

Judith Van Gieson / EL ALICANTE

When Estrellita, Ignacio's oldest child, was ten she already had five brothers and sisters. She ran faster and laughed louder than all the children who played in the dust of the ranch. She ate beans and tortillas and drank from the cows' tits. She wasn't afraid of the Alicantes, the snakes that put the cows in a trance when nobody was looking and sucked their milk, or the rats that ate the hay or the black widow spiders that dropped from the ceiling. The ranch was as familiar to her as the palm of her own dirty hand. During the day she worked in the fields. At night under the bright stars and the ever changing moon, she roamed. She knew where the rats hid and where the Alicantes nested. She had stood outside the door of every dusty hut and she knew where the next baby would be born and why, Concepcion, Jose's wife, embroidered with a sad face while her husband drank pulque in the barn.

Jose was the foreman of Rancho Escondite, a tiny, thin man, hard as a whip. He wore high heeled boots, his hat had a tall crown and the brim curled up. He worked his men harder than any other foreman in the Valley. After he married Concepcion, the daughter of the boss of the neighboring ranch, he was easier for a time. Concepcion was as small as a child. She had a sweet brown face and she embroidered beautiful dresses for the babies born on the ranch. As the years passed and she had no baby of her own, meanness sweated from Jose and things went bad. Crops shrivelled in the hot sun, milk thinner than water ran from the cows' tits, chickens hid their eggs, Alicantes sunned themselves in the afternoons, rats ate the hay. Jose drank more pulque, his men drank more pulque. They came home very late and beat their women and all day the children fought in the dust.

The men found their solution in pulque, but the women knew that something had to be done to save the ranch and on the night of the full moon they called in Remedios, the old bruja from the pueblo. The women captured the boldest rooster, the one who crowed when the sun was just beginning to light the next Valley to the East and they took him to Jose and Concepcion's house. With Jose's machete, the bruja killed the rooster on the bedroom floor. Concepcion lay in the flickering light of the bruja's candles while she sprinkled the blood around the bed and chanted in a language that the women did not understand. She cradled the rooster's bloody head in her hands and was holding it over Concepcion's womb when the hard, drunken footsteps of Jose sounded in the doorway. The women turned and were blinded by the glare of the light he carried.

"Chinga su madre," he screamed picking up his machete. "Get out of my house before I kill you, you old witch."

The woman fled, but the bruja, stooped and bent over her stick so that she was shorter even than Jose, looked up at him and spoke the words that none of them understood, but all of them knew were a curse. With her stick she made a line that curled in the dust like a serpent and then she left the house. There was no one left behind to watch Jose fling the rooster head from the window, no one to watch the shadows that flapped across the wall as he beat Concepcion, no one to watch him fall upon her and stab her with the hard, indifferent pecks of a bantam cock, no one but the child, Estrellita, who stood watching in the darkness beyond the open window.

Estrellita left the window and ran across the ranch stirring up clouds of dirt around her feet. She found her father, Ignacio, smoking in the doorway of the barn.

"Que pasa, hija?" he said.

Estrellita told him what she had seen; the chanting of the bruja and the strange pecks and flutters of Jose. Ignacio listened under the light of the moon. He was a big, smooth skinned man who had milked a thousand cows and knew the causes of things. He didn't believe that a bruja could cast any spell to compare with the magic in his own brown body. Ignacio knew what needed to be done. He patted the head of his oldest daughter and ground his cigarette out in the dust.

A smile softened Concepcion's almond hard little face, a roundness showed in her belly. Jose strutted through the barns and across the fields as if it were he who had performed the miracle. Ignacio squeezed milk, not water, from the cows' tits. The hens clucked and showed off the perfect brown ovalness of their eggs. The children played and the women sang as they beat their clothes in the muddy river. When the child, a boy, was born, there was a celebration on the ranch. The men drank pulque until they fell down in the dust and then they slept there under a thousand bright stars.

A fat, smooth-skinned baby was conceived, but he did not want to be born. He clung to his place in Concepcion's tight womb. The midwife could not push him out; she had to reach up and pull him, ripping Concepcion open like a star when she did. All the women on the ranch came to Jose's house to see the baby named Manuel. "Manolo," they said, "what a beautiful boy," but as the months passed the baby grew long, but thinner and thinner, and the women began to call him Flaccito, little skinny one.

Flaccito nursed and sucked and pulled at Concepcion's breasts but he didn't find enough nourishment there and he screamed his hunger out the window and across the ranch. Everybody heard him screaming in the middle of the night and early in the morning, everybody but Jose who slept soundly in the same room dreaming dreams about his son. The only time Flaccito kept silent was during siesta when the ranch had a strange calm and everybody stopped wherever they were and went to sleep. Jose refused to call in a wet nurse. He preened and strode across the ranch proud of the skinny baby boy but the women had never heard such screaming. They weren't sure who had caused the baby to be, but they knew it had been cursed. Ignacio understood that things were going bad again when he saw the cows' milk slipping through his fingers like water.

Manolo's sucking and crying tired Concepcion. Her little brown face tightened like an old nut. In the evening Estrellita looked in the open window and watched Concepcion nurse Flaccito. She saw the bruise around the mother's nipples spread to the baby's mouth. She saw the ugly stain swelling and darkening every day.

One day when nobody had been able to find any chickens' eggs, Estrellita left the fields during siesta. It was very quiet, everything that could move was sleeping; the cows slept standing in the fields, the men slept in the hay in the barn, Jose slept with his head down on the desk in his office, the women and the children slept on mats on the floor of their huts.

Estrellita walked silently through the dust of the ranch. She tiptoed up to the window of Jose's house and she looked in. The mother and the baby lay sleeping on the bed without a sound. Estrellita looked closely and then she saw the snake, the Alicante, fatter than her own leg, coiled and curled up on the bed between them. It had stuck its tail in Manolo's mouth and the poor dry baby was sucking in his sleep trying to draw some nourishment from the snake's scaly tail. The mouth of the Alicante, big enough to swallow an egg or a rodent whole, was wrapped around the breast of Concepcion, sucking at her nipple, stealing her milk, the life of the baby.

Estrellita tiptoed away from the window and then she ran to the barn where she found her father, Ignacio, sleeping in the hay. She shook his arm. "Papa, Papa," she said. "Wake up. Get the gun. There's an Alicante in bed with Concepcion. Wake up, Papa. Get the gun."

Ignacio shook the sleep from his eyes. He went into Jose's office, grabbed the gun from the wall and ran with his daughter across the ranch to the house of Jose. The Alicante felt the thumping of their feet and let go of Concepcion's breast. As they reached the window they saw it, a full two metres long, uncoiling and winding down the side of the bed reaching for the floor. It was bloated but it slithered across the floor, its head darting, feeling for the danger that lay in front of it. As soon as the Alicante was off the bed and Ignacio had a clear shot, he fired. There was a fractured instant of silence, then the sleeping ranch awoke; Concepcion screamed, Manolo cried, Jose's boots sounded in the dirt. The Alicante curled together, then snapped straight and burst open squirting milk up into the air. Jose stepped into the doorway in time to see the milk raining down like beginnings on the dusty floor.