

**COMITÁN ON THE FLY
A CONVERSATION WITH CONCHITA MUÑOZ CALVO AND RAFAEL
GUZMÁN UTRILLA**

Translated by Cecilia Chapa

Doña Conchita:

My mother was fifteen and my father seventeen. A couple of kids. But they were so young that the couple split and I was left with one of my grandmothers. When I was three, almost four, my grandmother died. And since I was her only granddaughter, the child of her only son, well she didn't want to die because I was there.

Before she passed, she called one of her sisters, the youngest one, because she could afford to adopt me. So she sent for her when she felt that she was about to die. And my aunt came. She says [that at the time] she had five children and another one on the way, six. My aunt gladly adopted me. But my grandmother told her she had to love me like a daughter and never to hit me, and not to [neglect me]... For heaven's sake! And my aunt said yes, she agreed to adopt me.

A little later, my grandmother died, I was just a little girl. Then my mother appeared. She wanted me, but my father said no, no. He quickly went to the courthouse and signed me under his care and not hers. So the judge asked to see me. He wanted me to choose if I preferred to go with my mother or father, regardless of what they wanted. So I went, but I remember that all throughout the day they gave me candy and told me: "Listen sweetie, when a man asks you: with whom would you like to go? You are going to say: with my aunt Lichita". And since throughout the entire day [they repeatedly told me the same], I had it memorized.

I remember that when they took me there, carried in arms because I was still very young, we went through the town's Central Park. And that there were huge faces, I mean, the statues of important figures. When I came inside, a man was there and a woman was in front of her typewriter. They sat me on her desk. And the judge said: "Listen sweetie, with whom would you like to go? With my aunt Lichita" [I answered]. I saw the woman writing and heard the judge say, "We are going to ask the girl three times". My mother was beside me, but since I wasn't raised by her, I didn't trust her or something. I was used to my grandmother. Therefore, the three times they asked me I answered, "With my aunt Lichita". Yes, [said the judge,] she will go with her now. And I left with her. I grew up with her. And when I was...

She loved me very much. They took good care of me. We had service workers. They raised me and I didn't lack anything. I had everything, thank God. There were two maids and young hands to mind the cattle. They had a dairy. They produced a lot of milk, and bread, only the good one. It was there that I had tasty bread for the first time. And so, I grew up and got older. And I believe you are born with it. Because when I was a little girl, I liked homemaking very much. When I saw my aunt making tortillas, I asked her to let me do it too. She would say: "No honey, you'll burn yourself! No, no". But she indulged me and let me have my way. She cut the husk, gave me my place, my water bowl, a small ball of dough, and I would make my own tortillas. They came out very thick, you see? But her children didn't like it. "Look at the little girl playing with the dough, we are not going to eat that!" they said. She would give me separate things so that

wouldn't happen. But they allowed me whatever I wanted. And if it was doing the laundry, the same, or ironing, I was there too.

Did you like housework?

Yes, I liked it very much. And her daughter didn't like chores. She would cry when she was told to do something. She cried. And I would say [to my aunt] "don't get mad, I'll do the chores". "No, but this shirker doesn't do anything at all" [she'd answer]. "Don't you get upset". She loved me very much, the little old lady. She had her husband who drank too much. Not every day, occasionally, but he would drink for eight days in a row. [...] He would give everything away. And as he gave everything away, he had everything in abundance. I always say that abundance comes to those who give.

That's true.

There's no profit for the stingy.

Right! That's true.

I experienced it, that's why I do the same. I give away everything, as gifts. I'll feed anybody. I'll take in anybody who doesn't have [a family]. And I've never lacked anything, in God's Grace.

How did you meet your husband?

Woo! I had other boyfriends; he was not the first one. I had a bunch. He was the last one I met. Maybe because he came from San Cristóbal or who knows why? I believe fate does everything, because there were many other young men here.

Good-looking ones?

Good kids, yes, cute and all that. This guy, whose father was the bank's manager, and I went steady. But, you know what? I was very fussy. They couldn't ask me for the smallest of things, 'cause break up! I broke up with that guy because he asked me for a kiss. I ended it for that reason.

Didn't you give him the kiss?

No. In those days we weren't used to touching, kissing, or grabbing. Nowadays, I see girls hanging from their guys. They have no shame at all. At the street corners with their boyfriends. They are stuck to each other. Oh! No, no.

Stuck to each other?

Yes, and they are there, on the street! You didn't see that before. Before, everything was honorable. I broke up for that and didn't care that he really tried [to make

it right]. I said no, no, no. And that's why my cousin, when Rafa and I were dating and he came to the store - we had this store downtown - said, "Be good Rafa, never ask this woman anything because she's very fastidious". At least he didn't ask anything, otherwise...

Ah! That's why you married him?

That's why I married him. Not that I should say, but we had an elegant wedding. It was at 10 a.m. at the church over there, the cathedral over there. In those days we only had power until 5:30 a.m. From 5:30 or 6 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. There was no electric power during the day. But when there was a somewhat nice wedding, the groom or his family would go to the power substation and pay for the power so there would be light in the church for the ceremony. And he went to pay. And when we noticed there was power [during the day], who could be getting married? We'd ask. Ours was like that. It was at 10 a.m. There was power and we were in the house. In his house, because he built his house before getting married, it was a big one too. We had the reception there. And around 2:30 p.m. we left for México City on our honeymoon.

Ah...

I didn't even know Tuxtla [Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas State Capital]. And from Tuxtla we went to México City. I only knew San Cristóbal.

How did you go?

By car. We drove to Tuxtla. And in Tuxtla we took the bus. We stayed in Oaxaca and other stops before arriving in México City.

How old were you when you married?

Twenty-six almost twenty-seven in December, which was very close. I was about to leave twenty-six. Him too. We were not kids. I thought, marry like my mother at fourteen? No, not me. I have to learn everything and enjoy my youth.

Right.

Do you agree? When people marry young and quickly, well... They say, "I went to heaven", but it's the opposite.

How did you begin in the bakery?

When I was a little girl I had an aunt who worked in a bakery, the best one in Comitán. And since she had a daughter, my cousin, we grew up together, she asked me if I would help her deliver bread house-to-house and they would pay me. I didn't need the money because I had enough, but I said yes just to be with my cousin. I went every afternoon. And by now you know that I was hands-on, so the owner of the bakery liked

me very much. And she would call me. She shooed all other kids, “Go away, we’ve nothing here for you” she would say to them. Not to me, they let me in because I helped them. I went to help near the ovens. There were three ovens with three bakers. Big baskets, this size, filled with *salvadillos* [local sweet baked bread]. I cleaned the *salvadillos* and I did pretty much everything they told me to, the bosses, the bakery owners. My aunt would get the big baskets and deliver the bread. And I helped her. [At the bakery,] I watched how they made it and I made a game out of cleaning. And I liked it.

Later, my aunt left the bakery. She opened her own and I was there too. In the evenings, when I came from the store, I went to the boards to make little figures, but I was never there when they got it ready or to see how they made things. No. I only saw the things they used. They mixed eggs and all, but I never [learned it]. What I did learn was how to make *turrón* [nougat], everything about sweets. I know how to make *muéganos* [local dessert made with sugar cane syrup] and all that. Later I said, “I want to make bread”. Why not? You tell me, [I asked myself]. I’m going to mix one with yeast and everything it needs and one day it’ll have to come out right. I might lose the first batch, but not the second one and so on. And I did. I didn’t have teachers or anything. That’s how it went, with a just a few pieces at a time. And I told him, “I’ll build for my winter”, didn’t I? I said, I’m going to make my *marquezotes* [bread made with whipped eggs and starch], and I did. They all came out right and that’s the way I did it.

Little by little.

Little by little.

How long have you had the bakery?

Well, the way it is now, more than forty years. More than forty years already. Right, because you see, this September we will have been married for, how many? Fifty eight years or so.

Wow! Wow!

We are going to be eighty-two years old! We got married at twenty-six.

You keep in good shape.

With exercise, because people who get to sleep, what for?

They shouldn’t because they could get sick.

They get sick. They go to sleep, and that’s it.

But you keep on working every day.

I do. Working is my dream.

At what time do you get up?

Well, I don't get up early now, but when there's no one to help in the bakery, I get up before 5 a.m. I go there to make a *bastón*. *Bastón* is the name of the ball [of dough] I mix and get ready. I come up to my store to see about the workers breakfast and all that.

[...]

Which tequila do you like best?

Don Rafael:

Sorry?

Which tequila do you like best?

All of them.

All of them?

Give us your name and tell us about your life ...

I don't remember.

Your name.

Rafael Guzmán Utrilla.

Where were you born?

In San Cristóbal.

Why did you come to Comitán?

I came to work in a factory they were going to build here for Don Señor Pedrero, the first millionaire in Chiapas, Norman Pedrero. I was a bricklayer working for him in his house, in his houses in San Cristóbal. They chose a team of construction workers they were going to send here.

Doña Conchita:

The best ones.

Don Rafael:

And I was chosen. So I came here, to Comitán.

Do you remember the year?

1947, yes, more or less. When I was working there I was appointed Director of our neighborhood's annual celebration, in San Cristóbal. And I had to go. I went back because it took three months to do it. We used to ask the whole town to give money for the neighborhood's festival. And it took three months. A foreman was in charge of building the road, and I found him and talked to him, and he gave me a job. I went to work a little further in a place called Sintur. I was there three months, more or less, and it didn't suit me because it rained a lot. It rained and cleared, the sun came, clothes dried on the body, and no, no. Things were going bad for me.

So I came to Comitán to find work, not where I was before, but as foreman for Mr. Guillermo Solórzano, rest in peace for he's dead. I asked him for a job and he put me to work. Since I knew the trade, right? I knew about construction and I worked for him.

As I got my bearings and made some friendships and all, I began building on my own. I began to build houses. One or two and the number began to grow. I built several houses here in Comitán. I've been looking around today, and my son in law has the one [I built] downtown, the way downtown was when I first came here. I worked in the Central Park that used to be there. I knocked down many of the houses in Los Portales. And decided to go on my own.

After about eight years of working in construction on my own, I gave it up to work in public transportation. I got to know the area around Montebello. I mean *Lagos de Montebello* [Montebello Lakes]. It was nothing more than a dirt road that followed country paths. We had to go around trees and all that. And we would go here and there. We would get together, some who lived there and some from here, driving people back and forth. Providing transportation for the people of the settlements.

Doña Conchita:

But not on a bus, on a pick up truck.

Don Rafael:

No, no. I began with a dump truck. And I liked it, learned about it. So I sold the dump truck and bought a small pick up truck. A Wheelie, that's what we used. We kept working like that until they built the highway where it is today. And we were moved over there as a group with Government permits for that route. We moved there.

When the highway was ready, they sent us to that side and they demanded that we had buses. Each one put in a bus, each one of the six in the group. We had six buses going back and forth. I worked for many years. I worked thirty something years in that area of *Lagos de Montebello*. I lived there for a long time. When I went up I slept there. Then I came back and went back there to sleep, and so on. At the end, because I got very tired, I sold it. Old age, you know?

It's been more or less thirty years since I left the transportation business. With what little money we had left, we bought some land, a field. We built a little farm. We

put it together and had it for a long time. Later, we gave it to the kids. We divided it, gave a piece to each one.

What do you think is better and worse today? Have things changed for better or for worse?

Doña Conchita:

I think everything is better now.

Everything?

Yes, because before we didn't even have shops here. There were very few, and if you started one there were no sales. We had a store downtown, and we had sales, but only because I was there. Not to brag about it, but my good disposition attracts people. People came looking for me because I served them with care and appreciation. And the store was full. The other store owners were jealous.

What did you sell in your store?

Vegetables. Vegetables, fruits, chile in vinegar that I made, two big jars everyday. It sold for two cents, one cent. Nothing like now, it sells for a peso, five, ten or fifteen. No, before, it sold for two cents. I sold lard, rice, well everything, everything. And I made *temperate* [non-alcoholic drink made with sugar, egg whites, cinnamon, cloves, and grenadine]. I made *rompope* [Mexican eggnog].

Did you make everything?

I made everything and sold it. And we sold a lot of fruit, lots of bananas and *guineas* [smaller, sweeter], and also countless hearts of palm. I got them in crates and I cut them into two-cent pieces. People wouldn't buy a whole heart of palm, no. I had to cut it and do it right so it would add up. Around eleven in the morning, it got very busy. I could barely manage to serve so many people. That ended when I got married.

Soon, the store closed. Yes, what do you think? The store closed because my cousin who stayed there, did not have the character for retail and didn't like it. And Mamá Josefa, the same. I have an aunt I also called mamá, the same. Their service was rude. Once, some ladies that used to come everyday said, "Ay Conchita! Now that you are getting married we are not coming back.

Why? I'm not taking the store with me. The store stays here." And they said, "No, with Doña José and Trinidad, so gruff, who is going to brave shopping here?" Customers said that. I wouldn't believe it, but it closed. Didn't it? In any business one's disposition should be friendly.

Right.

Yes. Serve people with courtesy, not with an attitude. Why should they treat me poorly if I come and will pay for the things I buy? We are not the ones doing them a favor. They do us the favor by coming to purchase our merchandise, right? That's why I always tell Rafa: never serve in a bad mood.

Tell me about how people and family used to be, traditions and things like that. About the changes you've seen.

Ah! Everything has changed very much, yes. Before, everybody made tortillas at home. They made tortillas. Today, nobody does. Tortillas are already there. I buy tortillas too, and I really would like to make my own. But I can't because of my bad leg. If it were not for my leg, I would make my tortillas. Oh! Home made. The ones we used to make kept well. These are all sticky and ugly the next day, but not the homemade ones, no. They are good for three days.

There are a lot of changes, in everything. Everything was very inexpensive. The *chorizos* [pork sausage] were, I can't remember how much, but they were a hand span long. A span was the measure for *chorizo*. I believe it was two cents for each huge *chorizo*. Now, the ones I make are only four small fingers long. He made some.

Don Rafael:

I told the worker to do it.

Doña Conchita:

He built my ovens.

Where did you get the plans? The plans for building the ovens.

Don Rafael:

Ah! They are made of brick. Let's say we have clay. Brick, yes, bricks. You shape the base using *adobe*. On the base you build the circle.

Doña Conchita:

They put one and go around until the shape comes up.

Did you design it yourself?

Yes, of course. We had a worker, who has been with us for many years, do it. He is very reliable; he does everything.

Doña Conchita:

Yes, look, something like this. It is like a seamstress who looks at a dress and says, "I can make one like this one". That's how he does it.

I suppose you know the trick to build a dome like that. That's why you did it without plans, because you had done it before so you knew it by intuition.

Don Rafael:

All the time, yes.