
Corazón's Café

Author(s): Judith Ortiz Cofer

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CORAZÓN'S CAFÉ

By Judith Ortiz Cofer

I

Corazón knew that she should go back to the apartment now. It was after closing time, and soon the street would be deserted. But she felt less alone here in the café, among the shelves that she and Manuel had stocked together, than she did in their apartment. It had been their home among the barrio neighbors who had also been their customers for ten years. Although she had often talked of moving to a house in the suburbs, especially after their store had started paying for itself, she knew that Manuel loved El Building for the same reasons that others claimed to hate it. It had *vida*. It was filled with the life energies of generations of other Island people; the stairs sagged from the weight of their burdens, and the walls had absorbed the smells of their food. El Building had become their country now. But Corazón did not know if she could call it home now that Manuel was gone.

Corazón was sitting behind the counter as if expecting a rush of customers at that hour. But what came to her were memories. From where she sat she could read the labels of cans that reminded her of Manuel's special way of doing things.

Habichuelas rojas, the can of red kidney beans they stacked in a little pyramid. There were little sacks next to it holding the long grain rice that Puerto Ricans like to eat. The only logic that Manuel followed in stocking his shelves was based on this idea of what most people wanted to see in a barrio store: foods that go together arranged in interesting ways in one area: rice and beans, with plantains nearby, as well as cans of sliced breadfruit, pumpkin, and other side dishes to inspire more creative meals. The whole store was arranged in possible meal combinations. And there was the "international" section where imported goods for the other Latino customers were displayed by nationality. Exotic canned products from Brazil, "Cuban" fruit drinks now bottled in Miami, black frijoles from Mexico, and assorted candies from several South American countries with curious names like *Suspiros* and *Merengues*.

Leaning over, she could smell the fresh coffee they kept in a can on the counter to serve free to customers. The aroma took her back to the time she had met Manuel.

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II

It had been a hot afternoon on the Island. He came out to wait on her from where he had been grinding coffee beans behind the counter of el mercado Gonzalez when she had walked in, her face streaked with tears after a confrontation with her father. She had been sent to buy a bottle of Palo Viejo rum.

Manuel had put the bottle in a brown sack, never taking his eyes away from her face. He had touched her hand with his fingers as he handed it to her. Later, she had smelled the fresh coffee on her skin. She had avoided washing that hand all day because by bringing it to her nose, she could recall the pleasure of his touch.

And his face was beautiful. She had always thought that it was not right to say that of a man, but as a plain woman who always noticed beauty in others, she considered herself a fair judge of *la belleza*. And Manuel had a face as lovely as Jesus in those paintings where he is offering you His Sacred Heart. Manuel had a little beard then too (which he had grown to look older than his eighteen years when he asked for the job at the store). But the beard only framed and softened his features. His eyes were almond-shaped with long eyelashes that made shadows on his cheeks when he looked down to figure an account for a customer. His lips were an invitation for a kiss: full and sensuous.

The most attractive thing about Manuel to Corazón was the fact that Manuel seemed to be unaware of his good looks. He worked twelve-hour days at the mercado, then he went home to help his widowed mother take care of the house and the little plot of land where she grew a few vegetables. They subsisted on Manuel's small salary and on the money his mother made cooking for other people's parties. That is how Manuel had learned to cook, by helping his mother in the kitchen.

Corazón's situation was the reverse. Her mother had died in child-birth, leaving her to her older sister's care. Consuelo had been little more than a child herself when she had to take over the house. Their father was a heavy drinker, becoming more reclusive and bitter as he got older. He provided for his daughters, bringing in money from his job as foreman at the factory, but he seemed indifferent to their emotional needs. Anger and violence were always a possibility when he was home. "Go get me a pint of Palo Viejo," was his usual greeting to Corazón in the evening. By the time she was eighteen, the task had become an unbearable humiliation. But if it wasn't for Corazón, it would have to be her sister, Consuelo, who was older and secretly engaged to a man who had warned her (or so Consuelo had told Corazón) that if her old man forced her to go buy rum, he would come over and beat him senseless. They did not want more violence at home, did they? And besides, at twenty-five years of age, Consuelo believed this was her last chance at marriage. Consuelo had promised Corazón that she would wait until Corazón had finished high school, then she would marry and leave town.

Meeting Manuel gave Corazón hope and a plan for the future. She had loved him immediately. But he was so timid that she found herself directing the courtship. She started by going on any pretext to the mercado, where she practiced seducing him with her eyes. She gave him looks she had learned from the Mexican movies at the cinema. But he simply looked embarrassed and lowered his eyes in confusion. Since

Corazón was well aware of the fact that she was not beautiful, at first she thought he was rejecting her in his own gentle way. But the attraction was real. She could detect the electrically charged space between them when he faced her across the counter. He was just too shy to speak. Finally Corazón decided to take action. One day she slipped him a note with the money as she paid for the groceries. It simply said, *Manuel, meet me behind the mercado at nine tonight*. Then she left quickly before he could say no. It was a daring plan. She had to get Consuelo to help her carry it out.

After dinner their father usually sat alone in his room listening to the radio. Consuelo and Corazón were supposed to wash the dishes, make the beds, and occupy themselves with sewing, reading, or some other "quiet" activity until he declared that it was time for bed at around ten. He never came into their room, though, and it was possible for one of them to sneak out of the house through the window, which led directly to a thickly overgrown backyard. The banana trees, the huge breadfruit tree, and the assorted plants that their mother had once cultivated but were now like a forest provided great cover. From years of playing in that wilderness as children, they both knew their way to the road by moonlight. So far, it had been Consuelo who sneaked out to meet her man. This night, it would be Corazón. Consuelo expressed concern about her sister's decision, but she also told the radiant girl that love had made her almost beautiful that night. Corazón smiled ironically at the "almost beautiful" but felt too excited to allow her sister's words to hurt her as they usually did. Consuelo offered to brush Corazón's glossy black hair. It was the one thing Corazón was proud of—she had beautiful hair like their mother's. She examined her face carefully in the mirror. She did not think herself vain, but for Manuel, she wished she were prettier. Corazón's face was the result of the history of Puerto Rico. Her high cheekbones and oval eyes came from her father's Taino Indian and African ancestry. From her mother's forebears in Spain Corazón had received the long, thin nose, curly black hair, and lightened complexion that made her skin neither copper nor tan but somewhere in between. Corazón wished she were thinner; her large bosom made her look heavier than she was. She wished she looked more like her mother, who, like Consuelo, had been a tiny delicate-featured woman with porcelain skin. She knew this from the wedding picture her father had on his dresser. She had seen him stare at it for hours while he drank and listened to the old songs on his radio.

Corazón let herself out of the window with her sister's help.

"Remember, I will be expecting you in two hours," Consuelo had whispered to her. "And please, Corazón, don't . . ." She had started to lecture her about not doing anything foolish, anything she might regret, but Corazón had already turned away from her older sister and was plunging into the garden's shadows.

Manuel was waiting for her on the back steps of the store. Her own daring had made her feel reckless, and she leaned down and kissed his mouth. It tasted like a sweet, moist fruit straight from the tree of summer. He pulled her down on the cool cement steps next to him.

"Corazón," he spoke her name for the first time, "what shall we do?" She knew immediately what she would say, and it would always be that way. Manuel would ask her to make the important decisions, and she always would.

"Marry me," she said.

"I have to take care of my mother. She is not well, and she's only got me."

"We will take care of her together, Manuel." Corazón felt like someone who dives from a sinking ship into the ocean. She would do anything to be with this man. She felt a sense of destiny, *el destino*, a powerful force taking over her life.

That night they began to make plans. Corazón would finish her schooling that year, then they would announce their engagement. She found it easy to take the lead with Manuel. She placed her eager mouth on his, and he responded with a tenderness and passion she could control by merely wishing it. He seemed to gauge her needs and give her exact quantities of passion—no more, no less. He smiled and nodded as she began to make plans for their future, even that first night when they knew not much more about each other than what their bodies told them—that they wanted to be together more than they wanted anything else. Manuel walked Corazón home, as far as the large tree at the edge of the overgrown garden. They held each other for a long time, then said a quiet good-night with promises of another meeting in a few nights. Corazón climbed through the window into the room, where she found Consuelo sobbing on her bed.

"What is it, Consuelo, what is wrong?" Corazón stroked her sister's hair. She feared something awful had happened in her house, since Consuelo was crying so hard that her whole body trembled in Corazón's arms. After a few minutes, Consuelo sat up in bed and laid her head on her sister's lap, letting Corazón wipe the tears from her face with her skirt.

"It's father. He found my letters to Gustavo and he is furious. Oh, Corazón. He called me out to the living room, and I had a terrible time explaining why you had not come out with me. I told him you were feverish and had taken medicine. But he was too angry to care about you. He wants Gustavo to come over tomorrow. I'm so afraid."

"How did he find the letters, Consuelo?" Corazón knew that their father avoided their private rooms, as he did most places and people that reminded him of his wife. He would not even allow flowers in the house, because she had always had things blossoming and growing in her home. His grief had turned him inside out, and he wore all his bitterness on the surface of his skin. He had withdrawn into his room with his bottle and treated his daughters like bad memories, avoiding looking at their faces, which were composites of his and his dead wife's, yet jealously guarding them.

"I had put them in my missal. I guess I left it out on the table by mistake. He must have seen the papers sticking out."

Corazón gently lifted her sister's face and looked deeply into her eyes. Rising from the bed, she walked to the dresser. She was quick to figure out that Consuelo had wanted the old man to find the letters. It was like her sister to manipulate events to suit her needs. Though Corazón loved Consuelo very much, she sometimes felt hurt and offended by her sister's somewhat devious ways of getting what she wanted. It was as if, in having to accept the responsibilities of a widower's home and a young sister to take of, Consuelo had decided she could never trust anyone to treat her fairly, so she kept secrets and maneuvered people. Now she was hurrying up her future before Corazón could get too much of a head start. Corazón knew what would happen in the next few days. A wedding date would be set for Consuelo and Gustavo to marry and thus save their father's dignity.

"Consuelo, I thought you were going to wait for me to finish school before you married Gustavo." Corazón's tone let her sister know what she suspected. Consuelo rose abruptly from the bed, wiping the last of her tears from her face.

"If you are old enough to be with a man, my dear little sister, you are old enough to take care of yourself."

That was the moment in the lives of the two sisters when Corazón began to understand that in the matters of love for men, family loyalty takes second place. Consuelo's maternal concern for Corazón evaporated when she felt an encroachment on her right as the eldest to marry first. She had come to this conclusion while she waited for her younger sister to return from meeting her man.

The wedding was planned rapidly. It was to be a simple ceremony at home, since Don Emilio, their father, would not agree to attend a church wedding. The witness was their aunt, who brought flowers for the bride in spite of her brother's ban and cooked a meal for the groom's parents. The couple would stay with his family at first, then leave for New Jersey, where Gustavo had been offered a job as a mechanic by his godfather, who owned a garage. Consuelo was a beautiful bride, painful to her father's eyes, since she resembled his wife so much. Right after the priest said his final blessing, Don Emilio retired to his room and closed the door on the party. Corazón helped her sister change clothes for the one-night honeymoon in the nearest city of Ponce. Though there had been tension between them in the past weeks, she was grateful to her sister for all her years of devoted care. She stood behind Consuelo, who was sitting at her dresser, and helped her remove the little crown of fresh flowers, *azucenas*, white lilies from her hair.

"Be happy," she had said, and she had meant it.

But Corazón's life in her father's house without her sister for company became a daily torment. Right after work, the old man would lock himself in his room to drink, and he did not emerge until morning. He did not speak to Corazón except to order her to do something around the house or to send her to the store for his main needs in those dark days: cigarettes and rum. Feeling desperately alone, one night Corazón looked outside her window and decided to go toward the one point of light in the distance—Manuel's house.

She found her way there in almost total darkness. Manuel's mother's house stood alone outside of town, and the streetlights gave way to a dirt road long before their few acres of land began. Corazón stumbled and cut herself on sharp rocks, and once coming upon a creek, she fell into the shallow water before finding the steppingstones by moonlight. When she arrived, she was hurt, bleeding, and soaked to the skin through her thin dress. The house loomed above her on stilts.

Corazón sat on the ground where she could see Manuel moving behind the translucent curtains like a figure in a dream. She was exhausted, and he seemed beyond her reach. She allowed herself to cry a little, as she watched him turn off the light and come to the window to close the shutters against the mosquitoes as he prepared for bed. Corazón ran to the house and stood under his startled eyes.

"Corazón!" He could not believe what he was seeing. But she just reached her arms up to him, and by leaning his body halfway out of the window, he reached her and pulled her into his room. Without speaking they came together in the dim room that

smelled of the warm milk sweetened with cinnamon he drank each evening, of soap and man's cologne. He unbuttoned her dress and dried her with his soft cotton shirt, and he knelt on the floor and removed her sandals. Then he lifted her up in his arms like a child and took her to his bed, where she shivered until he enfolded her body with his own.

He kept repeating her name, "Corazón, Corazón," as if he were talking to himself, warning himself to be gentle with her. He kissed her mouth until she trusted herself enough to kiss him back, and only when she let her body respond to his hands did he push himself gently into her. He was patient as she experienced first pain, then pleasure so intense that she laughed aloud in surprise. He said, "Hush, *mi Corazón*, Mamá's in there." He pointed toward the wall. Corazón felt afraid that his mother had heard them. But their desire was stronger than caution and they made love again, quietly, falling asleep exhausted when it was almost light outside.

Sleeping in Manuel's arms had come as naturally as breathing to Corazón. The first morning in his mother's house, however, began with her awakening alone in his room. She heard a woman's soft voice on the other side of the thin wall and Manuel's deeper voice responding. But she could not make out the words. She considered jumping out of the window and running back to her home. Perhaps she could sneak back into her room before her father noticed her absence.

As she hurriedly dressed in clothes that smelled of the muddy water with which they were splattered, Manuel walked in with a woman's bright yellow dress on his arm. He handed it to her. Smiling, he said: "My mother thinks it will fit you."

Corazón had never met anyone like Doña Serena. She was so thin that the veins on her arms could be seen through her skin like lines on a map. She wore her gray hair pulled back tightly in a bun. There was no trace of makeup on her face, which was vaguely reminiscent of Manuel's—in the darkness of the pupils on the high forehead. But she looked wispy and fragile—almost otherworldly.

Manuel had told Corazón that his mother was not well, yet both of them worked constantly. That first morning when Corazón had shyly walked out of Manuel's room wearing the yellow dress that was too tight on her, she had been greeted by Doña Serena at a table set for three. Without comment Doña Serena had motioned Corazón over to her and had kissed the fearful girl on the cheek. Over a delicious breakfast of homemade bread and guava jelly, mother and son had discussed their plans for the day, including the wedding. Early that morning Doña Serena had arranged for the priest to marry them that same day in a simple ceremony in her living room. On her way to talk to the priest, she had stopped by Corazón's father's house. Don Emilio had refused to talk to her, saying only that he did not want to hear anything that had to do with Consuelo or Corazón anymore. Doña Serena had packed a few things in a bag for the girl. The wedding would take place after Manuel got home from the bodega and before they cooked the three dozen pasteles that a new customer had ordered. Corazón had looked in amazement at the older woman, who spoke of these things in a calm voice. She felt a sense of peace, sitting in that sunny kitchen with these two people she would now call her family. After his mother went into the kitchen, Manuel asked Corazón if she agreed to Doña Serena's plans. Corazón assured him that she

had never been happier about anything in her life. It was as if she had a mother again to take of her.

And though there was little money, the three of them could have lived happily enough except for two awful things that followed one another in rapid succession. During the first year of their marriage, Doña Serena had begun experiencing excruciating pains in her chest. At first she did not want to go to the doctor, but Corazón finally persuaded her by telling her that she too had reason to have an examination.

The older woman had become her confidante in the last six months. Though she spoke very little herself, she listened attentively for hours to Corazón's story of her own mother's early death and the bitterness of life with an alcoholic father. The two women worked together all day. In the morning they tended the little garden. In the afternoons they prepared giant pots of ingredients for the meat pies to be delivered to people's houses by Manuel when he came home. The late evenings belonged to the couple as Doña Serena watched her telenovelas, the soap operas that she loved, on a little television set in her room. The noise made by the TV gave the lovers enough freedom to enjoy each other in their room next to hers.

They made love with the window thrown wide open to the smells of the Island, all concentrated on Doña Serena's property—her little garden of herbs with the pungent oregano overwhelming all the other aromatic plants, the cayenne peppers, the cilantro, the tasty Puerto Rican coriander, the *pimientos y ajíes* that went into her condiments and permeated even the naked wood of the house with the smell of food cooked in her kitchen every day. The breeze blew through the trees that surrounded and protected the little plot of cultivated ground, and it too added a special fragrance from the papaya with its pendulous fruit hanging delicately from its slender branches, and the banana trees that, even when not laden with stalks of the fat little *guineitos niños* that are melt-in-the-mouth sweet when fried, still bore the leaves that the expert cook knows should be used to wrap food that is boiled—to add the final touch of taste and also to make food a gift to be unwrapped in celebration. Manuel whispered these things to her as they lay in each other's arms at night. She laughed gently at his love of cooking and his amazing knowledge of plants and food; not long before, she had believed these interests were strictly feminine, but his hands caressing her body were also a revelation of what a real man could be. He was a passionate lover but patient, teaching her how to attain the most pleasure from her body. Her body. It was suddenly a marvelous thing, her body; a source of pleasure to a beautiful man, and now she was carrying his child. After lovemaking she placed his hand on her abdomen. Half asleep, he said: "You are enjoying my cooking, Corazón," and chuckling, "there is more woman here than I married."

Corazón smiled in the dark, her face buried in his neck. She was savoring the moment, postponing telling him until after she went with Doña Serena to her doctor the next day. There had been happiness followed by concern on the older woman's face as she had examined Corazón's belly. Doña Serena had been a midwife for many years, though she had given up the practice sometime ago when her strength had started to fail her.

"What is it, what is the matter?" Corazón had perceived Doña Serena's anxiety as her hands traced the tight roundness of her womb.

"It may be nothing, Hija, just an old woman's apprehensions about her first grandchild, but I want you to promise me something."

"What, Doña Serena?" Corazón felt a cold shiver run down her spine, a sense that something was wrong.

"That you will not tell Manuel about your pregnancy yet. Tomorrow I will take you to my doctor for tests." She had taken Corazón's hand in hers. "It is best to make certain in these matters, *querida*, men do not like to be disappointed about babies."

"I will wait until tomorrow to tell Manuel," Corazón had promised, something like fear settling in her chest so that she had trouble breathing.

And as the afternoon passed in its slow way, as it does in the country when the days are hot and humid, Corazón forgot about her anxiety and talked to her mother-in-law about the future—a topic that Doña Serena never contributed much to, knowing that it was not for her, instead listening attentively, closely, trying to picture what she would not be around to see. Mainly they talked about Manuel, who was at the center of their lives then. He wanted to open his own store. He was dissatisfied with the strictly mercenary way that his boss ran the mercado, caring only for the profits. Manuel wanted, even back then, to offer people more than a place to buy their groceries; he wanted to create the ideal food store where he would teach his customers how to select each fruit and vegetable and how to cook them, too. Doña Serena and Corazón smiled as they discussed Manuel's missionary commitment to his dream of a store. They also worried together about his health. Though it seldom happened, sometimes Manuel experienced shortness of breath and dizzy spells that drove him into a darkened room where he would lie on the floor until he regained control of his breathing. He made excuses for not seeing a doctor, but the women plotted about how to get him there. In fact in her usual reticent way, Doña Serena did not say much, but Corazón intuited that the mother feared that whatever made her chest hurt as if a jagged blade was being thrust through her ribs could also be part of Manuel's problem. All that she put aside, though, after Corazón announced her pregnancy and especially after Doña Serena's expert midwife's hands had discovered a more imminent tragedy taking shape within Corazón's body.

The doctor confirmed it. The pregnancy would not come to full term. Neither would any other. Corazón's womb was incapable of sustaining a baby; it would not stretch to accommodate a living fetus even for the minimum time needed. She would never bear a live child. The doctor recommended an immediate abortion and hysterectomy. Corazón collapsed in Doña Serena's arms. And when Manuel came into her room at the hospital before she was taken to the operating room, she pretended to be asleep. She could not look at him.

He was more loving and tender with her after that. Once he said to her that she was all he wanted, that he was happier than he had ever been. But seeing that Corazón's grief was too overwhelming for words of consolation, he never mentioned their lost child again.

Doña Serena died in her bed. The doctor expressed surprise that she had not cried out. An artery had burst. The pain must have been so unbearable that she had lost consciousness, or else she had chosen to keep it to herself. Corazón secretly believed that Doña Serena had always borne more than anyone knew. She was the kind of

woman who is called a *sufrida*—one who accepts pain and sacrifice as her lot *and* her privilege. While Manuel wept over his saintly mother, Corazón felt cheated. She was angry that another chance at a mother's love and companionship had been taken away from her and, most unfair of all, that she herself could never have a child to make her life complete. She looked at Manuel kneeling by the coffin, his shoulders shaking with sobs, and for the first time, she saw that she would now have to be strong for both of them. She would have to take him by the hand and lead him where he wanted to go in life. In her anger, Corazón also felt strength filling her with determination. He wanted a store of his own, but he had no idea how to get it. She would now have a lot of time on her hands. She would start planning a future for them. What else was there for her to do?

"Manuel." She offered him her hand. "It is time to go home now." And he got on his feet and followed her into their future.

III

Corazón wished she could move everything out of the store that night. She did not think she could stay in this place without Manuel. When Tito, the super, Doña Iris, Elenita from El Building, Joe Méndez, the lawyer, and old Don Cándido came by for their cup of coffee and their groceries, they would find the place as empty as the day she and Manuel had stepped in and Manuel had turned and hugged her. It had been just what he wanted: a blank canvas on which to create his dream of a store where both the body and the spirit could be nourished. Had that been ten years ago already?

It was nearly midnight. Corazón sat on her high stool behind the counter with only the security lights on. She allowed the tears to come. She felt so alone without the man she had loved and worked with for one brief decade. She should have made Manuel take better care of himself. After Doña Serena's funeral, she had made Manuel go to the doctor for a complete physical examination. Her worst fears had been confirmed. Like his mother, he suffered from a congenital heart defect: one of the valves was too small, it constricted the flow of blood during times of anxiety or stress. Surgery was advised but at very high risk. And of course, being young and full of energy at that time, Manuel had chosen to wait; there was always a reason: money, the right time—after they had saved enough to come to America, after they bought the store. It was as if he didn't want to know that his heart was failing him. Then two days ago, the sudden, swift coronary after unloading a truck with Inocencia. Corazón had watched the two men working like brothers, in silent camaraderie, as they always did, in perfect unison—Inocencia inside the truck, handing down boxes to Manuel, who stacked them in the back room of the store. Corazón had noticed the paleness of Manuel's skin and the heavy perspiration, though it was a cold day. But she had been busy waiting on customers in front. When she heard the truck drive away with Inocencia at the wheel—on its way back to Miami to pick up fresh produce from the Island—Corazón had gone to find Manuel and insist that he take a break. But he had already collapsed, as quietly as had his mother all those years before. Corazón knew

CPR and worked feverishly to bring him back, shouting all the while for an ambulance. There was one customer in the store—the old man, who spoke no English but who managed to dial the number written on the bulletin board behind the counter. The ambulance arrived and took her and Manuel to an emergency room, where he was declared dead on arrival.

Inocencia would have to be told about Manuel's death. She had to be there when he arrived in the morning. More than anything else, except perhaps the wake scheduled at the Ramirez funeral home for the next day and following that, the funeral—where Corazón expected most of the population of the barrio to show up, and to have to stand up to all the condolences by people who loved Manuel—she hated to have to break the news to Inocencia.

She remembered the day the Peruvian Indian had first appeared at the store. They had been doing all the work themselves then, from stocking to waiting on customers ten hours a day, and Manuel was driving to the docks of New York and occasionally to Miami for the fresh Island products he insisted on having. They could not afford to hire help yet, with the store just barely breaking even as they established themselves in the barrio. People here were slow to trust newcomers and loyal to the old bodega, Cheo's place, which was really more a domino hall and package shop. The ice had been broken when Manuel and Cheo became friends and encouraged each other's customers to patronize both places. That was one of Manuel's gifts, in Corazón's eyes—he had the magic when it came to people. One morning Manuel drove up to the front of the store in the rental truck he had used to pick up stock in the city. As usual, Corazón got ready to help him unload. As she watched Manuel stack the cartons in the back, she noticed a man squatting in front of the front door, basically blocking her way. She observed him for a minute trying to determine whether he looked suspicious and she should call the Paterson police. He looked like a statue carved in bronze, totally immobile, unblinking. He was wearing a heavy wood poncho that covered most of his compact body. His face was purely Indian: the sculpted cheekbones, long nose, and onyx eyes of the Inca. His age could have been anywhere from twenty to fifty. There were no lines to indicate the passing of time on this man's face. He watched Manuel as intently as Corazón watched *him*. Then, with a low and fluid motion, he rose from his squatting position and approached the back of the truck. Although Corazón was ready to take action should he make any threatening move, the man simply stood there until Manuel raised his eyes and acknowledged him with a puzzled nod. He had not been aware of his presence; that was obvious to Corazón. Since Manuel was holding up an obviously heavy box of canned goods, the man extended his arms toward Manuel, Manuel passed the carton down, and the action was repeated again and again until the truck was unloaded. It was like a choreographed dance. Corazón did not see either man's lips move. No words had been exchanged between them. But by the time she unlocked the front door to let them in, Corazón knew they had an employee.

After the shelves had been stocked, the men went in the back to crush the cartons, and although Corazón strained to hear, all she could make out was an occasional chuckle from Manuel and murmurs that were impossible to decipher. When they finally emerged, the man had removed his poncho, and Corazón noticed how thin,

almost emaciated he was, but strong-looking like a runner. The tendons in his arms were like brown cords. He was as small as a twelve-year-old boy, but he had the look of a man who had endured much.

"This is Inocencia Beleva, Corazón. He is from Peru."

Corazón almost extended her hand to the silent Inocencia, but he was looking down at the floor and not at her during the introduction. It was a gesture of respect, not humility. Corazón observed the almost imperceptible bow of the head, and how Inocencia looked directly into her husband's eyes after Manuel had spoken her name. It was all stated in silence: Inocencia acknowledged her as his boss's wife, but he worked for Manuel only. Corazón understood this and was a little irritated by it. The store belonged as much to her as to Manuel. In fact, she kept the books, paid the bills, and made all the decisions except those in the only area that really interested Manuel—the ordering of stock and its display in the store. But as the weeks passed and she saw how important Inocencia's quiet companionship was to Manuel, she began to feel differently about him. It was not a competition for Manuel's attention; Corazón noticed how inconspicuous Inocencia made himself when she was around. He was always busy in the back, organizing, sweeping, counting, and emerging only when she got busy with customers. Then he would simply do what needed to be done, from bagging to carrying groceries for old people or pregnant women across the street to El Building, where most of their customers lived. Corazón became curious as to what he did when he was not working, and she asked Manuel where Inocencia lived and whether he had a family. Manuel said that all he knew was that Inocencia had a room in a boardinghouse and that he had a wife and children in a mountain village in Peru. Apparently Inocencia had walked and hitched rides from Peru to Mexico, lived there for a while and then crossed over to the United States. He had made his way to New York by bus, then to Paterson after he found that there were better job opportunities here. Manuel also admitted that Inocencia was not a United States citizen.

"But that could get us in trouble with the law, Manuel." Corazón had really felt frightened about having an illegal alien working for them. But Manuel had smiled mysteriously and opened his ledger, where he had a stack of documents with the United States Customs and Immigration seal on them.

"I have contacted an attorney, Corazón. The process has been started to make Inocencia a citizen. It will take some time, but we can do it."

"We can do it?" Corazón had felt offended that Manuel had done this without consulting her—the first time in their married lives that he had failed to confide in her. But she managed to keep her anger in check when she realized that Manuel wanted to do this for his friend without her help.

The men's friendship had grown and deepened. Corazón was aware of it and knew that perhaps Manuel was filling a need that she had not been able to fulfill in their lives: a son.

IV

The two years after Doña Serena's death had been years of hard work and sacrifice

for Corazón and Manuel. Heartbroken, Manuel poured all his energies into the catering business which Corazón now directed from Doña Serena's house. Their goal was to save enough money to move to the states and open a store.

Reluctantly, Corazón had contacted her sister, Consuelo, now living with her husband in Paterson and expecting a child. It was Consuelo, lonely for her sister, who encouraged them to make the move. She would find them an apartment in the building where she lived. Corazón made herself believe that leaving the Island and starting a new life in America would help her get over the tragedy of being childless. At the end of two years, they had sold the little plot of land and house Doña Serena had left them and taken the airplane from San Juan to New York.

Corazón had not let her fear of the future show as they landed at La Guardia Airport nor as they rode in Gustavo's car through the labyrinthine city and across the gray Hudson River toward another maze of buildings which would be their new home. She and Manuel held hands in the back seat. At least they had each other.

Manuel had taken to barrio life quickly; she saw how the crowded apartment building everyone called El Building suited him. Each person he met was a future customer of his dream store. He became popular with the women because he spent time talking about food with them. The men liked him because he brought with him the dreams they had all had once and forgotten: to start a business in America, to prosper.

Corazón went with him to look for locations and soon they found the place they wanted. It had once been an Italian deli, and Manuel claimed that he could still smell in the wood the spices that had been sold there. It had "corazón y alma," he claimed, making a pun with her name, "heart and soul." So they had rented the place and Manuel had hired an unemployed artist from the Island to paint the sign on their window. He had not allowed Corazón to come to the place that day. He had wanted to surprise her. That night he took her to see the huge letters blocked in brilliant red: Corazón's Café. Under it there was a plump heart with the inscription "M ama C" in the middle. Manuel loves Corazón. She had cried. Manuel had his dream and she had him. What more could she ask for? She knew the answer to her own question. A child, a child. But she buried it deep in her heart that night as she stood in front of Corazón's Café. She was lucky enough.

Slowly the store had become part of the barrio. Manuel, Inocencia, and she worked as a team. There were good years and bad, but she had settled into a role that she had not foreseen. Some of the residents of El Building saw her as a *confidante*. It must have been the way she appeared, sitting behind the counter: a plump mother to everyone. She had gained weight—which Manuel said he liked: "The more of Corazón there is, the more of Corazón I love," he was fond of saying. A childless woman who knew how to keep secrets, she was unusual in the barrio where women married young, had more children than they could afford, and passed the time gossiping at each other's kitchen tables. Not everyone was like that, of course. Some of the young women graduated from high school and got good jobs and good places to live in the suburbs. She saw the changes that came over them. They were slim, spoke only English even when addressed in Spanish, and came to her store to buy Puerto Rican products only during holidays. The Island to them was an exotic place where their parents had been born

long ago. Corazón listened to their mothers' laments about their hijas and *el olvido*. It was not hard for the young people to forget the barrio. Life there was hard. But, as Manuel liked to say, at least there was *life* in the barrio. To him the suburbs were a fancy prison where you went to retire from life. And so Corazón also learned to stop wanting her own house. After all, there was only the two of them. They didn't need much room. And besides, they spent ten to twelve hours a day in the store, going home only to sleep.

And her life had meaning—all the people who depended on her and Manuel to provide them with a taste of home. There was not a birth, funeral, or holiday celebrated in the barrio that they were not a part of: Manuel was never happier than when he was planning the food to celebrate life and never more beautiful in Corazón's eyes than when he comforted the grieving widow or orphan with food prepared with all the care and love he had to give. And she made it possible by doing all the work needed to make his labor of love easy for him. She learned to speak good English in order to deal with suppliers and creditors. She took accounting courses at night school and kept books. She paid bills and made telephone calls. They were a good team, she and Manuel.

But she had again been betrayed by El Destino. Fate had tricked her once more and taken away her man, her partner, her anchor in life. Corazón heard the clock's hands move—it was that quiet in the store. It was midnight.

V

She must have fallen asleep sometime during the night, her head cradled on her arms on the counter. When Corazón opened her eyes, it was to find Inocencia outside the door, standing like a statue. She had no idea how long he had been there, but obviously he had seen her through the glass and not come in while she was asleep, although he had a key. She glanced at the wall clock as she hurried to open the front door. It was 5:45. They usually opened at six in order to serve coffee and pastries to those heading for work. Corazón mentally prepared for the day as she always had, even though she was also making plans to tell Inocencia that she was going to close Corazón's Café. She would ask Cheo to give the man a job. She was certain he would hire Inocencia. It had been a standard joke between Manuel and Cheo that Inocencia was the kind of worker you had to keep a secret or someone would steal him away. But it had been loyalty, not just the modest salary they were able to pay him, that kept him at the café for eight years. Inocencia was now a United States citizen and had brought his wife and two teenage children to Paterson. Corazón had been surprised that he was old enough to have grown children. And she had developed a good relationship with his family too, although they, like Inocencia, kept very much to themselves. Manuel had been beside himself with joy when the official citizenship papers had come through. And it had been the one and only time when Corazón had heard Inocencia laugh aloud. She opened the door and helped Inocencia bring in the boxes of frozen pasteles, the banana leaves in iced containers for the women who

preferred to make their own, and all the other holiday food that had to be driven from Miami up to Paterson for Thanksgiving and Christmas. She waited until the truck was empty and Inocencia was taking his usual break, sitting on a crate, smoking a cigar he had bought from a Cuban tobacconist: his only indulgence. Corazón then came into the storeroom.

In Spanish she said: "Inocencia, I have something important to tell you." He looked not at her but at the smoke rising in a spiral from the cigar in his hand.

"Manuel is dead. Muerto." The word was so powerful on her tongue, that Corazón broke down in sobs. She covered her face, knowing that this would embarrass the shy and reserved Inocencia. But she felt a warm hand on her shoulder and uncovered her face. He had come closer and was standing in front of her, looking into her eyes. He too had tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Ya lo sé," he said. He knew it already. Before she would ask him how he knew, a loud knock came at the door. Without thinking, Corazón rushed to the front. It was six in the morning. Old Doña Iris, wrapped in black shawl, was peering in the store through the glass. When Corazón unlocked the door, she saw that a small crowd had gathered in front. Doña Iris walked imperiously in as she always did but came directly toward Corazón, who had not yet assumed her place on the high stool behind the counter. The old woman hugged Corazón tightly, planted a loud kiss on her cheek, then demanded in her loud voice:

"Did my banana leaves come in? How am I going to make pasteles in time for Thanksgiving without the leaves? And she headed for the freezer in the back of the store. The others came in more quietly, but each one of them stopped to embrace her. Her sister, Consuelo and her niece, Cory who was also Corazón's goddaughter, took their place next to her as her family while she received condolences from her neighbors and customers. Inocencia came out to help her make coffee and serve *pastelillos*, and Corazón listened to them talk about her Manuel. Even when everyone had left for their daily occupations, and Inocencia was in the back organizing and sweeping as he did every day, Corazón felt Manuel's presence in the store. Would the loneliness come back after he was laid to rest far away from the barrio? Could she bear to keep doing alone the things they had done together all these years? And there was still the empty apartment she would return to that night. Corazón allowed these questions to come and go as she waited on her customers that day. And when Roberto rushed in to say that Lydia had given birth to a little boy that morning and that she wanted more than anything else for Corazón to come to see them at St. Joseph's Hospital and to bring her something sweet to eat, what could she do? She promised the excited young man that she would be there that afternoon. And when Don Cándido came in, looking as old as Methuselah but still willing to proclaim his views on the world to anyone who would listen, she listened. He had lost two sons to ideology in Cuba. One fighting for Fidel and the other one, a poet the government did not approve of, languishing in a prison. Don Cándido had made up his mind not to die before his son was freed. He kept himself alive by writing letters to judges, politicians, and the president and by talking and talking and talking. Corazón's Café was his forum and his refuge.

"Libertad!" Don Cándido waved a rolled-up newspaper at her as he headed for the coffee pot. And Corazón sat down to listen. He would drink several cups of espresso, talk about politics, read her a poem his son had written years ago before his imprisonment, and then leave—recharged—to visit his few surviving old friends, to talk away death for one more day.

The day passed quicker than she had expected, since each customer demanded her attention in a complete way. That afternoon she left the store in Inocencia's hands and took the bus to St. Joseph's Hospital. Lydia, whose mother passed away from cancer, was waiting for her with the tiny bundle in her arms. She asked Corazón to hold him.

The baby had the face of a wise old man and a shock of black hair at the very top of his head. Corazón pronounced him beautiful. Roberto burst into the room with a bunch of flowers in his hands. He shouted from the door: "Is Manuel awake?"

Hearing her husband's name said with so much joy stunned Corazón. Lydia hurried to explain.

"I was just about to tell you, Corazón. We have decided to name our son Manuel."

"Manuel," Corazón said, and the tiny boy in her arms opened his eyes and began to cry for his mother.

That night Corazón and Inocencia closed Corazón's Café together and walked to El Building—he had accompanied her there without asking. He stood silently while she searched her purse for her apartment key. Knowing him as she did, Corazón knew he was waiting for her to say something.

"I will meet you at 5:30 tomorrow, Inocencia. We have a lot to do before the funeral." She had had to pause after the awful word, but Inocencia continued to listen as if he knew that her sentence was not finished—"and a lot to do before Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"Buenas noches, Doña Corazón." Inocencia had never spoken her name directly to her; he had always called Manuel *Don* Manuel although they were more like brothers than boss and employee.

"Buenas noches, Don Inocencia," Corazón replied and saw the brief smile pass over Inocencia's serious face before he nodded and disappeared around the corner. Corazón then entered El Building. At the bottom of the staircase, she took a deep breath, remembering Manuel's claim, that simply from the lingering aromas, he could tell her what each family in each apartment had had for dinner that evening and whether they had bought the condiments at Corazón's Café. Corazón inhaled deeply the aromas of her country and started the climb up to her home.