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Milagros Riquelme

Towards the end of summer, the wind came strong from the north. It blew for weeks at a time, sweeping over flat grasslands and marshes, ruffling reeds and ancient *ombú* trees and green scummy waters, swinging sparse dark clumps of cypress and Spanish moss. It conquered the stone towers and balustrades of the Big House in Alta Gracia; it hammered on the corrugated iron roofs and adobe walls of the houses and ranches in the village. It sneaked through cracks in the roofs and windows and beneath doorsills, coating everything with layers of fine red dust. For days afterwards the women swept and scrubbed and washed: from the multi-colored tiles on the verandas of the Big House to the gold brocade mantle of the Virgin in the chapel; from the whitewashed walls of the tiny schoolroom to the earth floors of peasant ranches, everything had acquired a smell of soil and a reddish hue it took weeks to get rid of.

Milagros and the other children loved it. They ran against the wind and screamed with delight. They howled and shrieked with laughter as the red dust choked them. They spat and hissed and fought against the wind, hair and arms going wild, looking like

demented windmills. Countless small insects came riding with the wind, too, dry and buzzing and biting. They drove the cattle mad. The gauchos chased the insects away with their long whips of many tails. The children ran after the riding men, teasing, taunting, but always taking care to stay well out of reach of the lead balls at the end of the leather strips.

When they were breathless with running, they abandoned the chase and turned to catching as many insects as they could. They put them in matchboxes if they could find any, or just collected them in heaps. Then they buried them. The insect funerals were long and elaborate. At the head of the procession one child chanted gibberish through the nose, holding a makeshift cross. Then followed the coffin-bearers, holding the tiny boxes or the naked dead insects solemnly in front of their skinny little chests; the mourners came behind them, boys looking down on the earth or rolling their eyes to the heavens and swearing revenge, girls wailing and moaning and tearing their hair, the solemnity often interrupted by pushes, tumbles, and giggles.

The insects were buried in shallow graves just outside the wooden fence of the real graveyard. The children had been told it was as great a sin to bury animals in consecrated ground as it was to bury Christians outwith its boundaries.

The dry windy season brought human funerals, too. The whole village turned up at them. It was a show of respect and one of the few entertainments locally available. Children were not normally allowed to attend, but followed at a safe distance nevertheless, their avid faces drinking in the signs of the grownups' distress, picking up every little detail of moist eye and downturned mouth and bent head.

Milagros herself was as familiar with death as any of them. The fourth of six siblings, she was the only one to survive infancy. When she was born, her mother and grandmother consulted together and decided to force a miracle out of the Virgin Mother. They named her Milagros, and it had worked. She had no memory of

her siblings at all, besides a very vague recollection of the funeral for the youngest, Jorge Luís. Her father had held the small coffin himself. She had followed behind, holding Abuela's hand tightly. Her mother had walked next to her holding her other hand, head held high and eyes burning with a fiery grief. Doña Alejandra from the Big House made an appearance in the black and silver Rolls Royce driven by Old Man Suárez, instead of driving herself to the church in her Morris Mini. People agreed that this showed compassion for the poor Riquelmes, having to bury their fifth child. When the family returned home, the little Moses basket where the baby had been sleeping was waiting for them in the corner. Her father silently took it away.

During that night, Milagros had woken up several times, straining her ears to hear the sick baby's whimpering, but all she could hear was the wind sweeping dust and thorny balls of dried weeds in the deserted village road, all the way to the cemetery.

Milagros often thought of the dead at night, as she lay in bed curled up next to Abuela. She pictured the quiet cemetery in her head, the little graves neat and clean, her brothers and sisters resting in the well-swept flower-covered earth. Sometimes she worried about them when it was a moonlit night; her chest hurt as she thought of all that weight of dirt falling on their little chests, of how deeply they lay. How could they breathe under the earth? But when it was raining or when the wind was howling, she thought they would be rather warm and snug and out of harm's way, cocooned in their little boxes, tucked in safely in their beds of earth.

She would then listen for the sounds of the night. She would hold her breath in the darkness, trying to block the sound of Abuela's raspy breathing, and the irregular snores and sighs through the partition separating their room from her parents' bedroom, and the scuttling of mice inside the adobe and straw walls. There were voices in the howling wind, she was certain, urgent whispers in the persistent beating of the rain on the tin

roof. She would pull herself close to Abuela, who always slept with her rosary entwined in her hands, in case death came during the night, her fingers twitching as if counting beads even in her sleep. The old woman slept lightly.

"What is it, Mili, why aren't you sleeping?" Abuela would whisper, the sound of "s" coming funny through her toothless mouth.

"Abuelita, do you hear?"

"Hear what, daughter?"

"I don't know, it's like...words."

"Don't worry, my dove, it's only the wind."

"But there are voices in there."

"Of course there are voices."

The snoring in the next room stopped.

"What are they?" Milagros' voice was barely a whisper now.

"It's the dead. They're trying to speak to their loved ones."

"What are they saying?"

"Unfortunately, we do not know their language."

"They don't speak our language?"

"No, you see, they are in another country now. They speak different there."

"Shut up," a choking voice would come through the cardboard-thin wall.

They would stop talking immediately, and as Abuelita counted her rosary beads to lull herself back to sleep, Milagros stayed awake for just a little longer, eyes wide open in the darkness, ears straining to hear. Could it be that her brothers and sisters wanted to tell her something? Everybody knew the dead slept in peace, but of course they ought to wake up sometimes. Maybe this was when the living went to bed.

Milagros would shut her eyes tightly and picture the small cemetery under the moonlight. Tall thin wooden crosses shaking slowly in the night air, tattered flower crowns hanging from them, wooden railings around them to keep the wild animals away. They

certainly woke up, but did they rise? Did they walk? Did they run against the wind? Yes, probably, and that's why she could hear them, from all that distance away. Always she wonder what they were trying to say. But as she lay there listening, wondering, her head would fall heavy over her chest and her eyelids would relax, and in the short moment when sleep was hanging above her like a thick drop of honey from the spoon's end, she could hear the voices more clearly, the urgent whispers, persistent, susurrant, rising and falling with the wind.

2

An Education

After the wind came the rain, days and days of dull, relentless water dripping from heaven. The dirt streets in the village turned into quagmires. This is how flies must feel when caught on the flypaper, Milagros thought as she struggled on her way from home to her father's workshop on the village square, carrying his lunch which she had helped Abuela prepare. It was oddly pleasant, the sinking of feet in the soft, sticky substance, and the squelching and sucking sound it produced. Squelch, suck, squelch, suck. Her slender feet disappeared briefly and then emerged all covered in brown mud, her toenails gleaming through like white pebbles at the bottom of the river. It looked a little like melted chocolate. "I'm a fly fallen in the chocolate," she sang softly to herself. She stopped to wipe the mud off her feet on the iron boot-scrapers in front of her father's shop before she walked inside, shuddering at the feel of rough unpolished boards on the soles of her feet after the silkiness of the soft, slick earth.

Papá was sitting at the corner next to the window to catch as much of the gray daylight as possible. She usually found him working, but today he was reading one of the few, well-

thumbed books he had brought with him from the capital a long time ago. He read and reread them: there was no place to buy books anywhere near the village, and no money to buy them with. Sometimes her mother would come back from work at the Big House and mention that boxes of books had arrived for Don Aníbal's library, and Papá would sigh. Sometimes, if he was in a good mood, he would read parts of his favorite book to her. It was called *Los Miserables*: a story that happened in the old times, her father said, far away from there. But it could have happened here, he added. Some stories in it made her cry, especially the one about the poor little girl and how she was horribly treated when she was a servant at some cruel people's house. Other parts she didn't much care for, because she could not well understand what was going on; there was one about students and how they had made a barricade, whatever that was (it involved a mattress hanging from a window) and then they were all shot and they died. This was one of her father's favorites parts. Every time he read that one, Milagros would let her eyes wander over the low buildings in the village square and the endless skies rolling above and beyond, trying to see if she could catch a glimpse of the Big House, glimmering white among the trees.

She liked her father's workshop, with its view of the square from the door, where one could sit and watch for hours and know what was going on in the village and who was going where, and she liked the smell of leather and glue and boot polish and dry wood and tobacco. This was Papá's smell, and she inhaled it deeply as soon as she walked into the dark, cluttered little place. He mumbled a greeting without lifting his eyes from his book, and she placed the enamel bowl covered with a clean tea towel on the cluttered table, clearing things away with her other hand.

With the mildly annoyed look of an owl caught in the daylight, her father closed his book and went to wash his hands at the pump at the back of the shop, stepping gingerly over the mud.

“What have you got there?” he called over the sound of splashing water.

“Stew with sausage and corn bread.”

He shuffled back in, wiped his hands with a towel which he then placed on his knees, and began to eat. Milagros hovered over him, unsure what to do. If it wasn't for the rain, the other children would be playing in the square, and Milagros would join them. They would all run towards the groves and the watering ponds to the west of the village, or to the cemetery to the east, and sometimes even as far as the high fences of the Big House to the north. Milagros's mother worked there; she had recently been promoted to under-housekeeper. Sometimes the children would run up the hill to look at the train coming into the station; that was as near the station as they were allowed. And when it was hot, they would play near the streams which fed the watering ponds for the cattle and the horses, splashing about in the shallow leaping water of the streams, and the more daring ones, Pablito Suárez the indisputable leader, would dive into the scummy ponds, trawling out all kinds of horrible creatures, leeches and bloated frogs and water snakes to shake at the girls and scare them. But Milagros was never scared, and Pablito had learned not to try.

Today there were no children around. Black clouds lined up on the low sky, like the ramparts of an unconquerable city. More rain was coming.

“Do you have any chores for me to do?” Milagros asked.

“No, nothing.”

He rarely did; his few customers brought and picked up their mended shoes and boots themselves, because there wasn't much else to do. Going to the cobbler's was always a good opportunity to hang out and share a *mate cocido* and gossip. But today the rain had kept customers and hangers-on away.

A noise like thunder rose in the distance. Milagros stood on the porch and wondered whether she would have time to run back home and check on Abuela before the thunderstorm broke. Another rumble shook the earth. Milagros looked at the gray sky.

The clouds were dissolving. No silver seams of lightning that she could see, but still, the rumble was coming nearer. Her father rose from the table and came out, wiping his mouth.

“What’s going on?”

A large military truck, growling and splashing mud, manoeuvred into the square and halted in front of the new building with the corrugated roof on the other side across from the cobbler’s. This had been very recently erected by a taciturn crew from San Justo, who deflected the curiosity of the villagers with shrugs and monosyllabic replies. They had finished the job within a week; it was a humble, low, two-roomed shack, whitewashed inside and out, not different to the other buildings in the square. Nobody knew to whom it belonged or what it was for.

And now, five or six soldiers jumped out from the back of the truck and began to unload wooden crates and pieces of furniture, small desks and chairs and a larger, cedar desk, from the truck into the newbuild. It was not easy to do this in the muddy weather. Their loud voices – and occasional curses – and the thudding and scraping and banging of furniture filled the square. The commotion awoke the sleepy, huddled village; faces appeared at windows and doorways, and soon a small crowd was drawn. Four men negotiated a large blackboard through the front door, and another two carried large, framed pictures, one each, like a church procession. Milagros’s papa narrowed his eyes and craned his neck to see better.

“It’s the President of the Republic, *Juán Domingo Perón*, and his wife *Eva*,” he told Milagros, pointing at the portraits.

The whole village watched and made loud, helpful suggestions, as the soldiers hoisted a large blue and white sign over the door. Milagros, who had been taught reading and writing by her father, read slowly:

*REPUBLIC OF ARGENTINA. PROVINCE
OF LAS PAMPAS. ALTA GRACIA. PRIMARY
SCHOOL “EVA DUARTE DE PERÓN”*

One of the soldiers nailed another, hand-written sign on the wall. Milagros ran across the square and approached the building as much as she dared. The sign read:

*PROPERTY OF THE STATE
DAMAGE WILL BE PUNISHED BY LAW*

The soldiers stood with backs turned away from the crowd, admiring their handiwork. The gray clouds were dispersing, and a pale sun broke through, showing a face like a convalescing invalid. Milagros saw Pablito Suárez darting towards the truck, then backing away several times. Clearly, he was trying to find purchase to jump onto the back of the truck without being noticed. She knew well what that boy was like. She stole a sideways glance at her father. He was not paying attention to Pablito; he was gazing at the soldiers and at the sign, and his face was bright and uplifted. He looked like a younger, unburdened man.

“A school!” he kept saying. “A school! This is an important day for Alta Gracia.”

At that moment Old Man Suárez’s much smaller truck made its appearance at the end of the main street. It grinded to a muddy halt in front of the school, making some of the soldiers hastily move out of its way. Old Man Suárez, Pablito’s father, a small, wiry man who looked like a grownup version of his mischievous son, jumped down and ran to open the passenger door. Out came a young woman with dark shiny hair partly hidden beneath a printed silk kerchief tied under her chin. She looked assertive and smart in a yellow tailored jacket and pleated skirt, and incongruous but practical black rubber boots that were slightly too large for her. Everyone stared, speechless, as she stepped down the step that Suárez had pulled out for her, looking at them and waving like a queen. She then marched up to the soldiers and exchanged some words with their sergeant, who handed her a key. She smiled graciously, and turning to the gathered crowd, she waved again

and announced in a clear voice, obviously trained to carry, to the crowd of gawping bystanders:

"I am Señorita Delia Luggi. I will be teaching your children in the Alta Gracia Primary. School starts tomorrow at eight o'clock sharp."

She then walked into the school, and the soldiers shuffled in after her. Milagros could hear her ringing voice giving orders above the din of chatter that broke outside. Some of her father's workshop frequenters had now ambled over to the porch, eager for talk.

"Don Gaudencio," they said, "you are an educated man yourself. What do you make of all this?"

But now Milagros' attention drifted back to Pablito, who was on top of the truck, dancing and making all sorts of silly gestures to a group of admiring acolytes, cheering him on from below. One or two of them emulated their chief and began to climb aboard too. Not content to rest on his laurels, Pablito slipped round the tarpaulin, up the panel and, like the little monkey that he was, he attempted to climb inside the cabin through the open window. His ultimate goal was the steering wheel, she knew. He's crazy, she thought, he'll fall and get hurt. Or worse, he'll set the truck moving and kill others – and himself! In front of his father too! But Old Man Suárez was busy bustling in and out of the school room, looking important, not paying any heed to his wayward son.

She turned back to her own papa. She had never seen him looking so delighted.

"The question is why we never had a school before," he was saying. "Yes, I know she promised she would start one, but did you ever see it? I did not."

She was Doña Alejandra, and everyone knew of that vague promise made to the village for years now, without anything ever coming into fruition.

"Well, how do you know this is not her doing then?" someone said.

“Her doing? Ha! Didn’t you see those portraits? We all know how much they hate Perón and Evita. No, this is a state school.”

“I wonder what they’ll say at the Big House about this.”

“What do you think they will do about it?”

“There is nothing they can do,” Don Gaudencio said. “It’s out of their hands now. They cannot fight the state.”

He turned towards his daughter and pressed her shoulder softly and said, “This girl will get an education now. She will make something better of her life than serving the Goyenas.”

As if to underline the triumph in his voice, the deep, resonant horn of the truck sounded repeatedly, making them all jump out of their skins.

“It’s that little devil, the Suárez boy!”

Pablito was sitting at the driver’s seat, beeping the horn with great gusto. But at the sight of the soldiers rushing out of the school room to find out what was going on, he swiftly clambered back up the window, on to the truck roof, dancing and gesturing like a little fiend, then just as swiftly clambered back down and burst into a run, followed by a cheering posse of kids, and vanished down the road. The soldiers uttered oaths and one of two made to follow them. But now Señorita Delia was thanking the sergeant and shaking his hand, and he gave the orders for them to climb back on their truck. Old Man Suárez jumped into his to move it out of their way. Señorita Delia stood at the door of her school, serenely inspecting the scene.

“For such a young person, she has lots of guts,” Don Gaudencio said, smiling.

3

Delia's Diary – Fragments

March 10, 1948

Since I arrived at Alta Gracia – a misleading name, for I have never seen a place with so little grace in my whole life – I have been trying hard to get the school going, with little success so far. What children, what parents, what a backwater this is! The school is a ramshackle construction that I could hardly call a building. It's either roasting hot or freezing cold, stands on a little square at the end of the 'high street,' which is usually either dusty or muddy. No middle ground. A few wretched workshops – a cobbler's, a saddler's, a blacksmith's, a general store where you can buy very little – complete this picture of desolation.

I am everything in this school: teacher and headmistress, janitor and cleaner. There are very few pupils so far. The village does not exactly match one's expectations, when these are based on images of villages in story books and very little actual experience of the real thing. This is a loose cluster of homesteads, shacks really, dispersed all over the place, some in the pampas, some on the outskirts of the large oak forest, some belonging to the large estate of the same name, Alta Gracia. I'm not sure whether the village got its name from the

estate or vice versa. Everybody calls it the Big House – so feudal! It is the estate of the Goyena family. Yes, that Goyena family. Who has not heard of them? One of the ancient criollo families on the land, immensely rich and very prominent in political life. There has not been a government or senate or national assembly since independence without a Goyena in office. I have actually visited their mausoleum in Recoleta Cemetery, in a guided tour. It is an immense stone building resembling a Grecian temple. A flight of stairs leads up to the massive bronze door. There are three life-sized marble statues in front of the entrance, commonly known as the Stone Maidens. One of them is a veiled woman, seated, holding the body of a young girl on her knees; another woman, winged, stands over her, one hand on her shoulder. Both women gaze sorrowfully at the beautiful, serene face of the dead girl. “Look at the flowing hair, the drapery, the detail of expression,” the guide said, “this was made in Rodin’s workshop and they say the Master himself added his touch here, and here.” But as he pointed at the parts which Rodin may or may have not sculpted, and then went on about the immense sums of money the whole thing had cost, all I could think of was how obscene it was to spend such sums on a tomb, a place for dead, rotting bodies, for heaven’s sake! How many poor families could have been fed and clothed with the money spent on a monument for the dead who had no use for it anyway? Apparently I had been thinking out loud, and some people looked at me with annoyance, but others nodded in agreement. I was gratified to see that the majority agreed with me.

When I found out about my appointment, I went to see the Goyena town house in Buenos Aires too. It is an elegant mansion on a leafy street off Avenida Alvear. I vaguely remember having read Doña Alejandra’s articles about women’s emancipation in one of the literary magazines from back in the 1940s; like everyone else, I’ve heard the story about how Don Anibal Goyena survived an assassination attempt a long time ago. And so here I am, living in a small village attached to the Goyena country estate, which

looks like something out of a nineteenth century novel. Who would have thought that such an insignificant, godforsaken place would boast such illustrious residents, senator Aníbal Goyena, and the son and heir, a lauded youth who is the namesake of the Faustino Goyena, father of the nation, but apparently nothing like him. This one is always in the pages of the gossip rags one finds lying about at a hairdresser's salon or a dentist's waiting room – not that I would ever read them.

March 13, 1948

For such a small place, it is hard to believe that Alta Gracia has its own railway station. The colonial white stucco building, complete with large clock and colonnade, is rather an anomaly – why would such a tiny hamlet have a railway station at all? But it is obviously the clout of the Goyenas. This small family of three outweighs a village of a few hundred people, or indeed a province of a few thousand more. At least the railway is for everyone, and the journey to the provincial centre of San Justo, which is really just another village, albeit much larger and with a few real shops, takes just over two hours. If it all gets too oppressive here, that will be my escape, I hope, even though there is only one train per day, and this would mean staying in San Justo overnight.

Living here is really like taking a long dip into the past of our country. It is like finding oneself in the pages of Martín Fierro. Not much has changed here since that great epic of our literature was written, I'm afraid. Unless you count the railway. And the wireless. At least this is something to keep one company in the long dark winter evenings, so pleasurably spent by city people in cinemas, bookshops and cafés. In fact, the wireless is my tenuous link with the life I've left behind, a life that seems more distant, more fabulous day by day. I often wonder if I am the same person: Delia Luggi, twenty-four, spinster, born and bred in Buenos Aires, lover of cafés and theatres and concert-halls, of books and

interesting discussions with friends, or if somebody has taken that young woman's place and inhabits her body, a somebody who walks on dusty roads and lives with an old deaf woman who talks loudly and non-stop, a somebody who has sacrificed so much, for so little in return.

I still question my decision to leave everything behind and bury myself out here. How could I not, after everyone tried to dissuade me, and my parents nearly threatened to disinherit me? But the answer is clear: it is my duty to my country and its people. Unless we all make little or greater sacrifices, our beloved country will never fulfil its great destiny. Juan Domingo and Eva Perón set the example for me with their tireless dedication and courage. If the President and Eva ask each one of us to offer what we can, to fight from whatever post life has placed us in, who am I to refuse? I do my duty, as the rest of the country does, or at least should.

March 17, 1948

My best pupil in the school is a girl – it is always a girl, isn't it? She was the very first one to walk through the door. She is the daughter of the cobbler, a dark-haired, sort of brooding man with a limp, whose workshop is situated right across from the school. Milagros Riquelme is a lovely, serious, pretty girl, half-indigenous of course, like the majority of the villagers, with the straight black hair and long, narrow eyes of those people. Most people here are indigenous; you see comparatively few European faces. This takes a little getting used to, to be honest. But she is very bright and alert. She is very clever. She could already read and write, but her handwriting was the squiggly, illegible sort that passes for calligraphy among certain classes. I taught her to print plain and sensible letters, so that I can read what she writes. She picks everything up immediately and she has a good hand for drawing, too. She has never been farther than San Justo. I keep forgetting how isolated people are here, how little they know

about the wide world we live in. But she shows a great willingness to learn and make something out of her life. I understand she is an only child; all her siblings are dead. Her mother works at the Goyenas' house, and the grandmother, who is a Guaraní woman, is something of a healer, and apparently in communication with people "from the other side." They mention the ghost of an old Jesuit priest that counsels her. People are rather superstitious here, which is unsurprising for uneducated populations. They are not particularly religious. It seems the Goyenas are some sort of free-thinking liberals who don't care much for the Church, regardless of the beautiful Jesuit chapel on their estate, and are not really interested in the spiritual welfare of the village, or the physical one, for that matter.

April 10, 1948

The school is now set up, with the help of that nice sergeant from San Justo (he's married though, so I've been very careful not to give any grounds for gossip). However, it appears that my problems have only just begun. Our local petty tyrants, and I refer to the Goyenas, the Family (I cannot begin to describe how it exasperates me to hear the capital F in their tone of voice, to see it in the expressions on their faces) are clearly not very happy about the school. They sent two heavies. Or they may have fancied themselves as heavies; in truth there were two wrinkled old indios, rather pathetic.

Here is what happened. One morning last week, Tuesday or Wednesday, I cannot exactly recall, at a quarter to eight, the men appeared at the school. I was wearing my flowered dress with full skirt and my Ferretti court shoes (so it must have been Tuesday after all). Whoever said that a well-dressed woman can conquer the world was absolutely right. As Eva Perón has shown us. Anyway, I had just put on my white duster coat over my clothes and was about to start ringing the first bell, when I heard the thunderous

sound of galloping horses. I went out to see what was going on and saw two horsemen dismounting in front of the school. They had a sour look on them, as if they were burdened with a duty they didn't like and wanted over with soon. They came up to the front door and stood in the threshold as if unwilling to proceed. I gestured for them to come in and I sat at my desk, leaving them to stand in front of me. I don't think they have ever been to school, but the teacher's desk is a wondrous, powerful object; it can sap any man's will to dominate. I let them stand in front of me as I sat staring them in the face, not uttering a word. It always works. By the time they had summoned courage enough to say their piece, only a mumble came out. In the meantime, the school children had gathered at the door, and adults behind them, drawn by the news that spread like wildfire (I had noticed the cobbler and his daughter standing at the porch of the workshop as I walked in).

When I had enough of an audience, I asked the men what they wanted. They muttered something about Doña Alejandra wanting to see me. No doubt their script, or the delivery, would have been different with someone more diffident than I was. But even though my heart was beating more quickly – some drama, at last! – I was cool and collected and never stopped staring them in the face. “Am I summoned?” I said, just about managing to make my voice appropriately low and threatening. “Is she bidding me?” I stood up and showed them the way out. I stood at the door as they sullenly mounted their horses, and said loudly for my now quite sizeable audience around the square to hear:

“This is a democratic country, and a great democracy is built on education. A school in every village! These are the orders of President Perón himself! Anyone who has a problem with that, let him lodge a complaint. Here's the address: President Perón, Casa Rosada, Plaza de Mayo, Capital Federal, Republic of Argentina!”

The next day nothing happened, and the next, and the next. My blood boiled every time I thought of the nerve of the woman, Alejandra Goyena, to send her servants to summon me to her

presence. A nice little invitation on paper would have Done the trick, as she should very well know. She could have treated me with the dignity that my position deserves, instead of sending the gauchos, as if I were some outlaw they wanted to chase out of town.

So then this morning she came to see me herself, and the meeting was not at all what I had expected. She is an interesting type, I must admit. She must have been some kind of suffragette in her youth. She was urbane and sweet-spoken, if a little condescending, but I suppose those people cannot help it. She said she would support my every effort and assured me that nothing that could promote the welfare of the local people, and especially the local women, could be disagreeable to her.

"There are women here who've had incredibly hard lives, Señorita Luggi," she said. "Wait till they begin to open up to you and tell you their stories. Mind you, most of it is the fault of their fathers and their husbands, such lazy, rough scoundrels as you'll ever find."

"Well, this is where I will disagree with you, Señora Goyena," I said. "If those men had been given the education and opportunities denied them for so long, things may have turned out differently for them. What can they have known so far, but oppression and injustice, which of course they take out on the weaker ones? But trust me, educate the masses and you will see a very different attitude, you will see civilized and fair men everywhere."

"If being just and liberal were only a matter of education..." She paused and shook her head. "Don't count on education too much, Señorita Luggi," she went on. "When you reach my age, you'll realize it cannot really change man's nature very much."

Which is of course the kind of thing a person of her class would say.

"Don't be offended," she hastened to add. "I have a great respect for what you do, and I think it's very brave of you to leave the luxuries of the capital behind and come out here to help these poor people."

It is irritating that she, of all people, seems to appreciate the immensity of my sacrifice. Everybody else just takes me for granted. She did not say a word about the portraits, though I caught her looking at them with what I thought was distaste. I know the President and Evita are anathema to those people; it is one thing to be high and mighty and benevolent, every inch the enlightened despot, and another to actually see the objects of your benevolence and philanthropy having rights independent of your patronage and condescension. I would have liked to ask Old Lady Goyena, "Why don't you like Evita, since she is a strong woman who is not afraid to defy men and demand whatever is due to women? Isn't this what you claim you want for women, too? Aren't you supposed to be on the same side?"

Of course I didn't ask her that. I know better than to make overt enemies out here. I must depend on their good will, up to a point. And who knows? She might be converted with time.

I could ask Old Man Suárez to get me my mail and shopping from San Justo when he goes into town on Goyena business. True, if I want my complete independence, I should buy my own car. But it is unlikely I could afford it anytime soon, and asking my parents to help is out of the question. Mother was clear about it: anything I wanted was mine as long as I stayed in Buenos Aires, but away from it, they would have nothing to do with me. So I'll have to be diplomatic instead.

April 15, 1948

My accommodation is tolerable. The Widow Pérez may be deaf and rather slow, but she keeps an immaculate house and is not a bad cook either. I heard a story about her which I do not know if I should credit or not: apparently, she was of somewhat questionable morals in her youth, and for a time lived in this house with two men, her husband and a young man about whom the village could not decide whether he was her lover or his. That he must have been