The school of our childhood: From Queen Victoria to Vasconcelos.

Just another day in the life of teacher Teresita.

Teacher Teresita is a mysterious being, endowed with the gifts of ubiquity and eternity. She has been—and continues to be—the teacher of the first grades in every school in Mexico. She holds the matrix from which all the letters of the alphabet germinated. She is easy to recognize: she never ages, and her attire barely changes with the passing of generations.

Her breakfast is simple; her wardrobe, clean and modest. She didn't need virginity to be the immaculate mother of a timeless line of children. In an endless stack of attendance lists, she keeps every name in a nation, not a single one missing. She has a trunk that connects to the depths of the earth, filled with

tiny gold and silver stars. A glass of water is enough for her to produce the saliva that activates the glue holding those stars together.

She's the first to arrive at school, the one who breaks the silence of the playground. Soon you'll see her wiping away tears and soothing, with a warm embrace, the children's feelings of abandonment on their first day of school. She's the same one who, with her gaze, restores peace and bids farewell to a mother who feels utterly bereft.

—What's your name, baby?

—Seraph.

—Do you know what I keep in my pocket?

—No.

—A little cricket lives here.

—Can I see it?

—Yes, but only when we're with the other children. They want to be your friends.

That's where the first lesson begins. The child learns to say "goodbye, see you soon" by folding their hand from top to bottom. Then they are assigned a place in line, according to their height. Teresita straightens their sweater, pants, or skirt and checks that their shoes are well polished.

Ernestito's escort and itch.

Soon the bell rings. Everyone awaits the appearance of the headmaster, with the stern face of a battalion commander, whose expression remains perfectly still unless commanded by his voice. He welcomes everyone, extols the virtues of a good human being, and quotes the heroes of the nation and the sages of the Middle Ages.

Amid the anticipation, the murmur of the sixth-grade students falls silent, and, like Caesar, she raises her hand, signaling the start to the sharp sound of the trumpet and the roll of the war drums. At that moment, the flag bearer

raises the banner with the noble shield of the eagle of Anáhuac and begins the march of the honor guard toward the center of the plaza.

Perhaps, during the journey, Ernestito Bahena decides to scratch his bottom. The sixth-grade boys break the solemnity with laughter, but the principal's threatening gaze interrupts the rebellion.

Teresita, quicker than lightning, teaches and corrects the proper hand-to-chest salute to all the newcomers. There's always someone who responds with a swatting of his hand and an angry gesture, an unmistakable sign that identifies the undisciplined member of the group.

Typical personalities in each group.

In every classroom, certain figures are repeated like pictures in a school album. Two stand out for their intelligence: the studious one and the rebel. They shouldn't be confused with the flatterer or the sociopath.

The diligent person is methodical, disciplined, and values effort, tenacity, and fairness. Their intelligence is a daily conquest. The rebel, on the other hand, is an inveterate seeker, adventurous, and incapable of curbing their desire to understand the why of everything. Their mind doesn't stop at the established order; they love freedom and irony. The encounter between the two is a boon for human evolution, provided they learn to tolerate each other.

The flatterer is easily recognized: he arrives with cakes or sweets for the teachers, always friendly if there's something to gain. But behind his smile lives the betrayer. The sociopath, on the other hand, snatches and hurts to obtain what his meager effort doesn't grant him, or simply for the pleasure of inflicting pain.

The range is wide: there's the shy one, the indifferent one, the helpless one, the arrogant one, the melancholic one, the helpful one, the

generous one, the envious one, the lewd one, and also the precocious one. But in every group—and sometimes in the entire school—there is only one wise person. And that wise person is not a student: it's a teacher.

A man steeped in years, often marked by solitude, whose presence commanded respect. Not because of his authority, but because of the weight of his knowledge. Professor Orta was one of them. We knew him by his last name, as school custom dictates. No one is called by their first name, except for Professor Teresita.

Orta taught and embodied the fundamental values of civility, respect, and human greatness. He didn't concern himself with moral trivialities; that was the job of Miss Reséndiz, the school counselor. He taught the meaning of equality, the value of forgiveness, the pride in effort, generosity without expectation of reward, solidarity as a bond of

survival, gratitude, the power of the spirit in the face of adversity, and the courage to rise after defeat.

The lessons of Master Orta.

For Orta, the classroom was his temple, and justice, his creed. He didn't teach through punishment, but through experience. Every gesture of his was a living parable.

Once, Zavala —the boy who arrived by car and showed off his box of Prismacolor pencils, while the rest of us made do with Mapita— had the audacity to snatch Montoya's meager lunch of tortilla with egg and beans, only to throw it on the ground and make fun of him.

Upon learning of the incident, Mr. Orta didn't give a lecture. He demanded that Zavala apologize in front of the class and urged Montoya to humbly offer forgiveness. For a month, the two exchanged lunches during recess. In this way, privilege and hardship

would confront each other and learn to see things from one another's perspective. Eventually, they grew accustomed to sharing food… and became close friends.

Another day, Bermúdez, the bully with the clogged boots, tried to take Lozano—the diligent one—of his stamps. Lozano bravely defended himself, but was met with kicks in response. The headmaster had decided to expel the infamous boy, but Professor Orta suggested that, within the school, he should always walk barefoot. That way, he would understand how vulnerable a man can be, unarmed and at a disadvantage.

It was Lozano himself who asked that the lesson be interrupted, since in his opinion, the punishment was commensurate with the magnitude of his crime. Years later, Lozano would become a Justice of the Supreme Court. Bermúdez, according to the newspapers, died in the crossfire between bandits. The seed of a

great teacher does not always find fertile ground.

Teresita admired Orta. And—I'll tell you this in secret—she also loved him. Not with an abstract love, but with the kind that arises without permission. Her behavior never betrayed it, but I was always a keen observer.

Queen Victoria and proper school conduct.

Ethics is reflective; morality, an unthinking demand. Miss Reséndiz, the tireless monitor of school behavior, was in charge of the latter. She had two missions: to distribute pamphlets on how to wash hands and to teach how to be what society expects.

She extolled discipline, silence, and obedience. For the girls, in particular, she emphasized modesty and sacrifice. Punctuality was the rule, and respect for the teacher was absolute. When an adult entered the classroom, everyone had to stand. No one

dared use an insulting word in their presence. In that space, the teacher had the authority to punish any transgression. If the situation exceeded her authority, Miss Reséndiz would appear, the precursor to the dreaded meeting with the headmaster.

She kept a long list of desired behaviors and prohibitions. She didn't just monitor for swearing: there was also a catalog of "dirty" words, because calling them "obscene" was, in itself, an offense. Outside of recess, everyone had to raise their hand to speak and remain silent the rest of the time.

Sometimes, the school resembled a military barracks. An inappropriate haircut, a poorly ironed uniform, or dirty shoes could be grounds for sending a student home. In the 1960s, high school students wore a brown uniform with a small tie, similar to those worn by American soldiers who fought in World War II.

After the Mexican Revolution, the State aspired to create disciplined, patriotic, and obedient citizens. The school uniform became a symbol of this mission: children were presented as “soldiers of knowledge” or “guardians of the homeland.” The idea of destroying one's fellow human being has been, for many young people, a temptation cultivated by images of glory and recognition promoted from the halls of power. The elegance of these uniforms evokes fascination; it facilitates acceptance within zealous groups that treat war as a game. It is no coincidence that Nazi Germany transformed children and adolescents into proud fanatics by dressing them in uniforms.

Girls had to be mindful of the length of their skirts and keep their legs closed when sitting. There were parts of the body that could not be mentioned, much less touched immodestly. Even posture while standing or sitting was governed by rules. Care was taken to ensure that activities considered appropriate for each

sex did not cross boundaries. Games were also gendered: a girl's indelicate behavior, or a boy's, could be grounds for a report. Even hip movements were monitored.

The obsessive focus on sexuality seemed to be dictated by Queen Victoria of England herself. And although it may seem exaggerated, it was. The rules of conduct in educational settings—and education itself in Mexico during the first seven decades of the 20th century—were deeply inspired by that model.

Victorian education promoted sexual repression, moral purity, and the control of desire. Sexuality was considered dangerous if it was not subordinated to virtue, marriage, and reproduction. Female virginity was seen as a symbol of morality and family honor. Conversations about the body were avoided, and even words that might allude to parts of the anatomy were censored. Schools did not

offer sex education, and textbooks omitted any explicit reference to the subject.

I remember that, on more than one occasion, a student in my class was silenced for asking questions or uttering a word considered inappropriate. In the best-case scenario, they were answered with a story inspired by the life of bees or the famous little seed that a shameless hummingbird deposited in Mom's stomach.

Indecency and offenses against public morality.

During Porfirio Díaz's era, schools mirrored European standards. Manuals extolled chastity, modesty, and feminine decorum as pillars of public morality. Children were prepared for work, authority, and dominance. Ultimately, everything stemmed from religious dogma and the logic of the Industrial Revolution: literacy for obedience, not for

critical thinking. The goal was to create a workforce capable of operating the new profit-generating machines.

In 1974, when the SEP (Mexican Ministry of Education) attempted to include books with basic information about the body in the curriculum, protests erupted from religious groups. The textbooks avoided mentioning desire or the body directly, using euphemisms or scientific terms.

But censorship wasn't limited to schools. Until the 1980s, the Ministry of the Interior censored literary works and films that addressed sexuality. Carlos Fuentes's Aura and Where the Air Is Clear were attacked for their symbolic eroticism. José Revueltas's El Apando and Nabokov's Lolita faced the same fate. The Place Without Limits (1978) was targeted for addressing homosexuality, a topic that also suffered street repression and social isolation.

At that time, chastity and hidden sexuality in women were considered virtues. Desire was to be exercised within the “true love” of a wife or mother, and under the guise of responsible procreation. Calling a young woman “ma’am” could be offensive. She would demand to be called “miss,” even if it meant more effort.

In late 19th-century Britain, under the rule of Queen Victoria, it was customary to cover the legs of tables or pianos with long tablecloths, as they were considered "indecent".

But those were not matters that concerned teacher Teresita or teacher Orta. They had a deeper mission, born from social struggles and their origins: to uplift spirits and pave the way for social, cultural, and economic advancement.

Nationalism and its cultural graffiti.

After the Mexican Revolution, Victorian morality—which taught the people to read and

write only so they could understand machine instructions—received a respite. José Vasconcelos proposed another path: liberating the individual from ignorance and oppression. For him, education should perfect the soul. Beauty should be present in books, schools, murals, and music.

As Secretary of Public Education, Vasconcelos became the first graffiti artist of the 20th century. There wasn't a school, no matter how remote in the mountains, that didn't adorn its walls with images of national history or the legends of each region.

These murals depicted—to the delight of García Márquez and the Surrealists—figures such as “the boy who turned into corn,” “the teacher who spoke with the dead,” and “the jaguar that protected the school.” The pre-Hispanic past, the peasant origins with their magical world, and the wars were recurring

themes. Juárez and the Niños Héroes (Boy Heroes) were unavoidable protagonists.

Nationalism was in vogue, just as fascism was germinating in Europe. Mexico sought to elevate its symbols of greatness, and it had plenty of them: the Aztec gods, the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, the Mexica calendar, the volcanoes of Anáhuac, Ignacio Zaragoza with his sword raised high against some French soldiers in breeches, and of course, the Motherland, dressed in white, flag in hand, escorted by the Aztec eagle.

Norma López Molina—about whom almost nothing is known—was the model for the covers of textbooks during the administration of Adolfo López Mateos. For years, it was believed that she was an actress or a drawing without a real face, until journalists discovered her identity.

The Aztec nation and the Nazi salute.

What inspired Aztec culture to become a symbol of national identity for a country as diverse as Mexico? Two factors with great psychological power can explain it.

First, in an era when the right to rule was justified as divine will, the legend of a people guided by a supreme god offered historical grandeur. The Mexica myth enveloped all the inhabitants of the territory as legitimate heirs to its riches, by an unappealable design.

Second, military power was a universal symbol of territorial pride. It served as a warning: “A warrior people lives here.” The Aztec empire, with its military dominance, represented an inheritable force, a warning to outsiders, and a promise to future generations.

As usual, José Vasconcelos, captivated by these symbols, exalted them in all educational materials. Aztec gods, warriors, scenes from Tenochtitlan: everything became part of the official image. This nationalist and warlike

temptation influenced his sympathy for the Nazi regime, which he praised in the magazine *Timón* , which he edited in 1940. This provoked disappointment and rejection among many intellectuals and politicians.

I believe—and I say this cautiously—that Vasconcelos allowed himself to be swept along by the prevailing atmosphere of his time. Politics, too, has its trends. Fascism caught fire like a fuse in several Latin American countries: Brazil with Getúlio Vargas, Argentina with Ramón Castillo, Chile with the National Socialist Movement, and Mexico with the Sinarquism and the "Golden Shirts," whom Lázaro Cárdenas dealt a severe blow to.

More recently, we have moved from the fashion of market liberalism and the cult of the entrepreneur, to irrational populism, full of resentment and lack of judgment.

But Vasconcelos cannot be judged simplistically. He was a man influenced by

Plato and the classics. He championed Ibero-American culture and conceived of education as a universal and harmonious entity, capable of acquiring profound knowledge: philosophy, mathematics, science, and the arts. He envisioned the sons and daughters of Mexico traveling the world to bring back the best of human talent and transform the mestizo and agrarian nation into a new Athens.

One phrase sums up his vision: “The fifth race will not be one of force, but one of spirit.” For him, this superior synthesis would give rise to a more just, creative, and spiritual civilization.

Master Orta, beneath his elegant jacket, carried the echo of those times. Passionate about Greek tragedies and Renaissance artists, without neglecting the sages of the Middle Ages, his mind was a living archive: from Aesop's fables to *Animal Farm* and *The Little Prince* . His Palmer penmanship,

executed with a fountain pen, glided like a classical ballerina across the paper.

I never knew any "brat" who had learned that art from her. But we all knew that behind her serene gaze resided an entire library. Incidentally, calligraphy class always ended in a mess that forced our mothers to get their hands on magic chemicals to remove all the stains from her uniform.

There was no wine of poor quality or bad wood that could deceive this master's discerning taste, just as there was no corner of the nation whose lakes, trails, and rivers he couldn't depict on a map. He knew the names of all the world's capital cities.

The recital to the mother, the ode to the homeland, and the studious cow.

Maestro Orta had many talents, but none surpassed his skill at the piano. He learned it from his adventurous grandfather, with whom

he grew up. That grandfather, in the days of horse-drawn carriages, had climbed Tibet, escaped persecution through the Amazon rainforest, and attended Oscar Wilde plays in London.

At school, Orta would play while Professor Fonseca recited the *Bohemian's Toast* or poems by Rubén Darío. He always ended with "Autumn in Spring," looking at his hunched figure in a small mirror, supported by a Michoacán cane.

"Youth, divine treasure, you are leaving never to return!"

When I want to cry, I don't... and sometimes I cry without meaning to...

At the end, the fifth-grade boys came out of an adjacent room to perform the dance of the old men. Unintentional irony, but effective.

On Mother's Day, the celebrations were abundant, as were the mothers' tears, which threatened to turn the playground into a

branch of Lake Texcoco. Each grade rehearsed for weeks, but stage fright always betrayed them. Just when the prince was supposed to kiss Sleeping Beauty, she would jump out of bed and flee, pursued by the knight who would hit her with the calla lily she had abandoned, eager to finish the scene.

The celebration wouldn't have been complete without Manuel Acuña's poem " *To My Mother* ," with its poignant moment when Montoya presents his mother with a flower unlike any other. Among the poems recited were the Deer Dance, the Jarabe Tapatío, and before young Andrade took to the stage in his *cowboy* costume to dance *"The Cowboy Mouse* ," Andrade's mother would slip away for a few minutes to "discuss important matters" with the physical education teacher. It was common for them to disappear together. I imagine they were good friends. Despite this, she returned just in time to watch her son conversing with the illustrious rodent.

That teacher was strange: muscular chest, broad arms, but so short he couldn't hug himself. His legs, on the other hand, were as thin as chopsticks. Years later, I saw an animated movie with a superhero, the father of a self-inflicted firebrand boy, who looked a lot like him.

As in previous years, napkin holders and jewelry boxes made from popsicle sticks were handed out. Then, the parents had to buy stamps for the National Savings Bonds and sell the food they had prepared themselves, donating the profits to the school's governing board.

The patriotic celebrations were different: solemn and abundant. They are still commemorated on February 5, March 21, May 5, September 15 and 16, and November 20. All include parades, recitations, dances, and historical dramatizations.

The oath of Flag Day still resonates:

“Flag of Mexico! Legacy of our heroes, symbol of the unity of our fathers and our brothers. We promise to always be faithful to the principles of freedom and justice that make our homeland the independent, humane, and generous nation to which we dedicate our lives.”

The most idolized figure in this saga is undoubtedly Benito Juárez, whose hairstyle generated more ridicule than homage. I never understood why, on his birthday, that anonymous poem was recited:

"but I, a sad wretch, who live in this prison,

I don't even know when it's day or when it's night,

but by a little bird that sang to me at dawn...»

Power often breeds pride, it almost always corrupts, but it is always a prison.

I'm also unclear about the connection between the Constitution of the Republic and

the poem " *The Studious Cow* ," who one day decided to go to school. We must interpret this as meaning that law is a social asset, even for a ruminant, regardless of its political affiliation.

That galaxy beyond the school.

Stepping outside the school was like crossing the threshold into a Milky Way of wonders. More than just an extended recess, it was a buffet of sweets and games, where penny hunters awaited their prey. Just like the wolf in fairy tales, with caramel apples, jicama with chamoy, pieces of mint candy, agave stalks, donkey's chito (a type of candy), popsicles, peanut brittle, taffy... and an endless etcetera.

With only a few cents in my pocket, I had to choose wisely. I always looked for enchiladas made with unfried tortillas, smothered in green chile sauce, cilantro, and grated cheese. The ice creams, served in awkward paper cones,

demanded speed: otherwise, the treat would melt before I even got a taste.

There was the option of winning the coin toss against the merengue vendor, which was almost always unsuccessful. They knew how to control the coin with skillful and well-practiced movements, but a worn coin that made it land on one side also helped, as did the trick of distracting the child and then, in an instant, flipping it over with a shoe.

Another game of chance involved drawing a slip of paper from a bag: depending on the number, you could buy more wafer rolls for the same price. But high numbers were scarce.

The outing was also a time to trade stickers from the album, which was almost always incomplete because of that one sticker that was impossible to find. I remember the ones with wrestlers, natural sciences, Mexican history and geography, *The Pink Panther* , *El*

Chavo del Ocho , and the one from the 1970 World Cup.

It was also possible to pass the time looking at slides on the *View-Master* , swap marbles, and replay recess games like hopscotch, the road game with clay-filled tokens, or tag. And then there were the games forbidden at school, like hopscotch or hopscotch, which involved betting. It was the perfect time to settle scores with a fight, where winning was vital to avoid ridicule and being labeled as weak.

In those decades, going to or returning from school was an independent activity. At a certain age, parental supervision was no longer necessary. Children trusted the world and their child's ability to cross the streets. This is how they learned the value of self-confidence, a sense of duty, and gratitude for their parents' efforts.

School wasn't a burden. The only weight that could be challenged was that of the brown

leather backpack, with two straps and overflowing with books and notebooks. Effort and merit were both required and expected. There were no free rewards.

Today, fear has taken hold in classrooms. The teacher, the classmate, the passerby: everyone is a source of distrust. There is no longer any agreement on what is ethical or moral. Rewards don't take effort or behavior into account; they are offered like any cheap candy.

In the park where I go to breathe in the peace with Lucrecia, my Chihuahua companion, I can see the kilometer-long line of cars and parents picking up their children from the adjacent school, even the graduating seniors. Their vigilance on the playground equipment and their obsession with preventing falls or scrapes are also quite noticeable.

Once, a child tried to pet my gentle little dog, and within seconds his mother appeared to

pull him away from an imminent bite. Lucrecia, terrified, would have preferred to bite the woman's neurosis rather than the little boy's hand, which he only intended to lick.

At close range, I heard his warning: “Don’t go near strangers.” I never imagined that my senile image, next to a tiny, long-eared mammal, could seem so terrifying. As a child, the presence of an old person was a protective aura, someone to turn to in times of danger.

There have always been those who believed that education served to achieve economic well-being. It was much more than that. But at least that single purpose gave it meaning. With that objective buried, the nation has become blind and defenseless.

In those decades, rewarding laziness was unthinkable. Responsibility couldn't be bought. Conduct was monitored—sometimes with dogma and prejudice—but above all, the individual's well-being was protected. The

reason is simple: learning was necessary to build a nation.

“The spirit will speak for my race”

Professor Orta

Teacher Teresita

Professor Fonseca

Miss Reséndiz during the inspection.

Zavala mocks the boy Montoya after throwing his lunch at him.