

# SANGRE MATRIARCA

*The Story of Women  
Who Persisted*



# MARIBEL RUBIO

## Chapter I

Maria de Jesus, or as everyone called her, Chuy, was born on New Year's Day in the year of 1934 in Atotonilco. It was a very small town with fewer than 200 inhabitants in the municipality of Santiago Papasquiaro, located in the Mexican state of Durango. This town was, as the saying goes, a "pueblo chico, infierno grande," a *small town as big as hell*. She was the fourth of seven children of Jose Carmen, a baker by trade, and Nasaria, a housewife.

Chuy lost her mother when she was seven years old. She died while giving birth to her seventh child, at the age of 33. Nasaria's death was somewhat ironic as it occurred on Mother's Day. In Mexico, Mother's Day is always celebrated on May 10<sup>th</sup> regardless of what day of the week it is.

The loss of her mother was a huge blow to Chuy. As the oldest sibling still in the household, she automatically became in charge of the younger children, including the newborn. The oldest three children had already gotten married and left the house to start their own families, despite their young ages of 17, 16, and 15. Although they would've liked to help, they had struggles of their own. Each had moved to the neighboring town of Los Herrera, which was not necessarily around the corner. Few people in the area had motor vehicles at that time, and 261 kilometers was a long way from home when they had to ride in a buggy pulled by a mule or a horse. They could hitch a ride with someone who had a truck and was going back to their hometown to visit family or do business once or twice a month, but that wasn't frequent enough to really help.

It was soon decided that Chuy had to leave school after completing third grade to take care of her three younger siblings. Her mourning increased with the absence of education. In a short time, she had lost what she loved the most: her mother, her limited freedom, and the opportunity to go to school.

She was a very smart child and she loved school. She loved learning and exploring everything she could get her young hands on. In the town of Atotonilco, not many children went to school after sixth grade. As a matter of fact, they were lucky if they finished sixth grade. Literacy levels were low or very basic. But Chuy wanted to be different; she wanted to know everything there was to know about every topic. Her curiosity and insatiable thirst for knowledge led her to fantasize about all the things she could do in life. She didn't know much about the world or opportunities that might have been available to her, but she knew she wanted more. Despite Chuy's small world, she had a great imagination. She loved learning so much that she never complained about the nearly five kilometers she had to walk one way. Chuy sometimes even walked barefoot across town and would trek out of the way to cross the river that separated the school from where her family's house was located. Along the way, Chuy would think of all the things that an education would afford her when she grew up. She

would fantasize about being a respected lady in the town. Her imagination would take her to places she would wish she could visit, places she had seen in some of the books she had access to in school, and she would keep her mind focused on those fantasies so as not to feel the elements and the harsh conditions of the land.

She always had shoes in the winter, but she was still very cold. Regardless of physical hindrances, Chuy enthusiastically attended every day of class. To help with the cold, she would imagine herself walking somewhere warm, with a beach maybe, to distract herself. The pictures of tropical sands she'd seen in books seemed glorious. She wished one day to see the ocean, but until that day, she would travel there in her mind.

Walking through frosted fields her body would shiver and her tiny fingers were almost frozen and unmovable, but her soul was warm and happy. In her mind, she could always sense the breeze of the ocean, cool on her skin with the radiance of the hot sun rays beating against her face and warming her cheeks. When she least expected it, she was at school, always on time. The same routine would work going back home. During the hotter days in the summer, her imagination would take her to cooler places, mostly she would remember the winter days and that would help her keep going forward. Her education was worth the inconveniences of the weather.

All of this ended the day fate snatched her mother from her and turned her juvenile life into a whirlwind of things that didn't make sense. From then on, her childhood was over, her freedom was gone, and her education was halted. There was nothing she could do about her new circumstances. Chuy's father worked long hours at a small bakery that was the only supplier of baked goods in Atotonilco. The shop owner had decided to expand his business by "exporting" to neighboring towns, so her father found himself working even longer hours. This helped him in a sense, by providing a bit more income to support his family, but there was no one to take care of the young children, especially the newborn. In her mother's absence, Chuy looked after them, bathed them, cooked for them, sent them to school, and tried with all her might to nurture the new baby, Jose Inés.

Being a child herself, she didn't have the skills or knowledge to take care of an infant. Some of the women who lived close by would stop in and give her a little help whenever they could. Some would take leftover food for them to eat, give them used clothes their children had outgrown, and give her advice on newborn babies. The whole community felt a sense of responsibility. In small towns, many people embrace the mentality that it takes a village to raise a child. However, Atotonilco was still a very small and underprivileged town, and even with all the help, it still wasn't enough. Everyone felt sorry for the baby and they felt sorry for the children. They all wished Carmen didn't have to wait an entire year of mourning to be able to get married again. It was obvious that he needed to have proper help with his small children. Unfortunately, customs were strong and he had to follow the conventional social etiquette. Chuy's father couldn't just start dating or courting anyone, even if it was for the good of his family. Traditions were meant to be followed, despite everything. Many felt that ignoring

traditions would certainly bring the end of civilization as they knew it, and they couldn't allow that to happen.

Things at home were very difficult for Chuy. She carried a heavy heart because she missed her mother terribly and taking care of the house and the children was debilitating. She also missed her older siblings. They seldom visited, but when they did Chuy would take a break and rest or she would remember how to be a child again by going outside to play a little. She would allow herself to remember going to school and reading whatever she could get her hands on. Most of the time, however, she was too tired, and would simply fall asleep whenever a break from household duties became available. It broke everyone's heart, but there was nothing to be done. It wasn't like they could take the children to live with them. They were as impoverished as everyone else was.

Less than a month after his wife passed away, Carmen made one of the most difficult decisions a father must make: he sent the baby to live with his late wife's sister. There, he could be taken care of properly and Chuy would be relieved of that huge responsibility. However painful it was to be separated from her baby brother, Chuy understood. This decision brought immense reprieve to her tender little mind and allowed her more time to rest properly and to concentrate on the other two children. Because of this, they grew up very close to one another. They all suffered the same losses and only had each other for comfort.

Chuy's father was eventually remarried to a woman named Altagracia. She was younger than Carmen by at least ten years, had never married before, and had no children of her own. As was expected, she took care of the household and the children, although the baby Jose didn't return to live with them until much later. Altagracia taught Chuy how to crochet, knit, and sew. Naively, Chuy had high hopes of returning to school. She did not mind that she had already lost an entire year and would have to go back to the same grade; she had already made peace with it. All she wanted was some normalcy. If she went back to learning and being a child, she was fine with whatever came her way.

Fates shifted once again when more children came shortly after the wedding. The increased duties forever ended Chuy's hopes of going back to school. She never did return. Nothing had changed for her, even though she had a stepmother who would take the role of the mother of the family. She stayed at home helping with chores and taking care of her siblings. Chuy worried that her father had forgotten about her mother and was now forming another family with his new wife. He was still working long hours and had no time for her. With a new wife and more children, he had to work harder, sometimes even on weekends. The shop had been successful in the expansion of the business and had to hire a full-time driver delivering goods to other towns.

Chuy took solace in her needlework to maintain her sanity in a world where she felt completely isolated. Her loneliness was diminished only by her vivid imagination as time went by. She owned two dolls that, for years, would keep her company. These dolls helped her improve her skills as a young seamstress; she spent countless hours making dresses for them. They were small so she didn't need

much material. The workmanship had to be precise since the stitching was on such a miniscule scale. She would take old socks that were not useful anymore and she would make one long cut and stretch the material out. Then she would place the doll on top of the sock and cut out little pieces that she would later stitch together to make tiny clothes. Sewing helped her salvage part of the childhood that still remained and it gave her a useful skill that she would possess until the day that she died.