

WOMAN
OF THE
OLD ROADS

**WOMAN
OF THE
OLD ROADS**

WRITTEN BY

Juan Rodríguez Pérez



SIMIAN EDITIONS

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Printed in the United States of America

FIRST ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

ISBN 978-1-7341142-0-1

Translation and design by Joey Carney

Cover photography by Faviola Torres Agüero

This work was originally published on June 6, 2016 in Lima, Peru, under the title *Mujer de los viejos caminos*.

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TO JUANA PÉREZ DEL ÁGUILA

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THE TEACHER

HE WANTED to be an agricultural engineer his whole life. First he told his older brother, then his mother, and finally his father. But his father, with austere face and frown, told him that was fine, that he had great aspirations, but that he would have to wait for the farm to produce a little more, “So that, in the meantime, why don’t you teach? They need a teacher at Santa Rosa de Mishollo.”

“That’s far away, Dad.”

“It would only be temporary. Meanwhile, you could save money to get to Tingo María and you could apply to school. You’ll be an engineer. Besides, son, you just turned eighteen.”

This year he made new friends with others who arrived to give classes, and the students treated him like an older brother who guided them. So, even though it hadn’t been his intention, at the end of the school year he told his father that he would stay another year to finish saving money for college. But it ended up being three years. When he turned twenty-one, he fell in love with Jenith, a teacher transferred from Sauce who had studied in Tarapoto and was assigned to teach in Santa Rosa de Mishollo. At first he didn’t pay much attention to her, but when he saw her smile and shyly pronounce some words, he was dazzled. And from that moment he thought he would stay another year teaching. On weekends he appeared with a horse and invited her to ride around the edge of Don Elías Centeno’s

land, tasting sugarcane juice or ventisho. He told her about his plans to study in Tingo María to be an engineer and she pretended not to believe him because he always finished his stories by shrugging his shoulders.

His father realized that his son was about to cut short his aspirations, so before he started his fourth year of teaching, he came up with the money and let him know that in a week he had to go to Tingo María to apply to the university and be an engineer, as that was his greatest wish. Douglas, as the kid was called, was sad and made love with Jenith that night. He promised that as soon as he finished his degree, he would return to marry her.

“Do you promise to look for me when you come back?” asked Jenith, rolling around on the straw. “They might send me to another town.”

Then Douglas, closing his eyes and kissing her hands, told her with complete certainty:

“I promise.”

In Tingo María there wasn't a vacancy. Then a professor told him that while he waited he should study in the same university to be an agricultural technician, until there was a possibility to study to be an engineer like he wanted. For the three years that his studies lasted, he worked hard to gain the esteem of his professors, so that they would recommend him as soon as he graduated. He did the work that they entrusted to him with great effort. If the grass needed to be cut, he did it. If branches needed to be trimmed, he fearlessly climbed the tree. Then he gained the confidence of the rector of the university and the envy of his classmates. Douglas was a worthwhile aspiring agricultural engineer. Every evening, when classes were over, he ran to the river to bathe and then headed towards the

classrooms of the university where they were teaching a class that interested him. So they were able to see him in different classrooms, taking notes, asking questions, giving the effort, creating confusion among the professors, who thought that he was just another student from the university. When his academic training was finished, the rector told him that he could continue studying at the university to become an engineer and achieve his dreams. Douglas told him that he wanted to make the most of the break and return to his town to show his father the degree that he had received and to tell him that he was on the way to achieving his goal.

“There will be a vacancy waiting for you,” the rector told him, considering the effort that he put forth as a student and his desire to get ahead.

When he arrived in town, he was received with great happiness. They butchered some pigs and invited the town to congratulate the new agricultural technician. He wanted to ask about Jenith, but it wasn't necessary: his closest friends were responsible for informing him that she had returned to Sauce, where they offered her a position as principal. Douglas became sad; but the festivities and the happiness of his family kept him from shedding any tears.

The next day the celebration continued until very late. One of his uncles, the brother of his father, director of a school in the town of Juñao, congratulated him and was grateful that he had returned to practice in the place where he was born.

“In three months I have to return to the university, Uncle,” the boy said, squeezing his hand. “No one can stop me from becoming an engineer. I was just waiting for the vacancy that I've earned to open up.”

“Congratulations, son! You’re the pride and joy of your parents.”

Through the entire week, he was smiling at every towns-person that congratulated him. When his uncle was leaving, he leaned close and told him quietly:

“Just in case, if you want to work, even for a year, until you save a little money, in my school we need a teacher with your qualifications. The degree of engineer requires a lot of expensive books and instruments that you won’t be able to buy if you don’t have anything saved up. Besides, you have experience. Think about it, son!”

“Afterwards, nothing will stop me from continuing my studies,” Douglas said.

Juñao was far from any river town. One got there by going up and down the mountain that was across from the Huallaga River in front of Huinguillo. He realized that it was a great sacrifice, but it was worth the effort to achieve his objective. These were the stones that blocked him from his goal. That’s where he found out that Jenith had married a logger. Then his eyes filled with tears when he remembered his promise and he spent the night drinking cane liquor. He was twenty-five and was the most important teacher in the region. “Don’t let me fool you,” he told his coworkers, “I won’t be with you very long.” But he fell in love again, and this time not with just one but with everyone; that made the job easier. So, he was in Zenaida Pichis’ arms, he caressed Estefita Tarazona’s breasts, kissed Clara Mozombite’s lips, and slept in Florida Tuanama’s skirts. Douglas was fascinated by the way he was able to captivate the young teachers. Could it be his youth or his aspirations of becoming an engineer? He didn’t know the answer. The only thing that he knew was that they loved him. He

soon found himself in a mess when he made love to Erma Sifuentes, a girl recently arrived from Lima and furthermore the girlfriend of a young dealer who sold pigs in the slaughterhouses of Juanjui and Bellavista.

The family of the youth swore to get revenge, and his uncle, the director, helped him escape, sending him to a school much farther than his native Tocache, where his aspirations were. There they proposed that he be a professor for training teachers. At first he didn't want to, preferring to return to his town to go back to Tingo María and continue with his plan to be an engineer. But it was enough when they told him that Jenith, the teacher that had made him crazy since he had turned twenty-one and who made love like no one else, was another one of the teachers who gave these lectures, for him to put off his return to the university classrooms. He walked with her through different villages and even though she had a two-year-old daughter who never left her side, he thought up a way to show her his intentions.

"I've never forgotten," he told her when he met her alone.

But Jenith didn't want to know anything about it. She had forgotten now and only wanted to keep a sweet memory. She told him this shortly before resigning from the next cycle.

Before two years had passed, Douglas got mixed up with a student whom he got pregnant, and no one could do anything to save him from the situation. He could only escape as far away as possible, where they would not be able to find him. That's how he ended up working for a lumber company deep in the jungle. He only left at the end of each month. Thanks to his knowledge and abilities, he became a foreman. Before this happened, it had been

another three years. He was about to turn thirty, and his aspirations of becoming an engineer were dissipating. His bosses, who were Brazilians and Canadians, valued him greatly. That is why he supervised the making of the main cabins where the bosses and their visiting families stayed. Perhaps because of this, taking advantage of the fact that they held him in such high esteem, he dared ask for a raise for himself and for one of the men under him. The only thing he got was fired. He returned to his beloved Tocache unnoticed.

He didn't want to talk for a long time. Now no one remembered his aspirations. He got into the habit of walking for long stretches and drinking cane liquor at The Junction, Fat María's store, where he met John Clark Shupingahua, Russo Chujutalli, Isidro Tuanama, and Rosendo Apolonio, who talked with him about the boom of the coca leaf business.

"You, you're almost an engineer, you know how to work, you have experience. You've been a teacher and you know how to speak well. Do you want to help us? It's only temporary. Besides, everyone will respect you, no one will mess with you."

Douglas smiled and only then convinced himself that he would never be an engineer.

AUNT LUZMILA

THE WOMAN appeared in the morning, when the sun was getting stronger over us and my father was spreading a sack of coca leaves over the patio to let them dry.

My mother was holding her broom and keeping back the dogs. I saw the woman arrive puffing and panting, dressed in a white dress and a navy blue blouse. She held dark sunglasses in her hands, and a red shawl was protecting her hair. My father raised his eyes and, shielding them with his hands, tried to make out the figure that was getting closer and closer, recognizing her face and her scandalous smile that vibrated among us like an explosion. It was Aunt Luzmila, my mother's sister, the one who left before my grandparents died, trying to get away from this place that had wearied and consumed her.

She hugged my mother with a euphoria that she hadn't even expected herself. She told my father, "How are you, Arturo?" and gave me a kiss on my face. My mother wanted to cry, but she turned her face to one side and lifted her skirt to dry the sweat on her forehead.

She sat on a fallen trunk, crossed her legs, and Dad looked the other way. Aunt Luzmila's legs made him feel ashamed. Mom told her, "Come, come drink something, you must be thirsty." She asked about everyone, Uncle Arnaldo, Margarita, Esteban, and Matías, the little

one that my grandparents took care of since his parents had died.

“You won’t believe it,” said my mother. “He’s all grown up.”

“But I only left a couple years ago.”

“No, dear, it’s been four years. Remember that my boy is twelve now. Matías is almost his age.”

Aunt Luzmila liked to sing. She had said that she would be a famous singer when she got to the city. She used to spend afternoons at the river, modulating her voice, singing to the rocks, to the dry leaves, trying to sound like the birds, singing softly to herself like a Siskin through the roads that took us to the fields. My mother had told us that grandma had had a whip ready for this bad habit of singing when she should have been learning the lessons that she never managed to memorize, and that meant the loss of many years of study. Aunt Luzmila got tired of Grandma’s grouchiness and one day just left, not caring that my mother told her that here it was better, that the city was too big for her. Before disappearing, she shouted to us that soon we would be hearing her on the radio, that she would come to tell us everything and that she would take us from this region. We hadn’t heard anything from her until now.

“Do you know about Mom and Dad?” said my mom.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Aunt Luzmila, excusing herself. “We’ll have time to talk. For now I want to lie down in a cool room.”

She had brought a small suitcase with all her things inside. She was dressed like she was going out. We could tell her shoes tortured her. She took them off and, swinging them, came back to hug my mother and went into the guest room.

My father still hadn’t said a single word. Despite the

stifling heat, he lit a cigarette and before giving the first puff, chewed the end, spit out a thick loogie and, raising his eyes to the sky, blew out, to spew the smoke out slowly, as if he was reaching glory in it. He saw me sitting at the door, and through his look I was able to understand that my aunt's presence hurt him.

In the afternoon I grabbed my pole, made my little sister come with me, and looked for worms in the hollow, being careful that she didn't slip. I left my mother chatting with Aunt Luzmila while my father was lost in the back of the house. From our position we could hear that the two women were laughing without reserve. My sister smiled, hiding her face when she noticed that this much happiness scared me. We got some worms, and I asked my sister to go back home. Then I got lost at the mouth of the gully. So I wouldn't feel alone, I entertained myself by singing songs that I'd learned in school.

I came back along the shore of the stream. But before arriving at a well where we would play when we accompanied my mother to wash, I heard someone singing: it was Aunt Luzmila. I crouched down because I didn't want to interrupt her song. She liked shouting it out when she was alone. Hidden among the branches, I could hear her delicate voice and see her naked body, covered with foam. Her fingers ran up and down her back and neck and caressed them like it was the first time. Then she sat and stopped singing to splash water on her face. While she did it, her breasts swung like the oranges of our garden, and a strange shudder ran through my body, forcing me to close my eyes. When I opened them, she had disappeared. I got scared. I didn't move for some minutes. I heard my mom shouting my sister's name. I also heard my father's voice

chatting with Matías. But I didn't hear the footsteps of my aunt, who got behind me and affirmed with a serenity that I couldn't understand, "I see that you're growing up quickly." She shook her hair, throwing drops of water on my face.

"Should we go, young man?" she said, offering her hand. "It's getting dark. They'll start calling us soon."

She took off the towel that was wrapped around her and, without worrying about my presence, she slowly dressed, "Sooner or later you'll be seeing these things," she said, smiling with a certain malice.

When Matías said hi to Luzmila, he felt a little shy. He didn't say anything at first. My aunt hugged him and caressed his face, touched his hands, and said that he was a true country boy.

We sat close to the fire in the stove, listening to her adventures, from the first day of her leaving to her return to this town. Then she got up, took a seat on the patio, and watched the stars till my father asked her if she had managed to sing on the radio.

"That isn't important now," she answered without turning her head.

My father didn't ask anything else. He lit his cigarette and went off to smoke close to the garden where the wild cilantro grew.

"Come, Matías, come closer," pleaded Aunt Luzmila. "Tell me how you've been all this time. You must have a girl that would die for you."

Matías looked at me and chewed on some words that I didn't understand. "Come, lay by my side, look at the stars. Do you remember the names of each one of them?"

When I left, Aunt Luzmila was holding Matías' hand.

The next day we got up early. My father and I went to get some clusters of bananas while my mother prepared the coffee. Matías had left at dawn to collect some money for my father. My mother was worried that Aunt Luzmila didn't want to talk about the past. She was always elusive, like she was trying to hide part of her life.

At lunch we talked about a possible party at The Junction on the weekend. She was excited. She told mom that it was a good opportunity to see old friends.

In the afternoon, before fishing, she asked me to accompany her on a walk around the area. She put on a hat, a long, wide skirt with lively colors, sunglasses to protect her eyes from the sun, and sandals. She said hi to Doña Margarita, Aunt Rosa, Don Clodeveo's children, and stopped to hug Doña Martina's youngest daughter. Afterwards we went to the woods to look for worms. She sat on a trunk without worrying that her legs were uncovered. She said I seemed like a great fisherman. I got some worms and went to the shore of the river where my favorite fishing hole was.

"You know that this is my favorite place too?" she said. "I used to come here every time my mother got onto me for singing."

"Did you end up singing, Aunt?"

She looked at me, shook her skirt, and said that it was really hot. Without further ado, she undressed, and I felt that I would get used to her. She immediately jumped in the water, which bugged me because it scared off the fish, and she splashed water on me. Before I could do anything, she pulled me in. She laughed, rocking her naked body when she noticed that I was mad. She hugged me and covered my face with kisses.

“It’s nothing, dummy,” she said, getting out of the water. “It’s really hot and you should wet your head, otherwise you could get a fever.”

She got quiet. She slowly put on her skirt and then her blouse. “I noticed that you like my body.”

When we left the woods, we ran into Matías. She asked if he had been watching us. He said that now was when he usually went swimming.

“Wow,” she said, “it seems like everyone’s favorite place.”

Saturday night we went to The Junction. Aunt Luzmila had let down her hair and went with Matías. Mom had her arm around Dad, and I guess I was supposed to do the same with my little sister.

We had a great time. Mom smiled, holding Dad’s arm, keeping herself from falling before each onslaught of couples during the pandilla dance. Aunt Luzmila wouldn’t let go of Matías for anything. When it was two in the morning, we left. But Matías and my aunt stayed.

The next day they woke up lying over the bags of coca leaves that we had close to the oven. Mom didn’t say anything when she saw them eating breakfast.

“There were two men who were watching you,” said my dad.

“I didn’t notice,” she said.

“They were two strangers who arrived a couple of days ago. They’re staying in Alejandrina’s house.”

“I don’t know why they were watching me.”

“And, you don’t know why?”

“Nope.” She got up to get a little more coffee. “Maybe they were in love, or they could be buyers.”

I couldn’t deny it. My aunt had her charm. A little reckless, maybe, but she was pretty. I liked her body, and her breasts

that swing like those mombins that fall when they're ripe.

"You still haven't learned to dance," grumbled my dad. "You're the same provocative and reckless girl."

"Does it bother you?" asked my aunt, turning her head and frowning.

My father didn't answer. He looked at her with eyes that said he didn't like her presence and left, slamming the door behind him.

In the afternoon, a little after the sun hid, Matías and my aunt got lost in the woods. Mom didn't say a single word, but dad said he didn't like the way the girl was behaving.

"You never liked my sister," Mom answered him.

"No, because she's always been like that. She falls in love with the first person that crosses her path."

"She's not in love with Matías. He reminds her of her youth."

"Well, I don't like it. This woman is going to bring us problems. I want her to leave next week."

"She'll stay as long as she wants," argued Mom, and upon leaving, she said, "What happened is that she isn't interested in you."

The next day, at lunch, while Aunt Luzmila was visiting the neighbor's garden with Matías, two men on a motorcycle appeared. They wanted to buy the entire harvest that we had dried. They made the deal with my parents and agreed to return on Saturday afternoon. Before leaving they looked around, saying that it was a good farm we had.

A little while back, we had focused on planting coca and selling the harvest to the highest bidder. My parents took the responsibility of drying it in the sun for three hours and then bagging it in jute sacks. We had seen a lot of strangers in the area, some looking for work, others

buying, and the rest asking about people who had never passed through these lands.

In the afternoon Dad sent Matías to the town of Cai-mito to collect money for him. Aunt Luzmila offered to accompany him, but Matías said it was better for her to stay because the road was slippery and the horse couldn't take double the weight.

Before three in the afternoon on Saturday, the two strangers who had made the deal with my father arrived and took all the merchandise. My aunt watched them from the kitchen, close to the stove, eating a mombin. One of them looked at my aunt enthusiastically. Smiling, he told his friend that the filly was ready to be mounted.

Mom served dinner before six. She said that she wanted to wash before going to bed. It was really hot. Dad accompanied her to the swimming hole in the creek and sat on the rocks, waiting for mom to finish. He didn't want to get wet, arguing that he had already bathed in the afternoon. When they came back, they went into their room and didn't feel like coming out to socialize. Aunt Luzmila told some stories, but Matías didn't pay much attention.

"Why did you come back?" he suddenly asked while rubbing one of her hands.

"You wouldn't be interested," answered Aunt Luzmila

"Grandma and Grandpa died and you weren't by their side," he rebuked.

"Bah!" she exclaimed. "All the same they had to die, whether I was here or not. You guys go to sleep. I want to be alone!"

We didn't want to upset her. I curled up, imagining her on the mat, placing her butt over the wet earth, putting her two arms under her head, like a pillow, and letting out a

sigh as she looked up at the sky. I imagined her afterwards touching her breast, and then getting up to run towards the stream, undressing, and splashing water on her back, her face, and her body covered in tender moles.

I went to sleep with these visions while, far away, a noise bothered me. I didn't give much importance to a shout because I thought it must be part of my dream. But a dry knock at the door and two men that held Aunt Luzmila by the neck startled me. Mom didn't shout. She put her hand over her mouth and looked at Dad with wide eyes. The two men tried to cover Luzmila with a jute sack, but she struggled and from time to time shouted out. Mom tried to leave the room, but Dad wouldn't let her, like he was trying to say "Now isn't the time." Through a crack that gave a view of the scene, I could identify the two men: they were the same ones that had shown up as coca leaf buyers a couple days before. I looked for Matías, but he wasn't in his room. The men dragged Aunt Luzmila to the back of the house. She kept shouting. Once she managed to pronounce my mom's name. The men smiled and said that no one would help her, not even the family, because the jungle has its own rules. Then there was a sepulchral silence. Dad grabbed his breech-loading gun and slipped behind the kitchen. I saw that he was running barefoot. Behind him was my mother. I put on a shirt and tried to look for Matías again. But he wasn't there; surely he had left to go see Zoraida: that was what he usually did when my parents went to sleep early. Since I didn't hear voices, I gained confidence. I tried to make the least noise possible. I oriented myself by the dull moans of my aunt. I stopped close to a clearing, maybe a hundred meters from the house. The man who had said that she was good to be mounted held

the jute bag while the other pointed with the pistol. Any minute I would hear the shot that would hurt my heart. One of them said that she had made a bad move, that one should never flee with unresolved business, that in spite of having lost the money, they weren't interested in that. After all, money makes itself, but acts like those that she had done, a prostitute of low quality, who dreamed of being a great singer when she only knew how to croon in seedy brothels, one could forgive. They were finishing a mission, and they kept repeating, because they were professionals, and also considerate, because they didn't mess with the family.

"You see Luzmila? After all we're good people. Enjoy your stay in heaven, if they take prostitutes there... Ha, ha, ha..."

A shot was enough to wake me. The door sounded like someone was being careful to be as quiet as possible. I covered my face with the sheet and through a hole could see that Matías had just arrived. I left, looking for Aunt Luzmila's room, and when I was by her side, I gave her a big hug. She gently snuggled with me while saying, "You're sweating, dummy. What happened? Listen, lie here beside me. Did you have a nightmare?"

She covered me with kisses and I slowly fell asleep smelling the aroma of her breath. When I woke, she had gotten up and was packing her things.

"Are you leaving, Aunt?"

"It's time for me to go. I've had enough vacation for a while."

"When will we hear you sing on the radio?"

"Before you know it."

"Will you come back soon?"

“Of course! I want you to show me new places to fish.”

She rubbed my hands and pulled my head all the way to her chest. I felt her breathing.

“Come, accompany me to The Junction. I’ll find someone there who will give me a ride to town.”

This time my mom began to cry. She didn’t ask if she would come back soon or why she was leaving. Dad didn’t want to hug her, and neither did she. Matías caught up to us before we got to The Junction.

“Marry Zoraida,” pleaded my aunt. “She must be a good girl for you to risk going there at night when your parents are sleeping. When I come back, I want to see you with kids all over the place. Give one of them my name. I’m joking, but it’s not a bad idea.”

We saw her leave in a pickup. We kept waving for a long time, as if we expected her to come back and stay with us.

That afternoon I went to fish. I entertained myself by pulling leaves off trees and contemplating the fishing hole without really wanting to catch anything.

CARMELITA

THE MAN stopped across from the business going on in The Junction. He threw his bag over a chair and asked for a drink. Carmelita served him, the beautiful girl, Mariá's daughter.

"What does a beautiful girl like you do so far from town?" asked the man, lifting his glass.

"I help my mother," responded Carmelita.

The few who knew him called him "the Colombian" because he had an accent like the people from that country, even though he could have been from anywhere. He didn't try to deny it either. He had arrived with just a backpack and rented a room from Doña Olegaria, an old woman who had lived with her daughters and her grandchildren ever since her husband had fallen off at the edge of the road down a ravine when he was trying to bring three bunches of bananas on his back at once at an age when he should have been taking it easy.

Néstor and I were returning from Don Artemio's farm, who had given us a couple bunches of bananas, and we stopped in at Fat Maria's business. We were hoping she would give us something to drink, even if it was just a little water, since we didn't have a penny left to buy soda. That is when we saw him arrive. He said his name was Jair Casteñeda. He had blue eyes and a ready smile on his lips. I think this delighted Carelita and she sat talking to

him the rest of the afternoon. She went with him by our house, heading towards the bank to show him the Hualaga River. On the way back he greeted my mother, who watched from the hammock how she held the guy's hand and walked with him through the farms. I told Néstor that we should follow without them noticing. With the pretext of going to get guayabas, we disappeared into the woods and we heard him tell her, almost whispering, that he had come to Peru to seek his fortune and had finally found a treasure like her. Carmelita burst out laughing, scaring the birds sheltered in the branches of the trees. When night came Jair asked to spend the night in Carmelita's house because he didn't want to go back to Olegaria's place. María accepted and gave him a place to sleep close to the oven. That night he slept with a machete under his mattress.

The next day, before seven, Mama sent me to buy bread. She told me not to delay. I found Carmelita laying out the tablecloth to serve breakfast, calling Jair, laughing wholeheartedly, which was rare for her, what with her usual constant complaining, when the sound of a horn made us shudder. Three men in a 4x4 truck asked to speak with the Columbian. María got scared and went up to the door to get a better look. She could see that they were the Teacher's men. The boy wasn't worried though; he went out the door without a shirt, slightly sleepy. He spoke with them, and after a minute, they left.

"Don't be scared, kid," he said, slapping me on the shoulder. "They're friends."

Carmelita, a little frightened, asked him the reason for this strange visit, and he said not to worry. María didn't say a word. She served breakfast and I heard him order a rooster to be killed because he was craving soup with a

lot of yuca and cilantro. Jair told her he was going to stay and live in their house, and asked them to put him up in a room without fleas or chicken mites. María said yes. And that night she saw her daughter go into Jair's room.

The couple went everywhere they could. At first they walked or rode a horse that they would borrow from their neighbor who lived next to the river. Then, Jair appeared with a motorcycle and no one said anything. Not even Carmelita. She was happy to look good with the Colombian. Sometimes they interrupted us by throwing guayabo fruit at us during the best time for fishing. Other times we came upon them swimming naked and we would hide to watch Carmelita, our eyes growing wide when she kissed him and he squeezed her butt, saying that he was going to make her shout like a mare.

After two weeks we figured out Jair's profession: he was the chemist, the man who gave the "okay" for the cocaine paste. His tongue did all the work. It was enough to just try a pinch of the product that they cooked to know the quality. He became popular among the coca producers. Despite the fact that he said he wasn't exclusive to anyone, the Teacher's men were in the habit of taking him away at any time from any place they wanted, bringing him back the same way. Then we got scared. We, who only sold coca leaves dried in the sun in jute bags to the Teacher's men, knew that his presence would always be dangerous because the soldiers followed his steps.

Carmelita spent all the afternoons she could letting herself be seen in public with Jair. I would look at her, sitting on a stool, how her figure swayed, and nibbling the man's ear. Then she would bring him to the woods where they could shout at the top of their lungs.

The Junction was located in a strategic spot, at the exact dividing line of the roads that led to different towns. And María had her business there selling alcohol, soda, and whatever product she could offer, including to the girls who arrived looking for work. So, one could find drug-traffickers, soldiers, police, “partners,” and farmers from the area in her store as her customers. Everyone liked Jair, especially the Teacher’s men. Nevertheless, Mama told us during breakfast that María had told her she didn’t think her daughter’s relationship was good. She had found out that her Carmelita was pregnant.

“He’s going to leave any day now and you’re going to be left with the load,” María begged one day.

“Mom, I don’t care, he makes me happy,” answered Carmelita sharply.

“You aren’t afraid of the people who come to look for him?”

“We know all of them. Are you afraid of the ‘mule,’ Sajamí? You think the pistol that ‘Shitari’ Pérez carries would fire at you? Mom, please, it’s the exact opposite. With Jair here we’re protected.”

Carmelita was resolved when she answered her mother. She was also resolved when she spoke with her months later, when she gave birth to a baby boy.

One afternoon, when the day was over, some soldiers arrived and took charge in María’s store. They asked for soda without putting down their weapons. They joked around, and when they looked at the girls that served them, they whistled to one of them. The one who seemed to be the leader spoke with María. Both smiled, and she offered him a special house smoothie for free. The man looked at Carmelita and shook his head.

“That girl deserves better luck,” he said, swatting at a fly.

“One of my men could make her happy.”

Then they left without asking about anyone like they did other times. They weren't arrogant and they didn't try to touch the girls that served customers at the store.

Jair, under the pretext of working close to the kitchen that the Teacher was renting, moved away from Carmelita so that he was staying many kilometers up in the mountains, going deep into the jungle, at some farms that she had never been to and that her mother didn't dare check out. The man appeared on the weekends and spent all his time with his son. María would watch him, breathing deep, holding back the urge to grab a machete and follow him. It was Grandma Esmilda who told her one Saturday afternoon:

“That's what men are like! It seems like the more women they knock up, the more powerful and prideful they become.”

This kept up until one day when Jair completely disappeared from the scene. No one knew what had happened to him. The Teacher's men searched for him everywhere. They came to María's house and looked in every corner of their property: in the ravines, in the oven, in the chicken coop. Nothing. The mountain had swallowed him whole. No one knew why. We didn't want to leave the house for almost a week because we were afraid of a reprisal from the Teacher's men. They almost beat Filomón to death just for having mentioned something against Jair. Estanislao didn't have any better luck; they found him floating in the Hualaga River with his throat cut. Weeks later we heard the news that it was the soldiers who had trapped him, thanks to a snitch. Then, just before dawn on Good Friday, close to four, a little pickup appeared driven by a thin man (I know because they woke us up when they parked in front

of my house) and unloaded a large sack that was moving and kicking. They went out back, by the garden, where my mother had her mandarins. Afterwards we could hear her shouts. Mama told us to turn off the lights and we hid under the bed. Through the cracks we saw that the woman who was shouting was María, and they were blaming her for Jair's death. Then she, letting loose her tongue, shouted towards our house:

“I know you all can hear me but don't want to do anything. Heeeeelp!”

That was the last thing she said. Afterwards there was only the sound of rustling in the undergrowth and knives in the air. The men got back into the pickup driven by the thin man and they left.

The next day, Carmelita grabbed her child and left, on the wide road, without knowing where she was heading.

That afternoon, when it was almost dark, while Néstor and I were resting on a mango tree, we saw a group of men appear who were headed towards our house. We hid, but mama didn't have time.