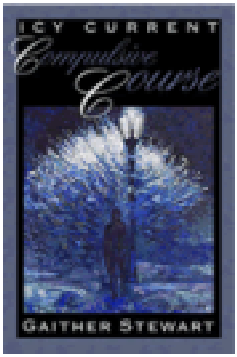

THE RAINMAKER

The gardener squirted water in a high arc, stratified in soft yellow, blue and green, in the vague direction of the rose bushes, and pronounced his hourly weather prediction: "*Va a llover, Señor*! You see those dark clouds gathering in the east? There's bad weather at Veracruz. That means hard rains here."

Like his Aztec ancestors, Miguel was fascinated by rain—and he believed he influenced it. His conversation with Gringos in the "Salinas Residences" regularly centered on weather and water. In his estimation Veracruz was responsible for most of the ills of San Miguel Allende.

"Ah, Miguel, I don't care what kind of weather we have," I admitted, following the gardener's gaze fixed on the east. "I like it all."

"That's the way you Gringos think."

"What can you do about storms in Veracruz?" I was trying to concentrate on Carlos Castaneda. But from Miguel it was the same thing every day. Bad weather, rain, Veracruz. Just the word *tiempo*, weather, set Miguel off.

"Señor, this is no paradise, Mexico. This is unstable land, Mexico. The hot sun, the crazy winds, the mad volcanoes, the deluges of rain. To live here you *have* to care about it. Our rains are unpredictable. Only in the Rain God's paradise are rains regular. Here nature is a threat. Rain is a god. Bigger than us. It's a religion."

The gardener adjusted his Dallas Cowboys cap. His eyebrows knitted. He scowled at the ground and carelessly directed the snout of the hose toward a clump of bushes and tangled flowers and vines between two jacaranda trees. Uncontrolled undergrowth was engulfing and devouring the once beautiful garden, but he didn't seem to see the chaos. The more water the better. Even under pouring rain he watered, as if trying to even the score between himself and the Rain God.

This morning he'd killed two peaceful hours, humming to himself, squirting the colibris, and occasionally peering toward the threatening east, or sweeping up the few twigs and leaves in the patio, near the gate, along the driveway, under the windows, and in the out-of-use Jacuzzi—the places he'd swept the day before. He only had to stretch the watering another hour and his morning of labor was done.

Miguel was a handsome man. Standing among the bushes, his heavy legs spread, a thickly veined, copper hand grasping the hose like a weapon, his athletic neck bronze under the morning sun, his broad sloping shoulders highlighted by a tight azure T-shirt, he looked strong and solid. His dark hair was thick and short-cropped, his complexion swarthy. The high cheekbones of distant indigenous ancestors framed his inscrutable black eyes. His usual half smile was at once sardonic and humble.

"Miguel, I've been thinking about you. You're too young and strong to stand here and water this garden forever."

"*Verdad*! La Señora"—he meant the landlady of the residential complex of which he was the official gardener—"la Señora says I'm no gardener, so I've decided to learn plumbing. They make good money."

"So you're taking plumbing lessons?"

"*Pues no exactamente*. But I observe the plumber while he fixes the toilets."

"For Christ's sake, Miguel! Why not find a plumber and offer to work for him free—like an apprentice?"

"Oh no, Señor, my wife would be furious. I have to earn something." A social worker, his wife already earned more than he did. She was the force in their lives. Because of her modernist views on contraception, Miguel had once explained, they had only three children, making Miguel an anomaly among his contemporaries, most of whom already had six, seven, eight children.

That, and his two stints as a wetback in Texas, had elevated him to a higher social level than that of his childhood friends. Those two adventures in Texas had changed his life, he boasted. It was the dare. When he stepped into the waters of the Rio Grande the first time he made the first step forward in his awareness of himself and seemed to have acquired new courage toward life. At times, the doubts in his guts about what he'd formerly accepted as his place in the world was written in his dark face. On the way to Dallas he'd also acquired a new attitude toward the closed life of his fellow San Miguelians.

Yet Miguel was lazy. He had few solid preferences. He seemed to see things in the light of what they might have once been in a previous life, or could be again in a future existence. But each day he depicted his present as grim and immutable. He was generous and even glad that his wife was smarter than he.

Though he talked about plumbing and watched the official plumber unstop toilets and repair the washing machine, his life

continued on its old track—four days at work, then a fiesta followed by a day of recovery before he returned to sweeping and watering and talking about Veracruz and the weather.

You could read in his eyes his acceptance of the futility of his clumsy life—great explosions of impulse that in Miguel were uncontrollable tempests, followed by periods of guilt and expiation and indolence.

La Señora, that is Maria Teresa Salinas, told her tenants that Miguel knew absolutely nothing about plants. “All he wants to do is sweep and water,” she accused. It was generally true, and she continually threatened to fire him. I suspect she kept him around because he was a convenient scapegoat for the ills that beset the compound. Everything was “Miguel’s fault.” Rainwater clogged up the drainpipes and it was Miguel’s negligence. The sole washing machine broke down and it was because Miguel washed his family’s wash in it and ran up the heat to the maximum. Water was central in Miguel’s life.

Nonetheless, he hung on. Sweeping and watering, peering into the garden’s dark corners and examining the horizon and talking to the gods and muttering his ominous warnings about approaching dangers and hating La Señora, in his maladroit way he seemed rooted in the damp garden.

He didn’t seem to care about his life—but I suspected he regretted that he didn’t care. That, I thought, was his redemption. Miguel seldom seemed to get mad; he usually concealed his hate for the landlady. Like the day before when the Señora chewed him out for some minor infraction, he effaced himself like a slave, his lips curled in a tremulous false smile, then he sulked in the corner of the garden and watered the same spot for half an hour.

Inside the compound he moved about furtively, exchanging enigmatic glances with his fellow workers and commonplaces about the weather with the Gringo tenants. Only when I saw him

on the streets of the town on a weekend did I detect a swagger in his walk. Though he was seldom arrogant, you could imagine his aggressiveness when he was drinking at a fiesta or watching the Mexican soccer team playing on television.

Handsome as he was, rumor had it that he was the father of a fourth child that one of the unmarried maids was carrying. As hopeless as life might have seemed to him, sex still had its way under Miguel's conniving sky.

"There she is," Miguel spat when we heard the automatic gate next door swing open. Through the bushes we watched her white Mercedes whip into the driveway. I shuddered at the thud as the landlady ran into what sounded like a wheelbarrow.

The gardener grinned gleefully and squirted water straight up in the air as if shooting a pistol at a fiesta. "She doesn't believe in water," he muttered. "But she'll get hers someday."

We looked at each other as the landlady called her dogs, the German Shepherd, Mädchen, and Chekhov, the Fox Terrier, and told her pregnant servant Marta she could go home. Silently, she and the dogs tramped up the stairs and entered her dark apartment.

At that moment, Marta the maid slinked into the garden, grinning maliciously, and whispered a few words to Miguel. He laughed and threw down the hose in a flowerbed and began slapping his thighs as he danced around in the water squirting crazily in all directions.

"*Chingada*! *Chingada*!" he sang. "She's fucked! *La puta* got what she deserved."

Like wildfire the news circulated among the tenants that our landlady's meeting in City Hall that morning had gone badly. The Municipal President—who lived just across the narrow street from our compound and whose wife detested Maria Teresa—had formally informed Maria Teresa Salinas that the City Council had

unanimously rejected her proposal to build the "Salinas Opera Theater."

During the remaining minutes until noon, the gardener cavorted among the bushes and celebrated her defeat in dance, song and water.

FEELING A CERTAIN CONTRITION for Miguel's excesses, I ran up the staircase to Maria Teresa's third floor to check on her. I couldn't let her kill herself. The door to her sprawling apartment was ajar. The living room was dark. My finger was on the doorbell when I heard her hoarse whisper inside, "*Platz, Mädchen, Platz.*" Through the crack I saw a plump figure dressed in white pajamas flit through a shard of thin light projected by a lone table lamp and disappear back into the darkness of the bedroom.

I grinned. That's her way. Only a suggestion of herself—a profile from across the room, a rear view of her plump derrière as she rushed past you on the street, the glimpse of an unreal person. The rest of her, her real person, regularly appeared later, theatrically, from behind the dramatic curtain of her life. In a room with others she might sit sideways in the shadows, sparing no effort to be mysterious before stepping onto the stage. Her initial inclination toward withdrawal was peculiar in a flamboyant show-off like her.

I hesitated. The other servants were downstairs. She unplugged the telephones and turned off the lamp. "Come Chekhov!" she said to the Fox Terrier. "Come now guys, let's go to bed." The door slammed shut.

What's going on here? In bed in pajamas in the afternoon! She never respects the siesta. Obviously she's forgotten she invited us to tea this afternoon. Perhaps there's been a death in her big family in the north. Or it's news of her sick husband. Since Maria Teresa was omnipresent in every aspect of the communal life in the

compound, seldom ill, never discouraged, her sudden isolation seemed to conceal something more sinister than the Opera failure.

"Well that relieves us of going to her tea," I later jibed to Sandra, who was waiting for me in the garden. "Her teas are a pain in the ass."

"Maybe," Sandra murmured, a perplexed look crossing her eyes as she gazed toward our landlady's dark third floor apartment. "You never know how she'll react to her setbacks."

We had believed in the Opera project that Maria Teresa had described to us in such loving detail. Had she not also conceived, financed, built and still managed San Miguel's tennis club, a green oasis on the nearby dusty plain, where last year's Salinas Open had been disputed? We'd also believed in the discarded castle project—a multi-million dollar deal to convert to luxury residences an abandoned fairy-tale castle with moat, bridge, crenellated walls with cannon positions, and towers and turrets overlooking a ravine near the Querétaro Highway and the Guanajuato Bypass to be called "Salinas Heights." And we still hoped that she would build the long promised swimming pool in our / her front garden.

"One day she's the most genteel person, the next day a devil," I remarked.

"It's her guileless smile that gets you," Sandra said. "She puts it on like a mask. She can be so charming that you feel like an ingrate when you resent her turnabouts. The old Canadian lady in the back house says she's a fiend."

"Miguel says she's a witch. I believe he's calling on the gods to crush her."

"That's mean! I still think she's just lonely," Sandra said. "Her husband sick in the States—and no friends here."

"Her own fault."

After nine months tenancy in the garden house next door to our landlady, I had mixed feelings about her. Like everyone I

criticized her mania about money, but I defended her against the poisonous attacks from her long-term tenants who warned us, “Just wait till you get to know her!”

After the siesta I was all the more surprised to find Maria Teresa’s perfumed-scented note under our door: “Dear Sandra and Peter Fleming, Forgive me for not confirming the tea for this afternoon. I hope you will still join me on my balcony at around 1700 hours. With esteem and affection, Your Mary”

I somewhat maliciously called our landlady by her real name, “Maria Teresa.” She called herself and wanted others to call her, “Mary.” M-A-R-Y, she said, stood for “Modest, Assiduous, Resolute, Yankee.” Mary had arrived in San Miguel like a whirlwind years back when on the death of her 90-year old mother she inherited a colony of houses and apartments in the Los Balcones quarter on the hill. She was a manager and had to manage.

Nevertheless, she insisted that she hated San Miguel.

Someday, she vowed, she would sell everything and return to the United States where she “belonged body and soul.”

All her life Mary had wanted to be American. Her second American husband, Robert Morgan, was a wealthy man, much older than she, who spent most of his time in Florida because of bad health. She carried an American passport and she dreamed of someday “returning home” to either Florida or California where one of her houses awaited her. Mary dyed her hair blond, let herself be seen in curlers on her balcony, celebrated the Fourth of July, attended the American Episcopalian Church, and traveled frequently to Florida. She spoke to her dogs in English. She spoke to her Mexican nieces and nephews and to her half-caste workers in English, followed by her own brief and whispered translations. Her native Spanish she spoke unwillingly and with the intonations and fake accent of an American.

Nonetheless, local Mexicans in the back alleys of the old town knew. To her vexation they persisted in considering her Mexican and called her Maria Teresa. However, since she was very rich and the locals didn't know what to make of her, they simply detested her.

"Why does she insist on the tea—after the bad news?" I wondered. "Maybe she wants to raise our rent again. She wants something when she's so gracious."

"Peter, you're too hard on her. Maybe she has the table I've been asking for. Or she's sick on her stomach again."

"Or she's rented the apartment over us to a family with five children!"

"I think she's just lonely, that's all."

"Well, Mexicans say she's stingy and mistreats her workers. Is that loneliness? When I see the way she makes them wait out there in the hot sun on payday while she's upstairs counting out those few pesos for José and Javier, for Miguel and Luis, well, I feel like throwing a bomb in her Jacuzzi."

IN THE WAKE of the restless afternoon sun moving across the highlands' sky, I constantly shifted the table and metal chairs along her long narrow balcony. After the niceties of the tea and a couple generous glasses of tequila, I asked about the progress on the new house in the back part of the compound.

"Oh, it should have been finished long ago—if I only had some good workers."

"But I see them out there early every morning."

"Yes, but they're so lazy. All of them. That's the way Mexicans are." Maria Teresa sighed, looked at the floor, and scratched Chekhov's neck. "They simply have no initiative. They're stupid. Then if anything goes wrong nobody knows anything. They just don't know their place."

"Their place?" Sandra said innocently.

"As you know, I'm not racist. But we are white, and they—they are not. They're different."

"Different?" I said.

"You know what I mean, I believe. Not only lazy but also liars. Nearly all of them are thieves. They're stealing me blind. They will steal anything you leave unguarded. I beg of you, please do not leave your house unlocked when you go out. And never leave a maid alone."

"Don't you have an inventory of your things?" She was the kind to have itemized lists of every nail in her houses.

A streak of madness crossed her dark eyes like a shadow before a sly gleam filled her pupils. "Of course! It's in my head. It's a long list. I know everything I have."

I stroked Mädchen's heavy fur. Sandra stared down toward the wide open door of our/her house next door. Mary sighed and looked at us with her big guileless eyes, a little smile at the corners of her thin lips.

"The world is unpredictable," she said softly, a combination of nostalgia and vengeance in her voice. She had never seemed so Mexican. "It's filled with changes of fortune. Strange betrayals. You never know what's around the corner. You must be ready."

"Well, you seem to have had a good and interesting life," I said to steer the conversation from thieves and betrayals.

"Oh yes … I had good times when I was young. Imagine, young and rich in Paris in the 1960s! And now this! Reduced to being a landlady in Mexico—of all places. What a despicable land."

Emboldened by the tequila I examined openly her face. She'd aged gracefully. Except for a little excess weight and occasional stomach disorders from the water, she was in good health. "Why don't you leave? You can do anything you want. Aren't you filthy rich?"

She smiled smugly, lowered her eyes, and in her most demure manner said, “I’m comfortable. But I have much work to do here. You see yourself how early I’m at work every day.”

It was true. When each morning I watched the sun illuminate the red tile roofs of San Miguel and the yellows and greens of the hillside villas, there she was at the work site just across the patio, regularly, unfailingly. She personally supervised the construction of all her houses just as she’d wanted to do at the Opera House.

“I wake up at five a.m. everyday,” she said to explain her Spartan nature. “Too late to go back to sleep but too early to get up. So I just stay in bed … and think.”

I had come to believe that her obsession with money and property was the cause of her insomnia. So what did she really do in those hours? I concluded that the answer to her beleaguered personality lay in the notes she slid under her tenants’ doors. “Since you insist on exclusive use of the automatic front gate,” she’d written to me a few months earlier, “I must ask you for an additional $17.50 per month, retroactive to the start of your annual contract. Please be so kind as to include $175.00 in your next check.” Another time: “Since you demand a private telephone, I must raise your rent by $22.00.”

The smell of money disturbed her sleep. I imagined her in her bed, surrounded by the total chaos of her own apartment, Mädchen and Chekhov and the two cats occupying the lower part of the king-size bed, daydreaming of ways to up the rents. Rents woke her. Rents haunted her. When her psyche reached the overflowing point she leapt from bed and began writing furiously rent letters on her flowered and perfumed stationery.

As time passed I had constructed what I considered a generous image of Maria Teresa Salinas alias Mary—an image based on her words, on compound gossip, and on a big hunk of conjecture. At a revealing encounter at tea a few weeks earlier, she told us how as a

little girl in Saltillo, the fourth of six children, she'd always wanted her own toys, her clothes, even her own small horse, separate from the things of the other siblings.

"I wanted my things for myself," she said, pride in her voice. She had a way of speaking candidly about the kind of personal characteristics that most people conceal, even from themselves. "What was mine was mine. You know what I mean?"

"Mary's egocentric nature became grabbing and avaricious"—I had noted in my log—"when at 13 she saw the fat cattle on the gigantic spreads of the Texas ranches near Devine where she lived with an uncle in order to attend American schools. Those fat steers stirred something in her. Everything in Texas seemed superior to her family's Mexico. Her possessiveness became obsessive at the exclusive girls' school in Vermont where Yankee girls delighted in displaying their wealth to the undeveloped Mexican girl who spoke funny Tex-Mex English."

She didn't have the courage to tell those girls that her family was richer than any of theirs. At 15, she said, the things of others seemed more desirable.

"As time passed," my log continued, "and her knowledge of the world broadened and Mexico seemed backward, her avarice became consummate. She could never possess enough. She had to have more than the other girls. She also had to *be* the most. As an adult, she wanted not only things —but accomplishments, honors, recognition."

To hear Maria Teresa tell it, there was nothing she hadn't done. Done better and more than others. When someone mentioned Germany, she revealed she had done her first Ph.D. at Munich University—she said "*platz*!" to Mädchen to prove it. If talk turned to France, she had taught literature at the University of Montpelier and she said often "*enchantée*" and liked to introduce one of her tenants as Monsieur André. She had villas in Italy, naturally in

Tuscany, and began morning encounters with almost anyone with a loud *buon giorno*.

In her fantasy she was omniscient and eternal. At first we were amused, then touched, by the Hirchfeld portrait of her hanging in the corridor of our house.

As the balcony conversation wound down and the high-altitude tequila effect began passing, I raised the subject of the Opera House. From where we were sitting I could see the downtown terrain she'd proposed, near the old hotel and the museum. A magnificent project, worthy of her organizational talents.

Maria Teresa shrugged, took another sip of the water that was central to her reducing regime, and looked thoughtfully at Chekhov.

After a moment of silence she raised her black eyes, smiled serenely, and asked if we had noticed the foundations and perimeter walls on the property just two blocks from the compound. Many people had long eyed that property overlooking all of the town, the lake and the distant mountains of the Sierra Morena.

"I purchased the whole thing and I'm going to build there the most sumptuous mansion in San Miguel." she said, and looked triumphantly from Sandra to me.

"Well!" I said.

"Really!" said Sandra.

We couldn't disguise it. We believed in her. Despite my sneers and Sandra's innate skepticism, and despite the admonitions of neighbors and town gossips, we still believed in her.

"I've engaged the most famous architect from Mexico City, Raúl Jorge Respighi, for the design. And I've commissioned a landscape architect from Florence for the gardens. I, of course, will personally oversee the execution of its construction."

THE NEXT MORNING while Miguel was sweeping and scanning the eastern skies and I was reading at the patio table and the colibris were darting about and the jacaranda trees had never seemed so purple and a glorious kind of effulgence illuminated the garden, apropos of nothing Miguel said, "*Sabe Señor, la vida no es un jardín de flores.*"

I stared at him and waited. Were his philosophic words an excuse for the state of his garden? Or did he want to discuss the lack of meaning in his life?

His melancholy eyes riveted to the stones, Miguel said, "she's not Christian." That morning the church-going landlady had issued him another warning and threatened to dock him a day's pay. "She hates our country and she doesn't know the meaning of charity."

"I don't think you need her charity, but justice," I said lamely.

The gardener raised his eyes through which passed a flicker of sarcasm. "Justice!" he echoed. Then, "*Verdad.*" Had he never considered the question? Many things escaped Miguel. The flora and the fauna bored him. A rose bush dying from neglect didn't affect him. He was just as indifferent to the multi-colored birds in the garden as he was to a delicate patio chair damaged by his tools. Brutishly he seemed to lack the sensibilities of Latin peoples. Perhaps because of the callousness of many very poor, he didn't seem to feel such things. He accepted the ugly with the beautiful as part of life and perhaps because of the still inchoate internal revolt that periodically awakened in him a destructive instinct.

The following morning at sweeping and watering time the gardener was not to be seen. What about the garden? I wondered. Should I water? I checked the places where Miguel sometimes hid, for a smoke or just to rest—the washroom, the empty upstairs apartment and the corridors and interior patios of the labyrinth of houses and apartments that made up Salinas Residences. Nothing.

I was about to give up when I sensed something above me. I looked up and started at the immobile silhouette standing on the second-story ledge of the work site of Mary's new house. I stepped back and shielded my eyes against the mid morning sun. It was Miguel. His gaze was fixed on the east. His lips were moving. He was praying … or singing a litany.

"*Hola,* Miguel! What are you doing up there? What's happening?"

Miguel interrupted his chanting and looked down with his sly grin. "I don't work here anymore. La Señora fired me. She said if I didn't take off this shirt, I was through." He pulled at his light blue T-shirt and leaned forward so I could read the words on the front—PRD, the initials of the left-wing Partido Revolucionario Democrático—an affront and challenge to the well to do in hyper-conservative San Miguel.

Miguel smiled proudly, as if the shirt was a symbol that things were no longer what they were the day before. "I'm not taking it off!" he shouted in the direction of Maria Teresa's apartment.

"*Viva Mexico*!" he yelled, as if he were cheering for Mexico's national soccer team.

Rebellion was written in his face. Rebellion against something indefinite but evil. If not against the system, then against his past, against his present, against what he'd always been. He wanted to yell obscenities as he did at the fiesta. He wanted to break la Señora's things, steal her things and hurt her. He was not sure what precisely he wanted to do. His own ignorance seemed to confuse him.

In that moment, standing on the ledge, torn between prayer and revolution, he seemed bedazzled by life. Maybe it was the sun. The blinding sun over the Dallas skyscrapers where he'd once worked. It was the sparkling sunbeams reflecting off the cement

and the trees and the warm winds and the rains of the high plateau. The blind alley that was his life bewildered him.

It was also the Rain God Tlaloc, I thought, and the threat of water.

I felt culpable too that in our morning conversations in the garden I had instigated Miguel in his private rebellion. As if I'd pushed him off balance at the edge of the precipice where his feet were losing their hold on the crumbling ground.

"*Suavecito!* Take it easy. Control yourself."

"I don't want to control myself," Miguel shouted, leaning dangerously forward. His face was purple. He picked up a bucket standing beside him and tossed the water in a high arc of glistening white that seemed to hang suspended in the air. "I don't want it. Let her control herself. You, Señor, you control yourself."

I had seen that look before. I'd seen it in the dark ironic faces of celebrating construction workers, drunk as lords on the Day of the Revolution. I'd seen it in the faces of street vendors when foreigners continued haggling for hours over two pesos. I'd seen it in the faces of taxi drivers when Gringos objected to paying twice the fare Mexicans pay. Like them, Miguel rejected the concept of self-possession. He rejected self-mastery and ordered life. His was the eternal struggle in this part of the world—the battle between the rich white minority and the multi-colored masses of have-nots.

He couldn't change things, he accepted that. But like any peasant at the fiesta Miguel wanted chaos. Chaos in life like the chaos in his garden.

AS THE WEEKS turned into months and the winds of change blew across the Bajío, the great mansion took shape. Each morning after an inspection of the new garden house, Maria Teresa, accompanied by Mädchen and Chekhov, marched off to the rising mansion. Passersby could see her figure in white flitting past second floor

window apertures or sprinting up and down the circular cement ramps that would form the grand staircase.

One morning I ran after her and asked her to show me the site. “I will be proud and honored,” she responded. “Just come along and you’ll see it all.”

She first led me down the nascent flight of stairs to the basements. “You don’t see this from the street. Here I have a team of seven workers dedicated exclusively to the cellars,” she explained as we stepped into a huge open space with high ceilings.

“Big enough for bowling alleys,” she said.

“Or arena football.”

“Here in this corner I plan a game room, you know, pool tables, ping-pong, badminton, or perhaps miniature golf.”

“Why not!”

“Over there I will build a Bavarian *Stube*, a replica of one I knew in a Munich restaurant. And in that other corner space there will be a complete gym—with sauna, of course.”

“*Por supuesto.*”

“There at the back side I plan a six-car garage, which should be sufficient, what with the prices of cars today.”

“Indeed outrageous.”

“And along the front side, there where you see the lines traced along the floor, I will put in eight storage rooms—with a private side entrance—which I will rent to Americans to store their belongings when they summer in the States. Not all can afford to maintain two residences!”

“That would be the case of many of us.”

“Now if you step out here onto the lower verandah,” she said leading the way to one of the rear apertures looking down over multi-colored San Miguel. “There is a team of—well, I don’t know exactly how many, maybe ten men—building a stone wall around the lower gardens and landscaping the entrance road that will lead

uphill toward the parking spaces and the garages. The road will be lined with cypresses. Naturally imported from Tuscany."

"Naturally."

"On another day I'll show you the upstairs and the guest rooms, and the section for a study and a library. It's simply breathtaking … But now, my dear boy, I must get to work."

DESPITE HIS SILENT RAGE, Miguel took off the rebellious T-shirt and was not fired. Instead he was demoted, removed from the soft garden job, and transferred to the landlady's construction gangs. Occasionally he came into the garden, drew a bottle of water from the faucet on the wall, and asked me for drops of disinfectant. From time to time I saw him talking and laughing with one or other of the maids.

Often, in those days, he would stand immobile on a scaffold and peer toward the east and, I now knew, pray for rain.

On the afternoon of the first great rain of the season—that Miguel that morning predicted—I found the interior of my car flooded with a foot of water. Somehow I was not surprised. A jubilant Miguel ran into the garden shouting, "I told you so, I told you so" and began bailing it like a leaky lifeboat.

On subsequent days, while storm clouds regularly gathered and light rains fell, the bailing of the car went on. At lunch and late afternoons a festive Miguel came to help. He acted as if it was his doing. His and his god's. The more we bailed, the more water magically surfaced and the more Miguel celebrated.

"Go take a look at it! Go see her mansion!" he shouted. "Go see it today."

Indeed Sandra and I were disturbed that the hectic work rhythm on the mansion had slowed. We were disappointed on those mornings it was too wet to work. The pools of water that formed in her cellars and amid the excavations for the Italian

gardens were a personal affront. Our enthusiasm sank when we counted only three or four workers at the site.

Yet Maria Teresa's constancy was reassuring. She still trafficked back and forth along the scaffolding and planked walkways and up and down the grand staircase.

Late one afternoon after a hard rain I noted with horror that the lower entrance gate and part of the adjoining stonewall were sagging backward. Yet, the next morning there was Maria Teresa in yellow rubber boots running among the garden crew that was back in full force. Harried men were pouring cement into gaping holes around the gate. Pumps were transferring rivers of black slime from huge zigzagging cracks in the earth, over the shaky wall and onto the cobblestone street below. The earth on which the shell of the mansion rested was gradually sliding downhill.

Times were critical. Rain was on the attack. Miguel was often chanting and praying.

Sandra and I went back and forth between our garden and the mansion.

Often Marta said that her mistress was ill with her stomach ailment.

Only as dark fell would we sometimes hear her voice calling, "*Mädchen, komm her!*" Or, "Chekhov, where are you?" before her door closed and her bedroom drapes were drawn.

On the fateful Friday morning I instinctively looked around for Miguel. I didn't understand why, but I needed to see him. I was beginning to hold the rebellious gardener responsible for the disastrous turn of events. Him and that crazy god, Tlaloc. Maria Teresa no longer permitted Miguel on the mansion work site. All work had stopped at the garden house. The tennis club was shut down. Miguel's favorite, Marta, was placidly sweeping the driveway.

But where was Miguel? Puzzled, I was peering into the labyrinth of passageways near the garden house when I remembered—and looked up.

There he was on the same ledge, facing the east, his open hands raised like a priest. He was chanting toward the sky. I stared and listened. I could make out some words of his solemn incantations. "*Oh grande Tlaloc … La tierra oh Tlaloc … Aqua para la tierra. Oh Tlaloc ayudame ayudame oh Tlaloc … Lluvia. Lluvia. Lluvia! Océanos de lluvia… oh gracias, gracias oh Tlaloc … Aqua.*

Much earlier in the day than usual lightening flashed across the blackening skies of the Bajío. Cannonades of thunder rolled across the plateau. The north wind blew pitilessly. The day turned dark as night. And then, oh how it rained! People said it was the hardest rain in memory. People said water flowed up the hills. Water invaded the houses and the gardens of "Salinas Residences." San Miguel was under water. Electricity was out.

In the late afternoon while we swept the water out of our house our thoughts were on the mansion. Had it withstood the storm? And where was Maria Teresa? There was no sign of life at her apartment. Mädchen hadn't once barked at the dark. Even when power was restored and we blew out the candles, Maria Teresa's apartment remained dark, obscure, silent.

We took courage and made our way among the debris to the work site. Despite all our trepidation and premonitions we couldn't have imagined a sorrier spectacle. The entire north wing of the once burgeoning mansion, its street-side exterior wall, the tile roof of the master bedroom and the framework of a long second-floor balcony had crashed down onto the garden-level flagstone terraces. Boards, iron bars and cables from the scaffolding and plank ways protruded awkwardly from piles of cracked rocks and cement. The grand staircase hung suspended in the air, still attached to the surviving elements of the central part of the second floor while the

flooring supporting it had crashed into the cellar. The gym, the game room, the Bavarian *Stube*, the garages and storage rooms, all rolled in black mud, were creeping downhill in a disgusting mass like a huge wave of dark lava. The stratum of earth under the cellar had been washed away.

Horrified we circled the mansion to the lower entrance. It no longer existed. Trucks and jeeps were parked all around and agitated firemen and city engineers were milling around.

The great gate and its high arch and the long stone wall had crumbled and collapsed under the onslaught of the water and its wrought iron and stones and chunks of concrete had spread along the street downhill toward San Miguel Center. Black water, mud, rocks and assorted building materials were still sliding down the gullies where the cypress-lined driveway was to be.

Sickened, our first thought was to express our sympathy to Maria Teresa. But her apartment was still dark. There was no answer to our knocks. When a few hours later telephone communication was reestablished there was no answer in the landlady's dark apartment.

The next day the same. The water was receding on all fronts but the destruction was total. There was no sign of Maria Teresa or Mädchen or Chekhov. On subsequent days Marta sat on the outside porch and waited. Gangs of construction workers hung around on the street waiting for assignments. It was if the storm and the landslide had swallowed up the landlady and her dogs.

Days later, the arrival of Maria Teresa's nephew from Monterrey seemed to augur more bad news. Young Javier opened her apartment and began collecting rents.

A week later a circular written in Maria Teresa's flowery English style addressed to all residents announced that "Mary" would not be returning. Javier "henceforth"—a word Mary always loved—would be managing his aunt's Mexican properties.

Javier let it be known that Mary's husband had died and she was being treated for severe amoebe at a clinic in West Palm Beach.

Within a few weeks after the washout, the splendid weather returned. Miguel was reinstated as official gardener by his new friend, the bonvivant Javier, who spent his nights in discotheques and his mornings in bed and wanted no labor problems of any kind.

Miguel swept and watered as before and reigned supreme among the festive servants. From time to time the gardener would sigh philosophically, gaze at the east, and remind me that *la puta* just couldn't take the water.