From San Pedro Huamelula to Juchitán: Ernestina, the Tehuana woman who walked from the hearth to Nirvana.

Ernestina and Apolonio: chronicle of a salvation among bougainvillea and centenarians.

Going to the mountain to gather firewood is usually hard work. It's even harder for a girl whom the village authorities have turned into a woman. But for Ernestina, it was an everyday thing: she had always done it to heat Romelia's hearth.

Very early, as soon as the rooster crows—that mysterious sound that foretells the sun's yawn while the night still breathes—Ernestina gets up without question. She puts on her worn wool socks, wraps herself in her poncho, gathers some ribbons, and walks along the path, two or three kilometers beyond the

coffee trees. She doesn't need to see the way: her feet know every stone, every curve.

She must be careful where she puts her hands. Two years ago, a scorpion stung her. Fever and delirium followed, and amidst the cold that contrasted sharply with the warmth of her body, she saw her parents forcing her to stay in bed, preventing her from walking toward the void. She never saw their faces; she only remembers the warm arms that held her.

But some things have changed. Now she drinks coffee at the table, devouring as many tortillas and beans as her stomach can hold. She can thank Apolonio, the husband who acquired her for two gold coins, four loads of corn, and a horse, when she was barely twelve years old.

Apolonio is a good man. He bought her a pillow and two wool blankets, which he uses to cover her at night after they have atole and egg yolk bread for a snack—that fluffy bun she never

enjoyed at Romelia's house, where her being an orphan was a contemptible burden. There, her only breakfast was a cup of hot coffee. After hours of work in the mountains, they would disappear from their sight.

That's why they sent her to Santiago Astata, to deliver the sack of roasted grain to Merino, the owner of the small shop. That was her favorite time: the road was lined with pitayas and sapodillas, sweet treats she savored. But nothing compared to the egg taco and soda that Ofelia, Merino's wife, gave her.

Thanks to that generosity —from Mother Earth and the grocer— Ernestina grew up strong and rosy-cheeked, very different from the children of her jailer, who looked malnourished and clothed.

Apolonio slept apart from her. He had never touched her. What's more, he pampered her with guavas and dreams of a wonderful future.

For him, Ernestina was more than a woman: she was the confidante of his secret.

In the darkness, illuminated by a spotlight, he modeled for her the splendor of her vibrant Tehuana dress. It wasn't just any outfit: it was her formal ensemble. A long, flowing skirt with a petticoat, a blouse hand-embroidered with flowers, all in velvet with ruffles, large earrings, a chain of coins, and lace that framed her face.

Ernestina was thrilled every time she saw him dressed like that. He was the star of the morning, ready for a grand party in the ballroom of the clouds beneath the mountains. After strutting his stuff with his fan and sharing laughter and little plays that Apolonio invented for his consort, his lady-in-waiting would collect the outfit, fold it with the utmost care, and store it in a metal box hidden under the pile of shelled corn in the tool shed.

This Tehuana dress comes from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where Zapotec women

embroider it with flowers and velvet. Its origins date back to pre-Hispanic times, when it was a ceremonial garment representing the earth and fertility. With the arrival of European fabrics, the dress was transformed: Turkish lace, French muslin, English velvet. Juana Catalina Romero, a woman of great power, stylized it in the 19th century, turning it into a symbol of elegance.

Apolonio never saw Ernestina as malicious. In fact, he sacrificed much of what little he had to rescue her from her oppressor. He decided to take that step when he learned that a wicked man—whom he knew—intended to take her. He knew the pain of abuse and did not want that infamy to happen.

—Will I ever have a dress like that, Apollonius?

—You'll have to work hard.

—I work a lot.

—"You'll have to do it more," he replied with a tender look. "I've been saving for forty years, ever since I was a child."

—What are you and I?

—What the people of San Pedro think we are. There are many bad people here, but in Juchitán I could be your mother.

—When are we going to Juchitán?

—Maybe in a couple of years. They say they're going to pay a better price for coffee.

—Tell me again what that place is like.

Apollonius held his breath and let it out slowly. Then he took three steps, opened the wooden doors of a window, and, after looking towards the mountains, a tear slipped down his cheek.

— “Juchitán is a long braid tangled with silk ribbons. There, roosters don't crow: they awaken people by playing the marimba. It has a calendar that sprouts two leaves every time you tear one off, because there, life is lived

twice. The muxes are butterflies that perch on bougainvillea to show off their wings. The Tehuana women embroider the fruit before selling it. The men speak with the whistle of a conch shell, like someone defending a castle. It is the place where the rain combs its hair to become more feminine. It is the resting place of a saltless sea that feeds on my eyes."

—And what are the bougainvilleas like there? —Ernestina asked, in a curious and dreamy voice.

—They are fans that open when the wind bites their little feet. They come in all colors: red like desire, white like calm, purple like mystery. Some grow on the walls of houses, others climb trees to watch the birds fight.

—Are there many parties?

—Every week there's a vigil. The Intrepid Danger Seekers dance in their gala attire, and the muxes are crowned with fresh flowers.

They dance until their bodies give out, but their souls keep turning.

—And do you dance?

—Only when I feel free. And with you, I feel free.

Ernestina remained silent. She gazed at the dark sky as if searching for a sign. Then she rose slowly, walked to the pile of corn cobs, and removed the metal box. She opened it carefully, as if unearthing a treasure. She touched the velvet, caressed the embroidery, and for the first time dared to imagine herself inside that dress.

Things often happen faster than you'd like. That's what happened during the festivities for the patron saint of San Pedro Huamelula. It had been a happy day for the couple: they were sharing a fritter when it was snatched away in pieces by teenagers known as "Los Negros," who roamed the streets dancing to

the beat of a drum, accompanied by their "Bonifacia," a wooden doll dressed in white.

Also present at the mayor's wedding ceremony was "La Lagarta," a terrified caiman dressed as a bride, to seal a peace agreement between the Huave people of San Mateo del Mar and the Chontal people of San Pedro Huamelula. In this community, voluntary marriage is not a respected custom.

It is customary for this tortured reptile—also called "The Princess Child," daughter of the Huave people—to be escorted by dance groups to the town hall. There, the elders cast their fishing nets toward the four cardinal directions, asking for blessings and permission to offer the princess in marriage.

I've often heard it said that hell is on earth. And it's true. But not for humans who imagine cauldrons of boiling water in the penny they're missing, in unfaithful lovers, in illnesses

caused by their excesses, in the ingratitude of their children, or in muscles tired from work.

No. Hell is experienced by the animals who share the earth with demons: those who agonize with broken bones amid laughter and indifference; those who are led bound and beaten to a warehouse amidst the smell of blood and wailing; the prisoners chained on a rooftop, under the rays of the sun, hunger, thirst, and loneliness; those who are separated from their young while they watch them being tortured and traded; those who live as slaves, deprived of freedom, drowned, torn to pieces, stripped of their homes, victims of an unquestioned pride that forgets its baseness in a second, that doesn't even question the filth of its actions.

It wasn't the first time that the mayor had celebrated his affections with a reptile. In fact, it was his custom, and no celebration was necessary. The night the pagan-religious

ceremony ended, the mayor decided to put the finishing touch on his revelry with another reptilian woman in a discreet office within the government building. What happened next would continue far from there, on a journey of no return.

It was already night when Ernestina and her “adoptive mother” returned to their home on the outskirts of town. The escape of some dogs led them to investigate the spot where, seconds before, there had been a commotion of growling and barking. In a ditch—which had once been a makeshift pigpen—they found the motionless figure of the town's highest-ranking official. The shock was immense: country folk know how to recognize when someone has passed away.

Startled, they rushed towards the road, only to scare away the last dog that was still clutching its trophy in its teeth. The shock was even greater when they saw a large leather pouch

on the ground with three fingers embedded in it. Without thinking, Apollonius picked up the pouch—from which the fingers slipped out—and, together with his daughter-wife, they set off at a brisk pace to their home.

Once there, seated on the bed, they embraced in silence, the terror still hanging in the air. Before them, on a chair, the bulky bag seemed to breathe. The hypnosis lasted a long time, until Ernestina, with a cautious air, decided to open the package. Several gold coins fell out.

Muxes of Juchitán, the intrepid seekers and the mushroom priestess.

Juchitán overflowed with beauty. Ernestina couldn't believe such a large city existed, so full of beautiful women, all sporting majestic hairstyles and embroidered garments, walking with a firm step, with an energetic attitude. That night, the marimba didn't play to vigil over a saint: the muxes danced to celebrate

themselves. To don the velvet dress, they first had to shed their disguises. They didn't venerate a martyr, but rather the joy of being alive.

Dancers in cotton trousers and bandanas accompanied the bougainvillea dance, its blossoms unfurling like fans. Apola, crowned queen by the unanimous consent of the Intrepid Seekers of Danger at the last Muxe vela, was the star of the festival. Ernestina gazed at her in awe: no other woman could match her powerful presence.

Ernestina grew up there, becoming a high-ranking young Tehuana princess, wearing a necklace with two hundred coins. In her spacious house, filled with pots of flowers from the Zapotec kingdom, coffee was served with milk and marquesote bread, no matter the day of the year. That home also welcomed other muxes and blond tourists who came down from the mountains with bandanas

adorned with mushrooms of spiritual wisdom, after visiting María Sabina, the priestess of Huautla.

María Sabina, a Mazatec healer born in 1894, was the guardian of the "holy children," psilocybin mushrooms she used in healing rituals. Her fame attracted controversial figures: Albert Hofmann, Timothy Leary, John Lennon, George Harrison, Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, and Walt Disney, the latter of whom, it is said, made contact with her in one of her dreams.

The fame of this healer became linked to the breakdown of values that began in the 1950s and extended into the 1970s. She was a symbol of a trend that justified drug-fueled fantasies, but also a revered figure who elevated the dignity of marginalized communities. At times, her image was taken to a level of shameful overvaluation, as if her apologists had inaugurated a new religion

mixed with compassion, in which they participated, but their saints died laughing.

In Juchitán, Ernestina developed a taste for cooking. She discovered local and exotic foods: vanilla, tejate, chocolate, tasajo, quesillo, achiote, costeño chili, criollo garlic, piloncillo, and hoja santa. She ate meats and insects, drank mezcal, and lit gas stoves. She tasted baby eels, serrano ham, camembert, salmon, shawarma, cherries, and even a detestable bun filled with ground meat and rancid paste that provoked her anger and the flight of a fluorescent-looking little boy with a flower in his ear.

But the day came when Ernestina had to be a woman. Apolonio told her so, his heart crushed like glass dust. He saw it in the men's greed, in the envy of the women of the Isthmus. Despite their pain, they shed no tears. They held hands tightly, their veins throbbing. Their gazes were serious, their faces

like those of goddesses carved from rock. As befits any ruler of a caste.

Juchitán, so far from everything and so close to Nirvana.

Before the nineties, arriving in Juchitán was like crossing an invisible threshold. You had to go through Oaxaca City, but entering it held a mystery I could never decipher. When you finally made out its lights—a promise of nearby streets—the city receded as if orbiting, always maintaining the same distance.

Every bus was a planet. In their eagerness to get closer, patience was lost. Like someone watching the milk to turn off the heat before it boils, the city spilled out just when one became distracted or closed their eyes.

Once the despair subsided, Oaxaca revealed all that such a beautiful city has to offer: the Santo Domingo Temple, the former Convent of San Pablo, the Macedonio Alcalá Theater, the

Juárez Market. A friendly city, except for the franchises and the Dutch waitresses in some restaurants. In 2002, the painter Francisco Toledo opposed the installation of a Sanborns store in the former Convent of San José. With the support of artists and intellectuals, the project was canceled.

Today, the neighborhoods of Xalatlaco and Xochimilco offer vibrant colors and artistic displays. The only thing you can't do in Xochimilco is hire a trajinera (a traditional flat-bottomed boat), despite its name. In 1492, the tlatoani Ahuízotl sent Xochimilco warriors to found a military settlement there. Despite the Zapotec demand of “¡Mexicas Go Home!”, they remained for at least two decades, until shortly before the conquest.

Walking through these streets, you see faces of Tehuana women painted alongside endemic species of the Isthmus. If there's one place in Mexico that stands out for its pride in its past,

it's Oaxaca. Beyond the rebellious figure of the muxe, there's a cultural force called tequio: a civic and moral duty of unpaid work for the common good. It's based on the guelaguetza—mutual aid—where what you give today, you will receive tomorrow.

Before the 1980s, this city was a mandatory stop for Buddha's followers and Nirvana devotees who came down from the Mazatec region to worship the turtles that support planet Earth in Tehuantepec. If there is a realm of "Far Away," it is the Isthmus. And, by extension, Juchitán.

That's what Sigfrido, a Colombian messiah who believed in universal peace, psychedelic galaxies, and free love, thought. He arrived with about twenty parishioners from Toronto, San Francisco, and the Seine River at Apolonio and Ernestina's house. For them, Oaxaca was rural Nirvana: making too much love and too little war, to the rhythm of guitars and

tambourines playing the songs of the Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the Grateful Dead, and under the influence of mushrooms and LSD.

In the house of the muxes, the silence almost didn't follow the noise, nor the calm after the storm. As happens in that place where, according to hippie belief, "the flower that doesn't need to bloom because it already is" germinates.

The musical commotion of these multicolored and amorous individuals unsettled the matriarchs, and tensions erupted when a naked priestess of the holy peyote paraded through the courtyards wearing a necklace of coins. The gesture was interpreted as an attempt at communal appropriation. An attempt was made to exploit the blonde lady's carnal desires, but Apola, with unimpeachable authority, calmed the ill will. A peace pipe, shared between the two communities, also

helped, dissolving the individual self into a broader collective.

Days later, Deborah—the woman who had stirred up the discontent—decided to leave her group to join a smaller community with a truck owner. The gender imbalance opened the door for Ernestina to decide that it was better to have ten husbands than one. Convinced by Siegfried's arguments about the advantages of a world free from constraints and filled with spiritual heights, she embraced the idea.

Apollonius's attempts to discourage our heroine were in vain. Convinced that evil lurks within the good intentions of those who merely seek their bread through the labor of others, he at least managed to persuade Ernestina to allow him to safeguard the greater part of the gold coins that were due to him as part of the day of the lizard's betrothal.

The Tehuana dress, the powerful symbol of the republic and magazine model.

There are symbols that rise like banners of a republic, and others that are displayed like mannequins in magazine showcases. The Tehuana dress inhabits both worlds: it is altar and display case, ceremony and spectacle. Its power resides not only in the embroidered velvet, but in what it represents—a living memory, a woven dignity, a resentment, and even a political emblem.

The mariachi and his sombrero are undoubtedly the most recognized emblems of Mexican identity abroad. They serve equally well to celebrate sporting triumphs or defeats, as campaign props for politicians who are subservient to their own culture, or as decoration for a retired tourist's apartment in Berlin. But the Tehuana dress, with its floral headdress and embroidered huipil, is the most

powerful. Not because of its frequency, but because of its symbolic weight. It is greater than the woman who wears it, and more complex than the postcard that simplifies it.

Ideological fantasies and diffuse resentment have transformed this garment into an icon that sometimes overshadows the strong and independent personalities of the women who created it. Sergei Eisenstein presented it to the world in the film ¡Qué viva México! as a sculptural, solemn figure, devoid of speech.

Frida Kahlo is the turning point that elevates this feminine vision to the altar of symbolism. Connected to her Zapotec roots, she transformed the Tehuana dress into an emotional anchor and a political manifesto. She used it to challenge European beauty standards, a protest against the erotic tastes of men in this country. Yet, we never see these dissenters criticizing other Mexican women for their similar European tastes in men.

But her act of exhibitionism was not the first. Before her, Nellie Campobello had already been portrayed in the Tehuana dress in the 1930s. Her work evoked feminine strength in revolutionary times, when the body was also a territory of struggle.

Her desire to highlight the central role of these women in social and economic life as a declaration of autonomy is genuine, an autonomy that was scarce in Mexico at the time when she confronted Diego about his affair with her sister. This did not prevent the painter from being the absolute dictator of her thoughts, as demonstrated in her self-portrait. Frida paints herself wearing a Tehuana headdress, while carrying Diego Rivera's face on her forehead. At that moment, her physical and emotional pain transformed that headdress and that man into a kind of armor to face life.

Elena Poniatowska reclaimed that power with a feminist discourse in her work * *Las mil y una... La historia de Paulina Lavista** *(One Thousand and One Nights... The Story of Paulina Lavista)* , in which she narrates the story of a girl who was abused and prevented from having an abortion. Within this framework, the Tehuana dress functions as a contrast: while Paulina is silenced and violated, the dress represents a strong, visible, and ceremonial voice. This duality allows for reflection on female bodies: Paulina's wounded body and the Tehuana woman's clothed body as a symbol of power and dignity.

Monsiváis agrees that she transformed the Tehuana dress into an icon of national identity, an emblem of Mexicanness, femininity, and resistance. In this way, the dress was adopted by public figures, artists, and activists as a way to reclaim indigenous and feminine heritage.

Social equality is often a facade of false kindness for those who live in comfort and without worries; hypocrisy is often dressed up in the vernacular; poverty outrages them in front of a franchise buffet dessert; persecution swells their chests in front of the television; injustice only disturbs them when it hits them in the face; equity is good for disguising a desire for privilege; selfishness and ambition are the essence of humanity; and charity is frequently a trap to embroider dispossession with flowers.

Since the Tehuana dress was elevated to a symbol, its image has traveled across runways, fashion labels, and editorials. What was once a ceremony is now also a showcase. What was once an altar is now a platform to combine its embroidery and floral headdresses with visual emblems from other social groups and ways of life.

Carolina Herrera included embroidery inspired by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in its Resort 2020 Collection. The brand Sézane dressed an Indigenous woman in pieces from its collection, paying her 200 pesos to pose in what others call a tribute. *Vogue* magazine has published editorials inspired by Frida Kahlo, where models wear floral headdresses, Oaxacan embroidery, and silhouettes that evoke the Tehuana dress. *Elle* , in its French and US editions, has showcased collections that reinterpret Mexican embroidery in haute couture contexts.

Marie Claire , in its European editions, has included features on ethnic and artisanal fashion, where the Tehuana dress appears as a visual reference. *Dazed & Confused* and *iD Magazine* , alternative fashion magazines, have explored the aesthetics of Frida Kahlo and the Tehuana dress as part of feminist and decolonial movements.

But it's not all happening in foreign shop windows. Several Oaxacan brands have illustrated labels for mezcal, chocolate, textiles, and cosmetics with stylized Tehuana women: Mezcal Tehuana, Mezcal Tehuanita, and Mezcal Tehuana Real. Some reinterpret the image with a pop aesthetic, others with vintage nostalgia, and still others with graphic testimony.

The power of this image extends far beyond the catwalk. It has been printed in textbooks, minted on coins, and reproduced on banknotes. The Tehuana woman appears as part of the national iconography, especially in discussions of Mexican identity, cultural diversity, and traditional clothing. In history, civics, and cultural education classes, her figure becomes a visual pedagogy: a symbol of who we are, or of who we are expected to be.

The painting "La Tehuana" by Saturnino Herrán has also been reproduced , and the Mexican

Mint has minted pieces with its image as an emblem of the Mexican tropics, which are distributed in international collections.

And what about that ten-peso bill that began circulating in 1936 and was discontinued in the 1970s? The woman featured on that banknote was Estela Ruiz Velázquez, a Zapotec woman from Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. She appears in traditional dress: floral headdress, embroidered huipil, her dignity undiminished.

“No woman has ever been in the hands of so many gentlemen as I have,” she once declared. She was chosen to represent indigenous female identity, but she died in poverty, without any financial compensation for the use of her image.

Ten pesos, in the early seventies, represented a tenth of a daily minimum wage. And my memory serves me right: with that you could fill a huge bag of bread, buy ten cakes at the

school store, fifty packets of stickers for the latest sticker album, two hundred pieces of a candy known as "foquito," fifty tickets to watch television at someone else's house, one hundred bread rolls, or five bags of chips with everything included.

That's why, today, giving that amount as a tip makes me feel like a generous man.

The lovers' escape

More than ten pesos were needed to sustain the marital needs of the commune where Ernestina was like an incarnation of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity. Food requirements were scarce, but not the fruits of spiritual manna that transported them in seconds to strike the gong alongside the Dalai Lama himself.

For the benefactress, life was comfortable and peaceful at the Tetecalita camp, where vegetarian supplies arrived to feed the

collective's meager appetites. Only she was authorized to consume meat, and out of respect, she would take a few days off to digest it.

It was after one of these absences that, without warning, the camp disappeared. The townspeople informed him that they had fled suddenly, warned by a proclamation from the governor of Morelos ordering the cleansing of the state of communist guerrillas.

Thus, Ernestina became the Mexican protagonist of the first mass divorce. She remained at the site to gather some belongings left behind during the escape and decide her fate. After two days, she resolved to go to the great city of cities: the land of Anáhuac.

The day before that trip, he received a visit from Deborah, accompanied by a two-year-old child. She was seeking refuge among her former accomplices: her husband had been

arrested for fraud and smuggling, and the cargo truck confiscated.

Seeing their gaunt and emaciated appearance, Ernestina salvaged two loaves of egg bread from the rubble to feed them. The boy was the most excited; so great was his hunger that he savored the simple cake like a delicacy fit for an Arabian prince. He made this known with the loving gesture of rubbing his cheek against the charitable lady's leg.

It is known that, more than fifty years later, there is no bite that can convince him of the unparalleled succulence of a yolk bread.

The City of Palaces and the letter to Apollonius: Ernestina is seen from within.

In the City of Palaces, Ernestina, with the funds Apolonio sent her, became the owner of

a tenement that stretched from the first to the fifth courtyard, from street to street. She was the only doorkeeper, and from her chair by the entrance she spied on the soul of everyone who entered or left.

She had other husbands. She served as an arbitrator in domestic disputes in the laundry area, where insults were washed away with warm water and bar soap. There, amidst the echo of buckets and soap operas, she developed a taste for musical talent shows.

One night, she stopped to watch two women dressed in what looked like a Tehuana costume: no petticoat, too much polyester, a costume jewelry chain instead of coins, and a Gucci bag hanging from their arm. A thought flashed through her like a slow lightning bolt:

“Dressing as a lady is a childhood dream, the excitement of combing a doll’s hair, the longing to grow up and be that same toy, the love inspired by being like one’s own mother. To

steal a dress is like kidnapping someone else's mother; to be the seed of a caste, one must pull the skirt of the one who lifts you in their arms."

That same night, she sat by the door—which she always kept open—and wrote a letter:

"What has become of you, Apollonius? My man, my mother.

This city is large and very beautiful, though not as much as Juchitán. I live happily, but I long for your embrace, the one that always stopped me from asking questions, the one that held me tight so I wouldn't disappear.

Thank you for covering me with wool blankets and not with silence, for hiding me inside a pink guava, for dancing in front of the rags of my abandonment.

You spoke to me a lot about love, the kind for which you've plucked so many bougainvilleas. But love isn't what lovers murmur: it's the warmth that rises from a hanging lamp, the

same warmth that chases away fear with a shadow puppet show and a fan.

Someday I'll wear a dress like yours. I hope you'll be honored, because that's my reason. I'm not asking your permission to do so, because that would offend you.

Thank you again for saving me from Romelia and the scorpion, but above all, for teaching me how to be safe from myself."

Deborah, for her part, became a famous showgirl. She performed numerous times at *El Capri* , where she portrayed the goddess Kali in an ingenious costume that made her four arms appear real. During the dance, she would extend them to caress the faces of some of the customers. One of them was a young soldier who dreamed of conquering Andromeda from the armies of the Milky Way. Disillusioned with the pleasurable substances, she preferred not to inquire further about the individual.

Ernestina, on the other hand, never embroidered fruit on velvet. Nor was she ever portrayed on an altar with flowers. No one copied her dress to wear it. There is no mural with her smile. She never felt the weight of a crown on her head, although she did feel the weight of a bundle of firewood on her back.

She has seen her caricature at marches for equality, where the clamor of the shouts ignores her. Her headdress is not adorned with the ribbon of a protest, nor does she need ceremony to know she is the master of her own steps.

The silence of the early mornings, the warmth of the hearth, and learning to walk alone from childhood were enough for her.

She's not interested in being on a banknote or in a textbook. She doesn't care about being seen.

Because she... looks at herself from within.