

Portrait of Gabriel

A Puerto Rican Family in San Juan and New York



Concluding a Series
by Oscar Lewis

Introduction: *This tape-recorded excerpt from my forthcoming book *In the Life*, to be published by Random House later this year, presents the observations of a seven-year-old boy who lived in a San Juan slum and then moved to New York City. Gabi is the eldest son of Felicita Rios,* whose story appeared in Harper's last month. Gabi and his twin brother Angelito were born when Felicita was fifteen. By the time she was twenty-two, Felicita had three more children by two other husbands.*

Gabi is an attractive, bright child with a ready smile. His experiences are typical of children who grow up in the culture of poverty. They really have no childhood as we know it. Prematurely burdened by heavy responsibilities, exposed to violence,

*The names of all persons have been changed to protect the subjects of this study.

promiscuity, drunkenness, and vice at a tender age, and subject to unstable and immature adults, these children develop an incredible precocity and a superficial maturity which is damaging to their personality. Psychological tests suggest that Gabi is a lonely, confused, and frightened child who depends upon cunning, denial, fantasy, and escape to survive in his hostile and overwhelming world.

The most remarkable thing about Gabi is how well he manages to cope with a difficult and pathological environment. Those who define mental health as the ability to adapt would have to conclude that Gabi has excellent mental health. However, his adjustment is achieved at a high price. His own dream, in which he sees himself at age twenty, may foretell his sad destiny. Gabi's story illustrates the terrible abuse and waste of talent and human resources which are the real tragedy of the culture of poverty. —Oscar Lewis

Gabriel

I

I love Felicita very much because she borned me, but I wish she behaved herself. I want her to be good, not to run around with men like she does and to pay more attention to her children than to the fellows she goes with. She used to live with Rosario, who beat her a lot. He didn't beat me, though. If he had I would have taken a stick to him. I'd have taken a club and bashed his head in.

Sometimes, when I'm alone, Felicita comes to me and says, "Listen, you, don't you dare go saying I have a man or I'll slap your mouth hard enough to make the blood come." When she says that, I always answer, "And why do you spend all your time with men instead of taking care of your children? You better pay some attention to us because if you don't I'm going to go live with Fernanda."

I think my *mamá* doesn't love us. When children are left alone all the time, it means their *mamá* does not love them. Isn't that right? Look, she would get up and go away and when I asked her, "Where are you going?" she answered, "To hunt goats."

"What! You really mean it? If you are going to hunt goats you'll have to take the children along. Those kids are badder than the Devil and I'm not going to look after them for you. If you go out, you'll have to take us all with you."

Then Felicita went to New York, so Grandma Fernanda took me to live with her. It was swell, living with Fernanda, she's nice. She used to buy us sneakers and lots of other things. She gave us toys for the Day of the Three Kings—and put up a Christmas tree. That was when I met Hector, Grandma's husband. He was nice. He gave me nickels. He was crazy about me. You know what he said to me? He said, "I love you so much I don't ever want to lose you." He took me to parks, he took me to the merry-go-round, he took me to the beach.

Afterwards Felicita came back from New York and took us to live with her, but she has never taken care of us. What she did was leave us at my Aunt Crucita's house and give her money to buy malt beer* for us.

You know, Cruz sometimes plays dirty tricks on me. She locks me up and makes me work. But I don't sleep there, I sleep at Fela's house. Sometimes Cruz bolts the door so that the kids can't

go out. When she does that I take something to cover myself with and I go to sleep in a car that's parked beside the house. It's better out there. Like last night, Cruz didn't put a diaper on her baby girl and I rolled over in my sleep and got her shit all over me. And then Cruz quarrels with me because she thinks I'm the one that shits on the bed. But I don't do that. I help clean up the house.

What happens is that Felicita works in a bar giving people things and all that. She leaves home at about five in the afternoon and comes back at midnight. We have to stay in the house all by ourselves but that's all right. I myself told her to get a job because she doesn't have a husband to give her money. Edmundo, the husband she used to have, behaved real well. He worked on a coffee plantation doing all kinds of work with a *machete*. He had us kids with him, in a room in Salinas. The house we lived in was little, like an ant, and the sink was broken. There were woods near the house and we used to go there to get firewood, yams, bananas and all that. Sometimes I pulled off a banana and ate it. When we got home, Felicita put firewood in a stone hearth and she'd light the wood with a match and cook there.

Ah, how I liked the country. There were rivers where I could bathe and everything was nice and clean. And I knew a pretty girl with white skin and black hair who lived there. Her name was Carmen Rosa. I whistled when she went by because I was in love with her. She was my sweetheart.

Edmundo wasn't bad, he behaved well. But one day Felicita said, "I'm going to visit my *mamá*." Edmundo had given her five dollars to buy food but she used it to pay the fare to San Juan, without even asking his permission. A few days later, Edmundo showed up at La Esmeralda,* hopping mad, and said he never wanted to see Felicita anymore. That was just what Felicita wanted, so then they broke up and she went and got herself a room at Papo's and moved in there with all us kids.

Well, so now Felicita doesn't have a husband anymore. She has to hustle to get money for breakfast. She usually prepares our breakfast herself. But sometimes she doesn't have money and then I take a nickel and get myself some bread and butter and coffee.

One bad thing Felicita does is to bring men to the house. She's always going out with Cuco. And she often asks me, "Have you seen Cuco?" I always answer, "No." Because you know, when Cuco goes to the house he gets into bed with Fela and they do bad things. I say to him, "If you can sleep

*An old and colorful slum in San Juan, built between the ancient fort walls and the sea.

*A nonalcoholic beverage.

in my *mamá's* bed, I can too." Then they pull the sheet up over my face. I can't breathe like that, so I soon pull it off and catch them screwing. So I cover my eyes with my hand and move to the couch.

There's an American she also takes home to screw. I cover my face when they are at it but I peek at them through my fingers. They begin to play in the bed and after a while they start jumping. Then I know what's coming—oops! they throw me down on the floor. I pick myself up and go to sleep on the couch. Then they have the bed all to themselves. Sometimes it comes over me all of a sudden. "How terrible—Felicitita doing bad things." But nobody dares tell me anything like that about her. Besides I'm always alone.

One night I had gone to bed when I heard men laughing in my house. When I see what they are up to I try to make them go away. I pull the man's legs to make him fall, Puerto Rican or American, it's all the same to me. Then I take a piece of charcoal and paint my face black as I can. I put on a pair of old gloves and take a stick to carry over my shoulder. I think maybe they'll get scared and run away, seeing me like that. I wish Felicitita would stop doing the things she does with men. Those things are bad and God will punish her.

I don't even like to have her do it with Cayetano who gives her five dollars every time she goes to his house. Cayetano is a long, skinny old man who has lots of money. One day he bought thirty dollars' worth of food for Felicitita. I don't know where all the money comes from. Maybe he gets it from a cave, or from the bank. The thing is, he gives me money too, quarters. And pomade for the hair and for the face. Last year, the Three Kings left presents for me at his house—balls, a machine gun, a revolver. They left a revolver for Mundito and a tea set for Tany. Angelito got a holster and Evita a doll that said, "Eeeee."

The trouble with Cayetano is that when Felicitita doesn't go to him, he gets mad and comes and complains to me about her. "I'm angry with you," he says; "I don't want to see that tramp in my house ever again." But that's a lie. He's never stopped being interested in her. When he gets to talking like that, I always tell him, "I don't know anything about that. You and Fela solve your own problems, I'm fed up. Some day I'm going to

sneak out when you aren't looking and never come back again."

When I see a ship coming I say to Felicitita, "Look, see what's coming? A *gringo* ship. Just the thing for you." That makes her laugh. "All right, tell me when it comes in, maybe one of my Americans is on it." When she says that, I run out into the street and play until I tire myself out. That way I can't see the ship come in.

An ugly, thick-lipped American called Walker comes in one of those ships. He comes to our house and goes to bed there and everything. "Look," I say to him, "I don't like you, so there." He's mean to me, you know. Sometimes he curses me out and other times he scares me.

There's a picture of him and Fela with their arms around each other. I'll have to tell Fela to get rid of that picture. If Edmundo should ever come to the house and see it, he'll chop Felicitita's head off with his *machete*.

II

Felicitita was going to take Angelito and me to our *papá* and leave us with him because he stopped sending money to buy us clothes and shoes. Someone told him something bad about Felicitita and the money stopped coming. Felicitita went to Court so they would make Angel take us but he didn't want us either.

Angel is my *papá* and sometimes I think I would like to stay with him. But no, he doesn't like children. Besides I won't go there to stay because his house looks like a worm and the roof is all black. He lives way off, in Culebra, where it's as cold as the inside of a refrigerator and muddy all over.

I didn't want her to, but Fela took us to Culebra anyway. It turned out we all had to go back home with Fela because Angel had the chest sickness and couldn't keep us. It got to be almost five o'clock, time for the ferry to start back to Fajardo and his *maí* bawled him out because he hadn't given us money for the fare until he finally gave Felicitita five dollars, which is what it cost.

We got back to La Esmeralda and I was mad as hell because of what Felicitita had done. I don't want her to do that to us. I stayed out in the street until it was dark. Then I got hungry and went over to Crucita's for a malt beer.

That night I said to myself, "Oh, if I could ever have some peace!" Sometimes I don't like being alive. I lay down on the floor and fell fast asleep. Suddenly I woke up because something was going boom, boom. "What can that be?" I asked myself. "Could the door be banging like that?" Then I looked outside and saw Nanda and Hector fight-

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ing. "Listen," I jumped up fast and yelled at them, "don't fight!" Then I ran out. I thought, "Well, they had to fight some day. But this fight is something people will talk about because Nanda and Hector are really hitting each other hard." Hector was all bloody where Nanda had scratched him with her long fingernails. Right in the middle of the fight, a cop walks by and sees them.

Those cops! They are the real bad ones. Bullies, that's what they are. When I see a cop, I feel like snatching away his club and bashing him over the head with it. They are like the undertow, because the undertow carries people away and so do the cops, only the cops are worse.

Well, the day of the fight, late in the morning, I see Hector around there and ask him, "What happened in Court? Say, what's the matter with you, fighting like that? Don't you know they can lock you up in jail and then you won't have anybody to get you out?" It's expensive to get someone out of jail. It costs a hundred dollars.

Felicita wants me to go to school. But sometimes she sends me there at one, knowing that it's too late, or at nine, which is too early. I don't like school because it's so big. And the bell rings so early it makes me mad because I know I can't get out again until five. Sometimes the teacher hits me right on top of those infected boils I have, thinking I have done something bad. I never do anything bad. I just sit there quietly without saying a word. All they do at school is to study and read books, and I can hardly read at all. I would like to learn but I don't know how.

Felicita beats us for any little thing. One day she made me bleed, she hit me so hard with a stick. She thought I had socked Tany but it was the other way around: Tany hit me and bit my ear. I cried a lot that time, not because my feelings were hurt but because I was so mad.

III

I don't love my brothers and sisters. Angelito, well, he's my twin and is just like me but Cousin Catín used to say that Felicita loved him more than me. When she said that I'd answer, "Well, what can I do? But if she loves Angelito how can she help loving his twin?" Angelito has "bad" hair and thick lips. He and I used to go out together and defend each other. One day I was fighting four boys and Angelito came up and gave one of them a black eye. I socked another one so hard that he bled. But then Angelito and I separated. He would go one way and I another. But when I got something he claimed it had to be for both. If I got myself a girl, Angelito would say, "She's my

sweetheart." One day we fought and I made one of his eyes all puffy. We fought all the time.

I don't like my other brother, Mundito, either, that goes without saying. He's bad as they come. If he wants a penny, you have to give it to him, whether you want to or not. When I'm eating, he sits there and stares at me. And he won't let me sleep. With Felicita away, drinking beer and then coming home so drunk and sleepy that I have to take her shoes off because she isn't sober enough to do it herself, I'm the one who gets screwed. I say to Mundito, "Look here, if you don't let me sleep with your shitting and yelling, I'll beat you up." He steals Fela's money too. He once took a dollar from Fela's purse and lost it. She beat him up for that. And then she tells me to watch Mundito. "Listen," I say to her, "I'm not supposed to be the watchman around here. Take your purse with you. Don't leave it lying around if you don't want your money stolen."

The only one I love a little bit is Evita. I saw her being born. It was on a Friday. Fela was lying in bed, with the curtain drawn so nobody could look in. A nurse-doctor came to take care of her and put on some gloves of the kind that don't make any noise. I was out in the porch when they called me to see my new baby sister. I looked at her a long time. She was crying. They slap newborn babies, you know, to make them cry. Sometimes I take care of Evita, a little bit. But for all of that, I still don't want to live with Felicita because of the things she does. I'd rather live alone and work in the docks, like Hector did when he left Nanda.

Listen, I can take care of myself. I don't get lost and I'm not afraid of cars. I go all over San Juan and Felicita doesn't even know it because she isn't at home. I'll tell you one thing, though, I always walk alone.

There's one good thing, I haven't gone hungry too often. Lots of the people around will give me something to eat. There's *don* Luis. I always get food when I go to his house. Bertha, *don* Luis' wife, feeds me too. So do a lot of other people. I go there to watch TV and they give me dinner.

When I'm hungry and no one gives me anything to eat, I go buy a malt beer before going to bed. If I have no money, I hang around a little longer to see if someone will offer me food. If not, I go to Crucita's house. But if Felicita hasn't given Cruz money to buy malt beer that day, I go hungry, because Cruz doesn't have any money herself.

When I'm hungry I get mad. I don't say anything about it and I get into bed. But then I begin crying and picking quarrels. Oh, how I wish *don* Luis were my *papá*! Then he would give me lots of food and I would grow big like him.

I would like to work, but I enjoy playing too. I play horsie—you hold on to something and go running and yelling, “Hee, haw, hee, haw, horsie.” I would love to have a swing. I asked the Three Kings for one, but they don’t come until you fall asleep so I didn’t get to see them and tell them.

I like to go to church. I go every Sunday, to that one on Tetuan Street. The captain (the chaplain) is there and a Dominican woman. We can paint there, with crayons or brushes. And they give us food, too, ice cream and lots of things. I also go to Father Ponce’s church. *Don Luis* and *Bertha* often pray to God there, together with the Sisters of Charity and Father Ponce. They help one to get into Heaven. You need a lot of help to get there and sometimes you have to help your friends get there, too. They put something white in your mouth and then it disappears. You aren’t supposed to swallow it.

I know a prayer: the one you say before going to sleep. It goes like this, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” I learned it hearing people say it when someone dies. Did you know that when someone dies he comes back as a monster? I have seen that on TV, in “The Premiere of the Beyond,” and in the movies. People pray for the dead and go to church to keep the monsters from coming back.

God is good to me. He’s always following me around to see if I can go to Heaven. Christ is good. He comes from Heaven. Sometimes I dream I am there with him, as an angel. It’s so nice to see myself in Heaven.

IV

Felicita told me she was going to send me to New York to live in Uncle Simplicio’s house. He wants me there. In New York, I can go to school and learn English to speak with Americans. Then I can get a job as a cook or get a job at the docks and earn lots of money. That way, when people are broke, I can give them money for food.

I want to grow up so they’ll quit screwing me. Grown-ups are big bullies. When I’m grown up I can lift weights and drive cars because by then I will be earning money. And then I can get married. I’ll find me a grown-up girl so I can be a real man and have sons and daughters. I’ll have a job and give her money so she can make our dinner. When I get home from work, I’ll hand her the money and kiss her. If she gets sick, I will send her to a doctor. When she’s going to have a baby I’ll take good care of her. And we will never quarrel or anything.

I told everyone I was going to New York and it was true. Felicita bought all new clothes for me.

She bought me a suitcase and it was packed and ready. On Sunday we were supposed to go. I said, “Okay, I’m leaving.” By seven I was all dressed.

I got to the airport at around nine. My grandmother, my *mamá*, and my Aunt Crucita went to see me off. When I said goodbye, I kissed my mother and grandmother and said to them, “Your blessing.” Then I was sorry for them because they were crying. But I wasn’t sad, I was happy.

I was thinking, “Maybe I’ll never go back again so at Christmas and for Mother’s Day, I am going to send my grandmother perfume and powder, the kind that smell a lot. Or maybe Uncle can save enough money to bring my grandmother up to New York for Christmas.”

Well, the plane took off about ten and we didn’t see each other anymore. The plane was so full that it looked as if it would fall down. I wasn’t a bit scared because I wasn’t alone. An American was taking care of me. And when we landed I’d be with my Uncle Simplicio and Aunt Flora.

I arrived at twelve. Oh, I felt happy! I didn’t know what New York was like. In Puerto Rico the trees were full of leaves, all green and pretty. Here, they looked dried up, as if they had been through a hurricane. I asked Aunt about it and she said, “Oh, no. It’s because of the cold.”

“Ah,” I said, “then it’s all right.”

We took a bus, which cost a lot of money—eight dollars. Eight dollars to get in! Then we had to get off and take a taxi for five dollars and finally change to another bus which charged six and took us all the way to Uncle’s place.

I feel very happy here with Uncle and Flora. They treat me well. Here I dream that this is a royal palace and I’m the prince and that’s why they love me so much. But my mother Felicita told me before I came, “Be careful what you say about me up there.” She thought I was going to tell everybody that she spends her time hanging around bars and leaves us all alone. But I said to her, “Oh, no, I won’t say anything. I’ll tell lies there.” I had forgotten all about it when she sends a letter here saying that at home I used to run off to the beach and never paid any attention to her. And she wrote too, “Goodness knows what he says about me up there.”

She was scared, you see, because she was living with an American. Felicita thought I was going to tell that up here. But all I did was to tell my aunt, “When you write, tell that rat I’m not saying anything bad about her. Tell her too that I am never going back to Puerto Rico until I grow up and that I’m going to school already.”

What I’d like is for Uncle and Aunt to have a baby in the house. I soon outgrow my shoes and

if they had a little boy, he could wear them. I wish Angelito were here with me. My mother just has to send him because we are twins and if we aren't together we miss each other. I'd like to have lots of sisters too . . . nice sisters who would write to me. So that when I'm grown-up they'll be my family. But the trouble is that if my mother goes and has a lot more children, there won't be anybody to help her support them and then I won't be able to buy food for all of them.

Aunt Flora has a job at a factory. She sent for her sister Irene. She's not related to Uncle at all but he paid her fare over so that she could come take care of me. One hundred dollars it cost us.

I took all my things out of my suitcase so Irene could use it and I put my stuff in an old suitcase. I even went to meet Irene at the airport. And after all I did for her, you should hear the way she insults me now. She tells me to go to hell but I get right back at her. I say, "Go to hell yourself! I have more right to be here because I got here before you did. You shouldn't curse me like that because I'm not bad. I am a good boy. If I were bad, I would have kicked you out of here already."

She slept in my bed and I'd say to her, "You'd better lie with your head to the footboard and I'll lie with my head up." Then, after I fell asleep, she'd take my pillow away from me. What a witch!

They said someone had to go with me the day I enrolled in school, so she took me there. Then she went and said I was in first grade. I said, "No, I am in *second grade*." She didn't do anything right. And on top of everything, she beat me. She hit my fingers and made my nails black. She even cut me up.

I like going to school here because this place is new to me. The school would be really good if they spoke Spanish as well as English. I don't like to be spoken to in English because I don't understand it. People speak English in such a way that one can't understand anything. I tell the teacher, "*I don't speak English*." If she gives me a paper and I don't understand what's written on it, I say, "*Teacher, I don't know*." She gives me low marks because I don't know anything. There's one teacher who knows Spanish, but even she teaches in English. All, all of them teach in English.

The kids are bad as the Devil. They push me. There are all kinds of kids there, Americans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Negroes. Those Negroes hide so they can stick out their leg and trip you. The Chinese pull my ears. There's a real mean kid called Bushelman who grabs my little ass. So, you see, I don't have any friends in school.

There's a little girl called Karen—I wasn't doing anything bad to her, just touching her under the

table, when she suddenly kicked me in the ribs with the heel of her shoe. I don't know how to speak with her because I don't know English. Then I called a little boy and told him, "Say something to her." You know what he did? He burst out laughing. "Haw, haw." I waited until school let out at three, then I really got hold of him. I hit him so hard, he bled. Teacher didn't see us. I never fight in front of her because if I did, she'd take me to the Principal's office.

I like it here, no matter if I don't speak English. I speak English just anyhow but now people understand what I say. I can ask to leave the room in English and then I go to the toilet. I repeat whatever I hear the other kids say and that way I learn quickly. I hear something today and keep repeating so by tomorrow I'll have learned it. A *gato* here is a "cat," the *mesa* is called "table." This morning I wrote, "Today is Monday" in English. "Monday" means *lunes*. They call the *ventana* "window," and the *casa*, "home." Isn't it true that I am beginning to learn?

In the afternoon I usually go with my Uncle Simplicio to his girlfriend's house. She lives way off in Brooklyn. You have to take the Lexington Avenue train. When we get there we find all the rest of them drinking. I would have liked to stay outside. I didn't want to see what went on in there.

I wish I were a grown man. I dreamed that I was twenty years old. I bought myself an apartment, a bed, and a chest of drawers with a mirror. The bathroom was next to the bed. I lived with Carmen Rosa and got up early to go to work.

Then it was Saturday and I went out to buy the food, corn flakes and oatmeal, meat and milk, chicken, canned spaghetti, sausage, bread, sugar, laundry soap, well, everything. After that, I went to pay the furniture store. And when my wife was sick, I did the cooking. I was always good to her. I'm telling you, though, if she does anything to me, I'll have a fight with her. You know what women are—when a man is all screwed up and doesn't have a house and lots of things, that is when they walk out on him. Well, if my wife does that to me, then I'll really beat her.

In my dream I walked and walked until I met some people. I asked them the way to the Bronx and they told me to turn and keep walking until I came to a hill. So I kept going until I got to Aunt Soledad's house but nobody was home. I went into several bars. In one of them I played pool. A man came and bumped against me. I said to him, "No, no, I don't want to fight," because he had a gun. But I had a knife, so the other man gave up. I was big already.