

The Last Indio¹

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Doña Isabel had seen this boy many times on her way to the village school each day. He lived with his older sister about 400 meters down the road toward San Pablo. It was a wooden house with a rusted tin roof and shutters for windows and in *mal estado*. The doorsill was high and appeared to have supported a small porch at one time. It stood in the shade of a large ceiba tree. *Probably has a dirt floor*, she thought. From time to time a horse would be hobbled in the yard, or perhaps a man sat on the rock that served as a stoop, but the boy almost always played outside, alone.

She knew that their mother had died when his sister was a new teenager. How they survived was the subject of *chisma*, the local gossip which stood in lieu of newspapers in those days. *No lack of chisma around here*, she thought. When she herself was a child there were *Indios* living on the slope of this hill that fell away, down to the Rio Grande gorge. As far as she knew, they were all gone except for this boy and his sister. Now the boy says, he wants to go to her school.

Isabel grew up two miles west of the town of San Pablo and three from the village school. She attended the one room schoolhouse about a mile from her home on the road to the town. Her father took care of the house and grounds of a large farm for its absentee owners and was entitled to harvest its mangos. For a local man, he made a good and steady wage. His still-living grandmother was *Indio-Indio* but no one in Isabel's family was allowed to mention it or to ask questions about her. Still, Isabel knew, as did everyone, and in spite of the taboo she loved the old woman as much as anyone.

Isabel was the good daughter. The eldest, she assumed responsibility for household chores, for collecting mangos, and for the children, without complaining and even with enthusiasm. She discovered "art" in high school and developed a rather good hand at drawing faces. Charcoal images of her entire family graced the walls of the house. In the year after her *quinceanera*, the traditional 15th birthday celebration for girls, Don Juan Carlos Aguero asked her father for permission to court her.

Her father was delighted but Isabel barely knew the man. He was ten years older and had lost his wife after the birth of their third baby. Isabel had seen him appraise her on the way to and from school and they had spoken at town fiestas; she knew that he was not ugly. He now cared for the three children, two of whom were approaching adolescence. She thought of him as a pleasant man but certainly not Francisco.

Isabel was a good girl, not at all a rebel, but she imagined herself in love with Francisco an older boy in the *colegio* of San Pablo, the local high school. In truth, the boy reciprocated but this love had gone unspoken for the weeks that they had looked in each other's eyes and smiled. The very air between them rippled and sparkled when they arranged to pass each other. *Why has he not spoken to father?* With Don Juan Carlos' proposal, her emerging dream would be as dead as she now felt. Her father knew this, but he persisted. Don Juan Carlos was more than a suitable match for this family, and his daughter.

For the first time in her life, Isabel fought. She was one of a few girls in *colegio*, education in those days being appropriate only for boys. She thrived in the stimulation, *like the spores in a petrie dish*, that she learned about in science, and she acquired the ambition of becoming a *maestra*, a teacher in the *escuela* that she herself had attended. Her father knew this also and had shrewdly spoken to Don Juan Carlos about letting her finish *colegio* and the suitor had already agreed. But her father said nothing of this to Isabel or his wife.

When Isabel's unexpected resistance devolved into a week of crying and sequestration in her room, her father bargained with her; he would speak with Juan Carlos to see if such a thing might be possible. But Isabel sensed manipulation and with a shrewdness beyond her years she agreed to see Don Juan Carlos for the year remaining in *colegio*. If all worked out, she would marry him. Her mother stood up for her. "No, husband," she said to Isabel's father, "she has agreed and that is enough. It will be this way or not at all."

Don Juan Carlos was annoyed. His generous agreement he felt, had been broken, but her father threw up his hands, "Women!" he said, "may you understand them better than I." And Isabel was both a comely and predictable commodity as a wife.

"Very well," Juan Carlos said.

That was fourteen years ago. When the agreement was struck, Isabel stopped making eyes with Francisco to the boy's visible heartbreak. But a deal was a deal, and in spite of her own *corazon destrozado*, she stuck by her part of it.

Her life as a married woman was predictable except in one respect; she did not get pregnant. After five years both she and her husband resigned to that fact. It was less of an issue for him except for the currents of invisible suspicion that flowed in the local *chisma* river. The river that informed life and arbitrated truth in the villages. Isabel was a good mother to Don Juan's children but it was only with the youngest that she ever came close to a feeling of motherhood. And the youngest, a girl, had the disheartening practice of wailing for her natural mother at times and pushed Isabel away.

Any sense of motherhood with the girl had to be recreated every few months. In time, that too became a stunted version of what might have been possible. Still, she knew from other women that Juan Carlos was a better than average husband. Every so often a woman friend, usually older, would congratulate her on her luck. But the reality of no children left her unfinished, self-conscious, and perhaps, a little vulnerable.

Isabel became a teacher. The one teacher in the school of her dreams, the one she had attended, had never left, so she found employment in the big *escuela* of San Pablo. Then four years ago, this particular village built a new school, all wood and two stories high. The village of Purires now had nearly 200 families within its purview and a retiring director. The school *junta* selected Isabel to replace her. The four years had passed without remarkable incident. She walked to her new post, three miles in each direction and uphill in the mornings, and as a result retained her health and her figure. In time her husband would buy her a gentle mare that would graze, hobbled, near the school. But that was still a few years off.

A great war raged in the world now but in these villages a subsistence existence continued unaffected. The country declared war on its benefactor's enemies but that did not amount to much except in the ports. This same benefactor had bought thousands of acres of Ceiba forest only to discover shortly afterwards that the type of kapok the tree produced was not suitable for its intended use. Any boom to the rural economy evaporated without effect. Life flowed on.

She knows this boy by sight. She makes his age to be about seven, maybe eight, but he is smaller than the other boys, so there was no knowing for sure. Birth certificates were a luxury found in the Central Valley and the larger cities, *for the rich* she thinks. And today he is freshly bathed and hair parted, the first time she ever noticed. The boy says he wants to go to her school.

"What is your name *chico*?"

"Purí."

"Is that your Christian name or your *apellido*?"

The boy hesitated, uncertain, "It is my name." He looked at her with a combination of confusion and melancholy that split her heart.

She smiled at him, "Well," she said softly, "Any boy named Purí can certainly go to the school of the village of Puríres. Do you have a uniform?"

"No *Doña Maestra*."

"Well, let's see what we have." Doña Isabel kept a few odds and ends that came to the school when the youngest child in the family finished *escuela*. She found an oft-repaired white shirt that might fit and a pair of too large navy trousers that would make do if he rolled them up. She left her office for him to change.

"*Doña Maestra*."

She opened the door. He stood there, hands shyly and tensely folded in front of him. Dust motes floated around his head in a ray of sunlight. They looked at each other for a long moment and a smile opened her face. He smiled, his eyes glistened, and she walked to him, kneeling to look him in the eye, placing both

hands on his shoulders, straightening his shirt and buttoning a missed one.

"I think you are very handsome in this uniform Purí. School starts tomorrow at 8:00 AM. Would you like to walk home with me, I will talk with your sister."

Before leaving for home that afternoon, when she added the boy's name to the roster, she wrote "Purí Purísima," then added "y Purísima," for good measure. The other teacher, who knew of the situation, chided her gently for the subterfuge.

"*Buenas tardes*, señorita, Purí has spoken with me. I am Doña Isabel, the *directora* of the school." The girl, perhaps 16, looked at her, then past her to Purí in his new clothes. Her face broke into a broad smile,

"Oh *muy buenas tardes* Doña Isabel, *mucho gusto*." Her hands clasped each other at her throat, "Thank you, thank you so much. We do not have the money for the uniform."

"Yes, perhaps we can find clothes as they are needed. We are looking forward to seeing Purí in class. Can you, perhaps," hesitating, *not likely*, she thought, "can you adjust the pants a little?" The house was more wretched than she imagined and she left as soon as she could without being rude, resolving to bring needle and thread the next day.

The walk home found her in a mood. The girl was doing the best she could, Isabel was sure of that. *How would I handle her twist of luck? Better? Maybe, But just maybe*, and her uncertainty blossomed into a grudging admiration for the girl's grit and her will to survive.

Isabel brought the needle and thread and many other things as the school year progressed, a loaf of bread from the previous day, pieces of fruit, and at times a plate of left over salsa de carne or pinto covered by a cloth. The girl was always grateful and had the plate cleaned and ready for Doña Isabel at the end of the day.

When the boy walked with Isabel, he always remained close and when other children appeared to grab her or talk to her, the boy would press even closer to her leg, his head barely reaching the top of her thigh. Once on the way home they passed a man trudging uphill from a day in the fields. He wore a machete and a cotton *lona* on his head. It used to be white, but was now dulled gray and brown from sweat and grime. The boy was chattering at Isabel, looking at her and did not see the man until he loomed in front of them. Purí gave a small cry, stepping behind Isabel as he tried to push his arm between her legs holding her tight and hiding in her skirt. A wave of embarrassment flashed over her followed by recognition of the boy's fear and its object. Anger rushed to the surface and she glared at the man, refusing his "*Buenas tardes*."

Another thing, essential to our story, came to Isabel's attention during those first two years. Once in the rainy season she arrived early at school to find Purí sleeping on the porch, its roof covered the entrance to the school. His uniform was wadded into a ball and his head slept on it.

"What happened *mi amor*?"

"They put me out last night."

"And you slept here?"

“Yes, *maestra*.” He looked up to her face, “I am sorry, forgive me.”

“Do not worry yourself, Purí. It is alright *mi amor*. Tell me, is your sister okay?”

“Yes, I think so, *maestra*.”

But it was not alright. *There is nothing ‘alright,’ about it.* And that afternoon, Friday, the last day of the school week, she asked his sister if she might take the boy home for the weekend. “Purí needs a little additional work on his letters and I can give that to him on the weekend.”

The girl looked at her, searching her face for some hint of condescension but there was none. Empathy for the girl herself and her struggle perhaps, but no pity. When Isabel said that there were many children around to play with and that she would stop by on Monday morning, the girl relented.

What Doña Isabel’s husband might think of this had not occurred to her, and as the two walked downhill, she thought of Don Juan Carlos.

It doesn’t matter, she thought, *maybe I am a rebel in my old age.* At thirty-two, the thought made her chuckle; her humor flowered into bravado.

Yes by God, this boy needs me as much as he does.

When they got to her house she simply introduced Don Juan Carlos to Purí and announced that the boy is, “visiting us for the weekend.” Don Juan was no fool, and after 16 years of marriage he could recognize a certain tone.

“Yes dear. Welcome Purí, is that your first name or your last?” He chatted amiably with the tongue-tied boy as he showed him to a bedroom and the bathroom. Later he said to his wife, “My dear, I hope you will do me the favor of talking first if you are getting ideas.”

A year or so into the arrangement, Purí returned home with a charcoal image of himself, a smiling boy leaning against a picket gate. It arrived with a tack and remained on the wall until the house was abandoned many years later. In time, Don Juan Carlos warmed to the boy and began to spend time with his wife and Purí. To a casual observer, they appeared as a family on those days.

Her husband was way ahead of her. He had learned to anticipate his wife in the manner of some older men who become more solicitous as time passes. And after two years of spending almost every weekend with the boy, Doña Isabel began to “get ideas.” *The boy is thriving in this home.* This time she spoke first with her husband.

“I cannot agree or disagree at this point *querida*. You must talk with his sister first. I do not know her but I would not be surprised if money must change hands.”

The schedule had evolved so that Isabel had not seen Purí’s sister for some time, routine having taken the place of polite amenities, supplemented perhaps with some modesty on the part of the girl. So there was a shocking moment on the following Monday afternoon when Isabel stopped by the house. His sister was clearly pregnant. Purí had said nothing about this. After the usual greetings, the girl spoke first,

“As you can see Doña Isabel, I am unable to earn much and it will get worse soon. I need Purí to help with the house and perhaps to earn a little money for us.”

The shock of the announcement and the girl's pride, *stubborn pride*, Isabel thought, surprised her. Her first thought was to the girl's well being, and the compassion in her face may have been misunderstood by the girl-woman. The second was to the options, *how can we do this differently?* Her husband's presence rose to the surface, *I would not be surprised if money must change hands.* "If it is a matter of money perhaps we—."

"No, señora, Purí must stay with me." The girl reddened; she seemed to suffer from a guilt, an inexplicable guilt to some, when it came to letting Purí go with Doña Isabel.

They talked further, Isabel trying to find a way for the girl to change her mind but the steadfastness of her resistance, *her stubborn pride*, the thought repeated itself, led to Isabel's capitulation and a decision that would haunt her for the rest of her life. "Purí," she said, "you must stay with your sister. You can come visit us whenever your sister says so."

The boy said nothing, he stood there staring at Isabel and sobbed.

Then Isabel sobbed, and they held each other until well past time to leave for home. The next morning, despite her repeated entreaty, the boy would not go to school with her. That night Isabel's distress became physical, migraines and nausea. She stayed at home for over a week and when she returned, the other teacher told her that Purí had come to school for three days, but had not been back.

The boy's attendance in school became episodic. Within a year, the river of *chisma* developed a new channel and rumors began to arrive to the school that Purí was busy at night, that in fact, the boy had become a thief. The good people of the village began to take precautions. In time, Isabel heard that the boy was seen sporting a *cruzetta*, a sword like machete with an actual hilt that grown men often wore to fiestas, and with which they sometimes fought each other. *Where did he get the money for that?* Doña Isabel's dissonance became so great she went to talk to his sister, her husband having agreed to offer a substantial amount of money.

Purí was there but he feigned politeness then slipped out the door. His sister said she would consider the offer but only to let Purí resume his earlier schedule. She had another mouth to feed now and she needed Purí's assistance in looking after the little girl.

It was the measure of her desperation that Isabel talked her husband into a lump sum contribution. Afterwards, Purí did spend a few weekends but he had friends now and he spent much of the time with them. The visits were almost always disappointing in some manner for the couple. Then things began to disappear from the house and finally, after one weekend visit, Don Juan Carlos could not find the revolver that he kept in his drawer next to the bed. Purí never returned. The couple did not report the loss but Don Juan changed the locks on the house.

When Purí was fourteen he fought an older and larger bully for, he thought, the affection of a girl. It was an adolescent, hormonal vigor but it led to his severe beating. The other boy held him down and pounded his head into the hard,

cracked earth and had to be pulled off Purí, almost too late, by the girl's older brother. Purí spent weeks trying to recover without medical care in his sister's house. At times it seemed the boy would burn up with fever.

Finally, his sister panicked and fled to the school to find Doña Isabel. She arranged for the boy to be taken by ox cart to the railroad stop at Quebradas some 15 kilometers away, then by train to the capital and ambulance to the hospital, an agonizing trip of nearly two days. Isabel went with the boy and nursed him. She took a room in the Capital for the two weeks of treatment and observation in which she visited him daily. The prognosis was that he would never be quite right but that he would be able to live a normal life. *Not quite right but, normal?* Isabel felt that she herself deserved that same verdict. *Not quite right, but normal. My God, what have I done?*

One of the losses the boy suffered was any sense of connection to Doña Isabel and Don Juan Carlos. He returned to his sister and led an ordinary, in some ways exemplary, life as a *peon*, working day jobs. Isabel could not say that the boy-then-man was unhappy. She watched him work as the years passed. He was always friendly yet her heart never failed to produce an ache whenever she spoke to him.

A few years after his return, his niece was taken from her mother by the authorities, a forcible removal that unhinged what remained of his sister's self-respect. Or perhaps it had the opposite effect; who can really say. His niece's departure seemed to have little effect on Purí but one morning his sister walked out of the house *pata en suelo*, barefooted, and never returned. Someone saw her in a nearby town and said that she was cleaning houses. He continued to live in the house and did work for the local farmers and occasionally for Don Juan Carlos. In time, the channel of *chisma* that had labeled him as a youth, dried up. He died, the river said, of something in the brain in the 1960's.

In 1970, for her sixtieth birthday, Doña Isabel and Don Juan Carlos were invited to the dedication ceremony of a new school. The fiesta was to be in her honor for the years she gave to village of Puríres and she was to dedicate the new building. Her request was that she be allowed to paint a mural on the school's wall of the indigen that gave their name to village. It was a bust with a few headdress feathers, and to some it looked familiar.

1 This is a work of fiction. The school exists and the vague, almost mystical figure of Purí, existed in about the time presented, and the school bears a mural of him. But other than Purí, the characters and the story are all from the imagination of the author.

