstrations," Sandra adds. That is a chore too. Usually these are *PRI* demonstrations, but sometimes also those of the leftist opposition party *PRD*. "I have no idea how they operate politically," says Sandra. "I just know that we always have to show up."

Shortly after four o'clock the speaker blares. On stage is "chief *comrade*" Bernardo, framed by his seconds-in-command, Enrique and Chayo. They carry weapons. Another twenty or so *comrades* of the People's Front, also armed, walk among the crowd.

"We have heard that again there are people who have not paid their taxes," says chief comrade Bernardo opening the *mitin*. First calmly, then more and more loudly. "These people have three, I say three, days to pay off their debts," Bernardo screams, and stomps on his crates. "We don't tolerate opposition!"

I look at Sandra. She stands there quietly. Like the others, she keeps her head down. The chief comrade roars like a lion. No discussion, no questions, just commands. Orders about patrolling, about the demonstration on Tuesday, about the need to pay Mr. Garcia a deposit for the land. "The payment is made to us," says chief comrade Bernardo, bringing the *mitin* to a close. "Either in cash, or a deposit in Garcia's bank account, number 5001335-8. I repeat: account number 5,0,0,1,3,3,5 dash 8."

Like a class of school children on their way to the principal's office for a reprimand, the people line up afterwards at the comrades' shack to get their booklets stamped. There is muffled talk, an occasional laugh, but no cheerful Saturday afternoon atmosphere.

Some people make payments. Bank notes are carefully removed from a pocket or a wallet. Bank notes for water, for protection, for Mr Garcia. Everything is duly noted in the blue booklet.

“Take a look at this,” says Sandra when we are back at her shack. She too has just paid. Not the contribution for Garcia but the municipal taxes. Three hundred pesos a month, paid to the *compañeros*, of course.

She takes a piece of paper from a plastic bag hanging from a nail. She puts it on the table, and trails the lines with her finger. Her lips spell out the words letter by letter. “M-o-l-i-n-o,” she says. Excited, she taps the word with her finger. “Here,” she says. “This is it. Isn’t this about a whole other piece of land than ours?”

I look at the paper. A document from the Mexico City department of finances in which it states that payments have been made to the city for the neighbourhood of *El Molino*. “And we are *La Polvorilla*,” says Sandra triumphantly. “*El Molino* is right the other side of city. Isn’t this proof they are pocketing our money for the municipal taxes?”

I look at her. How did she get this document?

“I found it,” Sandra says, carefully studying her hands, as I notice the naughty twinkle in her eye. “OK,” she says looking up again. Recently she went to the *compañeros’* shack to find out if they could explain why she had to pay money to the city, while the *compañeros* kept claiming that the land belongs to that Mr Garcia.

“That can’t be right, paying twice?” says Sandra, giving me an almost innocent look. Well OK then. First they wouldn’t answer at all, but when she insisted, the comrades waved this piece of paper as evidence that she really had to pay her taxes to the city. They waved so furiously that she didn’t have the time to read it carefully. “So I went by later to pick it up.”

“Stolen then.”

“Hmmmm,” hums Sandra. “Borrowed?”

I start laughing.

Sandra tilts her head. “Do you want to help me with this?” she asks.

Of course I want to help her. Her “Dust Heap”, my disco, one and the same story. With someone like Sandra on your side, shouldn’t it be possible to get somewhere? Some proof, a statement, a step in the right direction. Even if it is just a start.

Two days later Sandra rings my doorbell. I open the door, a little embarrassed by my luxury. The pretty courtyard, the large house. What will she think? How will she feel?

Sandra doesn't seem to notice. She gets straight to the point. "Have you found anything on Garcia?" she asks hopefully. Still talking, she follows me up the stairs to my study. She is short. I am tall. It seems to make no difference to her. Even my computer doesn't intimidate her. She sits down in my office chair and tells me about Yolanda. "Beaten again. Because she bought something on credit." And then about the deadline that the comrades have given to the residents for the payment to Garcia. "Everything has to be received in two weeks, they say. If not there will be punishments."

I tell her that I haven't been able to find anything about Garcia on my computer, though I have about the People's Front Pancho Villa. Did she know that the "comrades" fought an armed conflict to take over *La Polvorilla* from another group?

"Twenty injured in takeover of *La Polvorilla* by thugs from the Francisco Villa People's Front," read the headline in the *Uno más Uno* newspaper. Only when I see this does the double meaning of Sandra's residence hit me: *Polvorilla* means not only dust heap but also powder keg!

It must have been a real battle. "Armed with pistols and lead pipes, a gang of about 500 men of the People's Front Pancho Villa invaded the land the day before yesterday, in the early hours of the morning," the article reads. The security guards of the original political group were "dismantled", after which the residents' shacks were carefully searched, one by one. "The attackers entered the houses and forced the residents to sign a document stating they supported the People's Front," the article continues. More than 50 residents were evicted from their homes "because they didn't agree with the methods used. In the meantime, there are still children hidden in some of the houses who haven't seen their parents since Wednesday, because they have been banned from the land."

Did Sandra know all this?

Sandra nods. “An old *compadre* of ours was beaten with a pipe,” she says. Next time she will introduce him to me. He’ll tell you how the mandatory “patrolling” sometimes means that they have to help the *compañeros* with robberies. The *compadre* was surprised when one day he was taken by the *compañeros* to the city. They said it was for a “political action”. They pressed a weapon into the *compadre’*s hand and suddenly he was ordered to shoot at a bank security guard.

“Did he?” I ask Sandra.

Sandra gets up and paces up and down my study. “I don’t think so,” she says. But it doesn’t really matter that much, she says. He would probably get blamed for the robbery anyway. “Unless you can prove the opposite, you are guilty. That’s how it goes in Mexico,” says Sandra. “The common man is always eaten because of what he can’t digest.”

She stops suddenly, she tilts her head and listens intently. “Isn’t it haunted here?” she asks.

“It creaks a little sometimes. Shifted by the earthquake, I think,” I say.

Sandra raises an eyebrow, and starts to pace again. With one hand she traces my books and clippings. She looks at the corner piled up with junk I still haven’t cleared. Her face lights up. “Is that yours?” she points at the old typewriter gathering dust between the boxes.

I nod. “But everyone uses computers now.”

“I once wrote something on such a machine with hammers,” Sandra says, shyly. It was something small, she says, for herself, “so I could think better.”

“Would you like it?” I ask.

Sandra blushes.

“Take it. What am I going to do with it?”

“No,” says Sandra and turns around stubbornly. “That’s not why I asked,” she says still blushing.

Today I have brought the typewriter with me and have placed it in front of her on the table in the Powder Keg. There’s no refusing now.

"You shouldn't be afraid to take a step," writes Sandra. "Only if you conquer your fear, will you be capable of breaking the lies." Letter by letter, word by word she types up the courage. "It's about finding the truth, and then spreading that."

Yesterday there was another incident with the "comrades", Sandra tells me. She had gone to them with a couple of *comadres*, and demanded to see the famous Señor Garcia.

"Introduce us to Garcia," Sandra and her friends had suggested. "If that Garcia is really the owner of this land, then we will pay him the money ourselves."

The comrades didn't dignify us with an answer, Sandra tells me. They laughed right in the women's faces. Who did they think they were? "Do you think," the comrades had said. "that a gentleman like that would sully his shoes with your dust?"

"All we can do is find evidence that the land does not belong to Garcia," I say to Sandra.

Bus, bus, metro, and another bus. With baby Wendy in our arms, we wade across the city. We make our way past jiggling jellies, women's underwear, calculators, and coyote grease for rheumatism. At last we stand in front of a large white building downtown. "The Public Registry of Land and Properties", it says on the front. The everyday chaos of fire eaters, windscreen washers and street vendors reign outside. Inside, we end up in a labyrinth of empty, hollow hallways. We roam from one floor to another. Is seems as if nobody works here, and yet every time we do find someone, it turns out the correct counter is somewhere else.

"Not here," says the nail-filing lady at counter three where we started our quest half an hour earlier. Back to the fourth floor again. Finally someone attends to us. A man with a large moustache frowns. "On whose account are you requesting this information?" he wants to know.

"On our own account," says Sandra.

The man shakes his head. "I can't provide this kind of information just like that."

"But the registry is public," I object. "We only want to see who owns the land this lady lives on."

The civil servant studies Sandra carefully. “I am sorry. We can’t do anything for you,” he says and closes the counter.

A few moments later I walk, fuming, across the wide *Paseo de la Reforma*. Nothing worked. We knocked on the counter, but the moustache pretended we weren’t there. We then went to the director and demanded that we be served. “But Madam, it will take at least 3 months to find that kind of information,” the manager told me, “and we are undergoing renovations.” Begging, threatening, nothing. “We have to think of something else, Sandra.”

“Or not,” she says lightly.

Six lanes of traffic cough up their fumes around us. The pavement is a boiling stream of human flesh. We worm our way through thousands of bodies and the inevitable potholes in the paving. A blind beggar puts out his cane. A little boy with a plastic flute blows an earsplitting shriek in my ear.

“God bless you, God bless...” A blind beggar woman tugs at our sleeves. Please, let us pass. It is one of those days again, a thick layer of smog blocks out the sun. My eyes sting, my head hurts. The IMECA pollution index sits way above the danger zone of 200 points. Ozone levels, IMECA-index: the terms are as common for the residents of this mega-city as “continued precipitation” or “strong south-westerly winds” are in Amsterdam. I still have to get used to it.

We catch our breath in Alameda park. A small oasis of green, built on the remains of a church where the Spanish Inquisition used to hang heretics. On the right are the gaping remains of the Grand Hotel, destroyed in the earthquake of 1985. They are now building a high rise there.

This is a city of layers, I realize. Layers of destruction and violence, transformed into culture. Churches that were built by the Spanish on the remains of the Aztec temples they had destroyed. Temples that held the remains of an estimated 200,000 human sacrifices, made by Aztec priests to their blood-thirsty gods. Victims that had been captured in wars against other Indian peoples. Aztecs who then took their turn being the slaves and mercenaries of other kingdoms. Culture upon culture,

destruction upon destruction around a lake of floating gardens that, until the arrival of the Spanish, had been the valley of Mexico City.

At a food stand, Sandra buys a mango sprinkled with chili pepper. Baby Wendy sticks her tongue eagerly into the spicy powder. Sticky red stains around her mouth, but she doesn't flinch.

"A real Mexican," I say to Sandra.

"A real Indian," laughs Sandra.

We walk towards the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, the large marble cultural palace that was designed at the command of Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz. Then came the Mexican Revolution of 1911. Only many years later, after the revolution, was the palace completed.

In the meantime, the country was again bleeding with violence. The Mexican revolution: a slaughter of one and a half million Mexicans, one eighth of the entire population.

And yet, inside hang the fruits of the culture that the revolution brought forth. The cheerful-morbid "Carnival of Mexican life" by famous revolutionary mural painter Diego Rivera. Dancing skeletons, dancing dictators, dancing Aztec emperors, clowns and murderers. On the other side hangs the bloody "New Democracy" of Rivera's even more revolutionary colleague, Siqueiros. A gigantic she-man with iron breasts who seems ready to knock you into space with her man-sized fists.

Wasn't it Siqueiros who tried to murder Trotsky after he had fled here to Mexico? Fighting, mangled bodies. The painful struggle between "culture" and "nature" portrayed in brave, gigantic breasts.

And what was the end result of this spiral of violence and culture?

"That we can't access the registry," says Sandra, tired of lugging baby Wendy around. "Let's sit down for a moment, please."

She walks out of the palace of culture and sits down on the steps. People crawl below us like ants in an anthill, going somewhere, or returning, or roaming. People who somehow have found a way to survive in this gigantic city.

Strange to realize that it was in this city, not even 500 years ago, that the conquest of a continent began, the subjugation of thousands of years of Indian culture.

Excited, I read a translation of the Aztec chronicles about the Spanish conquest of Mexico-City in 1519.

“And there they are marching at us, soon they will enter Mexico,” wrote Aztec eye-witnesses about those strange creatures on their “large deer”, not then known as horses. “They arrive clad with bells. While the bells ring, the deer hinny and snort. And they make a lot of noise when they walk, as if a great many beatings are being given, they make noise with their feet, as if they are throwing rocks.”

The Aztecs watched those odd Spaniards with amazement. “White as chalk, with beards up to their ears, some even with yellow hair, fuzzy and thin, like a kind of embroidery.” Then the first Spanish company with firearms went by. That was something the Aztecs hadn’t seen before either. “The guns burst into fire, as if exploding, they thundered, time and time again belching out smoke, it became suddenly darkened by smoke, the smoke hung thickly above the ground and spread out, the sulphur smell causing the eyes of people to sting, people fell ill.”

And yet, the Aztec king Moctezuma received the Spaniards with full honours. Decked out in his finest feathers, Moctezuma went forth to meet the Spaniards. He shook the hand of the leader, Cortés, placed a flower wreath around his neck, and gave him a gold necklace. His first mistake. But he thought that the furry Spaniard was the feathered snake-god Quetzalcoatl, who had been driven out two thousand years earlier, and was now returning to claim his throne.

“O Lord, our Lord, you have worked hard, you have made the effort, you have arrived in the land that you have come to consider your safe haven,” is how Moctezuma greeted the Spanish fake god. Then he made one of his palaces available to Cortes. His second mistake, because as soon as Cortés entered the palace, he had Moctezuma taken prisoner and started his hunt for gold. The Aztecs didn’t understand that desire for gold at all. “The Spanish descend like parasites, they move along like animals pushing each other, as if guided by their inner selves.” Most bizarre of all was that the Spaniards tore off all the gold and silver from

Moctezuma's headdresses but just threw out the feathers, "and then they placed all those precious feathers in the courtyard, in the middle of the square," wrote a dismayed Aztec chronicler.

But nobody dared to speak. "People were afraid to show themselves, as if an animal would rip them apart, as if the earth had been killed." The Aztecs "soiled their loin cloths" in fear.

I look at Sandra. How did she feel when she entered the city thirteen years ago on that roaring, fire-spewing colossus? The city of today, whose soil was killed long ago, always busy and out of breath, on the brink of exhaustion. How afraid was she? What was it like not to know anyone, not to know where to go? Not to be able to speak the language, and to come here for the first time?

Sandra thinks for a moment, then gestures with her hand. "As lonely as a piece of fluff in the air," she says. "I didn't have a father or mother, nor a dog to bark at."

She has no idea where she wound up, she says. She roamed around the bus station, ate out of garbage cans and slept on the street. "One day I felt so dirty," says Sandra, "so dirty that I wanted to say goodbye to my own body. But then I smelled the scent of my baby. My child made me want to be less dead and stay in my body."

Finally, Sandra met a woman, one who spoke Náhuatl. The woman sold corn porridge, *atole*, out of a big pot by the bus station. She saw Sandra and asked her if she wanted some porridge for her child. That woman knew what it was like because she also had a child. She also had left her village with a child. "That woman told me that I should go to the nuns. She told me where the nuns were."

The nuns?

"Yes, the nuns that have a house where girls who have committed a *maldad*, a shameful act, can live."

Again I look at her, not understanding.

"Women who do things that make them a single mother," says Sandra irritated.

"But weren't you married?"

"Yes, but I had left Gabi's father."

That evening, the tension in the Powder Keg is palpable. Gabi is not home. She has gone to the library. The neighbours are spending the night with someone else. Sandra and I are sitting on the bed together. Every ten minutes the comrades come by on their rounds. They shout commands and seem to yell at everyone who gets in their way.

"Just like my first husband," laughs Sandra.

For the first time those words: my husband.

"Now tell me something about that man who I will never see," I beg her.

Sandra pulls a blanket around her shoulders, and as usual starts her story somewhere in the middle. "When that *señora* first came by I had just given birth to Gabi, a few weeks before," she says. "She was about fifteen years older than me and she had beautiful dresses. She had also done something with her hair. Blond, almost like you. But then black underneath." But Sandra didn't like that "madame". "She would come home with my husband and they would drink together. I didn't want my husband to start drinking. Then that madame would say to me, 'You are a small *indigenita*. Just look at yourself'."

One day her husband told her that the "madame" was going to live with them.

"So I ask 'where will she sleep?' And he says 'in my bed, where else did you think?'."

Sandra's eyes open wide with amazement, as if hearing this again for the first time. Only then did she understand that the "madame" was her husband's lover. Sandra objected. But her husband was in charge. Sandra had to sleep on the floor with her child, while he shared the bed with his mistress. "I had to fetch water, work the field, and cook and wait on the *señora*. Every day, every single day. And if Gabi cried, the *señora* would get angry. 'Keep that black bastard quiet,' she would say."

This went on for several months, until Sandra made a decision. "I wasn't born to put up with this." One evening she picked up her baby and headed for the village. But her flight failed. "He was just coming back with the *señora* and he saw me. I tried to run but he caught up with me. He grabbed me by the hair. 'Don't you dare,

don't you dare,' he said. Then he locked me up in the house so I couldn't run away anymore."

Sandra was kept locked up for weeks, until one day her brother came to see her. He had walked through the mountains with his lame foot, to see how his married sister was doing. He was the first family visitor she had had in a year. "I couldn't even let him in," Sandra says, still angry. They talked to each other through the cracks in the hut. "My brother and I waited for my husband together. When he got home, my brother said 'Open the door. You are not respecting Sandra as a wife. I am taking her with me. She is leaving here.'"

Sandra's story telling is colourful, with different voices and gestures. But suddenly she swallows her tears. "May God keep his soul."

After a break she continues. Her brother took her back to the village. He had finished school and had become one of the leaders of the community. He was the only educated man in the village and he negotiated with authorities on behalf of the village, reading and writing letters and mediating in community conflicts.

In the village he took Sandra to her in-laws. Because that is the tradition; as a married woman you are under the authority of your in-laws. "He convinced my father-in-law that my husband hadn't been treating me well. So they had to agree to take me in."

At her in-laws' house she was assigned a small corner. She earned some money working the land and she took care of Gabi. But soon it turned out that she wasn't safe there either. Her father-in-law was quick with his fists too. "It is a *vicio*," says Sandra. "A bad habit. Lots of men in Mexico think that women are there to be beaten."

Carefully, Sandra started to plan a new escape. Whenever she could, she held back some of her wages. One day she felt she had saved enough and went to tell her brother that she wanted to leave. "As an excuse I told him that my father in-law had beaten me a couple of times," says Sandra with a twinkle in her eyes. "That wasn't completely true. He beat me every day."

Her brother was very sad when she left, but he supported her plan. He promised he would cover for her in the village until she was safely away. “He gave me a blessing. He said, ‘Behave well in life. Then life will behave well to you.’” She will never forget those words, says Sandra.

“Only sometimes.” She hesitates. “Sometimes, it takes quite a long time before life decides to behave itself well.”