

Mother and Son in a Puerto Rican Slum

Part I: Felicita

by Oscar Lewis



Introduction: *In an effort to improve our understanding of low-income Puerto Ricans, their style of life, their problems, and the process of adjustment in New York, I have done a two-year study of one hundred Puerto Rican families in four slums of Greater San Juan and of their relatives in New York.*

I have excerpted for Harper's my tape-recordings with a Puerto Rican woman, Felicita, and her seven-year-old son, Gabriel, both of which will be included in my book, In the Life, to be published by Random House in 1966. The Felicita section follows; the tape-recording of the son Gabriel will appear in the January issue. (The names of persons and places have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the subjects.)

Approximately a million Puerto Ricans now live in the United States, over 600,000 in New York. Most of them live in poverty; they have a very low education level (the lowest of any ethnic group in New York City), a high incidence of mental disability, and a high rate of tuberculosis, conditions which reflect the poverty of their native land. Because of the dramatic and inspiring progress of

Puerto Rico since 1940, we tend to forget that it is still a very poor country, twice as poor as the poorest state in the United States.

In 1960, 42.7 per cent of all families reporting monetary income had less than \$1,000 a year; 80 per cent had less than \$3,000. Fourteen per cent of the population were still unemployed, 15 per cent of all families were on relief, and 20 per cent received food allotments.

In 1960, 58.5 per cent of the males and 85.1 per cent of the females between fourteen and nineteen—approximately 100,000 Puerto Ricans—were neither in school nor in the labor force. These are much higher figures than for 1950.

The persistence of a Puerto Rican way of life, especially among the low-income group, even after many years of residence in the United States, is the result of several factors, one of which is the maintenance of close ties with Puerto Rico. Indeed, one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Puerto Rican migration to the States is that it is a two-way rather than a one-way movement. In 1960, there was a total net migration to the United States of 20,000, but Puerto Ricans made

almost a million trips back and forth, taking advantage of the inexpensive plane fare between New York and San Juan.

One of the major obstacles to more rapid and significant progress in the current war against poverty is the great gulf that exists between the values and way of life of the very poor and those of the middle-class personnel—teachers, social workers, health workers, and others—who bear the major responsibility in carrying out these programs. We know a great deal about the statistics and economics of poverty, but we are only beginning to understand the psychology and inner life of some of the very poor. In the case of the Puerto Ricans, many of whom have come from rural areas or urban slums, the obstacles to understanding are even greater because of the barrier of language and the differences between cultures. And while Puerto Ricans have been one of the most surveyed and studied groups, most of the studies have been of a questionnaire type and have told us too little about the intimate details of their lives and the conditions which have formed their character.

In the Life is the story of a family from La Esmeralda, an old and very colorful slum in San Juan, built on a steep embankment between the city's ancient fort walls and the sea. Although only ten minutes from the Governor's palace and from the heart of old San Juan, La Esmeralda forms a little community of its own with about 3,600 people who live in 900 houses squeezed into an area of less than five city blocks long and a few hundred yards wide. Most of the houses are fairly large wooden structures set on cement bases, with overhanging porches and balconies. Many houses are painted in various shades of blue, green, or yellow; many are unpainted. Seen from above, La Esmeralda looks prosperous because all the buildings are roofed with new green tar paper, a gift from the Mayoress.

From the wall above, down to the sea, the physical condition of the houses becomes poorer and poorer and the social status of the people becomes correspondingly lower, until at the beach itself, the poorest people live in the most dilapidated houses. To live on the beach is dangerous. Only recently, fifty homes were destroyed by high waves in a single night and the residents had to be moved to public housing projects. The beach is the dirtiest part of La Esmeralda. Several large conduits, broken in places, carry sewage down to the sea, and the beach is swarming with flies and littered with trash—garbage, human feces, beer bottles, condoms, broken beds, and rotted wood. But the people of La Esmeralda use the beach for bathing, for lovemaking, for fishing, and when hungry for collecting snails and crabs. They raise pigs there because of the abundant supply of garbage. The beach is also a refuge for dope addicts (the so-

called "tecatos") who gather under the pile houses to inject themselves.

To the people of Greater San Juan, La Esmeralda has a bad reputation. Most middle-class people are afraid to go there, and even doctors refuse to make house calls. To the residents themselves, however, La Esmeralda is a relatively elegant and healthful place, with its beautiful view of the sea, its paved streets, the absence of mosquitoes, the low rentals, and its nearness to their places of work. Despite the poverty and occasional violence, the general mood of the people of La Esmeralda is one of gaiety. They are outgoing and friendly, with relatively little distrust of outsiders.

The people earn their living in a large number of occupations. By far the greater proportion of the men are laborers and longshoremen working on the city docks; others work in restaurants or hotels and in other service occupations. Very few men or women from La Esmeralda work in factories. Some women are maids in homes or hotels in the city, some are sales workers or clerks. Many of the women work within La Esmeralda taking in washing and ironing. An unusually large number of women—compared to other slums in Greater San Juan—work as prostitutes catering to longshoremen and to visiting sailors and soldiers. Approximately 30 per cent of the families have had some history of prostitution.

The Ríos family, portrayed in *In the Life*, is one of thirty-two sample families selected for this study in the La Esmeralda slum. The two principal criteria of selection was low income and the presence of relatives in New York. Forty-seven per cent of the sample families had an annual income of less than \$1,000; the average for the sample was \$1,370. Felicita was well above the average with an estimated income of about \$1,700.

The family consists of five households, a mother and two married daughters in La Esmeralda and a married son and daughter in New York. The mother, Fernanda Fuentes, a Negress, age 40, is now living with her sixth husband. Her children—Soledad 25, Felicita 23, Simplicio 21, and Cruz 19—were born to Fernanda while she was living in free union with her first husband Cristóbal Ríos, a light-skinned Puerto Rican.

Felicita, a slim, attractive mulatto less than five feet tall, is the mother of five children by three husbands. Her son Gabriel, age seven, and his twin brother Angelito are Felicita's eldest children by her first husband. Felicita lives with her children in a wooden house near the beach, in a two-room apartment which she rents for \$12 a month. A flimsy partition separates her apartment from her neighbor with whom she shares a common porch and toilet. Felicita has no kitchen and cooks on a two-burner kerosene stove. A leaking faucet in the toilet is the only source of water; the electricity was shut off because the bill had not been paid.

—Oscar Lewis

Felicita

I

When I was a child my stepmother told me that my *mamá* was a prostitute but I didn't believe her. I said I wanted to see my *mamá*, to know her, and my stepmother would say that there was no reason for me to see that bitch because she was no mother, the way she treated us. She said that my *mamá* didn't want to cook for us and that she went out with men, carrying on and drinking and leaving us dirty and alone at all hours of the night.

I didn't care what my stepmother said. I was sad because my *mamá* and *papá* were living apart and the only thing I wished was that they'd get together again so they could be a good example to us.

My *mamá* tells me that my father was mean to her, that sometimes he didn't give her money for food and there wasn't anything but corn flour for us to eat. She would have to go and wash clothes in order to feed us. So when the army sent my *papá* to French Guiana, she took a lover and ended up pregnant, and when my father came back he found her with a big belly. She tried to blame it on him but he said how could the child be his if he had been away for a year and a half? Well, they were fighting over it so much that they separated. I was about five then.

My stepmother, Hortensia, had moved to San-turce from the country and was living next door to us. She began making eyes at my *papá*, and this and that, until he fell in love with her. He said, "All right, I'll marry you, but my children must stay with me." She was angry but she accepted us because my *mamá* didn't want to take care of us.

Hortensia mistreated us kids and didn't want to cook for us or send us to school. According to my godmother, my stepmother would throw our bread and food to us on the floor. She didn't want to buy us clothes, and would beat us if we sat down in the living room. Once my sister Cruz was crying and Hortensia went and grabbed her and threw her to the floor and that's why she is lame, although my stepmother says it was meningitis which made Cruz a cripple.

Once when my *papá* was not in Puerto Rico, my real *mamá* came to the house and said she wanted to see my sister Soledad. My stepmother was frightened because people said my *mamá* carried a Gem razor in her mouth. So my *mamá* took my sister out for a walk and didn't bring her back. My stepmother didn't really want to have us anyway and she kept saying, "Oh, if that

woman would only come and take all of you." Then my *mamá* came and won over my brother and, after that, Cruz. Finally I was the only one left.

When I'd get home from school, my stepmother would have coffee and things ready for her boys but nothing for me. She didn't want me to play with anybody or to have friends. She wanted me just to stay in the house. If she saw me talking to a girl friend, she would spank me. I told her that I was going to stay with my *mamá*. She said that was a good idea because I was going to be a whore just like my *mamá* was.

I loved my *papá* very much. He would give me anything I asked for. And if I got sick, he looked after me and took me to the hospital and he himself would prepare the remedies. He is a fine man, my *papá*, but he was not very happy with my *mamá* or with my stepmother either, although he always did what she told him to. He set up a home for her, bought her furniture, and bought her a house right off, something he never did for my *mamá*. He bought another house that cost him \$3,800 but he gave it to a friend for \$80 one day when he had a fight with Hortensia and got drunk.

Papá behaved very well with my stepmother, even though he liked to run around with women and once she wanted to divorce him. At first, when he'd cash his paycheck he wouldn't give any of it to her, but later he turned all his money over to her, as if she had him tied up. It seems to me she must have put some kind of a spell on him because she kept going to the spiritist. She had *taltage* sticks all over the place, and crosses, lighted candles, saints, and prayers and such. And she burned a lot of incense in the house, to hold him in check.

She did as she pleased in the house. There were times when she would even beat him! What happened was that my father had a girl friend and he'd come home drunk. One day Hortensia got hold of him and was going to throw him down a staircase with seventy-three steps. I had to go out and yell for the neighbors because he couldn't get up and she was on top of him. She broke a chair over him and he couldn't get out of bed for a week. That's how forward she is with him.

Oscar Lewis has been professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois since 1948. His books dealing with Mexican life, including "Five Families," "The Children of Sanchez," and "Pedro Martínez," employed the technique used here and aroused remarkable critical and popular interest. Several of the Mexican characters appeared in articles in "Harper's" in 1961 and 1964.

II

I was living with my *mamá* and stepfather Pedro when I met Angel and we became sweethearts. He was a soldier at Fort Brook. He came to my house but my mother took a dislike to him from the start. She spent her time in the bars playing dice and getting drunk but she wouldn't let me go out with Angel. She was always scolding me and never gave me the things I needed. So one day I went off with Angel. He was twenty-six and I was fourteen.

On the way to his mother's house he told me he was going to marry me, that he had a house all ready for me. But we never married. His *mamá* was opposed to it because he was white and I was colored. We lived in her house for four months and I got pregnant. He had prayed for me to become pregnant but when it happened he turned awfully mean. He would come home drunk after spending his money and would beat me all over, kick me in the belly, and knock me on the floor. Once he gave me a kick that knocked me into an open dresser drawer. Then he picked me up in the air by one arm and one leg and dropped me into a chamber pot full of urine.

Finally my twins, Gabi and Angelito, were born. They were tiny babies. One weighed three pounds and the other four. Little bits of things. I had to put a pillow under them to be able to pick them up to nurse them. The two of them would cry at the same time and whatever one did the other did. They would get sick at the same time too, so I had to carry them both. It was terrible. Angel continued to get drunk and mistreat me and he wanted no part of the children. One day I told him I was going to leave so he beat me up and gave me a black eye. So after living with Angel for two years I went back to La Esmeralda with my mother.

One day a friend of mine, Zulma, who was in the profession, took me to Papo's bar to introduce me to a young man. He looked as nice as could be. He was well-dressed, and from the way he behaved you could tell he must come from good people. I told him I had children but he said he didn't care. He said he wanted to live with me and would support my children. I was only sixteen then and very ignorant. I fell for anything people told me. And on top of that I had to worry about feeding the two boys. Lots of time I gave them sugar water because I didn't have money for milk. So I let myself get tied up with Nicolás. After a week I had relations with him. I enjoyed being with him because after all I'm a woman and have sensations. He said he wasn't married but when he learned

that I was pregnant he told me he was married and would have to break off with me. He kept seeing me for a while at night but he never brought me anything except a can of juice. I was three-months pregnant when he abandoned me.

When I had the baby he said she wasn't his. But after the little girl's features began to form, people told him her face was a copy of his. As soon as he saw her he burst out crying because he could see that she resembled him. The next day he accepted her as his and gave me five dollars. The next week he gave me three more and that was the last.

I kept on fighting and fighting to keep afloat. I was in bad shape, very bad shape, and decided to go to New York. So I sent word to my father, who was now in Virginia, that if he didn't want his daughter to become a prostitute he'd better help me find some way to get to New York. So he said he would, and the first week he sent me fourteen dollars and then twenty after that.



My twins were only two and a half years old when I left them with their grandmother. I felt terrible about it but what could I do? I went to Virginia to live with my *papá* and stepmother. On the plane I imagined myself in the States, struggling through the snow, surrounded by luxurious buildings, like in the movies. I dreamed that I was going to be rich. "I'll work and get money together and find my happiness there." That's what I told myself and that's why I went.

My stepmother, Hortensia, behaved well for a couple of days. After that I had to be washing and waxing and polishing the floors. I had to clean

the Venetian blinds and the furniture, cook and iron for her. The baby had begun to crawl and would grab my stepmother's little figurines. She broke one and my stepmother hit her so hard her little leg swelled up.

Then my stepmother began saying things to me. One day, she let me know that a spiritist had told her I was a witch. I was putting on some cologne and she says to me, "Oh, pfui, that stinks of witchcraft. And now that we are on the subject, I'll tell you that a spiritist said you were going to the cemetery to sorcerize me."

When my stepmother began to treat me badly I decided to go to my Uncle Simón's house and work to get the money for my fare back to Puerto Rico. My father's brother, Uncle Simón, had a wife and four children in Salem, New Jersey. The first time I asked him if I could stay with him, he kept quiet but then when I told him I was going to work and help him out, he said, "All right, come." They live well. They own a two-story house and have sets of furniture in the living room, dining room, and bedroom. They also have a very pretty, well-equipped kitchen.

In Puerto Rico, my uncle sold candy off a pushcart. He lived at Stop 26 and his house was built right in the mud. If they ate a chicken there, they couldn't afford to discard even the neck and feet. In the States they'll take nothing but the breast and the drumsticks. The rest they throw away. My uncle had almost forgotten how to speak Spanish. My cousins, his daughters, spoke only English. They had a dance at their house when we got there and they played only English records. When I explained to them that I only knew Spanish, they turned to the other girls and spoke to them. I remembered how miserably poor they had been and I felt very uncomfortable seeing them try to act as if they were better than other people.

What I'd like to do to people who show off talking English! If I could be Governor of Puerto Rico or the Mayor of New York for five or ten minutes I'd take a pistol and I'd shoot every Puerto Rican who has forgotten Spanish. It's a disgrace! It makes me uncomfortable to hear a Puerto Rican talk in such a ridiculous way. The modern teen-agers, for instance, are speaking a brand of English nobody can make head or tail of. They'll play an American record and exclaim, "*Ave Maria*, that's really sharp!" but if you ask them what the words mean, they have to shut up because all they can understand about that record is the name of the singer.

I'll speak English to an American if I have to, but forget my own language? Never! Latins should speak their native tongue at home. Those

who don't can't love their own father and mother.

Family doesn't count there in New York . . . money is behind whatever anybody does. I got a job in a canning factory belonging to Italians and I was supposed to give my uncle \$20 a week, just for food alone. I bought my own clothes and shoes and did my own laundry. If I didn't give my uncle the money on the day I was supposed to, he would go around with a sour look on his face.

The only ones who were nice to me were the neighbors and Iris, my uncle's wife. She would take me along with her wherever she went. You see, she was in love with a fifteen-year-old boy, he couldn't have been any older, and she put the horns on my uncle. She would say to me, "Look, go tell so-and-so to come over here to do an errand for me." And I would go and tell him. But my uncle said that I was the one who was influencing his wife and he kept scolding me until he finally drove me out of the house.

III

I met my husband, Edmundo, at my uncle's house. Edmundo is a little darker than I and his hair is wavy. He looks Spanish, short and thin, and was about twenty-four years old then. He was a friend of my uncle's and he came to a dance in the house. A week after we met, I went off with him. And when I got pregnant we were married.

Our first house in New Jersey was very pretty. After that we moved twice. All three houses were nicer than the ones in Puerto Rico, because I had a set of furniture and a carpet for the living room. There were big curtains to cover the glass windows, and I had a dining-room set and a lamp. There was a separate room for the children. Edmundo gave me a washing machine and, later on, he got himself a car. I had everything I needed. Edmundo earned \$64 a week in the winter working at the graveyard. He paid the rent, bought the groceries, and gave me spending money. In summer he got a job at the canning factory. And he gave me driving lessons. But I didn't learn much because his car was a '49 model Cadillac and it was too heavy for me.

Edmundo was a member of the Sacred Name of Jesus. That's why he married me. We got married, there in New Jersey, both in the Catholic church and before a judge. Before I could marry I had to make my First Communion. I got scared when they put that stuff into my mouth. The week before, I had to go to confession. I told the priest, "This is the first time I have confessed."

"Confess, then, my daughter," he said, "and tell me all your sins."

"Well, Father, I have committed adultery, I have wished my husband dead, I beat my children often, I like married men." Just like that I said it. After all, I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me.

He asked me, "What else?"

"Father, when I was a child I sneaked money from my stepmother and when she went out I went to the neighbors! When I lived with my *mamá*, I was always falling for the boys. I didn't obey her and I took stuff from the refrigerator without permission. One day, in a store, I saw a little pearly clip I liked. I put it in my hair and walked off without paying for it." I said lots more things that I've forgotten now. He asked me, see? So I answered. He talked a lot to me. He kept saying, "My daughter, you shouldn't do that, the Lord . . ."

I answered, "Yes, Father, I'll never do that again." When I finished he blessed me without giving me any more advice. It had taken me about an hour to confess. My knees hurt from kneeling so long.

Edmundo worked and I would help him out sometimes, taking care of children. Then he began putting money in the bank, saving and saving. He worked in a box factory, making boxes for apples, I think, until he had an accident and hurt a kidney and was in the hospital for a month and a half. When that happened I got four people together that I gave meals to. I had to get up at two in the morning to make their lunches and then had to have dinner ready at five in the afternoon when they came from work. I did this for a month and a half and made \$95 a week, but got even skinnier than I am now. I couldn't sleep because I was worried about getting up at two in the morning to cook. I couldn't rest in the daytime either because I was washing and ironing for the boarders and doing the other household chores.

When he came out of the hospital, Edmundo went back to work. I went back to the factory again for two weeks. I worked on the labor machine making piccalilli, soup, and spaghetti. Every year, in the summertime, they hire a lot of women. I made \$102 the first week and \$94 the second week. They pay like that because there is a lot of work in the summer, from seven in the morning till eight at night and that's a lot of hours! But you can make a lot of money. Edmundo bought his car, paid for the license, and paid off our debts with that money.

But being pregnant I had a bad belly and the smell of the tomato sauce at the factory made me sick. I couldn't work any more and Edmundo wanted me to keep on working. He claimed that

the money he earned wasn't enough. He'd burst out, "Ah, you're the only woman who doesn't work." I told him I didn't go because I knew I couldn't do it and I wasn't going to kill myself. And right there we began to quarrel. One day I almost threw myself out of a window on the second story of our house. He grabbed my arm to stop me. Every time he spoke about that business of me getting a job I got mad and swore at him. So we quarreled and he kicked me out of the house.

Finally I said, "All right, I'll take care of children to help you out a bit." I got thirty dollars for taking care of two children. I was with them from 7:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. I had to bathe and dress them and wash their diapers. I kept this job for seven months, until winter. I had about \$300 in a bank in New Jersey. The account was in my name. Edmundo was getting money from Unemployment Compensation, you know, and he didn't want them to go thinking he had any money.

We were getting along wonderfully then, but after the baby was born he began to go out with other women and to mistreat me. He would stay out all night and one day he chased me with a gun. And he'd bring his women to the house, telling me they were just friends. But a next-door neighbor explained to me that they were women he was going with because she had seen them at the movies and dancing at the club. So there we were, fighting again and everything.

In less than six months we went back to Puerto Rico to buy a house. We had saved \$900 in New York and Edmundo bought a wooden house in La Esmeralda for \$525. So now we had property, a house of our own. I thought it was very pretty inside. It had a refrigerator, a living-room set, curtains, figurines, and a radio. The floor was covered with linoleum. It had electricity too. Edmundo bought everything *cash* except the bed, which he bought on the installment plan.

I was well off and had every comfort at home. My only trouble was that I had a quarrelsome husband and he beat me. It wasn't jealousy because I never left the house. I don't know what it was, a kind of madness. It's only when Edmundo is sober that he's so unpleasant. When he's drinking, he's a good guy. He was even worse when we moved away from San Juan to Salinas, because he beat my little girl Tany too, and mistreated the twins. He made those little boys go out into the fields with him to dig yams and carry them down to the house on their backs. When I asked him not to beat the children, he'd say they could get out because, after all, they were not his and he didn't have to support them. He kept sharpening his *perrillo*, as they call a *machete* in Salinas, and say-

ing he was getting it ready for me and the boys. I got to be really scared of him.

He was always throwing me out of the house, too, just as he'd done in New York. I had warned him then. I said, "You know that I have no one in New York except my uncle, and I can't go to his house. But once we are back in Puerto Rico, if you do the least little thing to me, I'll leave you. When you feel happiest with me that's the day I'm going to leave you."

One Sunday he went to the farm and brought me oranges, grapefruit, and a whole sackful of vegetables. He filled up the refrigerator with all kinds of soft drinks, fruit juices, and other things. I cleaned the house from top to bottom that day. I gave him breakfast in bed and fed him his oatmeal with my own hands. Then I watched him go. As soon as he was out of sight, I got myself and the children ready. I had already packed the suitcases and hidden them under the bed.

I returned with the children to San Juan and went to my sister Cruz' house. I wrote to Edmundo telling him the children needed money. He sent me ten dollars every two weeks. One day he came to San Juan to fetch me back but I wouldn't go. He came two more times, trying to get me back, but I wouldn't go. Once I leave a man, I don't want him to pester me anymore. When I love, I love with my whole heart. I love blindly, I live as in a dream. And I'm jealous even if a fly approaches the man I love. But when a man fails me in anything, even if it's only once, I hate him. I hate him and hate him and I'd rather see him dead. That's why all three men I've had have ended up the same way. And all of them have wanted me back. But I just stopped loving them.

IV

I had no money because my husband didn't send me any. My sister Cruz was as poor as I. I would go to where my *mamá* worked to ask her for left-over food and half a dollar or so for milk. I practically went begging for about two weeks. I would often ask people for money for the children's breakfast. If the boys at Papo's bar invited me for a beer, I always said, "No. Give me the twenty cents instead."

I began seeing my friend Zulma again, and she helped me out sometimes. Zulma, the drug addict, helped me out, but my own *mamá* often denied me money, even when she had it. One day she told me that if I wanted money, there was plenty to be earned in La Marina, especially since the sailors were in. Sailors are free spenders, she said, and that day it happened to be payday. I

told my *mamá* that I would never do what she suggested. Time passed and my children got sick. I went to my *mamá* again to ask for money. This time she said she had money but not for me, because she had to spend on her husband. I asked her then, "What do you think, shall I go down to La Marina tonight?" All she answered was, "Well . . ."

I had thought of going down before because I saw that the women who were whores dressed well and had all kinds of luxuries and I wanted those things too. But I wanted advice from someone who might at least point out some other way. But my mother said, "Well, go ahead. There's good money to be made there. I was in the life for a long time and I made quite a bit of dough. All you have to do is get ready, put the children to bed, and wait until they fall asleep. Then you lock them in with a padlock. You can go out hustling this very night." She told me too, that *gringos* pay pretty well and that some old men would pay quite a bit of money when they knew it was a woman's first time as a whore.

It made me feel uncomfortable that my *mamá* should give me such advice. In fact, I didn't go to La Marina that night nor for many nights after that. But time passed, and none of my children's fathers ever sent money. When my children got sick again I got ready that same night. I told Cruz, "Edmundo doesn't send me any money, so I'm going to go out." She didn't argue but said, "Go if you want to, but be careful nobody cuts up your face and be sure you get home early." I put the children to bed and prayed to the Guardian Angel. I left them locked in with Cruz and went to the Silver Cup to find customers.

The people I meet at work often ask where I live, and when I answer, "La Esmeralda," they say, "*Ave Maria*, that's a terrible place!" But it used to be worse. When I first came to live there, the place was full of whores. There were lots of fights too. And many of the houses were right at the edge of the sea. Everything is different now. There are fewer fights and fewer whores. It's much more peaceful than it used to be.

Father Ponce did a lot to improve the place. When that priest first came here, people from La Esmeralda were going to church just to joke and have a good time and the drunks used the church as a place to drink. Father Ponce would say, "Inside the church, I'm the priest. But out here, I'm a man like any other." He'd take off his cloak, cross himself and punch any man or woman in the face. That's why we all were so fond of him. More people went to church when he was there.

Life in La Esmeralda can be very hard but it has its good side too. It's very gay during the Christmas season. Every family throws a party. It's an amusing place to live. There are drunks everywhere, dancing around and acting funny. You often can see naked people bathing at the beach too. And cops chasing robbers. With such good shows on the street, who needs the movies?

Still, the first thing I'd do if I won a big lottery prize would be to get a house somewhere else. I'd like to move with my children to a suburb or a housing development, someplace with a very different atmosphere. If I could afford to pay thirty dollars a month for an apartment in San Juan, I'd leave La Esmeralda, although in some ways I like it. Here I pay only twelve dollars a month and still there are times when I simply can't make ends meet.

At the Silver Cup I made good money on the first night, but after that I earned very little, ten dollars or so a night. Business dropped off and they had to close the hotel because the cops were going around arresting the women.

You can't imagine how low people are. Just because they have been lucky enough to find their happiness, they treat whores terribly. They have their homes and wives and children and they think that anyone who goes whoring must do it by choice. They think that if one is a whore one smokes marijuana, takes heroin, and steals—they get those three kinds of life mixed up.

But I'm telling you, I'd rather be with twenty thousand whores than with one honest woman. Because whores know more about life. Suppose I'm going down the street with a whore and someone starts to attack me. The whore, being used to blows, would come to my defense. But if I was with a housewife, an honest woman, her thoughts would be about herself and her own danger. She'd be afraid of losing her husband or getting cut up, so she'd run the minute she saw trouble.

There are some women who want to be whores from their earliest youth, even from childhood, I think. They do it for love of the art. They may have good opportunities and yet refuse to leave the life, because they really like it. Whores can dress well, go anywhere they please, dance, stay out all night. They enjoy the gaiety, the drinking, the good times at the beach. But all I ever think of is my children and the bit of food I'm earning for them. I keep hoping that some day I'll find a good man who will take me out of this life.

I always dream that some boy, a foreigner or even an old man whose eyelashes are gone, will come along and offer me a home. And when I tell him I have five children he'll say, "Never mind.

I'll take your five children too." If he ever comes, I'll accept him, even if I feel no love for him at first.

As far as I can see, no Puerto Rican ever has only one wife, he has at least two. There are women who throw themselves at other men, and, well, if a man is offered beefsteak, he doesn't turn it down. All the women cheat on their husbands, absolutely all of them. Everybody who comes to La Esmeralda gets ruined, even if he comes from the other end of the world. There is a kind of fever here that everybody catches. They say, "Ah, if that one does it, I will, too." But when I had a husband, I didn't even dare leave my house.

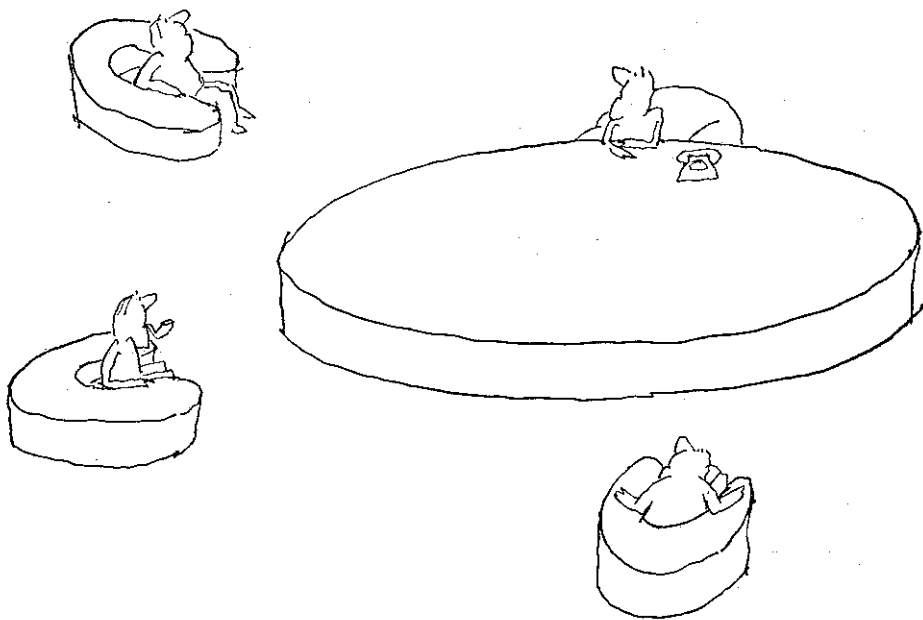
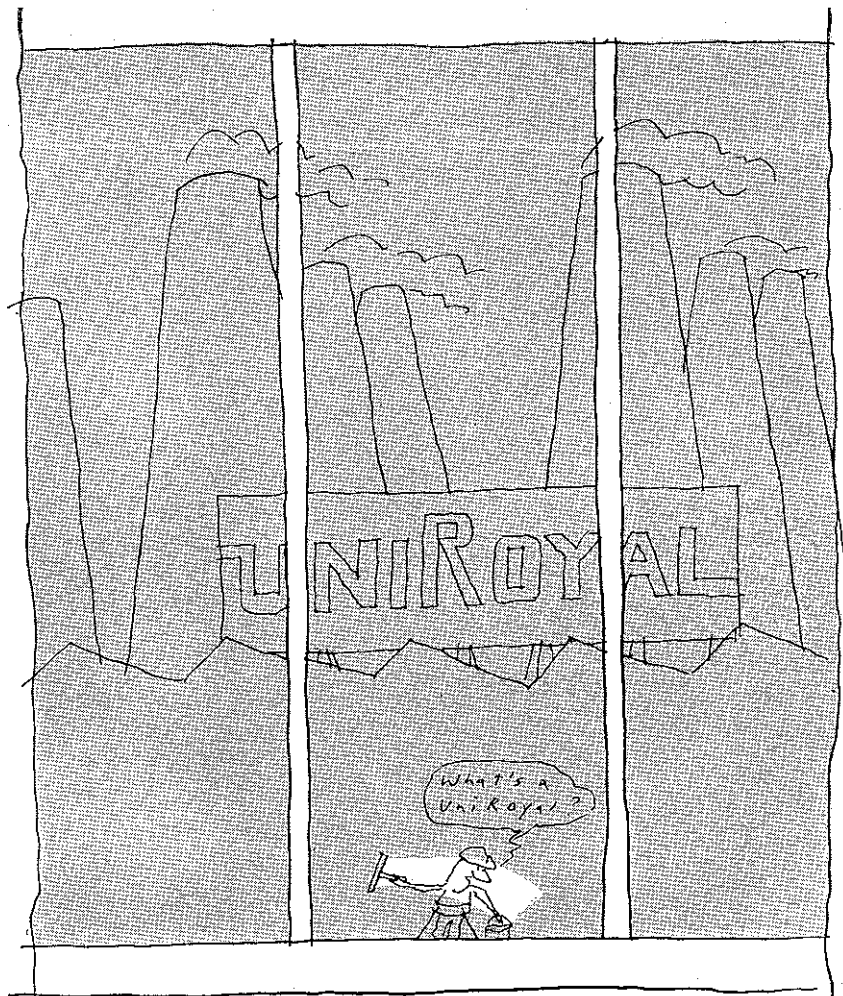
Once a spiritist told me that a man was going to fall in love with me and, as I wouldn't pay any attention to him because he was married, he was going to cut my face. She prepared some essence with my name hidden in it to protect me against evil and to wipe all such things out of his mind. It cost six dollars. I was to keep it in my brassiere all the time, but I lost it.

In order to dominate a man, the spiritist writes his first and last names on two pieces of paper and then drips some strong love essence, like "come-with-me," on them. She puts your name and your rival's name on top and folds it tight with those drops of perfume. She wraps all this in a piece of plastic and sews it with a needle and white thread. She makes some passes over it, then you take it and put it in your shoe or under your pillow. You can dominate a man with Saint Martha's or Saint Napoleon's prayer. You buy a red candle and the prayer of the Seven Restless Spirits, to make him uneasy outside the house and come back to you. You say the prayer backwards three times, light the candle from the bottom, say the first and last name of the person, stamp on the floor three times in the name of the woman. Then take a string and cut it into nine pieces. Take one by the end, another by the middle, and one by the other end, and throw them out of the house while saying the prayer. Do this for nine days.

There are many things like that and others which I have to look into more carefully. Some of this kind of work has turned out well for me. When Edmundo kept coming to my house, I bought mercury to make him go away. I threw it outside and that's why he left and has never come back.

V

When I went out hustling, I had to leave my children locked in at home. I used to leave them with Cruz but the next day she would insult me and want to know what made me so late. She'd say that I took better care of my boy friends than



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I did of my children and I would answer, "I have to, because they're the ones who give me cash."

I'm affectionate with my children. I love them because they're growing up without a father. I work hard for them and I suffer for them too. Christmas time is the worst because they expect new clothes and toys and I begin to think about what I can do, with no money and owing rent and payments on the furniture. Many people are sad at that time of year. The year Edmundo left me, I couldn't buy any presents for my kids. I started to cry right in the bar. A boy asked me what was the matter, and I told him.

"How many children do you have?" he asked me. "Five."

"Listen, stop worrying. I have seven, and last year I had no money for presents either. So I stole some." But when I need something, I'd rather pray.

What I'd like most for my children is for them to study and see if they can't make something of themselves. Not something very big, because I can't afford to send them to college. But I hope they at least finish high school, and have a trade so that they can get good jobs. And I'd like my daughters to be virgins and marry with a veil and crown. I want them to be decent people, better than I am. One should always live with hope. But as long as I stay in Puerto Rico, I don't see how I can get ahead.

I worry about my situation, about not having a husband. There are times when I can't even buy milk for the children. When I get hungry, *Ave Maria!* I get very nervous and can't stand to have anyone talk to me. I get very weak, too, and my stomach aches and I get cold all over. I lose my temper and snap at people, but I bear it as best I can and drink sugar water to make it go away.

I get fed up, but what can I do? Sometimes I feel like killing the children and then setting fire to myself. I have really thought of that and almost done it too. When I really get angry I punish those kids with fury. I do that because I want them to be well brought up. I beat them when they won't go to school but when I punish them, they stick out their tongues at me. The truth is, I don't punish them the way a mother should, because when they yell at me and don't obey, I feel myself getting tense all over. I lose my self-control when they jump about and start fighting each other. The little one hits the big one and the big one hits back. Then they make such an uproar that I don't know what to do. They begin to turn the house upside down and to say dirty words. That really makes me wild. I grab one of them and punish him. Sometimes I'll slap their faces. Other times

I'll take a strap and whip them on the legs or on the hands. I'll even hit them with the broomstick. But never hard enough to cause a dangerous injury.

I have told my boys to hit back when other children hit them, and if they don't, I beat them. Because it's up to me to develop their character. I don't beat them often, only about once a week when I've had all I can take.

I don't know what my kids think of me because I've never asked them if they love me or anything like that. Gabriel says that when he grows up he'll buy me a house and work to support me. And Angelito also says that he'll give me money when he works. Gabriel is brighter than Angelito in school. He can read well, add, and write his name. Sometimes when I take him to a store, he'll read the price tags for other people.

Mundito likes to play a lot. But he cries all the time and begs me for money. He's only two and a half and he already takes money out of my purse. Just now, when I went out, he asked me to light a cigarette for him. If he sees me drinking beer, he'll beg for some. He really likes it, too. Mundito is very troublesome and, in spite of being the youngest boy, he's always fighting. When he decides to hit somebody, it always has to be a bigger boy. I don't know what to do with that child because he's going to have his father's temper.

One time the twins wanted to watch TV and I told them, "All right, but let's go home and use the new TV set I just bought." They ran all the way home. When they got there they were mad at me because I had fooled them. There was no TV set at all. There was only a wooden box I had covered with a cloth. They began to cry so I said, "Do you want me to play with you?" I gave them a nickel for two rolls of caps and I told them to get their pistols. Then they hid behind the box and started shooting. Gabriel kept saying, "Ay, they killed me."

It makes me sad that the children call for their father so often. The other day, the baby kept saying *papá, papá*, and pointing outside every time she said it. That kind of thing makes me very sad. And so does the thought that I might get sick for a long time and have no one to support my children. My family would take care of them but that's not the same as their own mother. When I'm working, I buy them anything that catches their eye. If I could at least find somebody to take care of those kids I would look for a better job, because whoring is not my line.

Next Month: Gabriel, Age Seven