

Vira's Instruction

by José de Jesús Márquez-Ortiz

We left our cars at the red dirt parking lot at the bottom of the hill on a bright Sunday morning, walked past a few houses, and climbed the worn-out rock steps that Texcocans—responsible for the advancement of law, engineering, and arts; counterbalancing the military might of their allies, the Aztecs—had been climbing for many years before the Spanish conquest. Cuauhtémoc, our colossal brother, was the last one—asthma—to reach the flat trail for the last leg towards our destination; he bent over, resting his hands on his knees, while the rest of us stood around waiting for him to catch his breath. Other than that small setback, we brothers and our families walked quietly to the man-made stone terrace—no railing—that extended above a cliff. Allende, our baby brother, handed me the box.

Ever since we were children, my four brothers and I were instructed by my mother to—in case she died—“Just throw me in the garbage,” she’d say, meaning the landfill. This instruction was known by only a few more: my father, her close friends, and a couple of her in-laws.

My brother León kidded our mother about the inconvenience of her instruction to throw her in the trash, because we might end up being arrested for committing a felony based on a health hazard or illegal disposal of one’s mother’s body. “We are going to get in big trouble,” he said to her while a trash truck—an inspiration, I guess—was waiting in front of them at a stop light. León assured me that that conversation made her agree to be cremated. She adjusted her instruction: ashes into the landfill, please.

It occurred to me that her instruction may have been inspired by the last scene of Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados*, *The Young and the Damned*, where Meche—played by Alma Delia Fuentes, a Mexican actress who, oddly enough, looked like my mother—and her grandfather, dump Pedro’s—the hero of the story—dead body down a slope covered in

garbage, a shanty town's landfill. My mother made a slight, dismissive, but affirmative gesture when I asked her, jokingly, "So, you just want us to dump you in the garbage like Pedro in *Los Olvidados*, right?" I wish she had replied, "No, you blockhead! It's just a joke, get a clue!"

When she died, due to kidney failure in a tiny private hospital in our hometown, I was not able to say good-bye to her because I live in Kansas and the uncertainty of her condition's severity did not allow me to gauge when to visit her. Only a box containing her ashes greeted me when I entered her home.

A couple of times someone asked us if we were going to throw her remains over a field of garbage. At least once, just for the shock value—and for fun as well—we said yes. We weren't quite sure about what to do, aside from the instruction, but needed to act soon. While her ashes waited on a shelf in the living room, my four brothers and I sat around our mother's dining table, together with two of her daughters-in-law, her grandchildren standing behind our chair backs, like mafiosi henchmen.

"We could scatter her ashes in Veracruz," said Cuauhtémoc, since our mother grew up there. The rest of us said it would be inconvenient—logistically and financially—to take a trip to the Port of Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico, at least five hours away by car, from our hometown twenty miles east of Mexico City, then rent a boat or stand on the beach to perform a farewell ritual. I also remembered, but kept it to myself, that our mother did not like the tropical heat and humidity of the Port of Veracruz, and that was the reason she only visited my family in Kansas in the fall or spring.

I said that one time I had asked our mother what she thought about scattering her ashes at the Tláloc, the 13,000 foot mountain that began ascending to the east once you stepped outside her house. I added that I took her pensiveness at the time as an implicit acceptance of my suggestion. Some of us had climbed up the Tláloc—the namesake of the Aztec's rain deity—when we were young, but there was some risk involved, since we were all presenting hypertension issues inherited from both our parents.

"What about Tezcutzingo?" suggested León. The hill of Tezcutzingo, also known as "The Baths of Netzahualcóyotl," was a local open archeological site known for the remains of a pre-Hispanic botanical garden and an intricate aqueduct system designed

and built around the fifteenth century by the ruler of Texcoco—The Tlatoani Netzahualcōytl—as his place for rest and relaxation. It was a site often visited by locals as well as tourists off the beaten path. After a brief climb, a hiker could reach a trail that went around the middle of the hill to explore what was left of different stone-carved or built water-controlling structures and pools: a hidden archeological and engineering jewel. Without hesitation, we all agreed that that was the best idea. We would scatter our mother’s ashes in Tezcutzingo on Sunday. The only ones attending would be the five brothers, together with our wives and children.

We may have agreed as a family on an appropriate site to scatter her ashes, yet I remained perplexed by my mother’s original request. “Why the garbage?” asked my wife. It never occurred to me to ask my mother why. My drama-queen mindedness made up an explanation. Tossing aside the need for clinical evidence to support my hypothesis, I concluded that my mother had depression. First, I wrongly recalled her saying, “Black, like my soul,” when someone asked how she wanted her coffee. I considered this a glimpse of a darkness that she never shared with us. But, recently, my four brothers—I am the oldest—set me straight. “No,” their text messages almost sang in unison, “*Papá* said ‘Black, like my soul,’ not *Mamá*, she always drank her coffee with milk.” They missed adding the traditional “*Pinche Chucho*”—you are such a blockhead, Chucho—brotherly adjective before my nickname, that, admittedly, I deserve whenever I do or say something stupid. And no, my father did not have depression; but, like most of us do, he had his own demons to fight.

My error made me wonder why I tend to board the train of thought toward the town of Drama. The first thing that came into my mind was a day of real drama. My parents were quarreling, with my brothers and I—youngsters—standing on the sidelines. It got to a point that my mother packed a suitcase to leave for The Port of Veracruz to stay at her godmother’s home. This I remember clearly: she walked out the door and stopped on the sidewalk, vividly upset, but with enough resolve to ask her sons who was going to leave with her to Veracruz, whose team were we going to choose? Mom’s or dad’s?

I walked towards my mom and stood next to her while my dad, almost apoplectic, said, “What are you doing? Come back here!” I thought it was fair that, being the oldest,

joining my mom's team would level the opposing forces for whatever happened from then on. After further arguing, all standing at our marks like movie actors, I followed my mother back into the house, where our parents kept bickering until they made peace before dinner.

But it was not only the black coffee detail, which I got wrong, and my tendency towards drama that directed my reasoning towards an empirical—if not plain stupid—diagnosis of depression for my mother. She never met her father and lost her mother at sixteen. Her only brother studied away at government-sponsored room and board schools. She worked long hours cooking—each day she turned 200 pounds of corn dough, *masa*, into *tortillas*, *empanadas*, *picadas*, *gorditas*, and other traditional treats—for her godmother's restaurant, and she carried out chores at her godmother's home, all mantled by the humidity of the tropics. "How could this not be fertile ground for depression later in life?" I thought.

"Is not necessarily so!" sang my brothers in barbershop's quartet fashion. They pointed out, and I cannot disagree, that even when her blood relations were absent, she did have a family: her godmother, Cruz, together with her husband, Chico, who adopted and loved her. Yes, she worked very hard, but so did everyone at the restaurant in order to make ends meet, and, eventually, to prosper. Her stepsister had two children who, occasionally, were not the nicest to my mother, but we witnessed forgiveness and peace between them that only the passing of time can bring. Our mother finished secretary school. In the end, she made the best of a difficult life while blooming into an attractive young woman.

So, if depression was not the culprit for my mother's request to be disposed of like a bag of trash, what was the reason for such a request? My brothers insist that it was all a joke, a dark one. My mother could be very funny, and I am the epitome of gullibility. I surrendered to the truth of my brothers' points: our mother was a strong, dignified woman who attacked problems head on and came out victorious most of the time. Although I accepted my brothers' defense of her mental health, she never provided a straight answer to the question we failed to ask: Why the garbage? With time, my drama-oriented mind learned to live with the mystery of the matter.

Standing atop the terrace with my back to the cliff, I opened the box with our mother's ashes and, being the oldest, said a few words about how she would likely be in heaven by now—for the believers in our group—and that, also, she was now part of the universe's infinity—for those of us who were agnostics and atheists.

Only on completing my remarks did I notice that Cuauhtémoc was holding me by my belt. Concentrating so hard on not saying anything stupid among my august remarks, I had stepped close to the edge of the cliff, and Cuauhtémoc didn't want to climb the hill again, later, for my funeral.

I took a fistful of ashes and threw them away to the vastness beyond the cliff. The wind threw them right back at me, making me swallow part of my own mother's remains. I coughed, feeling the grittiness of her ashes in my teeth, the same sensation I felt when I ate oysters during our vacations in Veracruz. A little embarrassed, but not grossed out at all, I expected to hear the classic "*Pinche* Chucho!" from my assembled family. But I encountered only silence.

Our mother loved fiercely, her friends, her in-laws, and—especially us—her family. She moved mountains for the tenants of her heart.

Growing up, we lived in a social interest housing project town. We called it "*El ISSSTE*," the Spanish acronym for the Institute of Security and Social Services for Workers of the State. As a professor of a Ministry of Agriculture-sponsored agricultural university known as U. A. Chapingo, my father, being a federal employee, qualified for a house to be paid in installments deducted from his salary. That house became my mother's headquarters.

About a mile west from our home was the university, where my mother gave her best as the wife of an agronomy professor who, briefly, became the president of the university. She provided guidance and care—information about schools, recipes, even driving lessons—to the wives of newly arrived professors or grad students. She hosted different impromptu events at home for one or dozens of guests. She and my father welcomed the Russian ambassador and his wife during an official visit at the university. I remember the wooden matryoshka doll that the ambassador's wife gave my mother, a fascinating artifact.

In Texcoco, the town a couple miles north of the university and the official headquarters for the larger municipality, she became the power behind the throne for the best public elementary school in the area, which stood adjacent to city hall. As the leader of the school's PTA, she lobbied local businesses and state representatives to receive financial support to remodel the school's old auditorium and carry out other improvements.

Despite our mother's vision and fortitude that allowed her the ability to lead projects such as these for the school, our family, like most, had its share of problems: she had endured an unfaithful husband and the divorce that resulted. She had mourned those she had lost over the years. And like anyone, sometimes the battles of life brought her down. My brothers and I were not the best at comforting her when she was down. Sometimes, when she felt



defeated, we would point out all the great things she had accomplished: raising five boys into relatively decent men while rising to be a pillar in her community, the sort who others sought out, often referred by those who knew her to individuals seeking help or even temporary refuge. Always independent and resourceful, she was a woman who had taught herself English and then taught it to others. She was loved, appreciated, and respected by many. No matter our meager attempts at comfort by reminding her how much others valued her, the inevitable decision to get back on the horse and, again, give her all, was always hers alone.

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Having kept me from plunging to my own death, Cuauhtémoc took a fistful of ashes and threw them, better than I did, down the cliff, as did my other brothers: León, Gerardo, and Allende. Then I invited my daughters, nieces, and nephews to take some ashes and send their *abuela* away. After my wife, the last to join in the ritual, scattered her fistful of my mother there was still a significant volume of ashes left.

Spontaneously, León exclaimed, “One for *papá!*”

I threw some ashes on behalf of our dad, who lived in the western city of Guadalajara and could not be with us that day—they had made peace years earlier—due to frail health. After that, whoever came up with the name of a friend or relative that my mother held in her heart, just yelled it out loud: “Cony!,” “Pilar!,” “Zita!,” “Marielena!,” “Yola!” In response to each name, I threw a fistful of ashes from the cliff. At some point, Cuauhtémoc and I saved some ashes in a small plastic 35 mm film canister for his daughter Daniela, who was at home recovering from surgery; the idea was for her to come later and send her *abuela* to the wind. We ran out of ashes before we ran out of names.

When we were done, we all just sat quietly for a moment. Unexpectedly, Diego, the youngest child, started crying, triggering others to cry as well. We all hugged each other, whether we needed comfort or not. I took a long look from the cliff. I realized that, from that point, it was easy to see El ISSSTE, Chapingo, and Texcoco.

“How do you like that?” I thought. We had just scattered our mother’s ashes from a place where you could see the wide stage in which most of her life took place. Without modesty, I concluded, “We made the right decision.”

After we came down from the hill, we stopped nearby on the way home to have *quesadillas* and *tlacoyos* at Doña Vicky’s modest *antojitos* restaurant. Doña Vicky knew my mother, and, by extension, us. This was irrefutable proof of my mother turning the town into hers. We all sat at a long table enjoying our meal and even tastier conversations—like our parents and us kids did every day at breakfast, lunch, and dinner when we were growing up, we were that lucky—until it was time to go home.

The ashes we set aside for my niece never made it back to Tezcutzingo, because she passed away from her condition. Three years later, we mixed those remaining ashes

with my dad's, to scatter them over a plot of corn—another instruction—at the experiment station of his beloved university. My childish wish that my parents would get back together after their divorce, weirdly, came true.

As for me, thinking about a practical and easy way to dispose of my ashes when I die, I casually told my American WASP wife to scatter some of them at our deceased son Gabriel's tree and to dump the rest in the nearby Missouri River. My sappy plan was that my ashes would reach the Mississippi River, which in turn would take them to the Gulf of Mexico, where, with some luck, a current would deposit them on the beach at the Port of Veracruz, thus completing the circle that my mother started, landing me in my country of origin. I also wished to be cremated with my faithful, cheap, and beat up guitar—that is starting to look like Willie Nelson's "Trigger"—which has been my loyal companion most of my life.

She agreed with scattering some ashes at our son's tree, but not with the other plans. "But these are my wishes," I whined.

"You won't be able to do anything about it," she asserted. "You'll be dead."



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