

CHAPTER 1

“The Ladrillera”

Josefina García emerged from the Central Bus Terminal carrying her fourteen-month-old son. His head on her breast, Pablo slept from exhaustion after the thirty-eight-hour trip from Guadalajara. Her five-year-old, Miguelito, clung to the end of her long cotton blouse, as he had been taught to do when they were on city streets or in crowded places. Rubén, her husband of seven years, his sun-wrinkled face and quiet, serious demeanor, making him look older than his twenty-three years, walked beside her, carrying the two patched suitcases bound by a length of rope and containing their clothes and a few pots and pans.

Outside the terminal, the air rising from the cracked sidewalk shimmered from the midday heat. They had arrived in Mexicali again, as she had done every year for the past eight years, and as she and her husband had done since they had begun living together six years ago. The rains had come again in Jalisco, making it impossible for them to continue making bricks, turning their efforts from hard, rectangular building blocks to asymmetrical clumps of mud.

The only difference was that this year Josefina and her husband had preceded her mother and father and her two brothers and their wives and children. Usually her mother and father or her eldest brother, José, and his wife had come ahead to arrange work for the family. But this year, Josefina’s mother had wanted to visit the rancho she was from in Zacatecas, having heard her own mother was ill; Jose’s wife was going to give birth any day and didn’t want to come north until the baby was born, and José had stayed behind to sell the last bricks they had all made. And last year, her father had died of pneumonia.

Josefina and Rubén turned right and walked to the nearest urban bus stop. “Which bus goes to the Sanchez Tobaada crossing?” Josefina asked a grey-haired woman laden down with plastic bags filled with groceries from the supermarket across the street.

“Any yellow and white or maroon and yellow,” the woman answered.

Josefina was glad the woman had not replied with a bus number. Then she would have had to ask what the bus looked like, revealing that she could not read. “There’s still no bus that goes from here down the highway to San Felipe?” Josefina queried the woman again.

“No,” the woman said, “I have to change, too.” Then, after a pause: “Are you going to Colonia Santos?”

“No. To the brickyards,” Josefina replied.

They boarded the next yellow-and-white bus to Sanchez Tobaada, then waited for the hourly bus that traveled past the dirt road where the brickyard complexes to the south of Mexicali could be found. Little Miguelito complained about being thirsty, and Josefina extracted the plastic bottle filled with drinking water from the large canvas bag strung over her shoulder. They would have to buy more water soon. They had only 14,000 pesos and change. A kilo of beans, which would last the family only two days, and that without flour to make tortillas, cost 2,500 pesos. And they would have to buy drinking water, 2,000 pesos for the five-gallon bottle. This they needed for cooking as well. They drank so much in the heat when working that they went through three or four of these a week.

They got off of the bus at the rutted yellow dirt road two and a half kilometers outside of the city and started the long walk past the dairy farm that fronted the highway and that was backed by fields where pasturage for the cattle was grown, past the few large two-story houses made of brick, and up to the small side road that turned into the first brickyard complex.

They stopped at the one-room shack on the first brickyard, noticing two men mixing the *estiércol* with the clay and water in a wheelbarrow, using short-handled shovels. A boy and a girl, both under twelve, carried water to them in buckets from the nearby canal that wound its way through the brickyards. The foggy smell of the *estiércol*, formed of barnyard manure and cornstalk chaff, reminded Josefina of her childhood on the rancho in Zacatecas where she was born, of horses, cows, and burros grazing in the forlorn, infertile fields that then meant nothing more to her than spaces to play hide-and-seek with sisters, brothers, friends, and cousins, once the meager harvest was in.

A woman was baking tortillas de harina over a wood-fueled stove made from a rusting metal barrel in the ramada attached to the shack.

Josefina greeted her, shifting the baby in her arms. “Good day. Do you know if they need any brickmakers nearby?”

The woman looked up while patting a ball of dough into a flat roundness, then down again, to turn over the tortilla on the stove and place the new one beside it. She shook her head: “I’m not sure. My husband took on a helper last week.” She handed Miguelito a toasted hot tortilla, which he rolled and ate hungrily.

She shook hands, first with Josefina, then with Rubén: “Eliza Hernández, para servirle.”

“You’re coming in late this year,” Eliza commented, “Where are you from?”

Josefina, relieved at the woman’s welcoming manner, set Pablo down for a few moments, crouching beside him. “Guadalajara. How about you?”

“Mazatlán, Sinaloa.”

Josefina nodded and smiled, affirming that she knew of Mazatlán. When she and her brothers were children, her father had taken the family there two years in a row to make bricks.

Eliza handed each of them a tortilla and a glass of water that everyone who could offered to visitors in this heat that often reached 120 degrees in the summer. Josefina gave the glass first to Pablo, then to Miguelito, with Eliza refilling it each time it was emptied, then to Rubén, and then she drank a glass herself. Feeling refreshed, Josefina indicated that they would continue up the road to see if anyone needed brickmakers.

“You should try to rent,” Eliza advised Josefina as they got ready to leave. And, as they were leaving, she said, almost as an afterthought: “If you don’t find anything you can sleep with us in the ramada tonight.”

As they walked further up one short, dusty byroad, Josefina turned to Rubén: “Yes. We should try to rent.” Confirming something he already knew, she continued: “Sometimes the owners supply the molds and wheelbarrows.”

After a long pause, Rubén replied: “Usually you have to have your own shovels at least. And most don’t let you anything but the very brickyard. And they want to let it by the year anyway.”

Over the next few hours they walked, tired, sweaty, and thirsty, from brickyard to brickyard in the first complex, then up the main, winding, rutted road to the second. Most of the brickyard owners had already taken on salaried workers or had rented out the yards in May. But now it was June.

At the second complex, the third family to whom they spoke to said that Don Tacho was planning to rent out his brickyard. He would be there tomorrow to fire the bricks he had made last week. He rented it at the usual price of 11 percent of the bricks he made, but he was willing to rent it out to someone else for 15 percent of the bricks.

Exhausted from having slept only a few hours on the bus for the last two days, they returned to Eliza's. Rubén went to help Eliza's husband and their hired hand put the mixture in the molds to offset the losses to the family for their food and water for this night's stay. And in the evening, by a fire they lit to discourage the hordes of mosquitoes that came out after the sun went down and to provide light in the absence of a full moon, they talked, Rubén to the men and Josefina to Eliza.

While they were talking, two women, looking in the distance like young men in their blue jeans and T-shirts and caps, walked up the road and into the brickyard. The women handed both Eliza and Josefina a slip of paper, quickly, anxious to move on, one saying only: "The meeting is day after tomorrow at 10 A.M. At the field up the other dirt road," pointing south. "Gloria Sanchez and the Seventh Dwarf are organizing it."

Josefina and Eliza each stared at the slip of paper, wondering what it was about. Josefina asked: "Can you read it?"

"No," but my Chuey can, when she wakes up," Eliza replied, indicating her daughter, sleeping on the blanket beside her little sister under the ramada. "She had a year of school while we lived in Mazatlán. I wanted her to continue here. But she didn't know the kids and she was older than most of them. She said she felt ashamed. So she stopped going after a week. But she can spell things out for us."

After awhile they slept, under the night sky, waking when the sun rose at 5 A.M. The women made tortillas and were preparing to fry some beans when Josefina thought to ask: "And the leaflet?"

Eliza had her eldest daughter read it. Chuey did so carefully, pronouncing each syllable as though it were a separate word, running the different words together as though they were one: "Our last governor promised us a lot for every poor family. Join us to occupy the lands near the brick yards at kilometer point five. Or gan i za tion al mee ting at ten A.M. Wed nes day. Com i tee in sol i dar i ty for col o ni a Nue va Es tan ci a."

"Another invasion," Eliza commented when Chuey stopped. "It's nearby this time." Then, after a pause: "Three years ago there was an invasion. But it was too far from here. On the other highway. The one

to San Luis Río Colorado. We couldn't have gotten to the brickyards from there. I believe Gloria helped arrange that invasion too.

Josefina helped Eliza fry the beans, taking them from the hand-painted brown ceramic *olla*, throwing them into the hot fat, mashing them down, and serving first the men, then the children, and last herself. While she did this, she thought how nice it would be to have a place to live, to come back to, instead of constantly moving back and forth from one brickyard to another. And Miguelito was getting to be school age, and if only they had a permanent place to stay, maybe he could go to school.

“I think I'll go to the meeting,” she told Eliza.

Silent for a few minutes, Eliza then responded: “If my husband lets me, I'll go too.” Then, she added softly, “It can be dangerous you know. If the police try to throw us off.”

Josefina replied, “I've heard that.” She turned the beans over in the frying pan, carefully, poked them with the rusting spatula, then continued: “But it would be nice to have a home of our own.”

It was when they were going to meet Don Tacho, walking down the winding road following the curvatures of canals adorned with jutting green reeds reaching high beside them, that Josefina tried to convince Rubén how important it would be for them to get a lot, knowing what he would say, thinking up counterarguments to convince him.

“It would be nice to get a lot. They are close by our work. It would be nice to have a place to live. A fixed place. Our own place,” she said.

Rubén didn't answer.

“A place where we could build a house. Our own house. So we wouldn't have to travel back and forth every year. Search for a new patrón every year,” Josefina continued, pleading.

Rubén mulled awhile, finally answering, as she knew he would: “My mother could not stand the heat here. You know this. And I cannot leave her alone in Guadalajara.”

They both knew that until the invaded lands were regularized, which might take up to two years or more, someone had to live permanently on the lot, someone who would sign the papers necessary as they became available, which meant that they could not rent it or loan it to anyone else.

Josefina wanted to reply, angrily: “So why don't her other sons look out for her too? Why only you? Why mainly you?” But she didn't.

She didn't talk again until they approached the last long bend in the road before entering the brickyard complex where Don Tacho's

brickyard was. "It would be nice if Miguelito could go to school," she said then. "So he could learn to read."

Rubén answered more quickly now, as he did when becoming impatient. "Why does he need to read? I don't. My papá doesn't. Nor yours. Nor you. We make bricks. Miguel will learn to make bricks. It's more important to know how to work than to know how to read, don't you think? You don't buy beans and corn for tortillas by reading. You do so by working."

Josefina thought: "Why does he have to be a brickmaker? To get a factory job you need to read. Or to be a clerk in a store. Or a waiter in a restaurant. Why does he have to sweat in the heat until spots appear before his eyes, until he is so weak that he can hardly stand but must still continue, freeze his feet and hands in the icy cold of the clay in winter, until by twenty he too will have pains in his bones and joints and any shoe will hurt to wear?" But she said nothing.

As they rounded the bend, they saw Don Tacho standing, smoking a cigarette under the ramada attached to the three-walled room in his brickyard. The three talked terms, how many months they'd be there, what percent of the bricks they'd pay, how many bricks they expected to make each week, if they planned to hire a helper—but it was Josefina who asked if he would let them use the wheelbarrows, the molds, the shovels, and the buckets.

Don Tacho generously agreed to do so, provided that someone remained on the brickyard at all times so that they would not be stolen by strangers passing through. Other brickmakers would not steal them, they already knew. The brickmakers were a community, borrowing from each other, helping one another, and never stealing from a fellow ladrillero.

While Rubén checked over the tools, Josefina went back to Eliza's for their two suitcases and the two children, letting Miguelito carry his younger brother. And they moved into the brickyard's one-room shack with a mattress raised from the floor with stacks of bricks and an outside stove made, as Eliza's was, from an old metal barrel, dusted red with rust and mottled by the black stains of smoke and fire.

Soon after they arrived, Rubén walked back to the highway to catch a bus to the *ejidos*, collective farms, in the valley of Mexicali. He went to arrange to buy a truckload of *estiércol*, that mixture of manure and straw that had to be combined with the clay so that it stuck together and didn't crumble into dust after being baked. He didn't return until early evening, as he had to buy on credit and find someone who would trust him to pay later. A man who had lived many

years on the ejido finally remembered him from previous years and promised to deliver the *estiércol* the following day and accept payment after they sold a few thousand bricks.

In the evening, Josefina and Rubén scraped the shovels and wheelbarrows, removing the bits and pieces of dried clay from the surfaces and getting ready for the next day’s work.

Josefina slept little that night, wondering how to get away to the meeting about the invasion the next day. She had never lied to her husband, nor he to her. She resisted doing so, wanting their relationship to be based on trust.

Tossing and turning, she thought of Miguelito and how she wanted him to have a greater choice in life than she or her husband had had, children of brickmakers, brought up to be brickmakers. To live in isolated areas where there were no food stores, not even a stall where you could buy a soda, or no city buses unless one walked two kilometers at least, or even electricity so one could plug in a fan to blow away the mosquitoes and escape the heat at night. To drudge away without the medical insurance one got from a factory job, and when one got too old to work anymore, to hope that one’s children would provide support, having received no pension for having worked all one’s life as a brickmaker.

She made her decision. Miguelito was to go to school. And his going to school meant getting a permanent place to live. And in a colonia, not in a brickyard, where no schools were ever built.

In a planned invasion, she knew, once the settlement was recognized by the government, and even before possession of lots was legally regularized, that teachers were always sent, and a school, however rudimentary the building, was built with the help of the mothers of the students, mothers because the fathers were away trying to earn a living. Josefina had learned this from talk on the brickyards about previous invasions that had taken place over the last few years.

In the morning they ate the fried burritos that Eliza had sent them with her daughters. Josefina organized the house, sweeping the dirt floor with a broom made of reeds from the bank of the canal, carrying the mattress out to air, and hanging up their pots and pans, carried with them from Guadalajara, on extruding nails.

Then she bathed her two sons in the murky water she carried from the canal in the deformed aluminum buckets that Don Tacho had left for their use.

The *estiércol*, by the grace of God, had still not arrived when the sun told her it was after 9 A.M. So her husband would not need her to

help him mix the clay, carrying buckets of water from the canal and pouring them into the wheelbarrow while he mixed the water with the clay and *estiércol*, because until the manure and straw mix arrived, they could do nothing.

"I'm going to ask Eliza to lend me some money to buy beans and flour," Josefina said then. "I'll be back as soon as I can get them."

And Rubén, unsuspectingly, nodded his assent, accepting her lie.

She and Eliza, Eliza with the permission of her husband, went to the meeting. They were instructed that on Sunday, four days from now, they could bring some materials to put up a structure on the lots that they would be assigned today. And that within two weeks, they would have to present their birth certificates, proving that they were Mexican born, as well as those of their children, to show that they had dependents and thus would qualify for a lot.

Josefina was assigned lot 30, manzana 5, and Eliza the one backing hers, lot number 31, manzana 6. And then, back at the brickyard where Eliza lived, Eliza gave Josefina a half kilo of beans and a kilo of flour to take home. Josefina also arranged with Eliza that the scrap wood she would collect when her husband left the brickyard, as he had to do every other day to bring back drinking water from the colonia across the highway, would be left beside the shack where Eliza lived. From this wood, she would build a structure in which to sleep, proof of her occupancy of the lot, and the first step necessary for being recognized as a possessor of property in the new colonia.

The one thing Josefina did not know was who would live in that structure, as someone must, until the colonia was legalized and she became not only a possessor but a legal owner.

It was Friday when Josefina's mother arrived, bringing Josefina's youngest brother, Mauricio, age thirteen. Her eldest brother, José, his wife, and their three preschool children had also accompanied their mother, Guadalupe.

They too had stopped at the first brickyard, where Eliza lived, when they arrived at the complex asking for her and Rubén, and Eliza had sent them on, after first giving each a taco of beans garnished with pickled jalapeños from a can.

Luckily they had brought their own blankets, although there was no ramada to sleep under. Mauricio still had enough energy after the extensive bus trip to look for some discarded planks in the nearby fields, and within a couple of hours, the men had tacked together a makeshift roof, covered by one of the blankets to keep the sun away, resting it on the trunks of two slender young trees that the boys had

hatched down. There, soon after the sun disappeared, the family lay down to sleep.

It wasn't until the next morning, while her mother helped her make the tortillas de harina, that Josefina broached the subject of the lot to her. Josefina expected her mother to say that she, as any good Mexican wife, must let her husband decide.

But instead, Guadalupe observed: “It would be a good idea for José and my daughter-in-law to get one too.”

They worked awhile in silence, Josefina feeling uplifted, knowing that her mother was thinking about it and would come up with a plan.

And she did. “Mauricio can help José a few days each week. He'll more than replace Carolina's work. She has three little ones to tend to now anyway.” Guadalupe paused, and then surprised Josefina even more: “And I will stay on your lot, so you don't lose your rights. Maybe I can make some money selling snacks and sodas. About Miguelito going to school, this we'll have to see. About this I don't know. Your man will have to decide.”

Yes, in this her mother could not interfere. This was between man and wife, Josefina thought happily, knowing now that they would at least have a place to come back to.

Later in the day, when José and Carolina had gone to look for work on one of the nearby brickyards, Josefina approached Rubén with trepidation but feeling strong because of her mother's assent. “Rubén. I must tell you something. About the other day when I told you I went shopping. I put my name down for a lot in the new colonia. We will have a place to come back to. My mother will live there. Mauricio will give her a part of what he earns with José for her sustenance, and José will help too. And she'll open a little store to sell sodas, and tacos, and . . .”

The violence of Reuben's reaction surprised her. He, who seldom raised his voice, had never hit her, raised his hand threateningly: “Hija de la chingada. You lied to me. You went behind my back. Who knows what you will do next? I told you we are not going to live here. You expect me to desert mi mamá? You use your mother to stab me in the back?”

He did not hit her, and Josefina, who had never cried in front of him, hid her tears while she helped him fill the molds with the clay he had mixed earlier that day.

“Now I can never trust you. You say you go one place, and you go another. Who knows who the father of your next son will be?” Rubén added, as they worked side by side.

Josefina remained silent.

That night she approached him, putting her head on his chest as they lay together on the mattress.

But he did not search for her, and eventually he disentangled her arms from around him and turned to sleep with his back toward her, shutting her out.

Josefina, hurt by his rejection, cried softly into the folded flannel blanket she used as a pillow.

The next day was Sunday, the day the invaders had to begin occupying their lots. She would have to defy her husband, something she had never done before, never wanted to do.

José still had not found work that morning but was waiting to talk to a patrón later in the day. Their mother had already talked to him about the new colonia, and he had given Carolina permission to see if she could still get a lot number.

A little before 10 A.M. Josefina, her sister-in-law, Carolina, and Guadalupe started down the road to Eliza's. Josefina had said to Rubén only: "Now I am going. You know where. Now I am not lying to you."

She feared a confrontation, but Rubén pretended not to hear her, not wanting to call her hand in front of her family. He said nothing. Mauricio stayed behind to help him with the work.

At Eliza's, the women collected the wood that Josefina had gathered over the past few days when she had left the brickyard to visit Eliza. They bound together a number of planks with a length of rope, and each carried a load, balanced on her head, over the fields separating the brickyard complex from Colonia Nueva Estancia, Josefina with her youngest son balanced on her hip, Carolina carrying a shovel and a hammer borrowed from Eliza. The other children brought a plank or so as well, the smallest dragging them along. Eliza had taken her collection over earlier in the day. Josefina had gathered a lot of wood, enough to share some with Carolina, though not enough for two complete rooms, and they had to make two trips for it all.

There were indeed other empty lots. Josefina talked to Gloria, one of the organizers, and Carolina was assigned a lot one up from hers, on the same street. Now she would have a brother and his family, as well as her mother and a friend, living in the new colonia. She had seen a few other women whom she thought she recognized as brickmakers' wives from previous years as well.

Gloria also lent Josefina another hammer, and she, Carolina, and Eliza set to work. While Eliza pulled the rusty nails from the

planks they had found, hammering them straight on a piece of rock, Carolina and Josefina took turns digging holes for five stalwarts, one for each corner and one to hinge the door upon. Then, for lack of posts, they set some planks in place, stabilizing them with the pieces of brick and stones that the children had gathered, then filling the holes where they stood with earth.

With the nails Eliza had straightened, and with the children fetching planks, the three women took turns nailing together one wall at a time, first forming a rectangle with four lengths of wood, then setting the boards and pieces of board nailed together, between top and bottom. Josefina and Carolina next hammered the walls into place, nailing them to the upright planks. They then made a fifth rectangle for the roof, with Mauricio coming from the brickyard to join them part way through. It was Mauricio, lighter than the women, who climbed on top to nail it down.

In a little over four hours, they finished a room for Josefina’s lot and also helped Eliza, who had returned to the brickyard and brought them lunch, make two walls for her new dwelling. After awhile, Eliza urged them to put something up on Carolina’s lot, saying that her husband would come to help her later in the afternoon. Meanwhile, Josefina sent Mauricio, with Miguelito and Eliza’s Chuey tagging along behind him, to look for more wood in a nearby field that once had been used as an informal dump, and they began the walls for Carolina’s structure.

At one point someone from the organizing committee passed by and told them of a meeting that someone from each lot must attend at 4 P.M.

At the meeting, the Seventh Dwarf, known as such due to his small stature and constant efforts to help the poor and forgotten, explained that an adult must be on the lot at all times for the next few weeks. That if everyone had to leave, it could not be for more than an hour or so, and that a neighbor should be advised to keep an eye on things. That someone from each lot would have to stand guard at the two entrances by the road into the colonia, to warn the colonos if the police came to try to dislodge them. That although negotiations were under way with the state and municipal governments, they still had not been assured of recognition. That each woman would have to do two hours of guard duty with three other women every two days in the daylight hours. That young and older men would do the night guard duty. That at least one person from every lot had to do six hours of guard duty one week, eight another. That more than 1,000 of the

1,500 lots had now been assigned. That each street would have its representative, and each family occupying a lot would go to her to sign up for guard duty. The representative would be a woman who could stay in the colonia twenty-four hours a day, for men had to leave in the day to go to work. And some women too. That it had been arranged for water trucks—one with water to wash in, one selling bottled water to drink—to enter the colonia daily. That anyone who needed barrels to hold water should talk to the street representative, since Doña Gloria of the organizing committee was hoping to get a couple of truckloads sent over from the chemical factory in Fraccionamiento Obrero. And, finally, that they would cost 15,000 pesos each.

Gloria, the Seventh Dwarf's most trusted assistant, her cropped hair now streaked with grey, and her bulky body supported by a cane she carried to ease a limp she earned when she was beaten by the police during an earlier invasion, spoke next. She told the group that anyone who wished to open a small food store was encouraged to do so—and soon. That everyone should learn the meaning of the following signals: one skyrocket meant to assemble for a meeting; two that the meeting was obligatory; three that there was danger from the police attempting to dislodge them; four that there was active confrontation between the police and the colonos. That they hoped anyone with school-age children would aid in erecting a building, since the Secretaría de Educación Pública would send primary-school teachers in August—if the colonia was recognized by then. That those with children in secondary school would have to arrange to put them in school in Fraccionamiento Obrero, five kilometers away, for the next year or so. That hopefully those parents with cars or trucks would be willing to cooperate to take children of those families without transportation to the schools. And that the local university had promised to send recently graduated doctors to do their social service in the colonia if they could erect some sort of building to serve as a clinic.

Josefina's head hurt trying to take it all in. So much time was needed! She couldn't expect her mother to do guard duty. That her mother was willing to live on the lot to assure her possession was enough to ask. And how could she find time to contribute to building the school? She felt a weight on her chest. If only Rubén was in agreement. For so much work, one needed a partner, if only to tell one that good was being done. At least she had her mother. And her brother, José, would be nearby too. Maybe someday Rubén would understand.

When Josefina returned to the brickyard, when the sun was beginning to sink, Rubén was not understanding. “I can’t even expect a taco from you anymore,” he said furiously. “Where have you been all day? You expect me to make bricks alone? Even expect me to make my food alone?”

Josefina pointed out that she had left beans on the stove and tortillas already made. And that Mauricio had stayed to help him with the work, for at least four or five hours.

“And where were you all day? Do you continue with the same plan? Against my wishes?” Rubén continued.

“It can be a lot for my mamá to live on, Rubén” Josefina explained. “My brother, José, will have a lot there too. He gave Carolina permission to get one. And there was a number for her too.”

Rubén had not known this. He calmed a little. “Well, if it’s for your mamá . . .” he trailed off. “Are we eating today, then?”

Exhausted from the hard labor of the day, knowing Rubén too had worked hard, Josefina lit the fire in the stove. She wished she had some chickens to put eggs beside the refried beans she would make tonight. Carolina and her mother had stayed in the colonia, as they must every night now until the state recognized their claims. After feeding Rubén and the children, she would have to take them some beans and flour. If only her children were older, Josefina thought, she could send one of them! Mauricio had already gone over to the colonia, so she couldn’t send the supplies with him.

After they ate, Josefina said to Rubén: “My husband. I must take food to my mamá.”

“It’s dark now” Rubén, replied. “I cannot accompany you. We have promised Don Tacho that someone will be present here at all times. To protect the tools. The wheelbarrows. We can’t make an agreement then break it.”

Rubén was not used to saying so much at one time. But he continued, trying to explain his objections to Josefina’s plans. “You know it is dangerous for a woman to walk alone at night. Men will wonder why you have no family who cares for you. That your man lets you wander where you wish.”

He tried to make light of it. “Someone will rob you. Then what do I do for tortillas?” Rubén ended, giving in, “Wait until your brother, José, arrives. Then you can go. Yes. Your mother needs to eat.”

Josefina, pleased that Rubén feared for her safety, worried because he still seemed unconvinced of the value of her efforts. She busied herself making fried bean burritos to send to her mother and sister-in-law and brothers and nephew and nieces in La Nueva

Estancia, noticing she must soon go, or send Rubén, for more supplies.

José arrived a little after eight. Josefina served him and told him about the events of the day, that Carolina had been assigned a lot.

José told them that he had gotten work with a patrón who promised him 80,000 pesos for every thousand bricks he made, 10,000 pesos less than he had earned last year. "But what can I do," he said, trying to shrug it off. "We came late. There's not much work left now."

Josefina tried to make him feel better: "Mamá says you can have Mauricio to help you."

José smiled. "Teach him to be a brickmaker, I will. It's time he started learning to mold."

Then he added, "Now it seems I have a place here too. Next year I will be among the first to get work."

After eating, José prepared to go to the new colonia, to remain there with Carolina and his children. He asked Josefina for directions to get to the lot where he would now be living.

Josefina knew he would be tired, too tired to accompany her back to the brickyard. She decided not to go to her mother. Perhaps Rubén would be pleased that she stayed.

Josefina handed José the fried burritos, wrapped in a square of clean cloth. As José prepared to leave for the colonia, Josefina urged Rubén: "Accompany José, my little husband. You haven't been off the brickyard in two days. I'll be all right here alone with the children for a little while."

Rubén replied, shortly: "Go there just to amuse myself? When I don't want anything to do with the place?"

But that night he turned to embrace her.

The following day, Josefina helped Rubén mix the clay, carrying buckets of water from the canal. Then she cleaned the wooden molds, rinsing them in a bucket of water each time Rubén created four new bricks, and before he filled the molds with clay once more.

Together they made almost twice as many bricks as the 1,000 he had made the day before, 200 more than the average brickmaker working for a piece-rate wage usually made. He had worked hard. Together they worked hard as well.

"We'll bake an oven full in three days' more," Rubén said.

That meant they must start looking for firewood later in the day, Josefina knew.

"I must go to the colonia to see my mamá. I'll bring back some fuel," Josefina told Rubén later.

He grunted his assent, not looking at her.

At the colonia Josefina talked to the street representative, Hortensia, and offered herself for guard duty from two to four the next day and Thursday as well. She and Eliza and Carolina tried to get watch together and did so for Thursday. Then Josefina borrowed a little more money from Eliza and walked the three kilometers to Colonia Popular, across the highway, to buy beans and flour and cooking oil for her household and for her mamá’s.

As she walked back to the brickyard, carrying her supplies, she crossed the many fallowed fields and gathered firewood along the way, binding the dry branches and plank fragments together with a rope she had taken with her. She slung the cargo over her back. As she neared the brickyard, she appeared in the distance like a walking stack of dismembered tree limbs.

Upon arriving, she told Rubén: “Tomorrow I must take watch for my mamá from two to four.”

“Watch? What is this about?” he asked.

“The police might try to force us out,” Josefina explained. “The organizers are still arranging with the state for us to be there. Someone from every lot must take watch. I’ll be taking my mamá’s turns. Three times one week, four times the next, then three times again, and so on.” Then she explained to him about the skyrocket signals.

Rubén looked serious at this, but said nothing, and Josefina could not read him. Was he angry that she would be gone from the brickyard for so many hours? Did he suspect that she still wanted Miguelito to go to school?

So she went on guard duty. First Tuesday with some women she didn’t know. They exchanged stories of where they were from, about their children, about why they had come to the border. They became friends.

Then Thursday Josefina stood watch with Eliza and Carolina and a woman from Guanajuato with whom she had shared the first watch with. Their children played beside them as they sat in the shade of the ramada, erected to keep the sun from scalding those on watch. Hortensia arranged for the women to be together on future watches as well.

Nothing happened until Saturday.

It was that afternoon when carloads of men, five or six to a car, some in uniform, some not, arrived at the two entrances to Colonia Nueva Estancia. Where Josefina was on guard, the women saw first

three cars, followed by three more, and then another two. The first car in line drove right through the orange plastic ribbon that they had suspended between two posts as a symbolic barrier, respected and stopped for by those who resided in the colonia until it was lowered for them to enter. Two more cars barreled through before the women thought to block the roadway with their bodies, and with their small children in hand, they walked in front of the next oncoming car.

The car stopped. Two men jumped out. They pushed the women forcibly aside. One of the men flung Eliza to the ground. Another hit Josefina, hard across her sunburned cheek, with the back of his hand. She fought back, scratching his neck with her work-jagged fingernails, pulling some buttons from his neatly ironed khaki shirt. He hit her again, this time with a nightstick, twice, bruising first her upper arm and then her neck and chin.

As she fell back to the side of the road, Miguelito screaming “*mamá, mamá,*” she heard three skyrockets going off from the direction of the other entrance.

The other five cars drove through the flimsy ribbon guarding the colonos from hostile entrants.

Carolina went into the ramada where the skyrockets were stashed to give the next signal. They saw a car stop at Gloria’s house. Two men entered her door. Other men began tearing down the provisional stake fence surrounding her lot. More carloads of men had gone on to the house where the Seventh Dwarf was staying.

Some of the men and women in the colonia, having heard the three signals, began moving out of their lots, running toward the house of the organizer living nearest them, grabbing a length of wood, or hammer, or a rock, or a kitchen knife, or any object they could find to use as a weapon along the way.

Carolina and Josefina sent up four more skyrockets, one after another, alerting those in the colonia who still did not know that a violent confrontation had begun.

“They’re going to try to get Gloria,” someone shouted. “They want to jail the leaders!”

Josefina ran over to Gloria’s house, picking up a stake, after motioning to Eliza to watch her children. Her upper arm hurt her, but she ignored it. She ran up behind one of the men who was handcuffing Gloria and hit him in the back, and she was struck by the nightstick in the hands of one of his companions once again. Josefina picked up the cane that Gloria had let drop to the ground. She began slashing the calves and back of the man who was restraining Gloria.

More people swarmed toward Gloria’s lot, trying to prevent her from being arrested. Five men began pounding the colonos’ back with lead-filled nightsticks. One drew a pistol and fired warning shots into the air.

Josefina fell to the ground under the blows of one of the plain-clothed policemen. He kept slugging her, hitting her back, her shoulders, as she turned herself into the dirt to avoid being struck in the face once more. Some of the other colonos were being systematically beaten as well. Still others began moving backward when they saw the men pull out pistols.

Then it was over. Gloria had been put into one car, the Seventh Dwarf in another. The other three organizers living in the colonia were pushed into separate cars, and all were driven away, down the dirt road to the highway, puffs of dust rising like smoke in the wake of the disappearing vehicles.

Carolina helped Josefina get up, brushed off her clothes, and wept, repeating “Damn them. Damn them. Pinche cabrones. Cowards. Hitting women. Damn them.”

Josefina saw her brother, José, and Rubén running toward them, through the grassy field separating the brickyards from the settlement.

Rubén neared her, put his arms around her, and Josefina began crying, sobbing. “So important it is to you, my little wife?” he asked her.

She nodded, trying to control herself, to hold back her tears.

The organizers were not released until Tuesday morning. The newspapers had picked up the story of the invasion, of the confrontation between the invaders and the police, of the brutal beatings that some of the colonos had received. Editorial commentary supporting the recognition of the new settlement appeared in *La Voz* and *El Mexicano*. A candidate for governor of the state came on a local radio station and pointed out that the city thrived on industry, on factories set up by both foreign and Mexican businessmen, which benefited both Mexicali and the state of Baja California, but that without a workforce they would not locate here. And the workers deserved to have housing. There were not enough residences in the city, and rents were high where housing was available. Those who invaded lands built their own houses, expanded the city, and drew in new industries.

The candidate didn’t say anything about the ambulant vendors, the taco stand owners, or the garbage pickers, domestic servants,

gardeners, or brickmakers who had invaded the colonia, but the colonos, most of whom worked in these less-valued types of jobs, were happy anyway, because now a politician had taken up their cause. They knew the candidate would not win the governorship of Baja California, because he belonged to neither the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) nor Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) parties—the two major political parties in Mexico, though the former eclipsed the latter in its longevity and power—but he had made their existence a political issue that could no longer be ignored. Now other political leaders from the PRI, which had lost the governorship of Baja California to the panistas, the first time since the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and from the PAN, which wanted to assure its succession in the state, would try to woo their votes by calling for recognition of their settlement. Now too that the newspapers and a radio station supported their claims, more people in Mexicali knew about their efforts and would be on their side. Sunday's fray would be the last attempt to dislodge them.

Rubén began coming to the colonia, to expand the structure that Josefina and her friend and sister-in-law had erected. At times he even hummed while he worked, echoing songs heard in the distance on battery-run radios.

"Do you think we will have a radio one day?" Josefina asked him once.

"When we have electricity. In a few more years. We will put money aside to buy one. A secondhand one. From the tianguis," Rubén replied.

Yes, one day we will have electricity here, Josefina thought. She smiled happily at his reply and hummed a tune along with him.

There came the time that her mother stayed some nights on the brickyard so she and Rubén could be together on their new lot, in their new house. And Rubén did not object when Josefina asked permission from him to help build the new kindergarten and primary school, volunteering four or five hours a week every Sunday to do so. Once he even left Mauricio on the brickyard and came to help as well.

When it became possible to make bricks again in Guadalajara, Josefina left Miguelito with her mother and her younger brother on the lot she had invaded, and she and Rubén headed south once again. Her mother had opened a small food store with some of the money Mauricio had earned making bricks with José, and Josefina and Rubén had given her a little as well to offset some of the costs of her caring for Miguelito in their absence.

It was hard for Josefina to leave her eldest son. But in August, he and José’s eldest daughter had begun kindergarten. Her brother, Mauricio, had found two days’ work a week as an assistant on the truck that delivered bottled water to the colonias. The other days he helped José.

José was going to keep making bricks in Mexicali until the coldest weather set in, when the top layer of the water in the barrels and canals froze in the early mornings and when the freezing water burned bare feet while the clay was mixed. Brickmakers couldn’t afford enough boots or shoes to wear while mixing the clay. The earth would enter them and destroy the leather within a week. In any case, it didn’t pay to make bricks when temperatures were too low. The moisture in the newly molded bricks turned to ice and split them. When the shivering-cold weather began, he would look for a job in construction.

Josefina hoped it would all go well. Soon the colonos would begin building more permanent houses. They would need bricks. And construction workers. Maybe things would go well. But one must never count one’s chickens before the eggs are hatched.

Josefina repeated to herself the warning she had heard since she was a child, so nothing could disappoint her: “You are sure of nothing in this life but death.”

If God willed it, Josefina thought, then she would see her mother and brothers and little son again next summer when she and Rubén came back to make bricks, now with a place to return to. Miguelito might even know the alphabet by then.

Josefina and Rubén and Pablo boarded the bus to Guadalajara.

As she sat, looking out the window into the busy parking lot of the central camionera, her youngest son now in her lap, Josefina remembered another adage she had heard since a child: “Without hope, there is nothing.”

She reached for Rubén’s hand.



Plates 1 and 2. Beginnings ("Colonia Nueva Estancia," 1990).