

Gold Mina

Family Anecdotes

Héctor Manuel Alvarado Banda

Translated by Yul Edgar Ceballos



Illustration by Héctor Manuel Alvarado Banda

UNIVERSIDAD DE COLIMA

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Presentation

The stories gathered in this book are steeped in nostalgia, warm memories, and deep sentiments: loving, filial, gastronomical, historical, clinical, and geographical.

Stories with real characters, some of them still exist and others have gone to a *better place*, but undoubtedly, the ones that had the greatest influence were those of a feminine nature, above all Guillermina (Mina) and the *Nina*, especially since they were transcendent for the author and his siblings. It is precisely within these texts that Héctor Manuel draws out the best of his memories, fortified by a sensitive imagination that connects them to tales that are almost fantastical, at many times marvelous, and devastating on our conscience at others. They are chronicles that show the human side of everyday actions.

Personally, I became emotional with the anecdotes of Mina when she was still a little girl, incredible, due to her astuteness, intelligence, and great problem-solving skills. A true guardian angel who was always involved in the most unsuspected matters and jobs which were, apparently, reserved for males only.

The toughness of the environment that the characters faced is also surprising; for instance, the geographical en-

vironment, whose nature is at times hostile, aggressive at certain times of the year, and tough for the reaping of the best rewards. But even so, against all those adversities, these flesh and bone characters were able to complete their life cycles, withstanding hardships and building their character by way of the unexpected pressures of life.

What courage and admirable love of the author for his peers as he offers, in complete transparency, these portentous feats. Why so keen to *open up* to everyone, baring a soul full of lush memories, loaded with unforgettable yields, transformed into the lives of upstanding men and women, and citizens who are always grateful of those who supported them at all times?

When I started the job of *reviewing* these stories, I thought they would be simple genealogical anecdotes or traditional tales of town life, but I was wrong and I had to accept that deep within my human structure, the reasonings behind these such stories moved me. Some made me cry and others made me reflect on what I'm doing with my own children who are still adolescents.

I speak as a family man. I don't want to speak as an expert reader in the field of literature as I would seem pedantic and grotesque, since what is vital in these tales lies not in the flourishes of poetic language or the intricate complications which some authors prescribe us in the world of postmodernism. No, what is truly valuable of these stories is the quality of life they offer us, by way of imperishable teachings and which deserve reflexive attention since they are all examples of rectitude, valor, an encouragement of positive values, and healthy forms of human interaction which we so dearly need in these days of chaos and conflicts.

I am sure that you will also feel touched by this clinical narrative by a renowned physician. Let yourself be taken

by the emotions of the story itself and be surprised by a serious comparison of your own past... That's to say, has it been better than any of these accounts? Could you improve your own existence through them? If so, the spirit of imagination has touched your most sensitive fibers and I'm sure that you will also end up recommending it.

Victor Gil Castañeda
Colima, Colima

Introduction

The spirit of family, the social cell, is made up of small occurrences which string all of its members together until they weave a tight-knit fabric of great complexity. When what happens to each of them is shared with others, you can see the simplicity and harmony at first glance, but internally, there is a vast cohesion that sustains it.

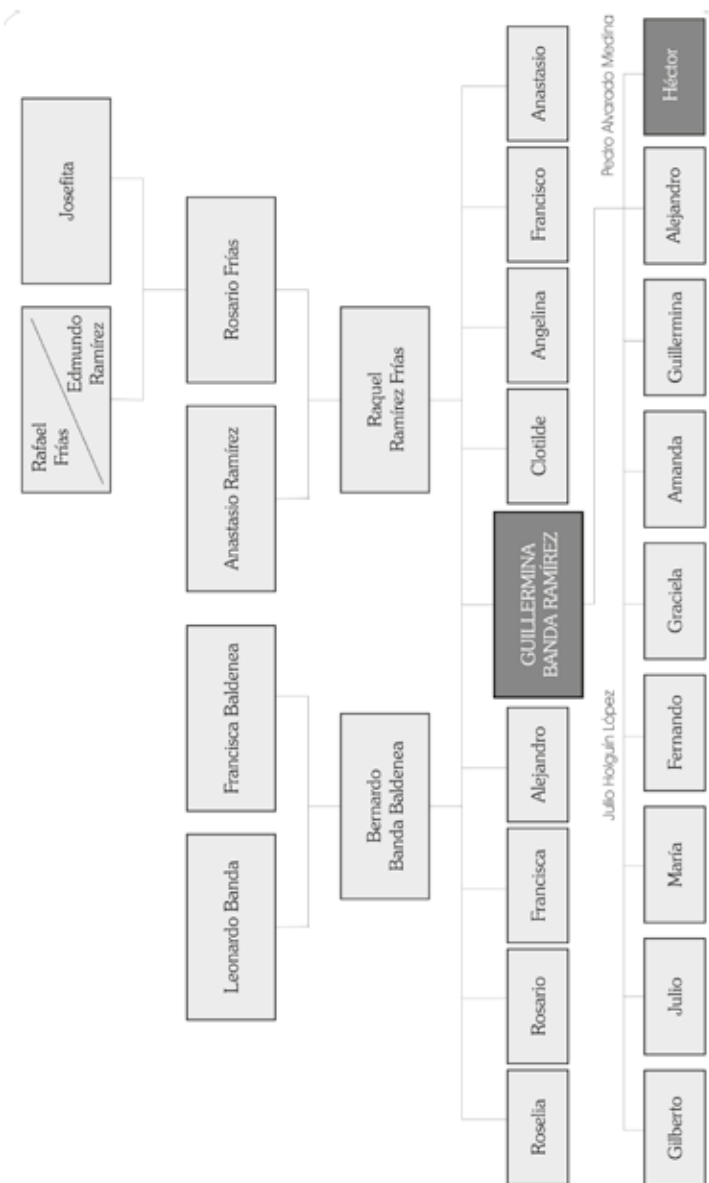
The organization and stability of all people is rooted in the family unit, therefore the country that has no projection for the future, based on the values of said cell, is destined to suffer damage which could have been easily avoided. The anecdotes that are relayed here are daily occurrences in which the love of life and fellow human beings can be observed as a fundamental value which may be qualified as the essence of our family.

This compilation, born from tales, is especially dedicated to one of its main protagonists: Guillermina Banda Ramírez, known in her childhood as *Mina*, a woman with a *heart of gold*, of which one can never deny holds virtues such as solidarity, empathy, simplicity, justice, sensibility, prudence, and charity, among many others.

Here is this humble tribute from one of her children who so admires and loves her.

Héctor Manuel
Villa Juárez, Sonora

Genealogy



First Part: Mina's Background and Infancy

Mamá Josefita

Upon her mother's passing, *Josefita* was left in the care of her elderly father, who sensing his end was near, married off his young daughter to a 70-year-old man, with whom there could be no descendance.

On a certain occasion, Rafael Frias, Josefita's husband and a profoundly devout Catholic, had the enormous desire of obtaining the Sacred Bible, which at that time and place was a document exclusively reserved for priests.

With the aforementioned purpose in mind, he embarked on the trip from Candameña, his place of origin, near the mining zone in Ocampo, Chihuahua, with the destination being Mexico City. At first, on donkey or horse lent out by the ranchers of the region, and afterwards on foot. How far must the poor man have walked? No one knew, but time passed and all communication with him was lost. Everyone took him for dead except for his wife who waited for him for years, sure that he would return.

One day, a rich Spanish rancher, Edmundo Ramírez, arrived in the settlement of Candameña and simple everyday life took a turn. Stubborn and persevering, he wooed her to no avail for various months but though the resistance was great, the insistence was greater and made her succumb to the pleas of the man in love. Finally, the faithful wife had lost all hope of her absent husband's return.

For some time, she received Edmund at home with great discretion, but since he was accustomed to being in control of his life, he convinced her to go and live in one of his plush estates.

Edmundo put Josefita at the center of his existence, making that love flourish. She seemed ever more beautiful and happier and little by little, the remorse that afflicted her at first was left behind. One day, he was returning from work and his woman, radiant with joy, jumped in his arms giving him the marvelous news that they were to become parents. The arrival of a baby girl filled them with joy but just like there's no evil that lasts a hundred years, happiness is not eternal either.

On a snowy night during which they sat together next to the heat of the chimney, one of the women that was part of the domestic staff let them know that someone was waiting to be received. Edmundo traversed the long hallway which led him to the main door of the estate where he found a man peacefully waiting who introduced himself as Rafael Frías.

The owner of the house only knew the name of Josefita's disappeared husband and after the introductions, there was no further exchange of words between them. While the visitor stayed standing in the threshold, Edmundo returned to the side of whom, until now, was his woman. He told her that everything that was in that place was hers,

gave her a cameo with his picture in it, and asked her to give it to their little girl so that she would always remember him. He kissed her on her forehead and, leaving the bewildered old man at the door, he left the place never to return again.

The little girl was registered as Rosario Frías, the last name of the man that returned with his beloved Bible in hand after seven years.

Gummersindo, the Early Riser

When Leonardo Banda (Papá Lalo) and Francisca Baldenea (Mamá Quica) got married, they decided to take Gumersindo, her younger brother, to live with them. She raised the boy when their parents passed away. So it was that Gumersindo grew up, under the couple's wing, until he became a strong young man. He was moody and untrusting, solitary and prone to getting upset from practical jokes the ranchers would play on him; however, Leonardo would provide him the deference that is given to a younger brother and he corresponded with respect.

On certain occasion, Papá Lalo gathered the cattle in order to brand it and went to rest under the shade of a tall and old oak tree. The horse he was riding lost its footing and started to sink. The old rancher thought this was odd and once he freed the equine's foot, he sized up the terrain with a stick and could feel in the cavity something that appeared to be a clay pot, he dug and to his great surprise, he found a great container full to the brim with gold coins. He covered it up once again since he had nowhere to transport such cargo.

Once he got to the ranch, he continued his work at night. He ordered Gumersindo to put the tack and some old empty sacks on a pair of mules at sunrise since, very early in

the day, they would go dig up a treasure that he had found at the foot of the old oak tree that was on the way to the *Los Pilares* ranch. Afterwards, he prepared to rest. It was a long night in which he was able to sleep for but short stretches of time, during which he dreamt of being lord and master of a tremendous fortune. The roosters announced that, finally, a new day was at hand. He got up before sunrise, prepared and savored a cup of the aromatic coffee that was never missing in his house; afterwards, he went out to the place where he would collect the mules and the tack which he had asked Gumersindo to prepare.

He was surprised to not find him since the young man would usually get up before anyone else at the ranch, but he thought that he may still be sleeping since the previous day's work had left them exhausted. He went to get the mules and didn't find them or the tack. He quickly saddled his horse and galloped to the place whose location he had entrusted his brother-in-law with. He found only silence, a hole in the ground next to the tree, and fragments of the clay pot that, just a few hours ago, held the elusive treasure. And Gumersindo disappeared with those vast resources.

Years after the unfortunate event, when only the unpleasant memory and resignation of what may have been remained, on one of the long trips that Leonardo would frequently carry out through the mountain ranges in the northern part of the country, he had the chance to go to a hacienda in order to stock up on water for him and his group of companions, as well as for the animals that took them there.

He called out at the door of the luxurious residence, like many others that were located in the region, and a young servant came to meet him. He asked the name of the owner of the beautiful and well-kept estate. The young man responded:

“It belongs to Mister Gumersindo Baldenea.”

The traveler’s surprise was massive, but soon he regained his poise and asked for his presence to be announced to the owner of the hacienda. The servant asked his name and went inside the mansion. After an exasperating lapse of time, he came back and notified Leonardo that the boss had gone on a long trip and would return after a few months, as he was accustomed to doing. The furious traveler turned right around and left, while the young man said:

“Sir, your water!”

Leonardo did not respond and without turning to look at him, with vigorous yells ordered his companions to initiate the trip back. There was nothing more to do there, nor water to receive!

Primitive Saponification

Behind the ranch’s storeroom, there were some wooden boxes with holes in which the ash, product of the burning of firewood that was used for cooking, was deposited. Every day, it would be watered in order to obtain an alkaline liquid of a dark yellow color (liquid caustic soda), which was also stored.

A hundred liters of water would be deposited in a steel drum which they would heat up with firewood until it boiled, then they would add four to five liters of the ash distillation and they would deposit the complete carcasses of wild, previously sacrificed, animals in said solution until the container was full.

For an entire week, they kept the contents over a low heat, they would stir it a few times a day and then they would let it cool down for a period of up to a month. Once the mixture was solidified, the resulting paste was cut into cubes and was split evenly among the families of the ranch. This factory's product was the soap that people used to wash their clothes.

At present, the process of saponification (or soap elaboration) is taught in chemistry laboratories to high school students in the following manner:

In a beaker, place 15 milliliters of sodium hydroxide (caustic soda), at a concentration of 20%.

Add 10 milliliters of vegetable oil.

Boil the mixture, frequently stirring with a glass rod and following the necessary precautions, since ebullience may cause splatter and injure the skin.

When all of the water is completely eliminated by way of evaporation, the resulting paste should be let cool.

The saponification is complete once a solid with a waxy aspect is formed, which turns hard and brittle once it cools down.

A Couple of Ragged and Smutty Elderly People

On his trips along the mountain range, Papá Lalo discovered a cave whose entrance was well disguised by the undergrowth and tree roots that grew over it. At first sight, it seemed like only a hollow at the foot of a precipice, but the difficult access to the place had probably prevented its sighting.

There was scarce evidence of that place being inhabited but he wanted to investigate, after all, he was used to entering the inner part of the earth. Using his machete, he freed up a part of the entrance and soon found that after a short and narrow entranceway, there was a widening, but the darkness impeded him from continuing on. He went back and outside, he found two branches of ocote wood, he lit one up and put the other away as backup. With torch in hand, he was able to explore the path, he found various empty chambers with clay utensils dispersed all over the ground. He went in further and more appeared. It was a chain of sculpted chambers, surely by an underground river.

By then, he could assure with greater certainty that that place had served as quarters for people, since he found more objects laying around all the time. The improvised torch was about to be completely consumed when he made a dismal discovery: set in diverse parts of the spacious inner area, there were some bare skeletons leaned on the walls or lying on the ground. The placement of some of them suggested that death had surprised them embracing someone or with a little one in their lap

The pitiful scenes made him think that they had succumbed to a collective illness. He checked and found more scenes of desolation and suffering, so he conjured up a prayer and, since the second light would only last him barely enough to get to the entrance, he withdrew with a great sense of sorrow.

After gathering a few friends and companions on the ranch, he returned to the place to remove the skeletons and give them proper burial. Soon, that would change the course of events. The saying “every cloud has a silver lining” could be confirmed before a week had gone by.

In the northern region of the country, as in many other places, people had created communication systems in which individuals participated whose personal characteristics, such as good memory, speed, and resistance, had assured them a trade. No matter the distance, young people had replacements in every town or settlement and they were called mail or *proper*. They were simply told a verbal message, the address of the addressee and shortly, they would deliver the message; they would return with a reply if the case so deemed it. And it was so, on that occasion. The news that the *Colorados* were coming soon. It was a numerous gang of rustlers who were extremely feared for committing atrocities everywhere they went, they would leave desolation and it was said that they were capable of killing a cow just to eat a small portion of its meat; they would rape the women and take the ones that they deemed attractive with them; they would recruit young men and adults in order to increase their ranks and continue to devastate the places in their path.

As soon as the news was known, after sending his emissary to the next settlement, Papá Lalo gave the order of gathering all the people and all the cattle. Some were charged with the task of guiding the people and the animals to the agreed place. They did so diligently and with the secrecy they were capable of, they quickly left. The group at the back made sure to erase their tracks.

The men were armed in case the need arose to defend the great family, fortunately there were no incidents; meanwhile they took shelter in the cave of skeletons. At the ranch, only a couple of elderly people dressed in tatters and with their faces and bodies full of smut were left behind, who took care of hiding what little was left. After a few hours, over one hundred rustlers arrived and found the old people

gathering some firewood in order to stoke the fire where there was but a small pot with beans. The signs of fatigue and hunger were evident in those scoundrels; however, the solitude of the place and the inexistent possibilities of satisfying their instincts changed their plans. They looked at the elderly people with disdain, some took a little fresh water from the water well, they wet their faces and without directing a single word at the only inhabitants, they left at full gallop, leaving as the only sign of their brief stay a beautiful but injured horse which they considered a nuisance.

When Papá Lalo and Mamá Quica felt sure that the rustlers were far away, with a smile they washed their faces to remove the smut and the dirty clothes that covered them. Hours later, they went to the cave to get all the people, who remained worried for having left them at the ranch, but at the end of the adventure, they celebrated with laughter and hugs.

Caballuza

When the rustlers, *Los Colorados*, got to the *Los Pilares* ranch, at full gallop as they were used to, perhaps as a strategy to intimidate the inhabitants of the place they raided, one of their horses, a beautiful sorrel horse, suffered a muscle tear on a front leg and couldn't walk. Since the horse was *espiado*, as the ranchers used to call that kind of injury, the unproductive horse simply no longer moved from its place.

Papá Lalo painstakingly cared for it, he knew from experience that the horse would get better; so, he fed it with love, he talked into it's ear, he looked at it directly in the eyes and would brush its pretty cinnamon-colored hair. He even gave it a name which it would respond to moving its

head. Surprisingly, the horse responded with greater trust all the time, as if it understood. After a few weeks had gone by, it got better and although it tolerated the horseshoes, quite some time went by before it was ridden.

The love was mutual, but the animal's greatest demonstration of affection came during one of Papá Lalo's sprees. Coming back home and under the effects of alcohol, he fell off his mount and fell asleep on the ground. His older children had an uneasy night but as morning came, they carried out a search. They found their father on the ground and the horse standing with its legs open to each side of him. The noble steed spent the night in that position to protect its master in fair retribution for the care received.

The *El Curro* Stream

It was never known when or who carved the imposing, well-made, and elegant figure of a *charro*.¹ The natural wall is so elevated and hard to access that all attempts to climb it all the way to the prominence would turn out to be more than complicated. At the foot of the hill, where said wall was, passed the stream and between both, there was a passageway that connected various ranch communities, one of them on which Mina lived with her family.

Papá Lalo, patriarch of the family, owned great extensions of farmland and numerous herds of cattle of diverse species. He was a tall man, stocky and brown skinned, strong-willed and dominating with the workers but once he

1 *Charro* is the name given to practitioners of the Mexican national sport, *Charrería*. It is usually carried out on a horse and the riders do tricks or show skills with other horses or bulls. A *Charro* is similar to what a cowboy is in the United States.

was home, he was obedient of the mandates given by his wife, Mamá Quica, a small-bodied woman but of great will and intelligence.

The place Papá Lalo visited two to three times per month was an enigma for everyone. He simply disappeared and upon his return, he would contend that he went off to look for a lost cow. Everything went according to his calculations until one day his suspicious sons, Bernardo and Elías (both married), followed him from afar, hiding in the nooks of the rugged terrain as to not be discovered. After a one-hour trip on horseback through the mountain range and being followed at a prudent distance, he got to the mouth of a cave which had signs of having been inhabited; he got off the horse and waited a moment before a brown-skinned indigenous woman, young and pretty, came out to receive him, they sat down and talked and after a while, they went inside the cave.

Outraged, the sons went back and on the way to the ranch, they cooked up a plan to give a lesson to the Casanova rancher. The next day in the afternoon, Papá Lalo returned. He couldn't conceal a certain trace of satisfaction.

The same adventure was repeated the week after, except that upon his return, during the twilight, on both sides of the stream and at the foot of the hill where, impassible, the elegant charro (nicknamed "El Curro") watched over, sculpted on the rocky wall, his sons waited for him. Each one with a black goat and a knife in hand.

At an agreed signal, they both cut off the tail of their respective animals, immediately the miserable goats jumped and took off, emitting high-pitched squeals of pain. One of them went in the direction of the horseman that was approaching. The horse reared up and almost threw off the experienced rider who, with fear reflected on his face, poked

his horse with his spurs as to make it run swiftly all the way to the big house.

Upon hearing the noise that the hooves of the agitated horse made due to striking the cobblestone of the main courtyard of the old house, Mamá Quica worriedly came out to receive him while he called out to her yelling, asking her to join him in the chapel and pray since an evil entity had just appeared before him. Little by little, calmness returned to Papá Lalo's agitated spirit and it was never again known that he didn't sleep at home.

After days had gone by, he said goodbye to one of his workers, an indigenous man who he trusted and was very much in his favor, who stayed two or three times a month during nighttime in order to take care of the cattle. He always contended the presence of coyotes who supposedly took the goats' young. The indigenous man was duly compensated and after collecting his belongings, he went far away along with his wife since the area where they lived was haunted.

Bitter Farewell

They had to sacrifice that cow since the exposed fracture of one of its legs risked it getting a severe infection, as well as a long and painful agony.

Bernardo and some ranchers slowly and carefully led it to the slabs that were at the edge of the stream. They killed it and sliced the meat in order to distribute it and use it as food. The cow's blood was left scattered there.

Under normal conditions, the cow would have died of old age, since its gender was reserved for breeding, in other words, for procreating; for this reason, they only used bulls and calves for food.

When nighttime came, bulls from the region started to arrive in the sacrificial place, the number was over a hundred, they sensed the blood and struck the rocks with their legs, charging the tree trunks as they let out mournful bellows. The terrifying scene made no one dare to get close. The children and women climbed on the rooftops of the houses fearing a massive attack, while the men armed with carbines and stationed in safe places, were concentrated on any twist the events could take.

The sad spectacle ended until the twilight of the next day, when the bereaved animals left, mooing their disgrace. As the herd disappeared, the ranchers went down to the stream to wash away the blood and avoid the incident from happening again.

The occurrence highlighted the fact that animals are capable of suffering with the loss of their congeners, just like humans bid farewell, with pain, to their loved ones when they go down the path with no return.

Drama of Love

Brothers, Bernardo and Francisco, complied to their father's request of taking the great number of barrels full of *sotol*² to *El Tigre*, where the stores of that place served as distribution centers in the region. Many days of travel were between them and their destination, as well as workdays of fatigue and uncountable perils, among which were robberies and confiscations. For the last ones mentioned, they protected themselves with a letter of safe-passage, a document issued by the authorities which permits free transit without risk

² *Sotol* refers to a distilled spirit made from plants that grow in the desert of Chihuahua.

for the merchandise and for those who carry it, and for robberies you would have to face off with the outlaws in a gunfight, whether it be with carabines or with the revolvers that they carried in their team of ten or twelve ranchers.

For what there was no protection was for falling in love with the beautiful young girls that they would encounter as they passed the towns and settlements in which they made stops. Francisco was a sensitive, handsome, and hardworking young man, so different girls had him in their sights; however, at every moment, he was thinking of María whom on the last trip, he left with the promise that he would soon return to get her so that they could fully carry out their love and start a family. Various visits to the town made it possible for them to get to know each other and start a clean and hope-inspiring romance. All of his plans were focused on obtaining the joy of integrating a family.

Bernardo would look at him and smile, he had always been his favorite and, although there were a few years difference between them, they had been raised together and in a certain way, he was Francisco's confidant; being so, he was glad for his brother's happiness.

After a monthlong journey, they finally made it to their destination, the young man in love wasted no time and entrusted his brother with the responsibility of delivering the merchandise in order to take a refreshing dip in the nearby river and change his clothes, since he didn't even consider how tired he was due to the urgency of seeing his loved one. He sent a message to Maria with a boy from the region and, when she complied to their meeting, he received her with the effusiveness of someone who suddenly feels he's the king of the world; she let herself be pampered even though her attitude let it show that she felt worried. When he recuperated his serenity, he noticed it and asked:

“What’s wrong?”

She hung her head low and answered:

“While you were away, I had a talk with my mother about our relationship. She was happy and asked me many things about you; what your name was, how old you were, about your family, she asked many things, and as I answered them, her face started to get serious, until she went quiet and embraced me. She couldn’t repress a sob and crying she told me that you’re my cousin. That after so long away from the family, the relationship had gone cold until they lost even the most essential information from the relatives. Afterwards, she spoke about it with my father and he also saddened since, being their only daughter, all they ever wanted was my happiness but conversely, he was unwavering in his decision and asked me to end our relationship. You could never imagine the suffering I’ve been through all these months that you’ve been away, but I have finally come to the conclusion that they are completely within reason. We would always be pursued by the shadow of our blood relationship. I love you very much, but our plans can never be fulfilled.”

While she spoke, his eyes were glued to the floor, like beasts of burden who, for weeks, withstand the barrels they carry on their travels. The weight on Francisco was moral but infinitely intolerable. He went to pieces and mumbled some incomprehensible words, perhaps entrusting himself to God as the terminally ill would, or complaining to him for the end of a romance that was so clean and sincere. Overcoming any other adversary would have been child’s play, he had done so against many misfortunes on countless occasions since he was a young man who had been hardened in the mountain range, but on these grounds, he was unarmed to defend himself.

Maria got up with the intention of leaving, but he asked her to accompany him a bit longer; he took her by the hand and without saying a single word, they walked a while. Without even noticing, they ended up at the cemetery. Could it perhaps be that the sadness they felt led them to the place where the remains of so many failed dreams dwell? When they raised their heads, they were able to see the whitish tombstones and with great sensitivity, he could only say:

“Dreams, as well as life, end here. Goodbye and take good care of yourself.”

She believed she had understood the intention of his words, she looked at him with deep sadness and said goodbye with a kiss on his cheek. She started her way back home and when she had walked less than fifty meters, she heard the bang of a firearm. Imagining what had happened, she came running back and encountered that Dantean scene: Francisco had taken his life with his revolver.

Upon finding out, Bernardo cried inconsolably for his brother's death. He held a wake and buried him in that very cemetery, asking himself time and again what explanation he would give his parents to keep them from the enormous pain; the answers never came and he decided to stay and live in the aforementioned town.

He returned the workers to the ranch and ordered them not to reveal what had happened but to say that both of them had stayed in order to work for some time in the mine and that Bernardo was asking for them to send his wife and children, and so it was done.

Nine years passed before Leonardo and Francisca were able to see their son, Bernardo, who due to his dete-

riorated health condition, asked to come back to the old and longed-for ranch and enjoy his final days of life.

Raquel and Bernardo had nine children (Three males and six females), one had the name of Francisca, after her grandmother, and the child they had after the tragic occurrence, they named Francisco.

Papante and Macuchi

Tabaco is a plant that belongs to the *Nicotiana tabacum* species and the *nightshade family*, it has different varieties and it is native to the American continent. After being condemned by the inquisition, it was exported and became popular in Europe since the sixteenth century, first as an ornamental plant, later with medicinal use, and afterwards in recreational use.

This crop is demanding since, on average, it requires two thousand, two hundred hours of work, per hectare, in order to be harvested; as well as special conditions of terrain, pH level, humidity, and temperature; needless to say, it is delicate since you must prepare the terrain, plant the seeds, transplant, fertilize, water, unweed them, remove some of the leaves, sprout, and disbud; even control pests, gather, cure, dry, and a very long list of etcetera. In a nutshell, any grower would think twice before *going all in*, as some would say and invest in this type of work.

Therefore, it is a product that is a commodity, and for things dealing with agricultural work, Papá Lalo always had a good eye. Agricultural workers know this, it's not only necessary to know the conditions in which you are to work, but also having that something they call intuition. A friend

defined it as that which *starts I don't know where, and ends I don't know when.*

When the leaves change color, from green to yellow, and from a shiny appearance to becoming brittle, this signal means they have entered a stage of maturity. That's when you begin the stage of gathering and manual curing; in other words, the phase of the greatest amount of work and not everyone can keep up the pace.

Papá Lalo would develop various hectares, therefore when the buyer arrived (once a year), he was able to have various quintals full of the product with dry leaves. Seeds would be picked on the following harvest.

Mina, as always, was in the loop of the entire process, since at the end she asked Papá Lalo to gift her some seeds to play with. He knew of the little one's initiative and creativity and gave her a handful, knowing that, in the end, he would surely find out what their destiny would be, and so it was.

Weeks after the start of a new cycle, he witnessed Mina's little patch in the backyard of the house. His smile of approval was instantaneous, though he didn't reflect on it again. Mina, on the other hand, paid close attention to every detail of what he did and, undoubtedly, applied it until the cycle of planting-harvesting-selling concluded.

While the buyer counted the sacks that Papá Lalo would sell him, Mina appeared with a sack of tobacco leaves of the *papante* variety and another with the *macuchi* variety, carefully selected and arranged in order to offer them to the merchant. The man checked them carefully and concluded that they were of very good quality and paid back that work with a magnificent buying price, while Papá Lalo, as reward for her perseverance, gave her another profit, equivalent to the payment received from the buyer.

Happy from the transaction, Mina bought, at the first chance she got, a dress and a beautiful coat for Mamá Raquel, so she would be protected from the harsh winter. She put away the rest of the money from the seeds to insure the self-financing of the next agricultural cycle.

Gold Mine in Sonora

Along time had gone by since Bernardo worked in the subsoil of mineral *El Tigre*, a settlement in the mountain range of Sonora. That mine, as well as many others, were exploited by people from the United States under authorization of the Mexican government. The extracted gold was melted and exported to their country, continuing the looting that was started centuries back by the Spaniards.

The miners got meager profits and were exposed to getting the feared but overlooked silicosis, an illness that ended the family well-being and the lives of those who depended on that trade. The laborers tried, in many ways, to outwit the surveillance of the foremen that were positioned in the entryway of the mine. The way that Bernardo chose was truly original, he called it: *travelled tacos*, but almost a century later, I believe the name of *golden fried tacos* is better.

The men that guarded the entryway of the mine carried out their role zealously. They weren't people who tolerated jokes or who established ties with those who worked there.

Their work consisted of checking everyone who went in or out of the mine, carefully examining the lunchboxes of every worker, both at seven in the morning, the time of arrival, as well as at three in the afternoon, the time the

workday ended. This routine had been ordered with the purpose of avoiding unauthorized removals of the precious metal which is extracted from the bowels of the earth by way of the titanic effort of the Mexican miners; in other words, by those who were checked in great detail and whom were paid minimally for said labor.

Like everyone else, Bernardo went through the rigorous revision. On certain occasion, one of the guards thought he had an exaggerated amount of food, but insightfully he answered that he had various young children who liked the flavor of the tacos so much, that they fought amongst each other for them, calling them *traveled tacos*. He couldn't understand why they liked them so much, but he supposed that the tacos acquired a special flavor inside the caverns and that for this reason, he asked Raquel, his wife, to include a greater number of tacos than he could consume at breaktime in the subsoil.

Apparently, the explanation was convincing enough to satisfy the curiosity of the man, who without asking more or protesting, let him pass freely every day. Neither the naïve guard, nor the foreigners who hired his services, ever knew that they were part of another of many of the miner's mockeries.

In reality, when Bernardo returned home, he had at least ten tacos completely filled with gold threads which had been extracted from the lodes. They were melted at home and turned into balls that weighed a few grams, which Raquel would safekeep in a glass vase. After all, there's a reason why we can assure that we all really like *golden fried tacos*.

Little Wild Apples

It was the year of 1925 when Papá Bernardo worked as a contractor at the *El Tigre* mine. At that time, he was in charge of approximately six miners, who went to his house on Saturdays in order to receive their pay and, as usual, he sent his kids, Alejandro and Mina, to get the money.

The children carried out the instruction and had the payroll in a canvas bag, corresponding to six days for each of the daily laborers, including their father. Although the path was clear, on Mina's suggestion, they preferred to go through the fields so they could take advantage and pick some wild little apples, therefore, they were prepared with an extra bag. They got to the place and left the small bag in the first bush. In that great field of apple trees, they went from one bush to another picking the best fruit.

By the time they filled the bag, they no longer knew under which bush they had left the money. With great fear, they started the frantic search until finally, after six hours, they found the valuable bag.

The Medicine Man

Most of Raquel and Bernardo's children were still very small when, in 1924, a medicine man arrived in the town of *El Tigre*, skilled in the art of the collection and therapeutic application of plants. Restless as she always was, Raquel was drawn to the activity of the roaming expert of the age-old art of herbalism, due to which she offered to be a collaborator, for free, while he was in town with the purpose of learning a bit of that thing which she always found so interesting. He

gladly accepted since it wasn't common to find such a young person who was interested in learning that trade.

During the two weeks that the medicine man remained in town, Raquel made her best effort to learn everything that he taught her, even to identify the medicinal plants. With great tenacity, she would go over the names and characteristics of each specimen of the plant kingdom and its applications, as well as the effects that the mixes had on the respective illnesses for which they were indicated. She was like a university student that was preparing for her professional exam with great determination.

But that well-meaning man had to leave town since he had to visit other places where he was also needed. He said goodbye while she, as a sign of gratefulness, gifted him a useful leather bag that she had made especially for him in gratitude.

Raquel continued practicing the gathering, separating, mixing, and sometimes the application of what she had learned with so much determination, and since nothing in life happens randomly, such dedication had to be put to the test, and it looked like the day of the *final exam* had come since suddenly, the first breakouts of a rare disease characterized by high fevers and gastrointestinal manifestations started to appear; someone said that it was *Spanish flu*. Probably the electrolyte imbalance was what led a great deal of people to death in that secluded place but extremely dedicated Raquel, remembering the herbalist lessons, sprang into action. She stripped the bark off of a substantial amount of Elephant trees, she macerated the husks in a mortar, and prepared a large volume of the infusion which she then distributed in the neighborhood where she lived, leaving it at the foot of the doors of the homes with a sign that read: "Give your ill ones this tea to drink."

It became noticeable that slowly but surely those that were ill started to get better. The epidemic had a duration of approximately one month and, in spite of it leaving a few dozen deceased along the town, Raquel's neighborhood had zero casualties.

Extraordinary Cesarean

Mina, being only eight years old, played with a small group of friends at the stream. They were trying to mitigate the midday heat when suddenly at the edge of the stream, next to the bushes, she discovered a snake that was getting around with difficulty due to a tumor in the middle portion of its body. She and Margarita got out of the water, going towards the reptile, they immobilized it by pressing its head down with a forked branch. Next, Mina asked Margarita to go home and bring the pocket knife she kept in her book bag. The girl didn't take long coming back. By then, Mina had already "numbed out" the animal with an accurate blow she had given it with a rock. Very carefully, she stuck the blade into its belly and her surprise was limitless when, from the serpent's stomach, she freed a toad that was still alive.

The Spotted Cow

Bernardo had worked at the *El Tigre Mine* extracting gold from the subsoil and, like most cases of people who work carrying out that trade, he contracted silicosis, an illness that is characterized by a condition of the respiratory system: coughing, difficulty breathing, paleness, and a sensation

of weakness, those were the troubles he dealt with day and night. His only hope was that his agony be brief and not as heavy. He wanted to return to the place where he had spent the best years of his life and went to where his father still lived: the *Los Pilares Ranch* (located in the foothills of the western *Sierra Madre*, two days away from Mineral de Dolores, Chihuahua). Bernardo arrived extremely ill and was resigned to merely waiting for his final days to come.

One of his modest preferences was having a warm glass of freshly expressed warm milk, but his sons quickly grew tired of satisfying him. A few days had passed without satisfying him and on that early morning, Mina, who was scarcely ten years old, heard her father ask Doña Raquel for the nourishment that satisfied his hunger (or his whim). As a response, all that could be heard was silence and the chirping of the crickets. Surely, the poor woman, exhausted by the fatigue of tending to the demanding children and to Bernardo himself, didn't even hear him.

Mina slid slowly from her bed which she shared with two of her sisters, went into the kitchen to get a small container, left her house and traversed the rustic property where thorny and stubby undergrowth grew. She crossed the stream, walked approximately one hundred meters, exactly where the palisade was located which formed the corral and where the dark silhouettes of the cows and fighting bulls were formed and which she feared so since she had seen how, with no prior provocation, one of them charged one of the ranch hands, seriously injuring him.

It was four o'clock at dawn when little Mina bordered the corral. She saw the spotted cow nearing the edge of the corral and she handled it by tying its hind legs with a rope she had found hanging from one of the tree trunks. Rhythmically squeezing the utters of "the spotted one" with her

little hands, she obtained the milk that her father wanted so and which Doña Raquel received with tears in her eyes.

In a noble manner, without grasping her actions' true dimensions, Mina tucked herself into bed once again to continue her blessed little girl's dreams.

The *Chichimoco* Satchel

Just like all the other students, Mina proudly carried her canvas satchel packed with her useful school supplies and an even greater quantity of useless items. Among the useful supplies she had: a little pocket knife, rocks to scare off dogs, and a funny and restless *chichimoco* (a small rodent of the squirrel family) that went everywhere with her, he was her secret friend whom she spent pleasant afternoons feeding, she had even shown it how to do some pirouettes; well, it's possible that the little *chichimoco* had already mastered them and she just discovered those abilities. Evidently, the company was nice for both, but there's always a fly in the ointment, and happiness is never eternal, although there are things which can extend it. One morning, the teacher, alerted by a girl from the class, checked Mina's satchel. It was a great surprise for the teacher when the famous *chichimoco* jumped in her face as she was supervising the satchel, generating tremendous yells from the governess, to the degree that they frightened the famed *chichimoco* even more and, while trying to get free, it decided to bite her hand and then swiftly flee amidst the joy and laughter of the children.

After everything settled down, Mina and the accusing girl spent the rest of the morning going through the cruel but customary punishment: kneeling at the center of the school

playground with their arms up, their wrists at shoulder level, and half a clay brick in each hand. Obviously, while the teacher lost track of them in order to continue the class, the bricks were placed on the ground, but they went back to the obligated position, once they were watched again.

There's one question yet to be answered: where did the *chichimoco* go? It was never again to be seen. Surely, for the longest time, there was loud laughter due to the teacher's loud screaming.

The Mysterious Case of the Tipless Chili Peppers

Chili Peppers, in their wide variety, are an essential condiment in Mexican cuisine, but those from the picturesque town nestled in a mountain range of Sonora were becoming victims of a strange plague.

José, the storekeeper, was seriously worried since it had been a few weeks during which the whole strings of chilis which were set out to dry lost their tips and rotted. The situation got worse due to the clients' attitude, who threatened to stock up on groceries elsewhere. The owner of the store had already placed mousetraps near the hanging clusters of chilis, also placed insecticide to the string from which they hung, he even tied up *Solovino*, his old and fierce dog, right next to the chilis. And nothing ever happened. Surely, the dog fell asleep or something happened to it because it never alerted them. The last straw was when José, on the edge of desperation, decided to stand guard in a secluded place but which had full visual scope of his damaged condiments.

Two days of boring expectation went by and nothing, it was on the third day when suddenly, the great doubt was resolved. As was accustomed, soon the children would come out from school and would go to buy sweets. José would have to tend to the young clientele but decided to give this task to his wife so that he, like a good soldier, wouldn't have to abandon his post; besides, he was beginning to like lounging around with the well-known excuse.

While the *rowdy little sparrows* asked for candy and cookies all at once, the new clerk started getting her nerves on edge, and Mina, with great caution and decided seriousness, closed in with her inseparable pocket knife in hand and started to cut one of the tips off of the new string of chilis which had just been hung up from the store's roof.

The evidence condemned her inevitably and she was taken by the offended storekeeper before the little girl's mother, as to afterwards stoically stand the unforgivable punishment. In her defense, Mina only dared say: "They looked so delicious!" In the end, once the mystery of the case of the pointless chilis was solved, Don Bernardo had to pay for various strings of chilis.

The End of the World

The place was at ease, few strangers came to that ranch nestled in the mountain range, normally, ranchers and local housewives came and went. Aside from the routine simplicity, very little important news got there; but on a certain day, news spread like fire through gunpowder, perhaps someone, with the naïve intention of having fun, had started a chain reaction which nobody could put a stop to. The rumor reached Doña Raquel's house in her neighbor's anguished voice:

“Dear Raquel, may it be God’s will, I just found out that a mule gave birth in Zacatecas! Doña Chepa’s oldest daughter came to tell me but that’s all she could say, the tears and sobs didn’t let her.”

Doña Raquel, holding 8-year-old Mina in her arms, could only say with a broken voice:

“Lord, may it be your will!”

That phrase expressed by the neighbor may seem hard to decipher for any foreign person but not for these people. All those simple townspeople kept, in the deepest part of their naïve hearts, the hope that such a prophecy never be fulfilled.

Mules, as we all know, are hybrids born from the gene mixing of two different, although similar, species: from a donkey and a mare, and they turn out to be sterile; in other words, they cannot have offspring. On the other hand, Zacatecas is a state belonging to the Republic of Mexico which, due to its name beginning with the last letter of the alphabet, one may conclude (through special logic, born from ignorance) that it was the farthest place and only in those faraway places could such strange and incomprehensible things happen. Thus, *a mule that gave birth in Zacatecas could only be a sure sign of the end of the world.*

Once the inconsolable neighbor left, Doña Raquel started to gather her children, since she couldn’t conceive reaching the end of the world without all of them:

“Rosario, Roselia, Alejandro, Francisca, Clotilde, Angelina, Franciso, Minaaaa!”

She called roll shouting out while she held little 2-month-old *Tachito* in her arms and Mina stood at her side.

Papá Bernardo, as was usual, had left before sunup in order to take the animals to graze and, precisely that day, he would return close to six in the afternoon so he could take advantage of the little daylight left and finish reinforcing the roof sheets.

It was a relatively easy task, and from the day before, he left everything ready: nails, hammer, and the bottle tops for said job; the ladder was placed at the rear of the house.

It was still two hours away from his return, so Mina took advantage of the confusion that was caused by everyone's yelling and running around and went to the kitchen to get some flour tortillas, she put a little *machaca*³ with potatoes on them which was in a frying pan and left the house.

At 9 pm, the neighborhood was much calmer, or perhaps it was resigned in light of the divine plan, but Bernardo and Raquel's family, as well as some solidary neighbors, got worried and looked for Mina. Lighting the way with torches and fearing the worst, among other things that she may have been attacked by some animal, one of the older brothers went home to mitigate the thirst caused by fatigue and fear when suddenly, he heard noises and intermittent sobs coming from the roof. He ran out of the house, went up the ladder, and found Mina, snuggled up in the little dove's house; her reasoning: the end of the world would never reach her in such a high place.

³ *Machaca* is a typical dish mainly consisting of seasoned and cooked shredded meat.

Discovering Orange Dye

Whenever Papá Bernardo managed to make enough cheese, dried meats, and other products, he would load up a few mules and together with eight to ten men, would start a journey to Dolores, Chihuahua, where he would deliver, after previous arrangement, his merchandise to various shops. It was a tiresome and sometimes dangerous trip, since there was always a chance of finding some prowlers; however, on that occasion, things went without a hitch.

As could be expected, said trips would also be taken advantage of to stock up on supplies that were necessary on the ranch, such was the case with clothing, shoes, toys for the kids, and gifts. On this occasion, the main objective was a piece or roll of fabric for making bedsheets, pillowcases, dresses, shirts, etcetera. Obviously, a great amount of similar clothes, since the roll (various meters long) was of the same fabric in its complete length.

For the person in charge, it was a difficult task, since he, or she, had to choose a print that could adapt to both kids and adults, men and women. Bernardo didn't make a great effort nor did he lose much time on the task, so upon returning from such an anticipated trip, Raquel's frustration couldn't be greater: it was a great big roll of a dim colored, dull canvas.

As always, Mina spared no detail and observed the fabric without making any comments. Just like all children her age, Mina was driven by her great energy for carrying out any activity, so she came out to her house's yard and invited her sisters to play hide and seek. It was Mina's turn to hide and she had no better choice than the oak that was right in front of her. The voice of "ready" was given and with

feline agility, she climbed up the rustic tree. It lost a small fragment of its bark leaving it nude.

After the unsuccessful search, Mina came down from the tree in order to restart the game, but one of her sisters noticed a stain that she had on the front of her blouse. Looking for an explanation, they looked towards the tree, it immediately stood out. Mina ran to the nearby stream, took off her garment, and rinsed it but the stain wouldn't come out. She put her blouse on again, wet and downcast, she sat down. After thinking a while of what had happened, she jumped up and yelled: "I've got it! I've got it!", upon the questioning faces of her sisters.

Doña Raquel, still pensive and looking at the unattractive roll of fabric, was abruptly questioned by Mina: "Mamá, can you give me a little bit of the fabric?" Doña Raquel answered without even turning around: "Take as much as you need." With the scissors, and any way she was able to, she cut a piece of approximately thirty square centimeters. She went back to the oak and cut some pieces of bark off, she put them in a bucket with water and also deposited the piece of fabric there. The next day, when she checked on her experiment, she found just what she was expecting: the canvas dyed evenly in a nice orange color.

Days after, Doña Raquel was making garments for her girls and husband with fabric of that eye-catching orange color and which, rightfully so, Papá Bernardo had to wear.

Money Begets Money

Well into the morning, Mamá Raquel yelled:

“Mina, look for your brother, Alejandro, and bring me the groceries on this list from the Chinese people’s store!”

They took the bag made of pita (agave fiber), the list, and two gold coins; a fifty-peso coin (commonly known as an *alazana*) and another smaller five-peso coin, and they said goodbye amid playing and running.

Through the route they chose, there was a small precipice and it was there where an oversight made Alejandro drop the five-peso coin which went on a free-fall with the boy’s astonished gaze. Mina, who remained unmoved, observed her older brother’s passiveness and took matters into her own hands:

“Don’t you worry, money begets money.”

And putting words into action, she threw the *alazana* which rolled and rolled, at the same time that she ran after it; but the coin was faster and she couldn’t catch up to it. They spent the rest of the morning looking for them, without luck not on their side. Sad and heavy-hearted, they came back to get heavily scolded by their mother.

Mina, more embarrassed than unsatisfied, returned to the precipice in the afternoon. It started to get dark when one of the last rays of light entered her pupils after being reflected on one of the coins that was scarce centimeters from the other one. Wow, does money EVER beget money! No doubt perseverance gets us closer to success than intelligence but, what if we combine both?

A Pair of Shoes for Mamá Raquel

What most stimulated the imagination of the inhabitants of the *Los Pilares* Ranch was the distance to big towns or cities, as well as the difficulties and dangers that came from traversing the mountain range which connects the states of Chihuahua and Sonora.

A common activity was the preparation of hides for elaborating diverse items, mainly from cattle and deer that were sacrificed for human consumption. The tanning of these hides in order to turn them into cowhide or suede consisted of exposing the skins to diverse procedures, using hydrated lime from a nearby deposit or ash, in order to give them the special textures.

Mina, after observing these crafts, knew the basics to carry them out and at ten years of age, she had taken on the responsibility of providing shoes for her mother, obviously also her own shoes, so as soon as she noticed her shoes were deteriorated, she would immediately start to make her ones.

She needed a pair of shoe lasts that Papá Lalo would get her from the city of Dolores and on some device called *patas de fierro* (iron legs) she would place the leather until it acquired the desired shape; she would sew cowhide soles on the machine which she would cut using a metallic template; she would paste two or three semi-circles from the same leather together to act like a heel and then one or two coats of black or brown dye to give them the final touch and, ready, Mamá Raquel had new shoes!

Chopping Firewood

It was dawn when Doña Raquel asked Alejandro (who was 17 years old and the oldest of the males) to get up and cut some firewood in order to stoke the fire from the fire pit. She had to make breakfast for everyone and he, who was never an early riser or had much initiative, just turned over and continued sleeping.

Mina, tired of waiting for her brother to follow the indication, stealthily and behind her mother's back, went to the place where Papá Lalo zealously stored a dangerous double-edged ax, which only he used since he feared someone else could get hurt. At her twelve years of age, she had already seen him use it on countless occasions and she didn't feel it was *that big a deal*, so she carefully retrieved it from its place and carried out the task. After a long absence, she came back with a load of firewood; while her brother, Alejandro, continued in a pleasant slumber.

A Wake in Chinatown

In the mineral town of *El Tigre*, there were three different social groups, each with extremely different customs and habits. The community populated by the Americans had granted the concession for exploitation and administration of the resources extracted from the mines and their stay in that place depended exclusively on taking advantage of said assignment, of course they owned the product; they also hired and established the workers' salaries, but when the mines stopped being self-financing, since the lodes had

run out, they simply abandoned them and returned to their country with their coffers filled with the golden metal.

Another was the community of Chinese immigrants: men who were very reserved when dealing with others, hard-working, clean, and organized. They made commerce with different products such as fruits, vegetables, and cereals that they grew themselves. Many formed homes with nationals but, even under that status, they had to abandon the country due to their condition as illegal immigrants. Credit-worthy sources assure that when they returned to their country, women who had had descendance with them, went with them of their free will, but when they got there, they opted to return due to the bad treatment they received.

The third group, was the community of Mexicans. As is natural, it was populated by the greatest number of settlers who carried out diverse jobs such as agriculture, cattle raising, and diverse trades, among them, mining. This last one was extremely dangerous, since whoever carried it out, almost always ended their days gravely affected by silicosis, tuberculosis, or even both illnesses.

At fourteen years-old, Mina and her family, lived considerably near Chinatown. At night, the chords of a string instrument which accompanied the voice of an anonymous and in tune but monotonous singer, got to her home. On a certain afternoon, the uniform and habitual serenade changed slightly, but perceptibly, giving way to a sad melody. Mina, sharpening her senses, could tell that, at a distance, people dressed in black were congregated at an address. She wanted to share the news with her friends who, at that precise time, would be gathered in the town square and headed there. In the town square, they agreed to go to where all of those people gathered. Curiosity instigated them but the fear of awakening some kind of rejection from the Asians

stopped them; finally, they got over the audacity and full of resolve, they headed for the place where the singing came from. They wanted to learn a bit more of that race's culture.

They were received at the door of that home by an older person who bowed and invited them in with signs of respect and attentions that they were not accustomed to. The person assigned a place for each of them, and they received gestures of kindness and condescending smiles from those attending.

After reasonable time, the visitors left, not without first being invited for the day after the burial, which they surely attended. Once the funeral rites had finished, one of the older Chinese people neared the young girls and thanked them for having accompanied them, assuring them that that had been the greatest demonstration of respect which due to that sad circumstance they had received from the Mexican people.

Dog Oil

Bernardo was going through the most difficult moments of his illness and silicosis showed it was close to taking one more life; his lungs no longer responded and, although he tried to desperately inhale great mouthfuls of air, he seemed to choke due to the lack of oxygen. Something similar to what happens to an unfortunate fish out of water.

The entire family suffered with him, most of all since they couldn't do much in regards to the permanent deterioration of his health. Hope was rekindled when a neighbor gave Doña Raquel the news that Jacinto had arrived in town, a man who enjoyed of great prestige as a medicine-man. Without waiting, even a minute longer, they asked one of the men from the house to find him and bring him

as soon as possible. So, it was. The old herbalist didn't take long to arrive and was soon put up to speed on the case. With a grim gesture and great restraint, he checked the ill man while he asked a question or two. Finally, with a deep voice and the attitude of a wiseman, he said:

"This man is so sick that the best remedies at my disposal are ineffective. The rehabilitation of lungs that are so damaged is very difficult, I've seen various cases with such an advanced evolution..."

He paused and sentenced:

"There is but one remedy that is capable of reverting the harm... —while he nodded with his head he asserted—, dog oil. But, be careful! It's so strong for the conditions of the patient that you must only give him, once a day, what fits on the tip of teaspoon."

Mina would have done anything in order to save her father, and so she did. On some occasion, she saw her mother extract and heat up the fat from a chicken she was about to cook. She stored it in the form of oil, saying: "this is chicken *enjundia*. It's meant to be rubbed on the chest and it's good for treating bronchitis." How hadn't she thought of this sooner? Her immediate reaction was to look for a fat dog. She found it quickly, petted it, and it let itself be loved. It followed her and stayed by her side while she drove two stakes at the foot of a tree that grew behind the house.

She tied two ropes to the stakes and to the animal's hind legs. Subsequently, she passed a loop through a thick branch of the tree which she later tied to the innocent dog's neck. After, she pulled and pulled, and when her strength was about to give up on her, the noble quadruped exhaled its last breath. While the animal was still warm, with her kit-

chen knife and great difficulty, she took its skin, as she had seen the ranchers do with the cattle that they sacrificed. She extracted enough fat to fill a small can she found in the cupboard. Moving away from the house, she dug a large hole, as deep as she could and buried the unfortunate canine. She melted the fat with the heat of the firewood which was always kept lit in the old stove, and soon after, she entered the room to deliver the promising remedy to her troubled mother, who without much ado, began the treatment.

The little sheets of the calendar that was nailed to the wall continued to fall, one by one, and inevitably, a few days later, inconsolable, a widow and nine orphans bid Papá Bernardo a last farewell.

Second Part: Adult Stage

Dumb Trini

Trinidad was a lumberjack who lived in *El Tigre*. His thick and strong arms made his activity easier and although he had a certain degree of mental retardation, this was not an impediment for him to carry out the activity with which he honorably made a living. He would be at the service of anyone who needed firewood, so there were lots of people who needed it; but he specifically looked for Mina because she paid him with neckties that belonged to her late husband, Dr. Julio Holguín, who was accustomed to dressing neatly in a suit, matching with eye-catching neckties.

Trini's work was a blessing, especially during the crude and snowy winter, since he was the person who helped maintain heat in the homes; however, Mina's joy didn't last long since she soon ran out of neckties. Resourcefully, she cut up an old silk dress and from the fragments, she made various neckties. When dumb Trini returned with the necessary firewood, he immediately noticed the difference in the quality of his pay and he refused it irately. She had no other choice but to pay him with food that she had just prepared and which he accepted, though not so willingly, but he didn't return in quite a while.

Mina asserted, with conclusive proof, that "there's no fool who would eat fire" or who would "buy a pig in a poke."

Starting a Town and an Honorable Activity

The *Yaquis*, indigenous people of north western Mexico, were known for being a brave and decisive people that did not tolerate the presence of the Spanish conquistadors and that fought in defense of its territory. There are even records in the CDI-Mex⁴ archives which confirm the confrontations between the two in 1607, in which the natives ended up being victorious.

The *Yoris* (white people) continued exerting pressure over the *Yoremes* (those originating from the *Mayo* and the *Yaqui* people) but, first by way of the Jesuit missionaries, and of the Franciscans afterwards (in 1741), an uprising was carried out, headed by Ignacio Muni, Calixto, Baltazar, and Esteban, which ended with the signing of a treaty in which the right of the *Yaquis* to maintain their customs and form of government was recognized, as well as the total possession of their lands and the right to bear arms.

Nevertheless, starting in 1767, the main problems for the *Yaquis* and which have continued to this day, began: the migration of settlers and the progressive dispossession of their territory, though for the latter, there are antecedents of other rebellions such as those from 1825 and from 1852—the first, headed by Juan Banderas (Ignacio Jusacamea), who proclaimed the independence of the Indigenous Confederation of Sonora and was processed in 1832 along with the leaders of the *Opatas* and *Mayos* ethnic groups, who integrated the confederation—; this last one wasn't suffocated but until 1868 with the almost total extermination of the *Yaquis* and the *Mayos*.

⁴ See for more information: http://www.cdi.gob.mx/print.php?id_section=359 (consulted on November 7, 2007).

The guerilla groups continued and during the *Porfiriato*,⁵ the offensive was intensified: thousands of *Yaquis* were sold as slaves in the Southeast region of the country. Álvaro Obregón promised to return their territory if they participated on the side of the government in the revolutionary conflict, but he went back on his word and in 1929, there were new uprisings. In 1937, Lázaro Cárdenas ratified their possession of a territory of 485,235 hectares and afterwards, with the construction of the *La Angostura* (finished in 1941) and the *Oviachic* (started in 1945 and finished in 1952) dams, the *Yaquis* lost the essential resource of water, due to which they had to massively migrate to the urban centers of the state.⁶

Since the territory of the state of Sonora was so extensive and uninhabited, upon conclusion of the La Angostura dam and with the *Oviachick* dam not yet started, the government, instead of economically compensating the workers, chose to found a new community which they called *Irrigación* —now called Villa Juárez, the municipal head or capital—, and supplied them with rustic stretches of land which they were to prepare as farmlands in what is now the municipality of Benito Juárez.

This is how our first settlers got to the great plains (extremely near the Pacific Coast), on December 4, 1942.

Guillermina Banda Ramírez (Mina) had become a widow upon the passing of Dr. Julio Holguín López, due to a devious homicide —the result of a decision taken in a litigation carried out when the doctor worked as Justice of the Peace in his community of *El Tigre*—. She was invited by her sister, Francisca, her brother-in-law, Mr. Humberto Pomposo and other relatives, to join the new *Irrigación* community.

⁵ Porfiriato is the name given to the period in which General Porfirio Díaz ruled as president of Mexico.

⁶ Source: <http://www.elimparcial.com/buscar/traernotanew.asp?NumNota=448621> (consulted on November 7, 2007).

It was 1946, she was 31 years old, and had eight children (Alejandro, the youngest, was but nine months old).

Mina had learned from her husband, the first lessons of a difficult trade, in spite of her mettle and audacity, she hadn't wanted to get closer to his medical activities no matter his insistence. On a certain occasion on which he was tending to Angelina, Mina's sister, giving birth and motivated by the protection of the parturient woman's modesty, his repeated request did the trick: she took the obstetrician's place while he directed her from the patient's headboard. That new experience left her astounded, so much that afterwards, she was the one looking to expand her experience helping her husband, reading his books, and exchanging impressions.

After a year and a half of obstetric practice, in which it was she who tended to the patients in labor, the ill-fated attempt on her husband's life happened. She dedicated full-time to the learned activity and obtained an honest and decent *modus vivendi* to provide for her large family. In fact, on the very day they arrived at the *Irrigación* neighborhood, they asked her to tend to a case of childbirth. It all concluded happily with the birth of a male and an economic earning of a hundred and twenty-five pesos and after that came fame, prestige, and respect from people of the entire region for Mina, "the nurse." Three childbirths, on average, per week was her quota in *Irrigación*, *Batevito*, *Jecopaco*, *El Alto*, *Agua Blanca*, and other communities.

Not everyone paid with money, there were those who paid in kind, like our ancestor's swapping: goods for a service or goods for other equivalent goods. Butchers paid with their product at the price of 40 cents a kilo, milkmen also at that price per liter, the baker, the grocer. The older children would go daily to these establishments in order to pick up

the merchandise, the owner would write down in a notebook what he or she had given and would discount it until the debt was settled.

This way, Mina contributed to the growth of the new town, just like various generations of men and women who have come from that place.

The Brick Kitchens

Recently arrived in the *Irrigación* community, Mina and her children stayed in an adjacent little house located on a plot belonging to Humberto Pomposo and his wife, Francisca, Mina's sister. They were rooms made from adobe which were independent from the main house. They lived there a few years, until the passing of the thoughtful brother-in-law, because Francisca let them know it was necessary to vacate the property. Mina asked for a bit of time in order to build on a plot that the neighborhood association had given her, and her sister accepted.

Truthfully, Mina was hesitating to stay since the inhabitants of *Jecopaco* offered her 20 hectares and a plot of land to build her house on since they considered her an excellent human resource for taking care of the inhabitants' health. The condition set to benefit her with the plots was for her to live in the place, but the people from *Irrigación* found out and matched the offer. The decision to stay there was mainly due to the fact that her children had already enrolled in school.

Some weeks before, the first outbreak of what would soon become the Asian Flu epidemic (and which claimed many victims in the region). This fact increased her work as an assistant nurse for the medical interns who rendered their

services in the small and insufficient local clinic, the same clinic that had been enabled by the Medical Association of Sonora and afterwards integrated into the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) of that sector. Aside from the institutional work, Mina made time to tend to patients that were not right-holders, to whom she administered the parenteral treatments that the doctors indicated in private practice.

The interest in safeguarding her neighbors' lives as well as the pressing need to build a home for her children motivated her to work hard, day after day, her economy improved this way, making it possible for her to buy construction material for her home: but something peculiar started to happen: the bricks disappeared from the plot where she was building and like magic, new brick kitchens would appear in the neighbors' homes. Tired of the situation, she put up a sign next to the material which read: Please stop stealing my bricks to make your brick kitchens. I need them to build my house. Sincerely: Guillermina, the nurse."

An instant solution! The bricks no longer disappeared. Was it due to the embarrassment of having been caught or the fact that everyone had finished building their respective brick kitchens? No matter. What's important is that Mina was finally able to build her family home.

The Valley Supplier

Five years had passed since they arrived in *Irrigación*, Mina was visiting her brother Francisco's home when a truck with diverse merchandise stopped by. "The Valley Supplier" was the name it displayed. It was driven by its owner, Don Pedro Alvarado Medina. She approached it and bought a pair of little boots for her little Alejandro, but as she looked

over the merchandise, the salesman looked at her intently. Afterwards, he continued to visit the place interested in seeing her again, but to no avail.

On certain occasion, Don Pedro privately told Manuelita, Francisco's wife, that he was in love with his sister-in-law; she knew that Mina didn't seem to be indifferent, either, so with her intervention, they began a friendship and after a while, a relationship that lasted a few months.

After suspecting being pregnant, Mina told Pedro the news, who was obviously taken by surprise; nonetheless, they agreed to wait until they were sure in order to decide what to do. Around those days, Pedro met with Maximiliano, another young man that was interested in Mina and told him the recently-learned news. Max responded:

“Are you sure it's yours?”

Pedro preferred to not go into detail and left, but doubt had been planted in him, so when he saw Mina again, he expressed his doubt bringing her up to speed, she answered:

“If you doubt me, I think it would be best that you don't return.”

He had a secret and at that inconvenient and uncomfortable moment he decided to let her know: He was married. Her castle of dreams fell apart from that moment on since she felt deceived, tricked, and betrayed.

For a while now, Pedro and his wife, Maria Rodríguez, had been facing difficulties in their relationship but their son, Francisco Javier, kept them together and with no intention to separate. Maria also had her own truck for selling merchandise, but it was driven by a hired driver and precisely he, was the root of the matrimony's conflict, until one day Pedro caught them in the middle of their romance and,

by mutual agreement, they decided to get divorced. The separation process was easy and brief and, once concluded, Pedro looked for Mina to offer her to formalize their relationship, he committed to support her by raising her eight children and of course, the one they had together: Héctor Manuel. Mrs. Raquel, Mina's mother, gave her approval; but Gilberto, her oldest son who was already 18-years-old, adamantly opposed the couple's intention. He even ran away from home and went to the city of Cananea where his uncle, Ramón Holguín López, lived; this fact started a family conflict which ended with Mina's refusal to marry.

A year later, Pedro married a young woman who was 21 years younger than him, Oralia Agüero, with whom he had nine children. He died in 1982.

Héctor Manuel integrated into the family as what he was: a child of the loving Mina, and he was taken care of and loved by all his siblings.

Meritorious Gratification

Nature made it so that most childbirths happen during the night and dawn, just like that dark and cold one during which, approximately at five in the morning, they knocked at her door. She looked out the window and could make out the silhouette of a man and two horses. She asked what they wanted and the tall and robust indigenous man said:

“My woman is going to give birth.”

Mina, who was always far-sighted in relation to these contingencies, came out as quickly as possible. The man helped her get on the horse and they set off without even asking where they were headed to. They traveled for nearly

an hour and finally arrived at a shack, where a woman lay in a gynecological position, with the facial expressions of pain and fatigue. There was an indigenous man acting as a *tenedor*,⁷ which consists of applying abdominal pressure to the parturient woman whenever there's a uterine contraction, while the empirical midwife tried, with her bare hands, to expand the birth canal.

When they noticed the presence of the new arrivals, Mina politely asked for permission to examine the patient. The request was answered reluctantly, since it was considered an intrusion.

With a kind expression and slow but controlled movements, which came from the skill obtained from experience, Mina carried out her work, she asked some questions and made a quick inspection. She applied the Leopold maneuvers in order to determine the situation, presentation, attitude, and position of the fetus. She put on some sterile latex gloves while she said some words of encouragement; then she proceeded to determine the degree of dilation and effacement and concluded that the expulsion of the product was imminent and, with deep equanimity, expressed her view aloud that it would still take over an hour for the childbirth to happen.

She knew that those people would only hinder the procedure and, judging by their dirty aspect, they may even cause some infection that could put the child's or the mother's lives in danger. She asked the couple of helpers if they had had anything to eat during the night and they both shook their heads. She kindly instructed the owner of the home to provide them something for breakfast and

⁷ *Tenedor* is a name that was unofficially given to a person who would aid a midwife during childbirth. It comes from the verb *tener* which means *have*, as in helping to *have* or deliver a child.

the three of them left the improvised expulsion ward. They went through a courtyard until they got to the stove where water was boiling in a bucket. The husband took some food from a small cupboard which he gave them to prepare and returned with the water to where the birth scene was being carried out; precisely, at the moment he was entering the room, the baby's head came out. He placed the recipient on a small table and assisted in the miracle of childbirth of his firstborn. Once Mina had used a rubber bulb to aspirate the liquid contained in the newborn's nose and throat with sterilized surgical instruments, she pinched and cut the umbilical cord and the child breathed spontaneously. She dried the residue from the amniotic liquid that covered the baby and before she wrapped the child up, she let the midwife and the helper know with a loud yell:

“The child is almost here!”

Exchanging gazes, they hurried the egg taco down with flour tortillas that they had in their hands and calmly traversed the courtyard. They saw the man with the child in his arms and at a distance, saw the placenta and the chorion being expelled.

The annoyance was evident in both of their faces, but Mina calmed them down assuring them that thanks to the care they had given the woman during the night, everything had gone smoothly and easily and that since she had no merit, they should accept the payment for the childbirth. Happy and smiling, they received the two hundred pesos and left placing themselves at her disposal while Mina did the cleaning in order to conclude her service and make time to watch for any complication.

When everything was completely in order, she gave the new mother and the husband routine indications, and she

asked to borrow a saddled horse in order to get back. She obviously refused to receive any payment. Quiet, as the man had remained at all times, he accompanied her back to her house and, without saying goodbye or thank you, he left.

Two weeks after, he returned mounting his horse and pulling behind him two mules loaded with a sack of beans, two sacks of corn, a pig, and various chickens; he delivered everything together with one thousand, eight hundred pesos and said:

“They’re for you. Thank you.”

And then he left.

The Girl Named Basilia

By 1953, Mina’s work had increased to the point that she was unable to cope with tending to childbirths, the nursing work at the small IMSS clinic, and caring for her nine children. Her sister, Francisca, called Basilia —a widow with no children—, who immediately responded to the calling and travelled from the *El Tigre* community to be in charge of her dear *comadre*’s⁸ children. Basilia was a slim woman with a moody face, glasses, a slicked-back hairdo and she never used a drop of make-up; she looked as if she were always in a bad mood. Although, after all, she had the right to be so since it’s not easy to deal with so many mischievous children who surely made her life complicated.

Her loyalty to Mina and the painstaking attention with which she cared for the children were infallible, and thus, she earned everyone’s respect. She took special care

⁸ Comadre is a term given to the mother of someone’s godchildren. It can be interpreted as co-mothers.

of her goddaughter, Mona, and of Alejandro whom called her *Nina* —short for *madrina*, which means godmother—, though afterwards, all of them called her that.

All the children were intrigued by the fact that she had no children, and whenever they saw a heron fly overhead, they tried to cheer her up with a rhyme that they recited in chorus since, according to a myth, it was supposedly a stork that brought newborn babies from Paris:

Brown heron, bring a little girl for my Nina.
Brown heron, bring a little girl for my Nina.
Brown heron...⁹

They would stop singing until the bird was out of sight or until their Nina Basilia came out with her sandal in hand and angrily yelled for them to be quiet.

Their Nina was of firm customs and beliefs and on an occasion that it rained copiously, or rained cats and dogs as they would say in her hometown and with lots of thunder, she took off Alejandro's clothes and took him out into the storm in her arms. Under the rain, she uttered an incomprehensible prayer as, in her other hand, she moved a sharp knife to both of her sides in order to cut the rain. To everyone's amazement, it stopped almost immediately.

Nina Basilia got to advanced age and passed away surrounded by those who never stopped being her children, whom she treated, cared for, and loved as if they were her own.

⁹ In Spanish: Garza morena trae una niña para mi *Nina*.

Mina, an Angel of Gratitude

There is definitely nothing more flattering than receiving demonstrations of affection and acknowledgement for the actions carried out, and Mina had the opportunity of enjoying them.

In December of 2005, the town of Benito Juarez, Sonora, offered a tribute in her honor presided by the authorities of the town council, as well as relatives, friends, and representatives of diverse sectors of the community.

Emotional speeches of gratitude were given in recognition of her labor which, directly or indirectly, influenced the lives of many people from the region, especially those that were sheltered by her love. At the end of the event, she was awarded a framed document which read:

Acknowledgement for *Mrs. Guillermina Banda Ramírez*, for her great career as a nurse spanning a lifetime, always being of great help for all of us; a true story of service and respect.

Mina said goodbye to life on Earth in 2007, at the age of 92. She remained lucid until the end of her days and had the firm conviction that human beings are essentially good.

And in spite of her absence, she continues to be our *gold Mina*.

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We have all, at one time or another, sat down to listen to anecdotes or imaginary adventures of our elderly. Mina de Oro (Gold Mine/Gold Mina) is the compilation of the nostalgic narrations of a woman whose circumstances, in an indelible manner, marked the history of a town, Villa Juárez, in the state of Sonora. The simple and day-to-day experiences of Mina are encouraging examples for those of us who believe in clear objectives and have firm convictions of achieving what we yearn for, but above all, of becoming infected by the infinite love of others and of what our memory is able to treasure of a heart of gold.

Héctor Manuel Alvarado Banda

Was born in Villa Juárez, Sonora, Mexico. He has a master's degree in the field of medicine and, due to his vocation to serve, he has been dedicated to Medical Education. He is an adopted son of the state of Colima where he has worked for over 30 years under the wing of his beloved Faculty of Medicine of the University of Colima. He has been accompanied by art in its diverse expressions and Gold Mina (Mina de oro) is his first literary work published; in it, he manifests his humanistic vocation by way of true-life short stories.



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