Portrait of a Young Painter

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Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zuniga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation.

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1. Lupe’s Voice

Today the city of Oaxaca is a magical place for the visitor. It is a polished jewel of aesthetics, old and new, with its splendid colonial churches and contemporary art galleries. Calling the public to fiesta, dancing giants lead parades of horns and drums, women in native dress balancing baskets of fruit and candies on their heads, and boys blasting firecrackers. Cafés open onto the shaded zócalo, the central plaza where couples perform the graceful danzón to the music of wind bands and marimbas. In the 1930s it was a small town wracked by earthquakes, epidemic disease, and class and racial divisions. Its aristocracy might claim a noble Zapotec heritage but took pride in its white skin and its control over native communities. Religion papered over social distinctions as life revolved around Catholic celebration, recently fortified by the modernizing campaigns of priests and women religious.¹

In the prosperous years of the Porfiriato (1876–1910), the city center had taken on a Parisian veneer—the transformation of its plazas into gardens, the placement of wrought-iron benches on the zócalo, the introduction of art nouveau touches to the refurbished cathedral. But Oaxaca remained a preindustrial town of artisan producers supplied by indigenous farmers and pastors from surrounding villages in the central valley and high sierras. The weavers and candy makers lived in the barrio of Xochimilco, where the click-clack of the looms can still be heard like the clopping of horses on cobblestone. Tanners and leather workers lived in Jalatlaco, shawl (rebozo) and hatmakers in Los Principes, the pork butch-
ers in Coyula. Each had their gremio (guild), and each gremio had its saints and feast days replete with masses, parades, and partying. Through the culture of devotion ran a deep undercurrent of pleasure and of violence, fed by alcohol, rancor, raw sexuality, and the exercise of power.²

Here in 1933, José Zúñiga Pérez and Guadalupe Delgado Olivera married. He was a nineteen-year-old tailor. She was a seamstress of twenty-four. They had known each other since childhood, for they had lived on the same block of Cosijopi Street in the barrio of Carmen Alto. They danced together as youths—to the new rhythms of the foxtrot, tango, and shimmy—at the parties José organized with his tailor friends. Shortly after they married, Guadalupe gave birth to Jesús. They called him Chucho. Very soon, she had another baby they named José. He was white. With affection, almost adoration, they called him “El Guero,” the light-skinned one. He had a marvelous sense of rhythm, always prancing around on his unsteady baby legs, even as he was dying of dysentery. Lupe was pregnant with another child when they buried him. In 1937, she gave birth to a dark-skinned infant. They named him José after the departed angel and after his father. They called him Pepe.
In the photographs, Lupe and José posed with Chucho, and José later had his picture taken with Pepe. “Photography was all the rage. Oaxaca had many studios,” Pepe reflected years later. “My father loved to have his picture taken. Not my mother. We will not see many photographs of my mother.”

A short while later, José Zúñiga Pérez left for Mexico City to create a new life for himself and his family. He left Lupe to care for the children in a small apartment in a big vecindad owned by Don Amado Alcázar, on Porfirio Díaz Street in Carmen Alto. Lupe worked in a factory producing mica for the Allied war effort. At home in the afternoon and evenings, she sewed dresses for clients and napkins for the Leyva weaving clan, to which she was related. She and the children lived with Arcadia Mendoza and Clotilde Ortiz Mendoza. Clotilde and Lupe’s deceased father, Man-
uel, were brother and sister. They were Arcadia’s natural children, fathered by different men. Mother and daughter eked out a living preparing chocolate in the patio. They covered their bodies in rebozos, skirts, and aprons. They braided their hair. In these pictures, Clotilde’s likely taken in the early 1920s when she was young, we note the bouquet of artificial flowers that hid Tía Arcadia’s bare feet.

The first memories of Pepe and Chucho are of their mother’s voice. She sang solo in the cathedral and in the choir at Carmen Alto church. Her boys can still hear her clear, rich soprano timbre breaking the silence of the sacred vaults. She sang as well in the churches of Santo Domingo, Guadalupe, San José, and the Virgin de la Soledad. She knew Latin and how to read notes. She learned all the litanies and prayers and was frequently called upon to recite them at wakes, funerals, and, of course, the Christmas posadas.
How she had learned the sacred texts is not clear. Her mother, Pastora, had died when she was young. Her father, Manuel, was a brute of a man given to drink and fornication (he is said to have died drunk over a woman’s body). Likely, his half-sister, the devout Clotilde, had played a role. Raised in a convent, she left as a young woman to care for Lupe and Lupe’s brother, Manuel Jr., upon their mother’s death. She went to mass every day, and in their small quarters she maintained an elaborate altar from floor to ceiling for the virgins of Guadalupe, Juquila, La Soledad, and Las Carmenes. On holy days she adorned the altar with flowers and illuminated the virgin mothers with candles. She rigorously oversaw the religious training of Chucho. She took him to catechism classes and to mass every Sunday. At home, in the afternoon they prayed the rosary. During Holy Week, at the Church of San José or the Virgin de la Soledad, she obliged him to get down on his knees and pray the rosary at all twelve stations depicting the anguish of Christ’s crucifixion. She pinched him to keep him awake. “Andale, hijo,” she nudged him, “Aquí está el Señor!” She kept strict watch during that sacred week: no one could go out except to church. At three o’clock on Good Friday afternoon, when Christ died, they all fell to their knees and prayed.

Alone at her sewing machine, Lupe sang the romantic songs of the day—“Verdad amarga,” composed by Consuelo Velázquez, and “Jurame,” written by María Grever, and María Luisa Landín’s interpretations of “Que te vaya bien” and “Amor perdido.” She had learned them from listening to Don Amado Alcázar’s radio and at the dances her husband, José, had organized. She learned them also during la hora romántica of the posadas. She sang them there accompanied on guitar by the young Manuel Santaella while the children ate dulces (candies) and drank chocolate. These were songs of great feeling, of love lost and betrayed, of deception and aching solitude. They were reminiscent of the deep melancholy of Oaxaca’s nineteenth-century waltzes—“La Sandunga,” “La Llorona,” and “Dios Nunca Muere”—but without their mystical solemnity. They went at a faster clip, sung to lively percussion and melodious brass. One of Lupe’s favorites was “Que te vaya bien,” sung by María Luisa Landín:

I don't care if you love someone and scorn me.  
I don't care if you leave me crying for your love.  
You're free to love in life and I don't blame you  
If your heart cannot love me as I love you.  
I know it's in vain to ask you to return,  
Because I know you always deceived me declaring your love,
And I don’t want to fool you or hurt your life,
I am sincere and know how to forgive you without bitterness,
Stay happy on your path! Stay well, stay well!5

As Lupe sang them at her sewing machine, she cried, pausing at times to wipe her eyes. Much later in his life, Pepe called these “canciones de arrastradas”—songs in which the woman begs the macho to command, to drag her by her hair across the floor. “Hit me,’ they say,” he reminisced. “And they don’t just speak of submission. They declare that power is at another level, not in them. They are songs of misery and the arrabal.”6 Yet as María Luisa Landín reminded her public, “Anyone can lose in love, a man as well as a woman.” Men and women composed and interpreted these songs. Mellow and poetic, they lightened the devastation of betrayal and abandonment to capture the poignancy of feeling. In fact, Pepe loves them. They bring tears to his eyes. “Mama sang and cried because she had a sexual and affective longing for my father.” Not only was he physically absent, she felt his emotional distance as well. Even if his father was dark skinned and she white, reflected Pepe, it was he who was handsome. She was plain, marked by the smallpox she had suffered as a child. She knew how popular he was among both men and women. She thought, recalled her son Chucho, he had had at least two lovers in Oaxaca after they had married, and she could only imagine what he was doing in Mexico City.7

According to Chucho, she sang from pure grief. It was his grief as well. Behind Lupe’s sadness was a sordid story that she would later tell him.8 She had fallen in love with the handsome, charismatic José, but he had seduced her in an act of vengeance ordered by his mother. José was the only son and youngest child of Petrona Pérez, abandoned by José Zúñiga Heredia, a tall, commanding galán, who had left her with five children.9 He enjoyed many women and moved to Orizaba, Veracruz, where he created another family. Petrona supported her children by taking in laundry, ironing, and making firecrackers, always in demand for the endless rounds of religious celebrations in Oaxaca. We see her in the photograph taken in 1921 with her daughter María, then pregnant, and her barefoot son José. She posed as if reading a book to cover her eye blinded by smallpox. She could not read.

She doted on her son and depended on him. When he reached the age of twelve, she took him to apprentice with a tailor: “Turn this meat into bones,” she said. “By this,” her grandson Pepe recalled, “she meant to say ‘Work this kid to death so he learns something.’” When he was nineteen, according to Chucho’s story, Petrona asked him to avenge the family’s
honor. She believed that Manuel Delgado, Lupe’s father, had violated her eldest daughter, Filomena. Filomena died giving birth to the child of this encounter, likely from the consequences of a deliberate abortion. For this tragedy, Petrona intended to make the Delgado family pay. She asked her son to deflower Lupe. He obliged.

When Lupe learned she was pregnant, she sought out José. He shrugged his shoulders. What did he have to do with it? And if he did, he wasn’t going to do anything about it. If she was really pregnant, she should get an abortion. Furious, Lupe took the scissors from her apron and held them to José’s throat: “You do your duty or we’ll just see what happens.” José Zúñiga complied. He married her. He did not love her, but he married her. He married her despite the fierce opposition of his mother and his sisters. They did not believe she was pregnant, and if she was, likely it was not José’s child but maybe Manuel Santaella’s—that fellow who accompanied her singing during the posadas. If she was pregnant,
she should get an abortion. Yet José Zúñiga defied them and married Lupe. No one is sure why. Perhaps he married because he knew from his own experience how sad it was for a child to be without a father. Maybe the movies influenced him or friends around him who were marrying under such circumstances. Perhaps, as Chucho ponders, he took counsel from his employer, Don Victorino, who made clothes for the wealthiest people in Oaxaca. Tío Lino, as Chucho called him, was an important figure in Oaxaca’s Catholic social movement begun by Bishop Gillow some decades before. Whether or not he encouraged his employees to join the Catholic workers’ circles, he saw to it that his tailors attended mass and religious celebrations. He encouraged them to lead honorable lives according to the sacraments, one of which was matrimony.

So José Zúñiga married Lupe, but now he was gone. He had left her open to the torment of his mother’s family, some of whom lived in Don Amado’s big house and the others around the corner. Only José’s sister María was kind: she gave her breast to the baby Chucho when Lupe could not. Her defenses were so low she had contracted scarlet fever. But the others and in particular the mother, Petrona, and her daughter Rosa’s child Susana spread hurtful gossip. Chucho was not José’s child, they said—he was born of some other of Lupe’s sins. Worse than simply rejecting Chucho, they taunted him, and they harassed Lupe. Susana, who sang with Lupe at the posadas, wrote to José in Mexico City that Lupe would leave the parties with men and not return until dawn. For too many years, José would harbor suspicions of Lupe until he finally learned the stories had been untrue.

Lupe had little support to fall back upon. Her parents were dead, and the aunts Clotilde and Arcadia were strictly devout and not prepared for the kind of struggle the Zúñiga women waged. Lupe’s brother Manuel made things worse. Lupe’s dying mother had given her and Clotilde a manda to take care of the boy—a mission to fulfill for God and the Virgin.10 They took care of him, but they had been unable or unwilling to discipline him. Although the Leyva family had taught him to weave, Manuel had grown into a surly, irresponsible youth, given to drink. He idled away hours in cantinas playing cards and listening to the jukebox. Like his peers, he was handy and quick with a knife. Then came the tragedy, one afternoon in 1941. Chucho remembers it was during the celebrations of the Day of the Dead, because Tía Clotilde had adorned the altar of saintly images with marigolds, chocolate, plates of mole, bread of the dead, sugarcane preserves, and stuffed chili peppers. Pepe does not remember, but Chucho recalls vividly.11 He was playing marbles outside
when his Tío Manuel ran screaming into the house. He was covered with blood. He told them he had been drinking in a cantina when some friends disconnected the jukebox because they did not like the song he had put on. Three times he reconnected it, and they turned it off. They told him if he reconnected it, there would be consequences. He reconnected it. As he sat alone at his table drinking mezcal, one of the boys plunged a knife through his arm into the wooden tabletop. Manuel dislodged the knife and ran screaming the two blocks to the vecindad. After the aunts cleaned his wound, he returned to the bar where he found his adversaries, now joined by his close friend Santaella, who accompanied Lupe in the horas románticas. The young men were all laughing about their deed. Not to be shamed, Manuel Delgado returned to the jukebox and put on the same song. They kept laughing. Manuel took out his knife and hurled it. It pierced his friend Santaella. The boys and the bartender left him to die. Manuel ran to the apartment, threw his knife behind Tía Clotilde’s altar, and fled.

When Lupe returned from work, she learned Manuel was hiding with the Leyva family in the adjacent barrio of Xochimilco. The Santaella family pressed charges. The police came with a warrant for Manuel’s arrest. Lupe disguised herself in campesino clothing and headed for the Leyva house. She paid a mule skinner to take her and Manuel some miles out to the Etila hills. She stayed with him there. She did not return for the posadas. In her absence, Chucho had to take care of his little brother Pepe and his elderly aunts. Once Lupe returned, she took the boys to visit Manuel in his hiding place in San Sebastian Etila. Chucho remembers that when they saw him, he was practicing his skills hurling his dagger into a cactus plant. Lupe helped Manuel cross into Veracruz.

The event gave the Zúñiga family more material to throw at Lupe. Then something worse happened. In front of the house, four-year-old Pepe called out “ugly” to a little girl who was passing by. The girl came up and slapped him. Jumping to his brother’s defense, Chucho picked up a clay jug and threw it at the girl. It hit her forehead and blood streamed down her face. Her parents arrived at the house to lodge a complaint. Clotilde told Lupe when she came back from work. Lupe was livid. Chucho had a temper and a fighting spirit. Lupe had told him before that if he fought again she would burn his hands “so you don’t turn out to be a murderer like my brother.” Enraged, Lupe called for him. “Chucho, come,” she said, “What do you have in your hands? Open them!” Lupe took Clotilde’s red-hot pincers from the fire and branded them into Chucho’s hand. “So you won’t go doing these kinds of things!” she yelled. He yelped with pain.
Pepe hid under the bed. Lupe stood there mortified. What had she done? She immediately embraced Chucho and begged his pardon. “But you know, you know,” she cried, “how many problems I have without your father, with my work!” The Zúñiga sisters immediately went to the police and tried to press charges against Lupe, but no witnesses came forward.¹²

Chucho was left with a gaping wound that scarred his hand for life. But he had to forgive his mother, for he was her support. With her, he suffered the attacks of the Zúñiga women. He listened to her woes. He helped her with her work. She suffered from hemorrhoids so badly that sometimes she could not sit at her sewing machine. Chucho pumped the pedals for her as she stood guiding the needle and the cloth. She was terribly modest and did this only at night. She was so sad, her teeth hurt. She put alcohol in her coffee to kill the pain. And her children listened to her sing María Grever’s “Jurame”:

Everyone says it is not true that I love you
Because they’ve never seen me in love.
I swear to you I don’t understand why you enchant me.
When I am near you and you are happy,
I don’t want you to remember anybody else,
I am jealous even in the thought of your
Remembering somebody else.
Swear to me that even after much time passes,
You won’t forget the moment I met you,
Look at me because there is nothing deeper
Or greater in this world than the love I give you.
Kiss me with a kiss of love
As no one has kissed me since the day I was born,
Love me, love me like crazy
And then you will know the bitterness I am suffering for you.¹³

“Why are you crying, Mama?” the children asked. “Because I want to talk to your papa,” she answered, “I want to tell him that I’m alone, that I miss him so much, and that I want us to be with him.” She talked a lot about him. In the boys’ eyes, he assumed the stature of a noble god. “The enormous love she had for him,” she transmitted to them, Pepe recalled. “She hugged and kissed us. She stroked my hair.” Pepe was more fortunate than Chucho. He did not assume responsibility for her pain as Chucho did, and he had inherited the love felt for the little white angel who had died. She gave him a photograph of his father. “I cherished it. I
put the picture under my pillow and I dreamed about him. On little pieces of paper, I scribbled letters to him and stuffed them under the tablecloth imagining it was a mail box.”

One day, Lupe took Pepe to Mexico City to visit his father. The train conductor charged her for his ticket. He said Pepe was a “big child,” not an infant, and she would have to pay. She was not expecting that. She left him alone for a bit on the seat that smelled of wood and sweat. From a distance, he could hear her singing, begging for money to pay for the ticket. Remembering the moment many years later, he cried. It was not humiliating, he said, it was about poverty. “Not the poverty of being unable to pay for the ticket but the spiritual poverty of her abandonment, her sacrifices, and her lack of love.”

His sadness disappeared when his father came to meet them at the station. He was so handsome in his Tardan hat, his coffee-colored suit, his tie, and his two-toned shoes. During the visit, they went to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe at La Villa. They posed there, father, mother, and son with José’s nephew Gilberto Colón, the son of his sister María. Colón wore a hat to hide his head: the police had shaved it when they jailed him on a robbery charge. José Zúñiga, in fact, looks gaunt and sickly in the photograph. He was suffering from a venereal disease. He was taking a cure. The disease would leave him deaf in an ear, nearly blind in an eye, and suffering from glaucoma. Little Pepe would not have noticed. He was enchanted and returned to tell his brother that his father owned a store near the Lecumberri prison. His father had taken him there; he did not own it but the idea filled the boys with pride and hope.

All around, Chucho suffered more in his early childhood than Pepe. Pepe did not have to bear his mother’s cross nor submit to Tía Clotilde’s rigid religious education. He does not remember much about the violence still engraved in Chucho’s mind and hand. He does not remember his father throwing a piece of wood at Lupe during an argument nor Lupe’s pelting the house of a woman she suspected of being her husband’s girlfriend. Chucho remembers her yelling: “I am the real wife of José Zúñiga!” Nor does Pepe remember how Luis Ramírez, the partner of his Tía María, demanded his dinner while his stepson Gilberto Colón was eating. He was so drunk and insistent, Gilberto got up and punched him, and they fell brawling to the floor. Nor does Pepe remember when an older boy tried to violate him in Don Amado’s latrine. Chucho recalls because he was Pepe’s protector.

Instead Pepe remembers how his cousins Marta and Carmen looked like pretty little brides in the white dresses they wore for their first com-
munion and how tasty was the breakfast afterward of tamales and chocolate. He remembers the church of Carmen Alto. He remembers the beautiful Virgin, the magnificent organ, and the sound of his mother’s voice. In the atrium, he followed the birds that made their nests in the walls. He remembers the summer festival at the church in honor of the Virgin del Carmen. “There were food stands where we ate corn molotes filled with potatoes and sausage and delicious fruit-flavored gelatins. We rode the mechanical rides: the carousel, the Ferris wheel, the little cars that bounced around.” In the evenings, the atrium filled with processions of rebozo-covered señoras, children, and men who doffed their hats in

Figure 1.6. Lupe, Pepe, José, and Gilberto Colón. Black-and-white photograph, 1941.
respect for the Virgin they carried out of the church. With their candles glowing in the night, they marched around the atrium to the music of the wind bands. “At the end of the evening came the best part,” Pepe recalls, “The castles burned with their multicolored wheels twirling round and round and up and down as the fireworks exploded in the dark.”

The fair also had a tent (carpa) where the children watched freak shows. Their favorite was the serpent woman. She had the body of a slithering boa constrictor and the head of a woman. The children asked her, “Can you eat?” “Yes,” she replied, “I eat everything.” Asked by the master of ceremonies how she had gotten the body of the snake, she ruefully confessed, “Because I behaved badly with my parents, they put a curse on me and my body turned into a snake.” “And what do you advise the little children so that they will not have a body like yours?” he asked. “That they obey their parents, refrain from naughty language, and study hard in school.” The children listened carefully.

In the courtyard of the church, Pepe recalls the wonderful Día de la Samaritana, when during Lent in the high heat of March, the beautiful señoras in their china poblana costumes served cool waters of watermelon, cantaloupe, tuna, cactus fruit, and rice milk from glass jugs decorated with green bamboo and tiny colored flags. Rose petals floated on top, lending a perfumed scent to the water the señoras ladled with jicaro gourds. Their gift symbolized the water given by the Samaritan to the thirsty Christ in the desert. In the spring as well, Pepe remembers the day in the federal Escuela Tipo Benito Juárez when the teachers let the children climb the mango tree in the patio and shake down and gather up all the fruit they could. There in kindergarten he first experimented formally with art. He marveled at the pretty scenes he created with a nail he etched into unbaked clay. He carved butterflies, birds, houses, wells, and clouds. The teacher baked them into little plates, cups, and saucers and sent them home with the children. Lupe accumulated a collection.

The Zúñiga children lived close to the ground with few material comforts. They went barefoot and dressed in simple clothes Lupe sewed from her leftover manta (cloth). Pepe remembers that the children they met at the posadas where Lupe sang were much better dressed. The brothers bathed every three days in rainwater in a tub in the patio warmed by the sun. There was one toilet with two big holes for the many people who lived in Don Amado’s vecindad. Lupe was keenly aware of the problem of disease. She herself had suffered from smallpox and scarlet fever. Her first little José had died of dysentery, and her sister-in-law, Petrona’s
daughter, María, was dying of tuberculosis in her apartment at the back of the vecindad. Pepe remembers an epidemic of sarna in the school—a skin infection that swept over the children’s bodies. So Lupe did her best to maintain hygiene: she complemented the patio washings with regular visits to the public baths, where she scrubbed the boys with sulfur. Pepe remembers watching cascades of suds falling from the women’s naked bodies.

Lupe fed them what she could and gave them gelatin laced with alcohol to rid them of bacteria. “Mama would take us on Saturday to the central market,” Pepe recalled, “where we drank the fruit-flavored waters at Tía Casilda’s famous stand. She also bought us rice pudding in the market. We loved these treats.” At the back of the patio in the kitchen area of Don Amado’s house, the boys watched Tías Clotilde and Arcadia grind chocolate. They waited to poke their fingers into the rich oily mass sweetened with sugar, cinnamon, and egg yolk. They delighted in eating the tortillas prepared by a señora in the street by the house. She filled them with the big insects known as chicatanas that came with the summer rains. The tortillas were tasty with salt and full of protein.

The children’s play and their delights came from their imaginative use of their surroundings and the practices and objects of everyday life. From her sewing scraps, Lupe made Pepe an enormous doll with long rag braids. He carried her over his shoulder and rode her like a horse. He pulled her with a string along the floor imagining she was a car. He hung her from a tree and attacked her with a slingshot. He called her “Tunca” because after the rough treatment he gave her, she lost a leg. Finally she got so full of ticks, the adults cremated her. Absent Tunca, he and Chucho and their cousin Nicolás, the dying María’s son, made their own toys. When the rains came, they delighted in exploring the hundreds of beetles that littered the streets, some dead, some crawling, some dying. They played with the grasshoppers and captured the june bugs with their beautiful blue and green wings. Attaching a string to one of their legs, they would twirl them in the air; the more june bugs one could fly, the more admired the child. With the husk of carrizo stalks and pieces of cardboard, they fashioned propellers that turned in the wind as they raced them. They played with Lupe’s chickens too. She made them responsible for feeding them and collecting the eggs, to the point of asking them to put their fingers inside the hens to see if an egg was coming. They invented their own games with them—often to no good end. Chucho peed on the hens only to have the rooster angrily peck his penis. When Pepe got in the way of two fornicating chickens and cupped the rooster’s
semen in his hand, his mother boxed him and told him not to do it again. The brothers love to remember things like that.

As the weather got hot, their Tío Manuel, before he fled the city, took them to the pools and swimming holes, where they splashed around nude with other men and boys. One was on the steep hill behind the house, and it was here in the summer that the white lilies, the azucena flowers, bloomed and bathed the brush in a cloud of sweet scent. “We played with the grasshoppers there and I picked flowers for Mama. We knew from the scent of the azucenas that the Lunes de Cero was coming. That was the day for the celebration of the Gueleguetza, when groups come from the eight regions of the state to dance. We heard the music, but we never went.”

One of their favorite spectacles and play sites was the garbage dump down the street. It stunk but was a treasure house full of strangeness and horror. Once, they encountered a boa, a huge enormous snake. It was dead, and from a cut in its stomach oozed what seemed like dozens of frogs the serpent had been unable to digest. They stared and stared and said to themselves, “Oh, dear, they have killed the serpent lady.” But they could not find her head. On another occasion, they came across a dead body. They drew close and saw a gaping hole in the man’s cheek made by a knife wound—a hole so big they saw all his teeth from above his jaw. His sombrero lay at the side of his decomposing body. Later, his mother told Pepe an uncle had come by and taken the hat. The police came after him thinking he had killed the man.

But the best spectacle from Pepe’s point of view was the movie The Thief of Bagdad. Lupe took him to see the film one afternoon when he was five. “I had never seen the sea, I had never seen a ship, not even in a picture. I had certainly never seen a princess or a garden full of flowering vines and gurgling fountains. Now they were in front of me in rich Technicolor. I couldn’t believe the wooden toy horse that flew through the air, but most of all I was thrilled by the giant genie who popped out of a bottle. This genie prepared food out of thin air. He rescued the prince and princess from a cave and flew them to safety on his magic carpet. What wonderful things! At home, I made a carpet from my mother’s sewing scraps. I put it over me and ran around the house pretending I was flying. With a candle I projected light onto the wall and captured my own shadow in flight with the carpet. I had produced a movie.”

One fall day in 1943, Lupe received a letter from her husband in Mexico City. He told her to gather up the children. They were moving to the capital.