

Stories of La Alameda in the 70s and 80s: Characters, Customs and Capital City Nostalgia

María Azucena: A lady amidst lace and urban dreams.

María Azucena couldn't believe her eyes. She blinked like someone trying to wake from a dream. Behind the shop window, a languid and beautiful figure—more specter than mannequin—extended its arm in a silent invitation. But it wasn't the plaster silhouette that captivated her. The true enchantment was the dress: celestial lace, pleats, and sequins like a thousand stars above a barren patch of prickly pear cactus. The shoulder pads seemed to rise like the mist of dew at dawn. Her woven mantilla was white, like that of the Virgin of Remedies of Nacelagua; the green and yellow skirt, like an ear of corn with her

hair, shone with satin and seduced with the texture of silk.

That Otomi virgin from the forest of Santa María Atarasquillo, surrounded by twelve columns guarding hills of prayer, seemed to inhabit the dress. Nacelagua, a syncretism of springing water, evoked deities like the Tlanchana of Metepec. María Azucena, captivated by the vision, imagined herself dressed in those immaculate fabrics, bestowing fertility upon the women of the great city. A discreet sigh escaped her lips. The desire had taken root.

Obtaining his desired object would not be easy. The negotiation with Gibran, the Lebanese man from the bazaar, was fierce. With part of his savings and a partial payment, he managed to acquire the treasure, but not

before signing promissory notes with interest rates that bit like snakes.

Sunday, as a rule, is a bright day: the occasion when her employer would have breakfast at the tables of the open-air market or in an American franchise restaurant. This, depending on the situation, would determine the outfit she should wear in public: either the cotton tracksuit that rivaled pajamas, or that floral print dress worn by tourists in the Caribbean that hugged her stomach and hips.

This was not the case for María Azucena, who, after a scalding hot shower during which she felt as if she could scrub her skin off with the scouring pad, adjusted her waist to the dress, a jewel worthy of the Princess of Asturias. This was the day when the rags and brooms, the dirty dishes and the detergent enjoyed the solitude of their cupboards. The same day she

would make her rounds with her fellow cleaners from Las Lomas del Huizachal: María Bernarda and Rosa María.

She would make them wait at "The Exile," a little corner of confidences, before appearing majestically: perched on a cloud, wearing platform shoes and the uniform of the Virgin Mary. 'Beautiful' is a poor description for anyone who could see her. There was and will be no runway model who can match her charm; every garment needs a goddess if it doesn't want to be just a scrap of fabric, and for that, the happiness etched on a face is more than all the curves of a highway.

Great was the surprise of her drinking companions—their eyes wide as balcony windows—to confirm that their expectation had been fulfilled. Upon her appearance, they fell into immediate silence, broken only by a

trembling greeting and an envious kiss from Rosa María, which sounded more like a slap across her cheek.

Between the austere silence of the latter and the talkative spirit of María Bernarda, they all headed to their usual appointment with the impromptu comedians and musicians at the kiosk in the garden of the viceroys.

The street vendor, the balloon seller, and the comedians: Voices from the garden of the viceroys.

As always, in this park - where the poplars are marginalized by the predominance of the ash trees and the purple foliage of the jacarandas, and where squirrels dominate the branches while rats swarm through the burrows on the ground - the atmosphere was one of a formidable celebration.

In one corner stood the charlatan with a snake around his neck, surrounded by adult and elderly women interested in the healing properties of the toad herb: capable of turning varicose veins into thin guitar strings; preventing indigestion in children; restoring milk to mothers with exhausted breasts; removing sweetness from blood sugar; making cancer a harmless Sagittarius, and even causing the divorce of an undesirable competitor.

Further on, the balloon man stood with his whistle and his collection of hot air balloons in one hand, which made one fear he might take flight, while with the other he frantically beat a small ball tied to a string. Beside him, the cotton candy vendor wound pink sugar ghosts around a stick, forming a frothy top that always ended up stuck to the hands and nose of some

greedy child.

There were all the staples of a mestizo snack: jicama with chili; hotcakes with cajeta from Celaya—whose secret recipe is only known to vendors at fairs; flour chicharrones; green mango with Miguelito; apples with red caramel stuck on a stake; corn on the cob made from cacahuazintle corn; melon seed horchata; and the poor man's sandwich with a slice of ham painted with beans under a square of salty cheese and a slice of jalapeño... a whole culinary carpet within reach of any proletarian pocket.

In the bandstand beloved by the three Marias, the catchy rhythms of Rigo Tovar's repertoire, sometimes off-key, rang out, having roused the audience from the dull slumber induced by the Philharmonic Orchestra of the City of Palaces. On this occasion, shouts and applause

erupted when the same group played "*Juliantla* ," an anthem and emblematic piece of rural nostalgia, a sentiment deeply felt by the crowd.

For María Azucena, these were moments that made her forget the unpleasant gesture of the boss's offspring, Doña Carmela; the latter's offensive attitude when counting the leftover money from the purchase of vegetables; the broken glass that she had to pay for with her salary; and the indifference of the boss when he dirtied the floors again after having washed them.

In the midst of this joy, he could not help but notice the sad and timid image of a dark-haired young man, who - sitting on a bench and dressed in a tight green t-shirt, Topeka brand jeans and black shoes with a chin strap -

had caused a disturbing palpitation in his heart.

José: The Rider of the Lagoon and Warrior of the Galaxies.

Tecocomulco is a melancholic town. It's no wonder José is too, like the fish that prefer to sleep among the reeds rather than gasp to see the world outside the water.

There's little to do on the shores of its lagoon: fry frogs, scare herons, or damage the alien spacecraft stranded on a nearby hill, which is the attraction for some fleeting tourists. They say that these visitors, the same ones who helped build the pyramids of Teotihuacan, conducted their first architectural experiments here. As proof, they left behind a foundation, carved stones, and a cave depicting a map and the inhabitants of their galaxy.

So frustrated were they at not being able to return to their world—because of the fishermen's sabotage—that they've formed a community, tucked away somewhere secret on the hillside. Fishing isn't a good business, nor are the bored tourists from Tulancingo, whom José used to take out on boat trips to photograph a solitary duck, the one that, with disdain, would dip its beak into the water, leaving only its feet visible.

Our captain preferred to sail alone. No one could match his speed at the oars or steer the vessel at will. He was, in a way, a rider mounted on his magnificent lake horse.

Few understood his habit of sleeping entire nights on the back of that steed, in the middle of the watery universe where, gazing at the stars, he dreamed of being a conquering warrior of the armies of Andromeda and the

Milky Way. Many times he invoked the alien soldiers to be admitted as one of their militia and fly toward the universe.

These, however, viewed the dreamer's request with indifference, for resignation had already accustomed them to living comfortably and on a nutritious diet of frogs.

Day off at the barracks.

In another corner of the city, a man was preparing for his own Sunday ritual. Not with the boisterousness of the three chatty young ladies, but with the sobriety of one who has learned to march to the rhythm of duty. José finished packing his belongings into his duffel bag, just minutes after solemnly and respectfully stowing his olive-green uniform in its assigned locker. His commute was short, but made more enjoyable by the news

programs " *La Hora Nacional*" and "*Radio Variedades*," which he listened to on his radio.

It wasn't that he was a lover of trees and nature, but the Alameda had a unique charm. In particular, that meddlesome clown who made him laugh and the delightful aromas of the Regis Café, located in that imposing building with Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Neoclassical touches, where he could feel like the commander-in-chief of the *Enterprise* , surrounded by soaring windows, fine linens, and distinguished clientele. A well-deserved luxury after having been drafted into the ranks of the 1st Armored Infantry Battalion.

The Hotel Regis and the Capri Cafeteria: Luxury and lost history.

The hotel where this café was located was more than just a place to stay. It housed two iconic spaces of Mexican culture: *El Capri* , a

refined cabaret where showgirls elevated the profession with talent and elegance, with well-rehearsed and expertly executed choreography, and a stage for performances by artists such as Pedro Vargas, José Alfredo Jiménez, Lola Flores, Edith Piaf, and many others.

The day before the September 19, 1985 earthquake that destroyed this building, the glamorous showgirl Mara Marú, who rivaled other stars like Olga Breeskin, Rosy Mendoza, and Princess Lea, performed here. Several well-known politicians of the time also perished there on that fateful day.

On that same spot was *La Taberna del Greco* , a Mediterranean-style restaurant and bar that emulated the bohemian atmosphere of its counterparts in Europe. With a bit of luck, you might share a drink, a conversation, or some

enlightened nonsense—and I mean that quite literally—with figures like Carlos Monsiváis, José Luis Cuevas, Octavio Paz, Elena Poniatowska, or Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Failing that, you could also discreetly exchange a few barbs at the hotel with figures like Fidel Castro and Richard Nixon.

José felt great pride in his uniform, in the exhausting effort he had put in, and in the strength of his well-defined muscles, with which he could arrange a hundred sandbags for a trench in just a few minutes. He also took pride in the discipline with which he could stand guard for ten hours straight, without losing his focus, and without envying his peers at Windsor Castle.

A mysterious and desperate courtship.

After the parade of flavors and characters, the park becomes the stage for another ritual:

courtship. Not the kind found in romantic novels or songs by trios, but a more awkward, more human, more desperate kind.

Mexico would be a ghost town, desolate, if our courtship rituals had to conform to the customs of figures like José and María Azucena. The birth rate would have preferred to chase the gray inhabitants of our park's burrows with its arrow.

I will offer the war report as it happened:

The report states that the male subject was absentmindedly peeling a large mango when the female—accompanied by her accomplices—stepped a few steps away from the group to stare intently at him. Surprised by this, he absentmindedly dropped the juicy fruit, leaving a conspicuous stain of Miguelito

on his pants. The woman then rejoined the group and exchanged suspicious comments that elicited quiet laughter.

Following these events, amidst repeated laughter and furtive glances from the group, long, impatient minutes passed—let it be noted that the impatience was mine. There was no change in the attitude of those present until the man, having washed away the Miguelito's mark with his own saliva, stood up and took two steps toward the site of the fire. After that, another long time passed, then another, and another, until he took another two steps. The impatience returned.

Amidst the chords of Rigo Tovar, José's steps and María Azucena's glances began to draw a dance that, rather than bringing them closer, seemed determined to keep them at bay.

It so happened that, just a short distance away, the stalker—with an air of feigned indifference—watched out of the corner of his eye as the opposing squad took further steps to the side to move away from him. More laughter, more interminable minutes of this repeated action. His patience nearly spiraling out of control.

Just when it seemed the kiosk walls would halt this longitudinal march, the action repeated itself in the opposite direction. At that moment, the observer was about to pick up the remains of the mango to attack the conspirators with this projectile. I had to abandon this intention when the man managed to break the routine and position himself a short distance from the arm of the aforementioned woman, who, in an agile movement, moved to the other end of the line that made up the group, to resume the chase.

At this point, the chronicler decided to stop his observations—amid repeated curses—to distract himself with the image of some bathing dwarfs next to the cherubs of the Fountain of Venus, which would surely be embarrassed by the spectacle just described.

The fountains of La Alameda and its sculptures.

The fountains of La Alameda are a haven that pleases the eye:

Mercury, a work by Juan Bolonia, as a symbol of commerce;

Victory, a work by Valdosine, supported by four tritons, on a tortoise as an evocation of nothing;

Neptune, ruler of the seas and oceans, conceived by W. Durbay;

Spring, which represents the goddess Persephone, who only emerges from the underworld when the flowers are reborn;

Venus, Roman goddess of love, sculpted by Mathain Moreau;

And the Danaids, who allude to the 50 daughters of Danaus, king of Libya and founder of Argos, who wanted to save his daughters from a bad marriage in Egypt and who -in the fountain- empty their jugs to fill a pool.

Legend has it that Danaus forced his daughters to marry the sons of Aegyptus, but ordered them to kill them on their wedding night . All obeyed, except Hypermnestra , who spared her husband, Lynceus. As punishment, the Danaids were condemned to Hades to eternally fill perforated pitchers with water.

After a long time of being engrossed in these sculptural thoughts, surprisingly, I could see in the distance the young couple from this story, affectionately sharing cotton candy, on their way to the 'family' courts.

With regret for my demographic predictions, and in an exercise based on the oracle of circumstances, I thought I guessed that his son could well be named Jesus.

I rule my own bed, the cry of the brave.

The great grove—a nickname that, to be more accurate, better describes this place—owes its vibrant flora to the mestizo fascination with diversity. For Mexicans, any novelty or difference is as attractive as any glittering trinket to a crow.

It's no wonder this was a suitable place for another kind of courtship, quicker and more fleeting, on the street leading to the temple of Saint Hippolytus, who lives ignored in his own home. This side of the park, all the way to the foot of José Martí, was, in the 1980s, the route Hippolytus—named after that marginalized saint—would take at night in search of an almost imperceptible sign of welcome, to enter through the door of love and desire.

He was by no means the only one who harbored this hope. The line of walkers was very long, as were the benches where others waited for a sign.

Polito, as we affectionately call him, was plagued by bad luck. Like that of the Christian martyr who gave him his name and who, as the story goes, was torn apart in all four limbs by wild horses. That was the same number of

directions in which his possible adventures veered away from him.

There's no doubt that beauty is a petty perception. No one seemed to appreciate his courage and the warrior spirit with which he defended the persecuted lovers of Avenida Hidalgo and the young men of Plaza Martí. While all those conceited youths fled from the morality police vans, he stood at the forefront, his thin and emaciated figure leading the way, his shouts paralyzing the coin-hunting dogs of the local authorities, who evaded him, knowing his determination and valor.

With a few other brave souls, he carried the cry of the avenue of the marginalized to the adjacent street, dominated in eternal marble by the hero of the Americas. I know from a reliable source that at first, fewer than forty-

one marched, but over time they grew to millions.

I vividly remember that there, to the war cry of 'I'm in charge of my bed!', I witnessed her honorable effigy, adorned by the warrior-like poise of her fifteen-year-old uniform, which without words or labels said: 'Here I am and here I will always be'.

I don't know how many exchanged glances and a touch with him on those furtive nights. I don't know if there were fewer or more than those on the commemorative plaque—seized by the authorities to make it clandestine—I don't know. But it's clear to me that the brave come first, and that later, he was loved by many.

The elderly don't waste time.

No one regrets losing what doesn't matter. Time has value for a business meeting; for getting a punctuality bonus at work; for doing laundry before the rain starts; for placing a bet on the lottery before the drawing; or for spending money before life ends.

In a park, it's only useful for watching squirrels devour a peanut; for delving into the pages of a newspaper; or feeding the pigeons. Often, it also serves to spy on others and try to guess their story.

This last one is the elderly's favorite distraction. They are a kind of natural intelligence software, capable of reading passersby who cross in front of their infrared cameras. They carry coded signals to a powerful server that links the present with the past. They are able to tie effect to cause; to distinguish truth from falsehood, and

sometimes, to create white lies to soothe the anxieties of the young.

The Alameda is the command center for this cutting-edge technological equipment. You can find them alone or together. Either way, you won't avoid being stripped naked if you dare to walk in front of their laser.

It was like that before, and it's like that now. I myself have been updated and rebooted for this task. I like this wooded landscape because it's a metaphor that never changes. In its essence, human concerns, their reality, and their origin are always the same.

Old tasters of history.

On these benches, just as today, sat the old connoisseurs of history—peaceful, but not passive—watching the massive marches on

June 10, 1971. Wiping the dust off with a handkerchief in September 1985. Here they stood, questioning the reptilian tears of a president of the republic. Counting the long string of zeros on a banknote; confirming that there would be no coup d'état; observing the return of a comet that cavemen had already seen; or welcoming nightfall in broad daylight without looking at the sky, for fear of going blind.

Today I am pleased to be the godfather of this tradition, with which I observe that the crooks have only put on makeup, and that the banknotes, just like before, have a big zero in their pockets.

Today, the heartbreak of impossible or unrequited love, the sorrow of a flower in a cemetery, and poorly disguised hatred and envy are no different. Nor is the desire for

revenge, nor the thrill of a first job or a "Yes, I love you" beneath the foliage of a jacaranda tree.

What's new is hopelessness. It's a future that, for young people, fades away as easily as a touchscreen phone. That phone that's their window to a universe where the wind doesn't blow; where not a leaf falls from a tree; and where pigeon droppings don't stain their heads.

The Alameda on Sunday is a living mural: From Diego Rivera to Stalin ...

Everything fits in a mural if you know how to arrange it. Maximilian, Porfirio Díaz, Juárez, Zapata, and La Catrina all fit. The penitents of the Inquisition, a Techichi, a gendarme, or a child at Frida Kahlo's feet all fit.

The absence of Trotsky is strange, however much he may have been the favorite subject of

the brilliant Diego. Despite his communist leanings, he knew Mexican history well.

However tempted he might have been to paint the hammer and sickle on the hot air balloon in his mural, he knew that every Lenin can become a Stalin.

This inspires me not to write praises that don't exist, praises of the people's heroes with stashes of cash.

The simplicity of this park is deceptive. Be careful on its paths. Before you know it, it will become a forest painted with brush and paint by the author of time. He, like Diego, enjoys drawing many faces, like those of José, María Azucena, and like yours.