

# **The Neighborhood Madman: Eccentric Characters and Urban Madness in Mexico City**

## **Dominguita: The Crazy Woman of Plaza Loreto.**

A few days ago, near Plaza Loreto, I stopped to watch an old woman feeding a flock of pigeons. It wasn't just any ordinary scene. The birds descended from a bell tower as if they recognized her presence. She called them by name, organized them firmly, and spoke to them as if delivering a secret message in their ear.

She whispered prayers, quoted fragments from an unlined catechism, and dressed simply: cloth shoes, a scapular around her neck. She took her role seriously.

While I was lost in that choreography, another woman approached me: plump, elderly, dressed like a housewife, with a white bag that said "El Gordo Butcher Shop." She offered me her romantic services at a low cost. Without appetite for her carnal proposals, I offered her a gift in exchange for knowing the story of the pigeon woman.

She told me about Dominguita. She said she believed that each dove was the reincarnation of an apostle or a virgin. That her family, ancient inhabitants of the area, fervently practiced a mixture of religion, witchcraft, and divination. That her madness began after a visit from the Virgin of the Lightning, who, to save her from eternal punishment, entrusted her with feeding these sacred beings.

We both agreed that it was a form of madness. But the curious thing was that this housewife

of the night didn't doubt the apparition of the Virgin for a second. For her, it was a proven fact.

## **Who Are the Neighborhood Crazy Ones?**

In every neighborhood, there's a cast of eccentric characters who, without asking permission, settle into the collective memory. We call them "crazy ones," although their madness is usually more enigmatic than clinical. They are different, yes, but also necessary.

Their presence breaks the monotony, challenges the norms, and forces us to look at life from unexpected angles. Some speak with invisible beings. Others dress as if every day were carnival. There are those who repeat ritual gestures, as if conjuring a secret order amidst urban chaos.

Their strangeness is not a flaw: it is a way of being in the world. They remind us that sanity is a convention, and that difference can be luminous.

Their existence is not new. They have inhabited the walled cities of the Middle Ages, the gardens of the Renaissance, imperial palaces, and the neighborhoods of our childhood. Joanna the Mad was a queen who kissed the corpse of her beloved Philip the Handsome. Carlota, the Empress of Mexico, mistook Juárez's face for the devil. In their mental labyrinths, evil, saints, and deities mingle with love, grief, or exile.

In our neighborhoods, the eccentrics are part of the landscape. They challenge us, unsettle us, move us. Some provoke rejection; others, tenderness.

Madness, sometimes, dresses up. It's woven into colors, drags along in ponchos, becomes embedded in plastic combs.

El Cobijas from Tultitlán comes to mind. Thin, poorly bathed, wrapped in layers of blankets like armor against the world. In his hand, the lid of a trash can: his shield. He used it to defend himself against the municipal police and the stray dogs, who followed him as if they recognized in him an old comrade.

A master at finding scraps among the market's garbage, proud of never begging. Some said he was a soldier, others that he was a librarian. He had his own logic, an aesthetic of survival. When he walked, the city seemed to stop. Vendors lowered the volume of their radios. The elderly greeted him with respect. He was part of the landscape, but also its crack.

Pita Amor, the eleventh muse, dressed like a baroque queen: pearl necklaces, enormous jewels, flowers in her hair. Her sullen expression contrasted with her heavy makeup, dark eyeliner along her eyes, and intensely painted lips. Provocative, violent, overflowing. Her confessional poetry was inspired by Sor Juana, Góngora, and Quevedo. They say her madness began after the death of her son Manuelito, who drowned a few months after birth.

And Oyuqui. Tiny, dressed in sheets tied like a geisha. Flip-flops instead of Japanese sandals. A comb buried in her messy hair, next to a pair of chopsticks. Her outfit was a loose interpretation of a character she never fully knew. But every element was chosen with intention.

Aesthetic madness doesn't seek approval, it seeks presence. On the streets, appearances always deceive. What seems like a disguise is sometimes armor. What seems like excess is sometimes an offering.

### **Cande and her street communion: Faith, fries, and blessings**

Around La Merced, it was common to run into Cande—perhaps Candelario by full name—a shy man with a slow gait and downcast eyes, who officiated his own mass right there in the street.

His ritual was simple, but sacred: he blessed each pedestrian who crossed his path with the sign of the cross. He did so solemnly, with a gesture behind each prayer. And to the stray dogs, he offered communion. Not with hosts, but with potato chips. The dogs, devout parishioners, sat before him, waiting their turn

respectfully. They received the chip on their tongues and then silently withdrew, as if they had been touched by grace.

Cande didn't speak much; his language was guttural. His faith, a mixture of family custom, trauma, and hope. They said his mother taught him to pray before a makeshift altar with holy cards and votive candles.

Her clothing was a way of saying "here I am" in a city that doesn't see me. And although her altar was a bench, and her chalice a potato sack, her ceremony was as powerful as a cardinal's.

**The mark of Auschwitz: Adversity is a relentless executioner.**

Adversity, when it takes hold of the body, isn't always visible, but it's tattooed on the skin. In



the seventies, around Santa Julia, a foreign woman appeared. She had no name or known nickname. Only a broken presence, who knelt weeping every time a car exhaust backfired or fireworks exploded. She hugged passersby, as if trying to save them from an invisible danger, as if the noise announced the end of human existence.

On her arm was the mark of her madness: the engraved number of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The calculations between her apparent age and the years of horror make me think she was a child when she lived through it. I can imagine the terror she felt from the Nazi soldiers' heels, the bullets against the walls, the sound of the artillery, the screams of her loved ones as they were dragged away. The loneliness, the vulnerability.

Every loud sound was an explosion in her memory. Every hug, an attempt at salvation. Her gesture, a silent prayer.

The city looked at her from a distance; some avoided her, others blessed her. But no one could deny that her pain was real.

### **Aurora, The Crazy Cake Lady: Sadness begins after madness**

Madness doesn't always arrive like a storm. Sometimes, it's the fog that settles after abandonment. A bitter echo, like the one felt by a child in an orphanage or a pet that doesn't understand the ungrateful repayment for its unconditional love

Aurora, known as “The Crazy Cake Lady,” was a mature and elegant lady, conservative even by

the standards of the seventies. She seemed to have stepped out of a perfumed soap commercial: impeccably clean, meticulous about ironing, educated at some school for exemplary wives. A Polanco housewife, a cook with delicate hands, the matriarch of a home that seemed perfect.

But it wasn't. Her husband, a conceited captain of industry, treated her with disdain. Her children, ashamed of the ample nipples that made them gain weight , erased her from their photographs. After a psychiatric diagnosis, a bedroom was prepared for her at the top of that castle with its fifties Californian architecture. From then on, she was absent from her children's wedding in front of the San Ignacio de Loyola church and from her grandchildren's vacations at Disneyland. In fact, she was never with her grandchildren

Aurora was a master of pastry. Even more: she was the Nobel Prize winner of baking. Sugar formed a carpet to cover her steps; chocolate melted to praise her; flour pushed her dough to the sky to carry it on shoulders.

She, for her part, carried a wide basket of pastries to venture into the ravines of Santa Fe and Tacubaya. All divided into exact slices, where none was larger than the other by a single crumb.

Her whole face was a smile at the joyful emergence of the disheveled children from the cardboard houses, who, like cadets in formation honoring the heroes of the homeland, stood guard to welcome her at each dwelling.

In those places, they always set aside the cot with clean sheets to shelter her during her stay, the only chair with a cover to serve her the only glass of milk on their table. All while dozens of children licked their lips and cheeks stained with cream, pistachio, vanilla, and chocolate.

His greatest pleasure was singing a lullaby to soothe a malnourished child and then losing himself in the void, laughing and engaged in a mysterious conversation with an invisible entity.

For years, his tomb in the French Pantheon has remained almost unvisited, except on All Souls' Day, when a solitary gentleman places an offering of wildflowers and a small but exquisite cake of the finest confectionery.

## **The House of Tiles and the Lord of the Owls: Guardians of Time.**

Madness can be mysterious and dwell like a specter in old mansions. This happened in the House of Tiles, which for some time was guarded by the "Lord of the Owls," whose room was decorated with paintings of these birds and also recordings of their calls.

For him, these were the guardians of time, capable of seeing into the past and the future. It is said that even today it is possible to hear the flapping of their wings and their hooting.

The home of the "Neighborhood Crazy Ones" is our street. They don't come from a mysterious planet: they emerged from a home with walls. I understood this one time when I was invited to the house of a tiny woman with rosy cheeks on Independencia Street next to Chinatown in Mexico City. With harmonious taste, she had

created a home without walls in two square meters, limited only by wooden crates and cardboard boxes.

I was amazed by her order and cleanliness, the delicacy of a vase with a single flower on a shoebox—which must have been the coffee table in her living room—her few clothes hung symmetrically on a tree branch, a piece of cardboard on the floor neatly placed as a rug, and a hundred other details for which I would have gladly entered her home, if only two people hadn't been an uncomfortable crowd

I often wonder: why do they proliferate in those old neighborhoods? The cause may be the silence behind the thick walls in the rooms of their homes; the coexistence with the beings of the underworld that live in every corner and legend; or the old age of their inhabitants, who see in the stones of the past a world better than the present.

I'm not sure, but those neighborhoods are not just stone and dampness: they are a world of subterranean beings. Their absence would turn these streets into mediocre postcards for tourists.

**We all have a bit of the genius and the madman in us.**

We are all capable of behaviors that disrupt our harmony, and others that are unusual. Almost always, these are cause for judgment, ridicule, or rejection. Therefore, we must be understanding of others.

Old age has given me the habit of observing in detail the objects and individuals that surround me. Nothing escapes my notice: The pedestrian who avoids stepping on the lines that divide the concrete of the streets; the lady



or gentleman who kidnaps others to torture them with a monologue about their life; the people who invent outlandish stories about their virtues, their successes, or fortunes to gain admiration; the individual who returns more than three times to make sure they have locked their front door.

None escape me: the infamous person who punishes their dog as if it were the cause of their misfortunes; the one who kicks a piece of furniture because they hurt themselves on it; the other, for whom everything in life is a reason for melancholy; the one who skips two meals a day to increase their savings; the owner of an overwhelming collection of any object; the person tormented by the discovery of a flaw in their beauty; the one who wages war against microbes or is an obsessive client of the doctor and clinical analysis laboratories

That said, in our daily lives, we all embody that character whose behavior hinders our functioning. What we call good judgment, sound judgment, is not the norm.

On the other hand, to create a marvel requires stepping away from the ordinary. It requires having an overflowing imagination to find the secret of the impossible. This kind of madness is known as talent.

### **Madness is an inheritance**

No one is born mad. There is no pill or surgery that can restore sanity. It invades from the very teachings surrounding a child's education. The madman is the leper of the modern age, a fear that threatens us, though they are not to blame.

Madness is rooted in the way the events of our lives, and particularly our childhood, have been linked together. It attacks us from within, never from without.

There is no abundant island of happiness to which we can send these individuals, sometimes owners of a better world than our own. Likeable, dangerous, or brilliant, they are part of our community, of the identity of our streets, of our history, and even of our infamies

Let sanity inspire us, let us ask that it not escape from within our labyrinths. Let us welcome these strangers with a language built from our own sentences, but articulated in a different grammar.