

I'm stuck here waiting—as if I was a piece of chewed gum on a church pew. I'm always waiting for this, waiting for that. *Como pendeja*. As if somebody said, "You will wait. And you will be good at it." Somebody like a nun with a face of crumpled paper.

*Chingao*, this is my lot in life—to let the world's time run past me, like lightning bolts *uno tras otro* in the summer sky, while I sit and wait. And wait. *Y otra vez* . . . wait.

I'm going through the five stages of death here. I'm in this revival, *oiga*, beneath a tent not far from downtown's Skid Row. You can see the rusted fire escapes on faded hotels and the tall buildings west of here that have windows like eyes, looking down on us. There's poor people everywhere. *Hijole*—it's funny how people who have nothing just love Jesus. I mean stone homeless, no place to take a . . . well, *ya sabes*. But, we saved.

My name is Ysela. Not your normal name. It's Mexican, pronounced e-SE-la. When I sing, I just get up and tell the world my name is Ysela. *¡Andale!* Say it right. The "y" sounds like an "e." And when you say it fast, *a la bravata*, it sounds nice. Ysela!

Inside the tent, there's a microphone up top of a wooden platform, fold-up chairs spread all over the place and people getting wound up like tops while others begin to talk. Somebody should know I'm still here, all alone. *Pinche* waiting.

What do I have to do, man!

So what am I waiting for? For somebody to hear *my* story. Everybody else's had a chance. They've all gone on up to the mic, *como dicen—test-i-fying*. They've all done their thing, had their fifteen minutes, boring us to pieces. Now it's my turn, *oiga*. I've been waiting a long time to tell my story. And I have a good one, too.

You know, I'm descended from an important family. My family's been in California for generations. I mean hundreds of years. My family came from the original settlers. The Californios. That's right. They owned all this land, *oiga*. They had ranches and horses and field hands. They had fancy clothes, stiff-brimmed hats, sashes, swords. They were handsome, brave too—true vaqueros, the original cowboys, the ones who named these lands.

But it was sad, what happened to them. *Pobrecitos*. They got ripped off after the Anglos came. They fought them—even stopping Anglo soldiers just outside L.A. more than 150 years ago. In the battle the Californios beat them with lances, *oiga*.

But the Anglos still came and forced them to sign a treaty. It was supposed to guarantee some rights. They got to keep their language, their land, and even some power. But that didn't last long. The Anglos found gold, *oiga*. Thousands came from the East for gold. Gold changed everything. They took the land. They killed people. Treaties mean nothing.

One of these last Californios was my great-great-uncle, or something like that. His family originally owned Griffith Park,

*oiga*. When the Anglos took it, they let the family stay in parts of it. The park got built up. Roads. Trails. Then the damn zoo. Tourists and visitors came by all the time. Soon all my ancestors had to do was clean up the place. My great-great-uncle, the last of his clan, at the very end was an old sick of a man, *oiga*, beaten down, roaming the park, picking up trash.

He died doing that. Working for someone, cleaning the land that used to belong to him. Now, not even his house—or that story—is 'round no more. It's all gone.

You might have figured, though, that I'm not all Californio. I'm real dark, see. Somewhere along the line, some members of the family got hooked up with the poor Mexican migrant workers and railroad hands who were living here building this place, L.A.

I got a lot of Indian in me, *oiga*. Along the way, somebody from Jalisco hooked up with somebody from Durango, who hooked up with one of my Californio family, and others came along, more Mexicans, more Indians, and then I came, born in a small room of a small house in La Kern Mara.

There used to be a brickyard by the Floral drive-in theater where I grew up. I lived near there until all of it got destroyed, *oiga*, the brickyard, the houses, the drive-in. They built a freeway. Then new streets. Then new houses. Soon there wasn't much of Kern Mara. Pushed out again, I s'pose.

If you haven't figured it out, I'm a churchgoing woman. This may be hard to believe, but it's true. I've been singing gospel since I was a little girl, the darkest Mexican in the choir. I almost look black.

*Fijense*, when I did the rounds through the southern part of the state, visiting churches, carnivals, rodeos, hoedowns, and jamaicas, doing gospel songs and things like "Bill Bailey, Won't You

Please Come Home" for good measure, most people who'd never seen a Mexican thought I was black. Once even, some *hueros* followed behind me. They yelled out "Hey, Aunt Jemima." *Miren no más*. I looked at them white boys and told them in pure barrio Spanglish—*comen caca, pinche huevones, slime balls* and sons of *putas sagradas*. They took off running, *oiga*.

I'm a big woman, too. Real big. I don't mind, really. I've been big so long, I don't know how else to be. My family called me Chata for years, *oiga*, till I wouldn't answer to it no more. I wear big dark dresses, my hair short, curly and bouncy top my head. When I started singing, God took over my tonsils. He invaded my throat, and now all I hear is an angel, and it's me. But, sometimes, I'm not so sure.

For now, I'm alone. In a trailer behind a row of small, unpainted wood houses in Montebello, not far from the Los Angeles city line. Years ago, this area wouldn't even be considered East L.A. When I grew up, East L.A. ended just past Atlantic Boulevard. My mother, *que en paz descanse*, said that other people, mostly whites, but sometimes Japanese, lived on this side for years. But now—nothing but Mexicans.

I know what I'm talking about because I grew up *en el mero* East Los—*en* La Kern Mara, *les digo*. When I was small, I remember the family gatherings in our dirt yard. You know what I mean—dogs barking, roosters strutting, and hens pecking at the ground. What a mess they made, *oiga*. We'd have birthday parties, *saben*, where everybody brings kids, but no presents. Whatever your name was, the adults always called you *m'ijo* or *m'ija*. There was kegs of beer and then a fight. You had the *tios* and *tias*, a *monton* of cousins, and 'buelita propped up on a metal chair under a tree. And the *morrillos* running *a donde quiera* like nobody cares.

Finally, like clockwork, *oiga*, mami and papi would get into their *pietos*, and everybody would leave before the fists start flying and mami runs to hide in the bedroom.

But lately, I hear people call all this area east of where I used to live, for miles into the county, I hear they call it East L.A. Like I say, Mexicans took over everything, *oiga*. Mexicans moved east of Atlantic, and kept on going, man—eating up Montebello, Pico Rivera, La Puente, Bassett, Whittier. *Ajúa*—you know it! So I tell folks that I live in East L.A., but for reals, I live in Montebello, *oiga*, in a small trailer tucked behind a clump of old houses.

I got a daughter and a son. They don't live with me. Not for years, *oiga*. They're going to school and living with my mother. They're only part Mexican. Their papi was a cowboy buck rider from Oklahoma; ended up here once, doing the rodeos, and he kinda' fell for a chubby young girl singing gospel in a wide dress.

I never liked that cowboy, *oiga*. Got drunk all the time. Gave me babies, then split. I hardly saw him . . . then I never saw him. He stopped coming 'round, and I was alone with the kids, Juana and Toño, who the cowboy used to call Two-Tone, partly because of the name, but also because of his white-brown color, *sepa yo*.

The kids keep growing, too. They come and visit and never really get into any big trouble. But I know they've suffered. I know they sometimes aren't sure about who they are—white or Mexican, or both. I tell them it don't matter none, *oiga*. That to God, it don't matter. And they listen. And they know. And they laugh. But they leave, and I keep thinking, I'm not so sure.

*Mis padres* got rid of me real quick with all this. Even got the church to refuse me singing there. But I never stopped loving my God, *oiga*, my Jesus. I never stopped.

I got real fat and ugly then, but now I think I'm okay. There

are men still hanging 'round me. I even had an affair going with a rich married *gabacho* who liked his women big, but he kept me in this trailer, in a hard-to-find place, waiting. He paid the bills for a while, as long as I didn't tell nobody who I was seeing.

Fine with me. That Doudy—he was Mr. Doud, but I called him Doudy—helped me get singing gigs in parks, at fiestas and dances. I did my gospel thing, but people wanted some up-tempo modern songs, so I'd throw in "Bill Bailey."

Doudy ended up getting away from me. He just stopped coming 'round. Then he stopped paying the bills. I tried to get him at his house, *oiga*. I even walked up miles and miles to Hacienda Heights, to his fancy ranch-style house there, walked up to his door, but in the end I got real sad, thinking about who I was—this fat, ugly woman with curly short hair and dark skin, who nobody can possibly love, and I just turned back and walked away. My tears feeling like broken glass.

I also went out with a Chicano police officer over in Santa Fe Springs. A big man, *oiga*. Real big for a Mexican. He liked his women big, too. In the beginning he was *muy de aquellas*—real sharp looking, *oiga*, in his uniform, shiny black gun, and chrome-like handcuffs at his sides, making noises of leather and steel whenever he moved around. Man, I liked that. He used to say, "I'm the white man's worse nightmare—a Mexican with a badge." A real *tripesso*.

*Pero* that *cabrón* also scared the shit out of me, pardon my French. A lot of anger in his blood, that one, like boiling all the time. He was good to the kids, but I always worried. Like maybe he'd pull a gun on them, *oiga*, the way he sometimes did with me in drunken rages—pushing the gun hard against my cheek, my heart going a thousand miles a minute, and me praying that I wouldn't be shot there and left to rot, *oiga*.

I had to get away from that one!

Anyways, God gave me a voice, and it's my blessing. I have never had no money. But I have this voice. To sing. To tell my story. Once, after Doudy stopped paying the bills, I came across a dude who heard my voice, singing and talking, and said he had a proposition to make. He wanted to know if I would do sex tapes, *oiga*. Tapes he would sell through mail order, you know, in porno magazines. I didn't like the idea at first, but man I needed money real bad. So I did a few tapes. Just my voice, talking dirty. On Sundays, I went to church and prayed for God to forgive me. I sang extra hard in the choir. I believe Jesus knows why I did them tapes. I believe He understands, so I don't have to 'splain to nobody. I only did a few. Anyways, it kept food on the table, *¿qué no?*

I got a story all right. But I'm not the only one, *oiga*. When I get my chance to talk at this gathering, I'm going to talk about my brother, Pompei. I don't know where the name comes from. Pompei was older than me. He even had a different father than me.

Pompi I remember well. Especially back in 1990. It wasn't so long ago, but it seems like it was. I was a teenager then. I sang all the time at revivals. I was kinda' round, and I know I was cute. All dark, with red blush, and thick curly hair, and singing like an angel.

Pompi was a Marine, *oiga*. A proud Chicano Marine. But he came out of the corps all messed up. Yelling all the time, and drinking. *Hijole*, could he drink! He started to get gray hair. He stayed quiet for a long time, sometimes. Then, he wouldn't come home for days. Then he would show up again, not saying nothing, *oiga*, sometimes not even hello. Man, he was *mírame, no me toques*: Look, but don't touch.

Something terrible happened to Pompei. He saw something.

He didn't talk about it to no one. But one night, *oiga*, he told me the story.

See, Pompei was a Marine who got sent to Panama in 1989. They were there to get that *vato* Noriega, or whatever his name was then. Marines stormed the country and set up shop for a while. Pompei was a new recruit. What Pompei saw, *oiga*, nobody should see. He a Chicano, a proud one at that, to see what he did.

One night he tells me what happened to him, with water in his eyes and his lips shaking. Drunk. Angry. His face was red. He tells me, "We were on patrol in a rundown part of Panama City. The place had just got the shit bombed out of it. There was a lot of wreckage, man—fires, debris, and a *chingo de* bodies. I mean blown to bits. At one point, I was standing next to a sergeant, some guy from Michigan who was our squad leader. We heard a noise and checked it out. Inside one of the tore up houses was this tiny Panamanian kid, about five years old, crying. He was full of dust, and his foot was bleeding. The guy next to me got angry all of a sudden. He screamed about these damn 'mud people,' and what a lousy job we did not destroying them. The vato put his weapon to the side of the kid's head, then blew his brains out. Just like that, man. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to yell, but the sergeant looked at me, telling me with a look that I'd better not say nothing. So what if the *morro* was brown like me—I was a Marine, and Marines stick together."

Pompi wasn't ever the same, *oiga*. He kept what he saw inside of him. Chicanos are used a lot by this government against other Latinos—like on the border or in Nicaragua. Some don't mind, I s'pose. But Pompei minded. He was a good Marine. He never said nothing. But he never forgot that Panamanian kid, *oiga*. He never forgot the expression then as his head exploded when that bullet hit him.

Maybe this was what Pompei saw the rainy night he put a shotgun into his mouth—the kid's face, his terror, his beautiful little brown head splattered everywhere. They found Pompei in his father's garage. It took a few days. Nobody knew where he was. The garage started to stink, *oiga*, and they found him, bottles of tequila all over, and his own head blasted open.

I felt bad for a long time. I got even fatter after Pompei's death. I knew what he knew. All I could do was pray. That's why I'm here, why I've been saved, *oiga*, and why I go to church. I'm in Jesus' hands. Pompei didn't have a chance. But I pray Jesus is taking care of him and that little Panamanian kid, too.

So here I am at the revival. Waiting for my turn to speak. I'm tired of waiting. Everybody's already had their say. I also got me a story to tell. I know I can tell it good, too. I'm good at stories. I'm good at singing. I'm good on those tapes. God gave me a voice, *oiga*. He gave me this, and I still can sing like I was a cute, dark little girl in the choir, singing like an angel. All the way to the Californios. All the way to Pompei. All the way to heaven, *oiga*.