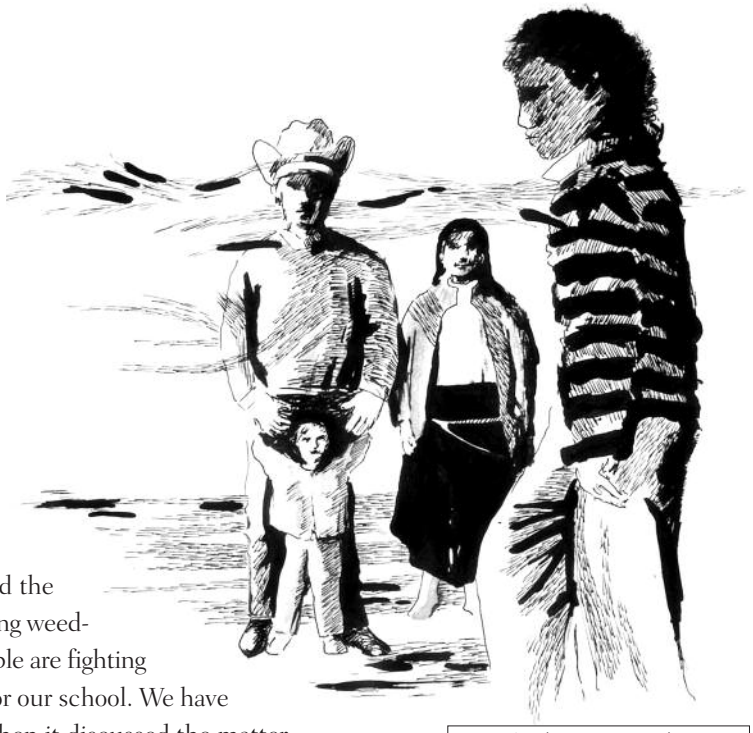
The Gift Refused[1]

Rosario Castellanos



Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

Before anything else, I must introduce myself: my name is José Antonio Romero and I'm an anthropologist. Yes, anthropology is a relatively new major at the university. The first teachers were culled from most anywhere and in the confusion, some undesirable elements had the chance to slip through, but they are being weeded out little by little. Now, we new people are fighting to establish a decent academic level for our school. We have even taken the battle to the Senate, when it discussed the matter of the Law on Professions.

But I'm straying from the topic; that wasn't what I wanted to talk about, but rather a very curious incident that happened to me in Ciudad Real, where I work.

As you know, in Ciudad Real there's a Mission for Aid to the Indians. It was founded and initially maintained by private contributions, but now it has passed into government hands.

There, I'm just one more among many technicians, and my duties are quite varied. As the saying goes, I'm just as good for sweeping as for dusting. I do work as a researcher; I intervene in conflicts among towns; I've even done service patching up marriages. Naturally, I can't just sit in my office waiting for people to come looking for me. I have to go out and get ahead of the problems. In those conditions, I have to have a car. Lord almighty, what it cost me to get one! Everybody, the doctors, the teachers, the engineers, they all asked for the same thing I did. Well, in the end, we figured it out somehow. Now, at least a few days a week, I have a jeep at my disposal.

We have finally come to understand each other, the jeep and I; I know its little tricks and even how much it can give. I have discovered that it runs better on the highway (well, at least what we call a highway in Chiapas) than in the city.

Because in the city, traffic is a mess; there are no traffic signs or if there are, they're wrong and nobody obeys them. The people from San Cristóbal de las Casas (we call them "Coletos") walk down the middle of the street, without a care in the world, talking and laughing

as though the sidewalks didn't exist. Honk the horn? If you like wasting your time, go ahead. But the pedestrian won't even turn around to see what's going on, much less move out of the way.

But the other day, something very curious happened to me, which is what I was going to tell you. I was coming back from Navenchauc and driving the jeep down Real de Guadalupe Street, which is where the Indians and the *ladinos*[2] do business; I couldn't drive more than 10 kilometers an hour amidst those crowds and the people enjoying themselves bargaining or stumbling down the street loaded down with large bundles of merchandise. I said 10 kilometers, but sometimes the speedometer needle didn't move at all.

This slowness had put me in a bad mood even though I wasn't in a hurry or anything like it. Suddenly, a little Indian girl, about 12 years old, came out of nowhere and threw herself at the jeep. I managed to brake and only gave her a little light shove with the bumper. But I got out in a black fury, swearing. I won't hide anything, even if I am ashamed of it. I don't usually do it, but this time I swore as much as any Ciudad Real *ladino*.

The little girl listened to me, whimpering and hypocritically rubbing her eyes, where there wasn't a trace of a tear. I took pity on her, and despite all my convictions against begging and the ineffectiveness of isolated actions, and despite the fact that I abhor sentimentality, I took out a coin amidst the jeers of the onlookers who had crowded around us.

The little girl did not want to accept the money, but took hold of my sleeve and tried to take me somewhere that I couldn't understand. The onlookers, naturally, laughed and said things in double entendres, but I paid no attention to them and followed after her.

I wouldn't want you to misunderstand me. Not for a moment did I think that this was a liaison, because in that case I wouldn't have been interested. I'm young and single and sometimes the need for a female can become oppressive in these miserable towns. But I work in an institution, and there's something called professional ethics that I respect very much. Also, why fool ourselves? My tastes are a little more demanding.

So anyway, we came to one of the streets that crosses Guadalupe and there I found a woman —also an Indian— lying on the ground, apparently unconscious, with a newly born infant in her arms.

The little girl pointed to her and said who knows how many things to me in her dialect. Unfortunately, I have not learned to speak it yet because —apart from the fact that my specialty is not linguistics but social anthropology— I haven't been in Chiapas very long. So, I had no idea what she was saying.

When I leaned down toward the woman I had to repress the impulse to cover my nose with a handkerchief. She gave off an odor that I don't know how to describe: very strong, very concentrated, very unpleasant. It was not just the smell of someone who was dirty, although the woman was very dirty and sweat soaked the wool of her jacket. It was something more intimate, more... what can I call it? More organic.

I automatically took her pulse (I have no more idea of medicine than anybody else). And I was alarmed by its violence, its chaotic beating. To judge by that, the woman was in very serious shape indeed. I didn't hesitate any more. I went for the jeep to take her to the clinic at the mission.

The little girl never left us, even for a moment; she took charge of the newborn infant, who cried desperately, and made sure that the patient was, if not comfortable, at least secure in the back of the jeep.

My arrival at the mission caused the confusion that you might well expect; everybody ran to see what was happening, but they had to put their curiosity on the back burner because I couldn't tell them anything more than what I've told you.

After examining her, the doctor at the clinic said that the woman had childbed fever. Just imagine! Her son had been born in who knows what unhygienic conditions, and now she was paying for it with an infection that had her on the verge of death.

I took the matter very hard. At that time, I had a kind of vacation and decided to use it for those who had come to me in a moment of need.

When the mission pharmacy's antibiotics ran out, so as not to get into a lot of red tape, I went myself to buy them in Ciudad Real, and what I couldn't get there, I went to Tuxtla to get. With what money? My own. I'm not telling you so you can praise me, which I'm not interested in, but because I promised not to hide anything from you. And why should you praise me? I earn good money, I'm single, and in these towns there's not much to spend your money on. I have my savings. And I wanted that woman to get well.

While the penicillin took effect, the little girl wandered around the clinic halls with the baby in her arms. He never stopped bellowing, the little bugger. And well should he, what with how hungry he was. He was given synthetic food and the wives of some of the mission's employees —good women, if you hit the right note with them— provided the kid with diapers and talcum powder and all that stuff.

Little by little, those of us who lived in the mission became fond of the little family. We heard about their misfortunes in great detail thanks to a maid who served as translator from Tzeltal to Spanish because the linguist was on a trip at the time.

It turns out that the patient, whose name was Manuela, had been widowed during the first months of her pregnancy. The owner of the land who rented to her dead husband set himself up as the Great Captain. According to him, the peon had made commitments that

he hadn't finished paying off: loans in cash and kind, advances, a mess that now the widow had the obligation to unravel.

Manuela ran away from there and moved in with members of her family. But the pregnancy made it difficult for her to work in the fields. Also, crops had been poor in recent years and everywhere people were feeling the scarcity.

What way out did the poor woman have? She could think of nothing more than to come down to Ciudad Real and see if she could get a job as a maid. You think about it for a moment: Manuela, a maid! A woman who didn't know how to cook anything but beans and who was incapable of doing an errand, who didn't even speak Spanish. And to top it all off, the baby about to come.

After much searching, Manuela found a place in an inn for muleteers run by Doña Prájeda, famous throughout the neighborhood for working anybody who had the misfortune of serving her to the breaking point.

Well, that's where my fortunate Manuela ended up. Since her pregnancy was well along, she finished up the housework with the help of her older daughter, Marta, a very smart and naturally vivacious little girl.

Somehow, the two of them managed to please the *patrona*[3] who —as we found out later— had her eye on Marta to sell her to the first man who asked for her.

No matter how much she denies it now, Doña Prájeda couldn't help but know what state Manuela was in when she took her in. But when the time came for her to give birth, she pretended to be surprised and raised a hue and cry, saying that her inn was not a shelter and made preparations to take her servant to the Civil Hospital.

Poor Manuela was crying her eyes out. Just imagine. Who knows what she had contrived to imagine a hospital was. A kind of jail, a place for penance and punishment. Finally, after much begging, she managed to get her *patrona* to relent and let the Indian woman give birth in her house.

Doña Prájeda is one of those people who don't do the whole favor. So Manuela wouldn't bother anybody with her screams, she hid her away in the stable. There, amidst the dung and the flies and who knows what other filth, the Indian woman had her baby and caught the fever she had when I picked her up.

As soon as the first symptoms of the disease appeared, the *patrona* shouted to the high heavens and, without a drop of pity, threw the whole family out on the street. There they could have stayed, from sun-up to sun-down, if a charitable soul had not taken pity on them and given Marta the advice that she try the mission, since the Civil Hospital terrified her mother so much.

Marta didn't know where the mission was, but when they saw a jeep pass by with our logo on it, somebody pushed her so I would have to stop.

If we put to one side the scare and the dressing down, things didn't turn out so badly for them because in the mission, not only did we cure Manuela, but we worried about what was going to happen to her and her children after she was released from the clinic.

Manuela was too weak to work and Marta was more of school age. Why not sign her into the mission's boarding school? There, they teach them skills, the rudiments of reading and writing, the habits and needs of civilized people. And after their learning, they can go back to their own towns with a job, a decent wage, with new dignity.

We proposed this to Manuela believing that she was going to see the heavens open up; but she just held her son closer to her breast. She didn't want to respond.

We thought a reaction like this was strange, but in the discussions with the other anthropologists, we came to the see that what concerned Manuela was her daughter's wages, wages she needed to support herself.

You can just imagine that it was no big thing; a pittance and for me, like for anyone else, it was no sacrifice to make that monthly expenditure. I went to propose this arrangement to the woman and I very carefully explained it all to the interpreter.

"She says that if you want to buy her daughter to be your mistress, she's asking a gallon of liquor and two almuds of corn.[4] That she won't take any less for her."

Perhaps it would have been more practical to accept those conditions that to Manuela seemed normal and innocent because they were the custom of her race. But I tried my best to show her —for me and for the mission— that our aims were not like those of any *ladino* in Ciudad Real, neither to corrupt them nor to exploit them. What we wanted was to give her daughter the opportunity to get an education and improve her life. Useless. Manuela kept insisting on the liquor and the corn, to which she now, seeing my insistence, had added an almud of beans.

I opted to leave her in peace. In the clinic they continued to care for her and her children, feeding them, pouring DDT on their heads because they were seething with lice.

But I couldn't resign myself to giving up; it nagged at my conscience to see a little girl as smart as Marta be raised any old way and end up in who knows what poverty.

Someone suggested that the best way for me to win the mother's trust was through religion: being god-parents is a spiritual family relationship that the Indians respect very much. The newborn was not baptized yet. Why not convince Manuela, little by little, that she ask me to be her baby's godfather?

I began by buying the baby toys: a rattle, amber for the evil eye. I made sure I was there when the nurse bathed him and I even learned to change his diapers relatively painlessly.

Manuela let me do all this, but not without concern, with a hesitation that she could not dissimulate behind her smiles. She only breathed freely when the baby was in her lap again.

Despite everything, I had my hopes that I was gaining ground, and one day I decided that the moment had come to propose the matter of the baptism.

After all the necessary circuitous preliminaries, the interpreter said that the baby could not continue to live like a little animal, without a name or any sacraments said over him. I saw Manuela docilely assent to our reasoning and even reinforce them with affirmative gestures and exclamations that showed she was mentally weighing things. I thought the matter was settled.

But when it came time to pick the godfather, Manuela did not let us continue; she had thought of this from the beginning and there was no use discussing it.

"Who?" asked the interpreter.

I moved a few steps away to allow the patient to speak freely.

"Doña Prájeda," responded the Indian in her half Spanish.

I couldn't contain myself and, clutching the bars on the bed, I shook it in a paroxysm of fury.

"Doña Prájeda?" I repeated incredulously. "The one who sent you into the stable so your son could be born amongst the filth? The one who threw you out on the street when you needed her support and sympathy the most? The one who hasn't come by the mission once to ask if you were dead or alive?"

"Doña Prájeda is my *patrona*," responded Manuela seriously. "We haven't broken our agreement. I am still not out of her power."

To make a long story short, the argument lasted hours and Manuela and I could not come to any agreement. I left the clinic angry as hell and swearing to never again get involved in something that was none of my business.

A few days later, a completely recovered Manuela left the mission with her children. Naturally, she went back to work for Doña Prájeda.

Occasionally I have run into her in the street and she averts her eyes from mine. But not like she was ashamed or remorseful. More like she was afraid of being harmed.

No, please don't call Manuela ungrateful, or abject or an idiot! Do not conclude —in order to avoid taking responsibility— that Indians are incorrigible. Their attitude is very understandable. They don't distinguish one *caxlán*[5] from another. We all look alike. When one treats them brutally, they know what's happening, they know what must be done. But when another is friendly and gives without asking anything in return, they don't understand. It's outside the order of things in Ciudad Real. They fear that the trap is even more dangerous and they defend themselves in their own way, by running away.

I know all of this, and I know that if we work hard —we at the mission and everyone else— someday things will be different.

But meanwhile, Manuela, Marta... What will become of them? What I want you to tell me is if I, as a professional, as a man, did something wrong. There must be something. Something that I didn't know how to give them. VM

NOTES

[1] Taken from, Rosario Castellanos, *Obras Completas* I (Mexico City: FCE, 1999), pp. 313-320.

[2] In Chiapas a *ladino* is a mestizo, usually one who mistreats and despises indigenous people. Tzeltal and Tzotzil people called people of their own race *ladinos* when they learn the ways of the mestizos, speak in Spanish and refuse to wear traditional clothes. [Translator's Note.]

[3] *Patrona* can be translated "boss," but this English word does not convey the semi-feudal nature of the relationship established, which includes aspects similar to those in the relationship between a lord and his serf. [Translator's Note.]

[4] An almud is a measure of grain anywhere from 2 to 21 quarts. [Translator's Note.]

[5] *Caxlán* is a mestizo or a white man, usually one with authority.