



# Achuchau y Alalay

The clouds no longer warn us.



This little potato has developed a black fungus. I know it because dark brown spots have appeared on its leaves and stems, and when there's humidity, it releases a white fuzz. This fuzz is small and soft, but very deadly. Because of this fungus, nothing grows anymore. Once it rains, the little fungus moves from the leaves to the potato and contaminates the entire soil. On the potato, you can then see the same spots, and it looks rotten. What's worse, they say that once the fungus appears, it stays in the soil and won't leave. Even if the rain changes.





Now we have to buy potatoes from the coast, and if there is no money, try to barter. Once a week, every Tuesday, all my neighbors and family come from their farms to the Choropampa market to sell or exchange their harvest. Every Tuesday brings different stories, journeys, and encounters. It's quite a journey from the moment we prepare Rosy Mery, the little mule that helps us carry the load, until we reach Choropampa.



My mom sends me to fetch Rosy Mery, and I prepare her in the shed. I put the harness on her and load her sides with sacks full of pure squash harvest. One on each side. Normally, they can carry between 40 and 80 kg depending on their condition. I adjust the load with crossed ropes and check that Rosy doesn't sway too much. The weight has to be well centered; otherwise, it becomes unbalanced, and she can get hurt. We always leave the mouth rope on; I don't think it bothers her too much. She usually eats and even brays when she has it on.

This morning, she was braying a lot; she usually does this when rain might be coming, but lately, she seems to be more confused and doesn't get it right. Now I adjust it to guide her. We're all ready to go, my mom, my aunt, and I.

Like Rosy Mery, we are also loaded, each carrying little herbs in our lliclla[1]. We put on our hats, my aunt grabs her cane, and we're ready.

[1] Traditional Andean woven cloth used to carry goods, food, or children on the back.



The road to Choropampa is muddy. With each step, the ground sinks. It swallows my foot and then doesn't want to let me go. It's as if it were warning me about something, or maybe it's jealous of my new llanques[2] and wants to keep them. I lagged, walking heavily; I liked the sticky feeling, but it also felt like I was stepping in cow dung, and walking was harder.

[2] Traditional sandals, often made from recycled car tires, commonly worn in rural Andean areas.

My mom and aunt hurried me. Suddenly, I see them standing still.

*Everything had collapsed into the ravine, and the path was blocked. It's been raining these past few days, and it seems it came down hard. We'll have to take another route, and now I don't know if we'll make it on time. If we don't, I won't be going to school today either.*



The harvest hasn't yielded much again. First, that chachay<sup>[3]</sup> didn't let it grow much, and now, because of the rain and sudden alalay<sup>[4]</sup>, it has rotted quite a bit. We'll still try to sell what we have. We turn around and take the long route.

[3] A local expression used in Cajamarca to describe intense, burning heat.

[4] An exclamation used in the Andes to express intense cold.



Slow but steady, like a dung beetle, we move forward, encouraging Rosy Mery, who already looks tired. Our first neighbor, Panchita, greets us. She has a wide smile that pulls her cheeks tight, showing a few teeth. They look like little corn kernels, each a different shade of pale yellow—some more golden, some more sunburnt. She was sifting wheat surrounded by the chickens that kept her company while stealing the seeds that jumped from her sifter. We stopped to greet her.

We told her that the creek is impassable and that to get to the market, you have to take the long way. She won't come down today; she's too old to walk in these conditions and depends on the goodwill of the traveler. She asks us to bring her anise for the bread she is going to bake and offers us some limes for the journey. We've already been traveling for an hour, and we have two more to go. On the short path, we would have already arrived.





The swallows look like little sparks of fire, flying across our path from every direction. In flight, they seem to be contagious with each other's energy.. Under the mezcal leaves, there are doves, moving and singing slower—they remind me of the women in the village who sell alfajores[5], slightly hunched, taking short steps until they reach their stall or a worm along the way.

[5] Traditional sweet biscuits filled with caramel (dulce de leche), commonly sold in local markets.

*As we walk, butterflies weave between our steps, bouncing around our legs, and with every beat of their wings, they leave a vibrant violet trace. They move at our pace, as if they were trying to make us fly.*





There are flying plants, too. Their roots are far from the ground. People say that when the plant is still just a seed, butterflies carry it up to the branches of the trees, and early in the mornings, the hummingbirds give them water with their long beaks while the plant drinks from them as if through a straw. I like life here, the tranquility that exists, but I would like to become a doctor. I hope to make this journey one day to heal the people of Choropampa.



*Something that worries me is how the heat will affect us. It didn't use to be this strong, but now it has come without warning, and it makes the crops produce less, and when they don't produce, we don't eat. I feel more dizzy on my way to school now, and I have to walk more slowly. I wish I could cure this.*



The fog is rolling in, but we're almost there. I know because when the prickly pears start appearing along the path, it means we are close. As a child, I can't even count how many times I pricked myself on this plant while playing. I didn't like it at all, and it made me cry when they pulled out the thorns from my skin.

My aunt taught me a secret that took away my resentment towards this cactus. Even though it hurt me at first, it wasn't the plant's intention. She can't move, and this is how she defends herself; I understood that she wasn't attacking me.

Growing up, she had to learn to survive in harsh conditions, with sudden climate mood swings, animals that would try to eat her, and insects and fungi that plagued her. That's why now she is covered in thorns, an armor that protects her from everything and anything that might harm her, but without meaning to, she harms too.



*This is how I think of my mother when her crops fail to yield—her strength hardening. She was taught she must always provide for us, so she grows frustrated when she can't feed us.*

She has small white balls attached that look like spots from a distance, called cochineal. They are soft like velvet, and if you press them, a deep carmine red color comes out. Like guilt on my mom, they are one of the insects that drain their energy, feeding on her sap. Imagine being infested with ticks, so many that your skin looks like a cow's. Day and night, feeling them moving, growing, leaving their larvae in my wounds. But I can't move, and I can't take them off. I wish I had the cactus skin. —bristled, rough, and tight, protected by spines. I wouldn't be able to hug anymore, but it would give me some relief, and maybe I could survive.



I help the plant by taking some of the weight of these bugs off it. Just before the rain falls and wets them, I take a few and crush them between my fingers. It feels like liquid ink, not sticky at all. I put the color like lipstick on my lips.







Finally, I can see my uncles selling at the market. They bring everything: fava beans, olluco, carrots, beans of every color, fruit, and more. It's easier to meet them at the market than go all the way to the pampa[6] to visit. We arrive just in time before it starts to rain. It seems Rosy Mery wasn't wrong this time.

[6] An open stretch of land in the highlands.



Nowadays, you never know how long the rain will last or what it will bring.

Sometimes it revives the crops, and sometimes it kills them. The sun comes out strong, and a moment later, the mountain disappears. I used to know how to read the clouds. Not anymore. Now, not even the sky can warn us.

That's why I'll become a doctor. I don't want to sit and wait to see whether the harvest will yield or not.



A story by Slavia Salinas, inspired by Victoria León's (13) experience.

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