

# The Real Story of Don Manuel

David Toscana

I HANG UP THE TELEPHONE AND THINK about the last time Toño, Ruben, Anselmo, and I got together. I can't remember the exact date, but I can recall many other things: the place, the heat, the drinks, the faces, the mood.

"It was about time," babbled Anselmo, drinking his beer.

"Yeah, but he seemed in no hurry to die," Toño said.

We had just buried don Manuel: a coffin that barely seemed to have anything inside because the old man was just a husk. He had no relatives left—the only ones to say good-bye were the four of us who'd lived on the same street, facing his shoe shop, thirty years ago. In those days the city was simply a village, dedicated to making brown sugar; not even in our dreams could we have imagined that we would get an oil refinery, an auto plant, and gringo *maquiladoras*.<sup>1</sup> In those days we were about ten years old, and don Manuel was already an old man.

"And who'll be the next one to give us an excuse to get together?" Ruben's words made us smile until we realized that we were all looking at Anselmo. Even with all the time that had passed since we'd seen each other, somehow things get found out, and the three of us all seemed to know about Anselmo's cirrhosis.

I was the one who called them to come to the funeral. I wanted to tell them a secret about don Manuel, a secret that I'd carefully kept until the day he died.

"The bar hasn't changed," Toño said.

"Just a little—now the naked women are in color," said Ruben.

"And prices are much higher," Anselmo lamented.

And a lick of paint, the bar recently varnished, and new ceiling fans. The bartender wasn't Meliton anymore but a hard-faced mustached middle-aged man. As for the rest, it was just like the old days. I could even hear the same music. Outside, the same sign on the wall: "Lontananza," and next to

---

<sup>1</sup>Assembly plants.

the door, with small red letters: *No admittance to minors*. It was precisely by disobeying that sign that we got close to don Manuel.

I couldn't wait any longer: "Actually, I arranged for this meeting to tell you a secret about don Manuel."

My three friends, who'd been bumping against the backs of the chairs, moved toward the table with their eyes shining, half-curious, half-morbid. For a second I felt that time hadn't changed us, but the illusion was broken by our thinning hair, our thirty-eight- or forty-inch waistlines, and the offhand way Anselmo scratched his balls.

"He loved to talk," said Toño. "I doubt he had any secrets left."

The first time we entered the Lontananza, looking for anyone who might want a shoeshine, Meliton came toward us angrily, and when he tried to kick us out, don Manuel spoke. "They're my friends, let them in." There was something about the way don Manuel talked, and since he was such a regular customer, he was boss. We started to go every evening after school. He used to give us a bottle of beer that we shared, drinking it with little sips while he was drowning himself in whiskey. Then he started to tell us stories about the days when he fought in the Revolution. "Don't believe him," the rest of the drinkers yelled at us, "they're all lies." They said that don Manuel used to hide in the attic of his shop every time he heard news about any army—federal or revolutionary—that was approaching town, and he didn't even complain the two or three times that soldiers came to steal shoes.

It didn't matter whether the stories were real or made-up. The important thing was that they were funny, and, above all, that thanks to them we could get into the Lontananza every day. After a time, nobody complained about our presence, neither Meliton nor the rest of the drinkers, and that made us adults—the sign on the entrance didn't apply to us. Before long we gained a good reputation as pool players, and we earned more from playing than we did from shining shoes.

"Come on, tell us that secret," Ruben hurried me.

"Wait, asshole, let's ask for another round so this will be more exciting," suggested Anselmo.

I used to ask myself whether Anselmo had nice memories about don Manuel or whether he blamed him for the way things went in his life. That's why I watched him carefully when the coffin was being lowered.

Maybe there was a touch of happiness in his expression, something like fulfilled revenge. But probably I only saw what I wanted to see.

“Are you sad that he’s dead?” I asked him.

His laughter showed me how foolish my question was. Who could be sad about the death of a man who’d lived for more than a hundred years?

The next round of beer was served in the midst of Toño’s applause and Ruben’s hurrahs. “Now we’re ready,” said Anselmo. “Tell us all about it.”

The atmosphere was hot and humid, as if it were about to rain. The bottle of beer was covered with a thin coat of water that began dripping after a while. The place suddenly felt sultrier, and I had to speed up the damned fan.

“Do you remember Samuel Ituarte?” I asked, pulling one, two, three times on the fan chain.

“Father or son?” asked Ruben.

“Father.”

Napkins flew with the wind. We immediately felt the coolness of evaporating sweat.

“Who wouldn’t remember that son of a bitch,” said Anselmo, loosening his belt in the hope of getting something to eat.

Samuel Ituarte was one of our most unpopular governors. He stole like all of them, maybe a little more, and he did as few public works as the rest, maybe fewer. He was authoritarian, despotic, with no personal qualifications to warrant so much responsibility. That didn’t bother us. The thing we could never forgive was his marriage with Estelita. Samuel Ituarte came once to the town’s fair and fell in love with our brown sugar queen. A few days later, after who knows what sort of secret negotiations, his emissaries had arranged the wedding of Estelita with a man three times her age. Even Estelita’s parents had to leave town because we never forgave them. Yet we never resented her; we regarded her as a sort of martyr who sacrificed herself for some vague purpose—and sacrifice is always virtuous. We saw her from time to time because, to please his wife, Ituarte bought a nearby hacienda for a vacation home, and Estelita would come to visit her old friends.

An all-but-invisible hand put a bowl with popcorn and unshelled peanuts on the table.

“We’re not monkeys,” Ruben complained.

“I can bring you the menu,” said the waiter angrily.

Now our eyes were turned toward Toño. He'd not loosened his tie, even though he was drenched with sweat the way we were. Toño was the only one—or so we believed—who could afford a platter of liver, cheese, kidneys, and tripe. He was manager at the oil refinery, the one that has the best pay and lots of benefits: political connections, cancellation of traffic tickets, school for the children, the right to live in a walled compound. Ruben and I worked at the auto plant: he was an operator, and I was a supervisor, thanks to my high school education and my having read a few books. The factory is so big that Ruben and I rarely got to see each other, and when we did, we barely waved. I've always been smarter than Toño, but you can never go far without a degree in engineering or whatever. Anselmo's situation, as always, was pitiful. Whenever he was sober, he could get a job as a janitor because the only requirement in the *maquiladoras* is having two arms.

"Bring us something decent and take away this shit," Toño finally said.

Anselmo had time to grab a handful of peanuts and put them in his pocket.

Samuel Ituarte used to walk hand in hand with Estelita at public events. He liked showing her off, knowing that everybody hated him because of her. That's why rumors spread right after he appeared alone for the first time. "He beats her, and she can't appear in public with all those bruises." And we talked about all sorts of things that none of us could prove but which all of us believed: when he arrived without her to inaugurate the bullfight plaza, he had whipped her; when in September he came alone to celebrate Independence Day, he had kicked his wife till her teeth were broken. Nobody changed the story when Estelita appeared later with her teeth intact.

"Do you remember," I started again with the same formula, "the day that don Manuel said that Ituarte was a chicken."

"He said that all the time," answered Ruben.

"Yes," I explained, "but one day he said he would prove it."

"If Ituarte was never known for his courage," Toño laughed, "what's the point in showing that he's a chicken?"

"Even I have more guts than that motherfucker," mumbled Anselmo behind his empty bottle.

They started to joke and talk about things that had no relation to don Manuel. I thought about swallowing my secret. It wouldn't be the only one

I didn't reveal. They kept asking for one round after another, certain that Toño would take care of the bill.

"I'm going to take a leak," Anselmo said.

"Me too," seconded Ruben.

Toño followed them without saying anything.

They would soon be drunk and wouldn't give a damn for any secret, not even one about their own daughters. At that moment I felt proud of my loyalty. Revealing a secret after all these years wasn't a sign of treason—quite the contrary. That was something, I was sure, Anselmo could appreciate, even though right then all he probably cared about was getting back to his drink.

The moment had stayed fresh in my mind because don Manuel's words had another purpose: they were not so much about proving that Ituarte was chicken as they were about making himself look brave. That would show that all his stories of the Revolution were completely true, that a man like him would never hide in the attic, that the shoemaker of Cinco de Mayo street, the short man of short steps, the wrinkled old man who sat during the evenings in his rocking chair at the sidewalk counting cars by their colors or by the first letter of their plates, had actually been in the Revolution, knew something about artillery science, had shot his rifle until it blew up in his hands. "Or do you think I got these scars by playing tic-tac-toe?" he would say.

"I mean the day when don Manuel asked us to meet at the entrance of Ituarte's hacienda." I tried to start my story again as soon as they came back from the restroom.

"You mean the day he never showed up?" asked Toño.

My beer was warm, so I pushed it toward Anselmo. He didn't mind the temperature. Toño raised his hand to the knot of his tie. It was a moment of doubt. But he must have reconsidered the advantages of keeping his distance as he let his hand move past his tie to his chin.

"The truth is that he did show up," I explained. "He came a couple of minutes after you left."

They started to laugh. They'd just remembered why I couldn't go back with them. I'd made the mistake of carrying my shoeshine box. We'd waited for don Manuel for more than an hour when we saw Ituarte's personal escort approaching—fifteen infantrymen and a captain. We saluted nervously and started walking as if we were just passing by, until we heard

the captain's shout. "Stop!" Don Manuel's absence made us feel guilty of something, and we turned warily toward the escort. "Are you all shoeshiners?" asked the captain. "No," Anselmo answered quickly, with his finger pointing at me, "only him." "So you three better get moving—and you, give us a shine." I was brushing the second pair of shoes when don Manuel appeared down the road. I hardly recognized him. He was dressed in a dirty old military uniform. From his chest hung a pair of decorations that I couldn't make out, but they surely suggested high rank.

I was telling the story just as I remembered it, though they weren't showing much interest. Ruben was joking with Anselmo, tapping his back and poking his ribs. Both burst out laughing, and Toño watched them, suppressing a smile, tempted perhaps to take part in that child's play but determined to act like a respectable man.

"Do you want to hear the rest?" I asked with annoyance.

"You can pretty much go to hell for all I care," answered Anselmo. But I didn't want to take him seriously—his words were just drunken babble, so I kept talking.

Ituarte's escort ignored the odd-looking man. They kept up their own talk, waiting for their shins. "Attention!" shouted don Manuel as he approached. First, they looked at each other in confusion, but as soon as one of them came to attention, the rest—captain included—did the same. I couldn't help thinking of Sundays at mass, when someone stands up at the wrong time and draws the rest of the congregation along too.

"Attention!" shouted Anselmo, and Ruben stood rigid as a mast.

"Behave," Toño interceded, "and let this man finish his story."

Don Manuel walked back and forth with his hands behind him. I noticed that his decorations were really medals of the Virgin of Guadalupe and of the Sacred Heart. I don't know whether the soldiers noticed this too, or that they had more respect for religion than for the army. "Listen to me, men." Don Manuel thickened his voice. "We've been assigned a very delicate mission." The captain stepped forward, and, seduced by the heroic tinge of don Manuel's words, he said: "Whatever you command, we'll do. Our life belongs to our country." Since I'd moved off to the side, I could see don Manuel turn his back to them and struggle to control his laughter. Finally, he looked at them and said: "On the orders of the President, we must put Samuel Ituarte under arrest." An objection, a timid protest, broke out from the escort in the form of a murmur. Don Manuel hushed them. "I suppose

you know the penalty for disobedience, and you must know that neglecting a presidential command is treason.”

“Treason is letting your beer get warm,” Ruben interrupted.

I emptied the bottle with a long gulp so they would let me continue. Just then, I noticed that the table was full of tortillas, salsas, and sausages. The sight made my mouth water. I was tempted to reach for some chorizo, but that would undermine the purpose of our meeting—my purpose anyway.

They entered the hacienda. I followed them at a distance. Ituarte was lying placidly in a hammock, perhaps asleep. “You are under military arrest!” Ituarte seemed as if he weren’t used to hammocks, for he had a tough time getting himself out. His expression went from amazement to indignation. “Do you have an official order?” Don Manuel took a gun from one of the soldiers and aimed at Ituarte’s belly. “Is this official enough?” I could hear everything so clearly that it seemed best to retreat a little. It would be easy for them to hear me too if I had to cough or sneeze. Hiding in a gully, I could see that Ituarte had shifted from indignation to pleading. He talked with a broken voice, joining his hands as if in prayer, and, to my surprise, this didn’t make me happy. I was ashamed to see the grotesque way that the power roles were reversed. Even though everyone hated him, he was our governor, but now his posture made me think of the piteous state of the governed.

“That’s bullshit,” Ruben said, “everybody knows that governors are governors because they have the right friends.”

“Even I could be one,” Anselmo added, “but I’m not interested.”

This time I liked the interruption—it showed that they were listening. Only Toño hadn’t interrupted me; university boys are taught not to speak when they shouldn’t.

I lost sight of them when they entered the house, and then waited for a long time, biting my nails, until they appeared through the hall. Ituarte was in his underwear, hands tied, driven by a pair of guns in his back. “Your valor will be rewarded,” don Manuel said, riffling through a wad of bills. The servants came out behind the soldiers, afraid that the arrest of the boss would mean the end of their jobs. Just then we heard a squeak at the entrance of the hacienda: it was Estelita coming back from town.

“Nice piece of ass,” said Ruben, leering.

“No,” Toño spoke, “she was much more than that.”

“A toast for the face that launched a thousand ships,” Anselmo lifted his bottle.

“This jerk thinks he’s a poet,” said Ruben.

The thread of my story was about to break. The waiter appeared with new rounds, and I noticed that the clock was dangerously close to eight. A sign over the counter said: “2 for 1 in national beverages from 8 to 9 P.M.” And, of course, the “national beverages” bit was a joke.

“Looks like we all fell in love with her,” I said.

“Maybe it was a boy’s fantasy that’s endured,” Toño said.

“What crap!” Ruben protested.

“That’s because you lack poetry,” Anselmo said. “Otherwise you’d understand the meaning of Toño’s words.”

“And what’s that?” Toño asked, on the verge of anger.

“That you used to peel your dick with Estelita in your mind,” answered Anselmo.

I didn’t like the tone of the conversation because it was clearly steering us away from don Manuel.

“OK, it was great seeing you.” I pushed back my chair and pulled out my wallet.

“Don’t go,” Anselmo cried.

“Wait, buddy,” Toño pushed me toward my chair. “Go on with your story—don’t worry about the money.”

Several rounds earlier we’d realized that either he was going to pay or we’d have to wash dishes. Anyway, I hated to think of Toño as our benefactor. And to be honest, I’d only pretended to leave to regain their attention.

Estelita came close. Ituarte’s eyes were lowered, and he didn’t look up when he heard his wife’s voice—directed not at him but at the captain. “What’s going on here?” The captain looked at don Manuel and waited for him to answer. But after a moment of silence, he said: “The general has an order from the President to put Mr. Ituarte under arrest.” Estelita knew don Manuel very well. She had lived two blocks away from the shoe shop. It was don Manuel who made the white shoes with silver tassels that she wore for the brown sugar festival. “Can I talk to you for a minute, general?” Don Manuel was purple-faced by then, suffocating beneath the military gear. “How could I say no to such a lady,” he answered, with his last shred of poise.

“It’s eight o’clock,” Ruben shouted, and four pairs of bottles arrived at the table.

Again, everybody went to pee so as to make room for the double bottles, while I helped myself to a chorizo taco—it struck me as better than any story about an old shoemaker.

“We’re all ears,” Toño said when they came back.

“I’m coming to the end.” I hid the half taco that remained in my hand.

“The end?” asked Ruben. “I’d thought it was finally going to get more interesting.”

Don Manuel and Estelita moved away so they could talk without being heard. It was a friendly chat, with some smiles. At last, Estelita turned severe and poked don Manuel’s chest with her index finger. With utmost seriousness, he nodded over and over. He took out the wad of bills from his pocket and handed it to Estelita. Then he walked toward me as if he’d always known where was I hiding and said: “Let’s go.” Neither of us turned back, but I like to imagine Ituarte soaked in tears, kissing the hands of his rescuer. I followed don Manuel up to the town entrance without saying a word, my mind embracing Estelita, more beautiful than ever. We entered the shoe shop, and there, in the midst of all those shoes, I realized that I’d forgotten my shine box at the hacienda. “I’ll buy you another if you swear something to me,” said don Manuel.

“And then?” asked Ruben.

“Estelita told him that if anyone found out what happened, Ituarte would execute him,” I said.

“And you kept silent to save his life,” Toño said sarcastically.

“Come on, Ituarte died about ten years ago,” Ruben said.

“Yes,” I stated, “but we still have his son.”

Nobody mentioned Estelita. She was also alive.

“OK,” Anselmo said, “now tell us the famous secret.”

“And what do you think I’ve been telling since the first beer?” I asked uneasily.

“Come off it,” Ruben said, “all the world knows that story about don Manuel.”

I guess I stayed to drink my two-for-one beers. They were still in the mood to joke and chatter. They even told me things I didn’t know: don Manuel had Ituarte in underwear because he wanted to expose him in public; and he didn’t return all the money to Estelita. I stood up and threw

a bill on the table; I couldn't tolerate the humiliation of letting Toño pay for me.

"I drank four, so I pay four." My voice had all the dignity I could muster right then.

"You also had a chorizo taco," Anselmo added. "Don't you think I didn't see you."

I turned around—one quick stride and I was outside. *No admittance to minors*. Somehow things get found out, just as we all knew about Anselmo's cirrhosis. I went to sleep and the next morning, or some morning after, I passed Ruben somewhere in the auto plant. We barely waved.

But that was some years ago, then today I had a phone call.

"Do you know Anselmo Sandoval?"

I hesitated for a moment. The name Sandoval seemed unfamiliar.

"Why?" I didn't want to say yes until I knew more about the purpose of the call.

"He passed away last night. . . ." The voice became solemn; maybe I was supposed to cry. "A car ran over him . . . and we found your telephone number in his wallet."

Poor Anselmo. Cirrhosis or not, he'd had to be the next. The voice asked me if I would take charge of the funeral. I said no. So the voice told me that he would be taken to the public cemetery.

To be honest, I would rather bury Toño; Anselmo never did any harm to anybody.

I remember when he was on his way to becoming an alcoholic. Progress was coming to town, and Ituarte had been reelected. I found Anselmo drunk and crying. He told me that he had no money and that his mouth felt so dry that he'd agreed to spend the night with an engineer from the refinery in exchange for a bottle of tequila. I think we were still a couple of kids, and when he was sober he begged me to keep quiet and then threatened to kill me if I said a single word about it. "I know how to keep a secret," I said, thinking of don Manuel.

I pick up the telephone to call Toño and Ruben. I think we should go to the cemetery and say good-bye to Anselmo. That's what friends are for. Later, if we feel like it, we might go to the Lontananza. We'll drink two-for-one beers and I might even tell them a secret. Or maybe I won't say anything. What for? Somehow things get found out and with a little luck I'll

even find out the name of that engineer from the refinery.

*Translated by the author with a little help from his friends*

## A SHORT INTERVIEW WITH THE WRITER

*Tell us a little about your decision to become a writer.*

I grew up only wanting to follow the pack. I graduated in engineering although I knew I didn't want to be an engineer. At the same time I had no idea of what was my real vocation, so I searched about by trial and error. I tried to be an Olympic marathoner, but my times were never good; tried to be a cyclist, but on two occasions cars ran over me. I started three businesses and went broke in each of them. In a three year span I had nearly ten different jobs. I became an expert at job interviews. At that time I used to despise literature. Who could care about things that didn't happen, that come from the imagination of a writer? Of course, I had never read a novel. But one day, a very boring day, my trial and error approach put *Don Quixote* in my hands. I read it three times in about two weeks. When I finally closed the book, I was exhilarated. My search was over: I wanted to be a writer.

*How did you begin to write?*

I felt anxious to write. Actually, I wrote my first novel when I had just read *Don Quixote* and *Crime and Punishment*. It took me three months to write it and, of course, it was a complete disaster. Sometimes I read fragments of this novel to my friends and we laugh a lot. It's a really lousy piece of writing. I then followed the "normal" steps: a workshop and tons of reading. But looking back, I realize I've been a story maker since I was a child, so my struggle was just to find a way to put these stories on paper.

*How do you coordinate being an engineer and a writer?*

My 10+ jobs showed me that I am a good engineer. As an engineer I could be making a lot of money, but I simply search for a writer's income, so I only spend around ten hours a week doing engineering consulting for several companies and I have the rest of the week for writing and reading. I don't think my technical background is a weakness in my writing, on the contrary, it gives me a different perspective and a logical mind that helps me

in developing plots. In addition, many of the frustrations from my vocationless life are now raw material for my writing. Of course, not having a formal education in literature separates me from the academic world, but I feel free to read whatever I want, with no formal sequence, and without making myself answer too many questions about any book. What I mean is that a book teaches me about writing, not about literature.

*What has surprised you most about the U.S.?*

Maybe your litigious culture and the way you apply the law. Here, law goes beyond justice and common sense. Any reason, any stupid reason is enough to sue somebody. I've even seen thieves that sue their victims. I can imagine a future where Americans mistrust everybody and live in an atmosphere similar to that of plague years, when people didn't want to get close to each other to avoid contamination.

*Have you discovered any writers here that you think highly of?*

Not yet. I bought a lot of books from contemporary American writers (Cameron, Ford, Chabon, Wolff, Canin, etc.), but I will read them when I get back to Mexico and I'm sure I'll find very interesting things.

*Who (besides yourself) should we be reading from Mexico?*

I think the only *must* is Juan Rulfo. Besides him, I think a reader with no special interest in Mexico can choose to read any good writer from the U.S. or from any country and his time will be equally or better spent. With so much to read and so little time, each time you decide to read a book you are also deciding not to read thousands of them.

*What are your views on NAFTA? We have heard that to turn down NAFTA would be unfair to Mexico.*

Don't worry about fairness; that has never guided the decisions taken by the U.S. NAFTA is not about justice, society, opportunities, better life, etc. NAFTA is about money, about macroeconomic money. It doesn't matter what happens to people as long as big companies get bigger. The consequence? I don't know if in the long run a majority of Mexicans will or will not be benefited from NAFTA. I don't know and I don't think a Harvard economist knows. Let's wait and see.

*What about the revolt in Chiapas? What is it telling the us?*

There has been a lot of media discredit for the *Ejército Zapatista*; they have been called traitors. But most thinking Mexicans consider them heroes, brave men who are saying and doing things we never dare say or do. It is not that we like violence, but we understand there was no choice. This revolt is telling the world that Mexico hasn't changed much in terms of justice and wealth distribution, but I don't think the *world* cares.

*Any comments on the recent elections in Mexico?*

Nothing new, nothing has changed. In Mexico the expectations on the future are not based on numbers, plans or projections. They are based on trust, and after so many years of going downhill, of broken promises, there is not much faith that things are going to change for the better. With nine political parties in the elections, the opposition's concern in the presidential race was to be second. Everybody knew who would be first.

*Any comments on the recent election here?*

I hear a lot about the weakness of a two-party system. Don't change this system or you will regret it. Politics, in essence, should be made of people who agree with the way things are and people who disagree. If you divide the people who disagree in two or three or whatever, they will maybe never be strong enough to produce a change.

*Who would Mexicans prefer for our next president—Clinton, Dole, Gramm, none of the above?*

Mexico (like many other countries) is somewhat governed "under the table" by the U.S. Still, I guess 99 percent of Mexicans don't care who will be your next president. I'm in that 99 percent. Right now it looks as if the U.S. has a lack of leaders; any name seems small for the task. But so as not to avoid your question, I'll say that I'd prefer another four years with the Clintons.