

WARTIME TEACHER:
SPAIN, 1932-1939

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Based on a true story

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*To my parents, my first teachers
To Julia and Celia, who make everything clear
To my husband and my children, for their unconditional support*

.

PROLOGUE

W e'd been living in Mexico City for more than ten years when one night I decided to take stock of our situation. We were a tight knit but vulnerable family that consisted of my husband, Esteban, and our three children: Arturo, twelve, Luis, ten, Alicia, three, and me. I was the vulnerable one; I was the problem. I was sitting at the dining room table trying to plan classroom activities for my third-grade class the following day while Arturo and Luis did their homework. It finally occurred to me why I was subject to consuming feelings of dread, sadness, and nostalgia. I missed Spain.

Adapting to our life in Mexico had come easily to Arturo. Luis had managed to fit in, too, except that he constantly complained about his Mexican classmates and neighbors, whom he liked to criticize: "They look at me funny and call me Hernán Cortés!" Three-year-old Alicia skipped happily around the house on her magic carpet of innocence and cluelessness. Luis was tracing a human skeleton from the encyclopedia and on top of each traced bone he wrote its name. Even though he was only 10, he had said that he wanted to be a doctor like his father. But that night, as he was making his paper skeleton. He asked me softly, "Mama, do you think that someday we'll be able to go back to Spain?"

"What a question!" I thought to myself because I'd been asking myself the same thing since I'd arrived here, and I still didn't know how to answer it.

"I think so, Luis. We'll go back soon, you'll see!"

I wasn't lying on purpose. I just wanted to cheer him up because he'd spent most of the day claiming that the neighbor kids had been laughing at him because "he talked funny."

“That’s stupid!” answered Arturo with his usual self-confidence. “You should be laughing at them! They’re the ones that talk funny, not you!”

It was my husband, Esteban, and our oldest son, Arturo, who’d fit in best in Mexico. Esteban, though cheerful looking on the outside, felt lost and desolate until the Mexican government validated his medical degree, allowing him to go back to practicing medicine. Arturo, who always carried a pencil in his hand, was strong-willed and artistic, as if the pencil he carried around made him willful and free. He had a gift for sketching, and with a piece of charcoal in his hand, he could draw anything in sight. He reminded me of Reme, one of my best students back in Aranjuez who would take white chalk and cover the blackboard with such pretty drawings that no one wanted to erase them. Instead of becoming a doctor, Arturo wanted to be an architect. He spent a lot of his spare time sketching family members, neighbors, or classmates, sometimes in exchange for favors.

“Well, I don’t want to be stuck here forever,” said Arturo. “I’m sick of the kids at school. They only talk about things that happened a thousand years ago and act as if it’s my fault.”

“What a wuss!” countered Arturo. “Everybody in your class is Spanish. You’re the only Mexican!”

“I’m not Mexican, get it?”

“Let’s see. How many Mexicans are in your class? C’mon, how many?” asked Arturo.

“At least two or three, I think...”

“Look, Mama, he said three! So many! And you can’t handle it? I would have declared a secret war on them by now. Well, secret and not so secret.”

Arturo was right, but Luis was a complainer and criticized almost everything. We were very lucky to be able to attend the boys’ school, where I was a teacher and they were students. The majority of students were Spanish; they were the children of Spanish Civil War refugees who had been forced to leave Spain. The school, named Colegio Madrid, had been built in Mexico City by the Spanish Republic in Exile with wholehearted support

from Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas and his wife, Amalia Solórzano, who, from the very beginning, had enthusiastically received us in Mexico.

The Colegio Madrid's mission was to assure that the refugees' children didn't lose their Spanish identity. In addition, it gave meaningful work to professional educators such as me, allowing us to make a living in a country so different and far from our own. The faculty of this school and others consisted of people who had worked in schools and colleges and other educational institutions in Spain. Joining us were writers, musicians, scientists, and poets whose voices, like ours, had been silenced. We all found refuge in teaching, and the students were the fortunate recipients.

For me, teaching at the Colegio Madrid was like returning to life. It was a relief, a release, an illusion. I was open to proposed changes and initiatives with well-trained and talented teachers from all over Spain who gave classes both in and out of the classroom. We relied on new experiences and the teachings of Francisco Giner de los Ríos and Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, that had been so successful in Spain, and were easily implanted in Mexico. I was always willing to try new methods. I was lucky to have Cossío as my teacher in the course Professional Selection that the Republican Government created to take the place of the unpopular competitive career exams, and I remembered the course as though I had taken it just yesterday. It was an innovative, exceptional life changer. It not only prepared us to face a class professionally; it gave me the chance to meet people who dedicated their lives to education, and one of them was Manuel Cossío. He made a notable entrance into the classroom. His elegance and personality made him special, and he was able to pave the way for us without our even noticing. He taught us by using simple but clear and precise examples. I learned so much from him, and I learned by heart that school meant much more than imparting a little knowledge. The job of teaching was to invest our soul in the tiniest details. When I did this, I got excellent results, so I've tried to put this methodology into practice ever since.

In the Colegio Madrid there reigned a feeling of brotherhood and friendship, but we all felt wrapped up in a fog of hope and despair simultaneously regarding our going home and tending to the wound of having been driven from Spain like traitors and assassins. Not even this wonderful school nor this dynamic and vibrant city could begin to alleviate these injuries, much less erase from our minds the idea of going back. All of us felt like enraged schizophrenics who had been torn away from our homeland and forced to live in a faraway place, our only possessions being a will to survive and to make a living.

It wasn't the first time Luis had asked me about returning to Spain; he had heard us talking about it so much that he felt we were just passing through Mexico even though we relished working there and living there and having our children happily in school there.

"It's getting closer, friends! It's time to pack your bags! Things are changing all over the world! Let's see if Spain finally figures that out!"

These and other similar comments echoed throughout the school corridors and the rooms in our homes whenever a little hope overshadowed our despair. They were frequent at the end of the Second World War, when my heart raced at the thought of returning to Spain to see my sisters and their families, to see Veva and my other friends and neighbors. The days seemed lighter and brighter. I was happy.

But the illusion never became a reality. The Allies supported Franco without noticing the absence of democracy in Spain, where politicians and non-politicians ended up in jail and dissidents of all parties went into exile. If it didn't happen then, why would it happen now? But I tried to cheer Luis up thinking that one day our situation would have to change; I just didn't know when.

"Mama, when you're finished writing that book, can we go to Spain? OK? At least you and me, and, well, Alicia. If they want, Papa and Alicia can stay here."

Things seemed so easy to Luis. The book was no excuse. I would have dropped it immediately if there had been the slightest chance of going back home. But, in the meantime, the book was a dream,

a salve that conjured up ghosts and helped soothe the rage that I felt for the injustice my family and others like mine had suffered.

Luis' query and others were always on my mind. Why did my fellow teachers and I, who had worked together to create a fun, open and creative school, end up dead or in jail or exiled? I didn't know the answer, and that's why I'm writing this book, so I don't forget. I want to show that a love for education along with freedom of expression made for an ideal school, especially if teachers injected a feeling of joy into their job. That had been my political ideology, my reason for being in the classroom.

That's what Luis didn't understand. I told him it was his bedtime. I swore to him that the book was almost finished and that soon we could cross the ocean and visit Spain, visit the aunts, the cousins, the friends... See Papa's and my town and visit the school and the hospital where we had worked. It's what I had told him more than once to give him something lovely to dream about.

CHAPTER 1

It was a cold, winter dawn in the city of Valencia, in December of 1932. Sleet had fallen during the night and coated tree branches with ice while frost made the ground underfoot hard and crunchy. I rose early because my lifelong Valencian friend Amparo Puig was going to meet me at the door of the Ministry of Public Education; there we would find out where our government teaching jobs would take us. That same day we would earn the title of teachers, and after Christmas we would go to our assigned schools and begin to teach.

I was breathless with happiness and excitement. Our dream had come true! Both Amparo and I lived far outside the city of Valencia, so as “free” students we had done our required high school and college coursework on our own. We had passed all our exams one by one and gotten jobs. It hadn’t been easy. The process had taken us years, and though we were discouraged at times, we were so illusioned at the idea of being teachers that we kept at it. That’s why, at the end of our studies, we were proud of ourselves and knew the future we were facing was going to change our lives.

“Martina María Navarro! Aranjuez! Martina, you’ve been assigned to Aranjuez!” shouted Amparo, who was stretching her neck to see the Ministry’s list of teacher placements. “Aranjuez! You can’t complain! It’s the biggest and prettiest town outside Madrid! And me, let’s see...where am I going? I must be at the end...Yes, I’ve been assigned to Villalba!”

She shouted this so loud that everyone within earshot heard it. We hugged each other and jumped up and down. We hugged the other aspiring teachers who were there to find out where they would be working. We couldn’t wait for Christmas vacation to be over so we could go to our assigned cities. We were sure our new students were dying to meet us.

On our way home Amparo said to me, “Wow, Martina, I’m so happy! We finished school and now we’re living our dream! They’re sending you south, and I’m going north, but that’s OK. We’ll write to each other and tell each other what we’re up to. It’ll be great, you’ll see, and when we want to get together, we can always meet in Madrid.” We hugged each other again. We were anxious to start teaching, convinced that we’d chosen the most worthy profession in the world.

The school year began on January 11, 1933. I was living in Madrid with my sister Luisa and her husband, Vicente, who’d been a teacher in Valencia but had decided to relocate to El Grupo Escolar Joaquín Costa in Madrid because he believed that it afforded a better future for his children. I was happy living with them, but after receiving my assignment in Aranjuez, I decided I would gladly exchange their house on Ercilla Street for one I’d been assigned to in Aranjuez, a town I’d dreamed about, imagining its palace, its gardens, and its fertile orchards watered by the Tajo River. What more could I want?

I left Madrid a day early so I could learn my way around Aranjuez and put away the few belongings I had brought with me. I had asked for this location in the first place though I could have been assigned to go somewhere else, but I got my choice because I had gotten a high grade in my Selection course, which had been initiated by the Republican Government to replace the former competitive exams, which in turn were considered ineffective and antipedagogic. The Spanish Republic had realized the importance of employing new methodologies in education to make students the main center of attention by increasing student activity and participation in the classroom. I agreed with the new methodologies and went to Aranjuez with the intention of putting them into practice.

The train was waiting in Mediodía Station. When I boarded, the outside of the window was still covered with frost. I warmed it a little by rubbing it with my hands, I leaned my head against it, and I felt myself be carried away by the clackety-clack of an old, third class passenger train that I would get used to taking on my numerous trips to Madrid. The towns I was passing through began

to fly by, and I tried to take a nap, but I couldn't, even though I had been too nervous to get much sleep the night before. Along the way, my thoughts flew ahead of the train, and my expectations about what I would do in my new destination became mixed with the smoke of the locomotive.

I was happy I was going to begin working and learning about my profession firsthand. But most of all I was anxious, anxious to put my passion for teaching into practice.

I was so absorbed with these and other thoughts that we were in Aranjuez before I realized it. The morning dew was filled with earthy scents: boxwood, magnolia, walnut...I forgot everything and stood there for a moment deeply inhaling all those early fresh aromas. I tried to return to reality. "Does this bus go downtown?" I asked a portly gray-haired gentleman in a railroad uniform.

"Yes, Miss, it goes downtown."

I sat behind the bus driver so he could tell me when to get off. The bus was old and bea-upt. It had several broken seats. It filled up slowly with people who talked loudly about the morning gossip. The inside of the bus reeked of exhaust, and every time the brakes squealed, the bus driver swore vehemently, but he remembered my stop and announced our arrival at the school. I jumped down, clutching my suitcase by my side.

I was standing in front of the school, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing! I stayed looking at it for a few minutes before I went in. It was not at all what I had expected. In front of me stood an old, dark building that brought to mind more the England of Dickens than the modern Swiss schools that my college professors had talked about. I had heard so much about large, modern, well-lit schools engaged in educational innovation that it was what I had expected. But I was wrong. Many years would pass before schools would start to look like what I'd imagined.

The school was an ancient building that, I was soon to find out, had housed the Royal Treasury and the residences of the governors and the administrator of the Royal Country House. It was an old-fashioned, majestic building, but it had not been built as a school;

it had been remodeled to be used as one. I would have preferred a big well-lit school on the outskirts of town, with lots of space for a playground for children to run around in. To the right of the entrance there was a an off-white marble plaque that read Llano and Persi Graded School Group. "And who's this?" I wondered. The plaque hadn't been there long because it wasn't as worn-looking like the rest of the building.

If the outside of the building was neither modern nor attractive, when I crossed the threshold, I was even more disappointed. I entered a large lobby that was dreary and old and so cold that I was worried I might catch a cold. But then I noticed the bedel standing there. He was around twenty, had wild, curly hair, and wore a uniform that was too small for him, but his presence lit up that gloomy space and made me feel almost at home.

"I'm Martina, Martina María. I just got assigned to teach here, and I'd like to talk to the principal." I showed him my assignment letter. He smiled and told me to put it away.

"I'm Agustín, Agustín García, the bedel, and I'm sorry to tell you that the principal isn't here. He just left for the Town Hall to take care of some issues before classes start. Those meetings are endless. He wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. I'm so sorry. I can take you to an inn where you can spend the night, and if you can wait a little while for me to close up, I can show you my town, that everyone says is very pretty. Of course, I see it every day,"

"But aren't there houses for teachers?"

"Well, no, no there aren't. Don Justo told me that there used to be, maybe fifty years ago, I wasn't born yet, but I think they had to tear them down to build more classrooms. He said that the lack of teacher housing was one of his worst headaches, but I'll let him explain it to you."

Oh, for heaven's sake! My happiness dissolved like sugar in hot coffee. What a way to start! But it wasn't Agustín's fault, so I accepted his offer to show me around the town.

“You won’t be sorry. I promise. Take a look around the school while I finish up some things Don Justo asked me to do, and we’ll go. If you want to leave your suitcase here, I can lock it up for you.”

Agustín could see I was reluctant to leave my suitcase. In it I carried all my belongings, my school materials, my memories, my life. “OK,” I finally replied.

While Agustín finished his tasks, I looked around the school as he’d told me to. It was completely empty and seemingly dead, without noise, without teachers, without students, without life. It consisted of extremely old rooms full of worn and darkened teaching materials. On that day, the only person I saw inside was a janitor who came out of a classroom and went into the one across the hall. He was heavy set and had a jovial demeanor. His overalls revealed a pot belly underneath, and he was smiling as he hummed the two-step tune *Sighs of Spain*. He told me he was giving the final touch-up to the classrooms so they would be fit for the start of school the next day. I waved him good-bye and he returned my wave.

Agustín and I finally left, and I was happy to be outside and feel the sun on my face. I was glad for these short, cold, sunny days of winter. Throughout the town, there was a clamor of cars laden with goods, horse hooves, blaring car radios, and shouts of children who were not at all anxious to go back to school. We walked through the market on the Town Hall plaza, where the merchants, interrupting each other, loudly offered their goods to shoppers. Agustín knew a lot of the townspeople; almost everyone said hello to him. I asked if he was from Aranjuez, and he answered immediately, “Yes, we’re all from Aranjuez: my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles, and my sister and I. We live there, in La Flamenca,” he said, pointing the place out with his arm. “I come and go every day on my bike or walking. The only one who is there all day is my sister Veva, and you’ll meet her soon.”

“There are so many people outside! Is it like this every day?”

“Yes, it’s a comercial area, and the people come from neighboring towns to buy and sell. On Saturdays there’s a large farmer’s market where men and women bring seasonal fruits and

vegetables, rabbits, chickens and eggs. There's not much industry here, and it's growing, but there is a lot of political activity. Here all the parties are represented. I belong to the Socialist Youth, and I'm also a true Republican. The Republic is going to bring us education, equality..."

"Well, that's great. It's what we women really need."

Agustín talked to me nonstop about Aranjuez, politics, the school, and then we walked into the most enormous square I'd ever seen. It had a fountain that sprayed water from the center and showered drops colored by the sun as they grew brighter and brighter.

"The Mariblanca Square," said Agustín proudly, "but we call it Liberty Square," he emphasized solemnly. "Here's where the militants read poetry by Lorca, María Teresa León, and Rafael Alberti. I come pretty often to listen, and when I do, I get goosebumps."

I paid close attention to everything he said. In the distance, I could make out the palace, a symbol of a prosperous monarchy now in exile. It looked beautiful though there were no longer kings inside. It now formed part of the Republic's property that Agustín was so proud of. But I immediately fantasized and tried to imagine kings and queens inside, living in their royal rooms and entertaining their elegant lord and lady friends. I could see them all together enjoying the garden, boating on the Tajo River, or going to horse races. But, of course, now there was none of that. The palace was mute and orphaned from the laughter and dancing of the court.

"It doesn't surprise me that the monarchy chose this place to relax in. They certainly knew what they were doing."

"You're so right. It's the best place," answered Agustín proudly. "But that's all over now. The palaces have all been converted into museums, which is what they should be. We don't want kings and subjects; we want the sovereignty of the people and believe that all citizens should be free, and that can only be accomplished by the Republic."

The more Agustín talked, the more interesting he became. When it came to expressing himself, he didn't mince his words. I could have been anybody, but he didn't care. He went on and on,

criticizing courtiers. He held nothing back; I couldn't tell if he was telling me facts or fiction. He spoke of those shameless lords who hung out with kings. It got to the point where I thought he had to be kidding me.

He saw me smiling and said, "Well, now you're happier, right? I wasn't sure what to tell you about how the principal wasn't there and how there was no teacher housing in this town. Tomorrow you'll meet Don Justo, and you'll see that he keeps his word. He's understanding and reasonable."

I listened to every word Agustín said. I was in an unknown town, and I needed as much information as I could get.

"We're almost at my sister's place. She lives on the road to Andalucía," he interjected while he used his arm to indicate the San Antonio church, which had the appearance of a prop in an outdoor theater. "Do you want to go inside?"

"No, Agustín, I think I've spent enough time being a tourist. I got to the school too late to meet Don Justo, and I'm going to be late to dinner. The best would be for you to take me to the inn. You can't imagine how intrigued I am to know where I'll have to live from now on."

"You'll find a house to live in real soon, and I can help you look. And hey, I've heard Don Justo say, even though it's none of my business, that Town Hall has given you a grant to help you economically, but he'll explain all of that to you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Agustín, I've had a great time getting to know your lovely town," I said when he left me at the inn and went to get my suitcase for me.

The rundown inn was large and cold, and its best feature was its low price, which meant I could stay there a few days without having to spend very much money. In a pen outside, the owner, Mr. Juan, kept roosters, hens, chickens, rabbits, and ducks, and on a patch of earth modeled like an orchard, he grew cabbages, chard, and other vegetables. Mr. Juan spent most of his time out there. He also had logs, lots of logs, very well cut and piled into huge stacks, which would never, however, be able to heat such a huge dwelling.

Mr Juan was married to Mrs. Segunda, and though they were different in style, taste, and personality, they were an agreeable and affectionate couple, plus they were friends of Agustín's parents, which inclined me to trust them.

Mr. Juan took my suitcase upstairs to my room, which was damp and smelled of sour milk. At least it was big and had a fold-up iron cot for a bed, and the closet was large. I hung just the clothes necessary for a few days because I wasn't planning to stay very long at all.

On that cold and damp January 10, I was the only guest staying at the inn. The owners and I had lunch and supper in the kitchen, the only warm space in the house, heated by the logs Mr Juan had split. We had long conversations; they brought me up to date about what was going on in town, and it became clear that with both, but especially Mrs. Segunda, who had a motor mouth, we would never lack for something to talk about. But I was tired and ready to call it a day.

Before I went to bed, I looked through a window that held a view of a town clothed in white, half hidden by fog. The only person out was a woman wrapped up to her eyes in a thick blanket. She crossed the street and quickly entered a house, but the rest of the houses were closed, and I couldn't see anything inside because the windows were completely frosted over. I heard a dog bark nearby, and others responded from as far away as the train station, it seemed. I thought about the sites that Agustín and I had visited that morning. The Mariblan Square would now look completely different enveloped in fog. That immense area, surrounded by gardens that had smelled of plants and flowers, would now seem completely different shrouded in the spectral fog. I had trouble imagining myself in the palace with the elegant lords and ladies in royal rooms. And even the Tajo River, though somewhat muddy, flowed smoothly and easily. Silence and fog encompassed everything so completely that I felt nervous, nervous and cold because the space heater Mrs. Segunda had left in my room was now full of burnt-out embers. The only sound was my breathing and my heartbeat. I asked myself if I had arrived at the right place to start the beginning of the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 2

It was my first day of class, and I was a nervous wreck. When I woke up, I planned to talk to the principal before my colleagues and the children arrived at school. I bathed, put on my dress and shoes and a little lipstick, had, had breakfast with Mr. Juan and Mrs. Segunda, and left for school. The fog of the previous night hadn't completely disappeared, and it stayed with me for a good part of January as my companion as I was walking to my new job. Every morning, being lovingly lured by the Tajo, the fog hugged the town. The outlines of the houses shyly made themselves visible until the sun broke through and lazily unraveled the wisps of fog that had clung to the trees and buildings.

When I entered the school, Agustín greeted me with a smile and asked me how I had slept, then led me to the office of the principal, whom I'd been dying to meet to find out if he lived up to Agustín's glowing descriptions of him. And there he was, waiting for me: Don Justo Germán Escudero. He was tall, slim, and elegant, and he was eager to meet me. His clothes were a bit old-fashioned, his hair was silver, and his glasses made him look intelligent. He greeted me kindly and apologized for not being aware that I might arrive a day early. He told me to take a seat so we could talk privately for a while before the rest of the faculty arrived.

"I want you to know that I'm so glad you've joined us. I'm here to help you. I have a lot of experience, all my life being a teacher and more than twenty years being a principal, so I'm at your service. By the way, a question: Is María your first name or your last name?"

"It's my last name."

"Well, that's great, Miss María, I prefer to call you that, if you don't mind. I love your last name."

So I was stuck with being María as though at age twenty I would change my name, but that's how Don Justo introduced me to the other teachers, and that's how I introduced myself to my students.

Don Justo interrogated me about everything in my present, past, and future, and said he wanted to clarify the housing situation to me. Unluckily for me, he repeated what Agustín had told me the day before. "But the law says that town governments are obliged to provide decent housing to teachers," I declared, not a little annoyed.

"Yes, yes, it's the law, but, as in so many other cases, the law isn't obeyed. Still, since I don't want to disappoint you on the first day of class, I'm happy to let you know that Town Hall gives you a grant of seven hundred fifty pesetas a year, so you can rent a more or less decent house," he said in a snarky tone. "But, if you pay a peseta more, it comes out of your own pocket."

I nodded in agreement, and he looked at me in such a way that I understood that it wasn't going to be easy to find a house at that price. This had to be one source of the headaches Agustín had referred to the day before, but he immediately changed the subject and said, "So. Here's a list of your students for this year: fifty-six third section girls of the group that is called Llano y Persi in honor of the celebrated congressman who did so much for our town. And I want you to know," he continued, "that your group, 3rd grade B, like all the others, are ranked by age, and your students are eight and nine years old. Now it's up to you, and only you, to get them to the same grade level. And try to make your class fun! And do what you can to get most of the registered students to show up!"

"That's how I'll do it," I answered him, and, based on what I'd learned from Agustín I even dared to confess that I'd be much happier if my students were ranked not only by age but also by sex.

He took his eyes off my list, wrinkled his brow, raised his eyebrows, stroked his tie with his left hand, thought a few seconds, and, without losing composure, added, "You might be right, but it's too early to make that decision. We'll get there if we all work together. Now I can only promise you that your students will be very happy when they find out that they'll have a new, young, well-trained teacher. I'll help

you in whatever way I can to put into practice the famous Selection course you took; it hasn't arrived here yet. We need young people like you, able to enlighten our children and to get the disillusioned ones to fall in line."

I have to admit that even though Don Justo was not yet in favor of co-education, his way of talking, his personality, and the clarity of his ideas impressed me. His head was full of thoughts and plans for improving the school. I was glad that he was the principal and was in charge of encouraging me, because in other schools the opposite was true.

"Come with me!" He gently took my arm. "I want to show you your classroom before the students get here and the noise starts. In a few minutes, the shouts, the laughter and the crying will mark the end of the quiet in here." And as we climbed the stairs he told me, "The school, as you see, is old, and a good part of the faculty is too. That's why I'm happy when young people like you arrive. Young blood brings fresh air and new ideas to these worn-out schools with outdated teaching techniques."

Don Justo kept showering me with compliments as he led me to my 3rd grade B classroom. The room was spacious; it had high ceilings and big windows. It was filled with dark wooden desks that had two or three seats connected to slanting desktops that had inkwell holes surrounded by dry ink stains. At the back of the classroom sat one large table and a few smaller ones. There was also a closet that was filled with used chalk, and unusable bottles of ink, colored pencils and other worthless school supplies. A blackboard was at the front of the room and beside it a hole where the crucifix used to be. The Republic, promoter of secular education, had ordered it removed. There was also the occasional map, a globe, dusty posters and a lot of useless papers.

"The room is big," I noted. "But how am I supposed to fit fifty-six girls in here?"

"Unfortunately," he answered, frowning, "the fifty-six are never going to be present. Absenteeism is very high because the families have low incomes, and some of the students have lost interest. A lot of times the girls don't come because they have to take lunch to