



Juanito, poor Juanito

Author: Sayén García

Source: English Studies in Latin America, No. 25 (July 2023)

ISSN 0719-9139

Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





JUANITO, POOR JUANITO¹

SAYÉN GARCÍA²

¹ Originally written in Spanish, translated to English by the author.

² Sayen García is an academic whose research addresses issues related to knowledge and gender. She is also a feminist activist committed to dismantling patriarchal structures within academia and addressing gender violence and discrimination across spheres. Rooted and always building from Wallmapu, an indigenous place in the South of Chile, where race, class and gender inequalities and injustice are intertwined. She fiercely believes in the power of words for moving consciousness, affects and actions.

Six in the afternoon, winter downpour in the South, someone knocks on the door while I am standing next to the wood stove, trying to calm the cold after a seemingly endless trip on a bus with no heating. With my coat and scarf still on my body, I hope my mother returns from looking for firewood in the yard, to drink *mate* and have a chat. That conversational mate that travels from mouth to mouth while the neighbor's stories or memories of the past crop up like daisies in spring. The blackened kettle, as a result of soot, begins to bubble drops of water, a steam that mixes with the fine thread of smoke from the stove and escapes towards the small window in the kitchen. Knock, knock, knock: the knock on the door sounds faster and faster. My mind, focused on the cold I feel, the smell and heat of the fire, doesn't allow me to consider that there is someone at the door. I don't want to move, so I just stand on tiptoe and glance toward the front yard to make sure someone is there. *Doña María*, standing at the front door of the house, keeps her head down, hiding her usual patient and friendly smile. She never lost that smile, not with the drunken and violent husband she put up with her whole life, nor with the ten children she had, now grown up: seven boys and three girls. There were so many children that, as adults, they formed a band of *rancheras* in the town and constantly traveled in a van singing through the fields in the rural areas.

My mother comes in, firewood in her arms, and looks at me asking for an explanation; why am I still standing next to the stove with a scarf and a coat on, instead of opening the door. Not for me—I hesitated to say; explaining how cold and languid I feel to move away from the heat that emanates from firewood. *Doña María*, says my mom, as she opens the door. Come on in, it's cold. I'll just stay right here, —she answers, and stands at the entrance of the door, feet on the welcome mat, as a way of saying, I'll be fast, and I don't intend to stay, not for the mate or for the warmth. She wears a black coat, a dark gray skirt, and black boots. The same color and skirt I saw her wearing when she went to the neighbor's store since I was little.

It always seemed odd to me that she walked to the store so many times a day, not because of frequency, but because in my house the children ran the errands to the store, and she had so many that she could send any of them to buy bread, oil, yerba, those things you buy at the corner store, and that aren't bought all at the same time, but one at a time.

— I'm looking for Juanito, she says with *an anguish in her voice*, but keeping her words calm.

— Juanito? Noooo, Juanito came around seven in the morning, he was out back in the yard for a while, but he didn't come back. He didn't come to work today.

At that moment there is an exchange of glances among us, a tension that expands in the room and that weighs more than the thread of smoke that escapes through the window. Me, not understanding the anxiety *Doña María* showed, her son Juanito was a man, about forty something, whose whereabouts at that age shouldn't be of concern to anyone. I decide to focus instead on the chili peppers, garlic and rues that hang next to the wood stove. We haven't found him or his wife since this morning and we are worried, —she added while her hands trembled, hands that trembled not from cold, but rather from nervousness.

Doña María leaves, my mother and I, without saying a word, get ready to prepare the mate, while I hang my coat and my scarf on a hook near the stove. Someone knocks on the door again, this time the knock knock was loud and hasty. It's your dad, —my mom says. As always, almost running, she heads to open the door, while I shake my head thinking, this man has had keys all his life and he always knocks to be let in. Before my father enters the house, my mother tells him, Juanito's mother was looking for him. Without even listening to her, he rushes to his workshop, and she calls out to him again, screaming from the kitchen. Are you deaf? I'm talking to you! But he continues to dig through the drawers of tools he keeps in his room. He returns to the kitchen with two flashlights, he looks at us and says, —Juanito has gone missing, I came to look for

flashlights, we have walked up and down the river. We are going to go up to the dam on the way to Quechereguas and we need more flashlights. While my mother slices her kneaded bread, she replies, —that’s what I was telling you, you stubborn fool! Juanito’s mother came.

I return to the wood-burning stove and don’t say a word, I only see that his green coat, rather black from motor oil, drips water on the kitchen floor, and his muddy shoes leave marks all over the hall. I keep my eyes on my hands over the fire, on the crackle of the burning embers, and on the flames emanating from the fire. Juanito’s story has been much discussed in the past, and at this time, when they are looking for his body –no one is looking for someone alive on a cold and rainy night in the river. I consider it inappropriate to comment on Juanito. My father takes some bread and comes out saying, –see you, I hope we find that poor man. I couldn’t help to ask, —I guess they’re looking for the woman too? Before my father’s shocked face says something, I add, *Doña María* said that the ex-wife is also missing. His tone turns serious and he answers, —if you don’t know, don’t speak. The wife must be with the lover, remember that she abandoned this poor man. He leaves, saying, poor Juanito.

—Poor Juanito, poor Juanito, poor Juanito. Juanito does not work. Juanito became a boozier. Juanito has depression, and nobody cares that Juanito left his wife more battered than a cake mix before she left. I take my *mate* to throw away the old *yerba* and continued my word vomit without being able to stop myself. —In this country, a man leaves his wife, and the woman has to forge ahead with the kids and get on with it. The woman leaves the man, and immediately she is the whore, she has a lover, and the abandoned man becomes depressed. I finish by saying, in a raised tone, this is what living in a male-dominated society is. While I continue my monologue and prepare my *mate*, my mother has already started drinking her first one and looks at me without saying anything. Perhaps, in her mind she wonders where this fickle daughter came from. Or maybe

she thinks that I am wrong since the Bible says that the wife should be subject to the husband. She listens to me, but she is still focused on her mate and her cheese sandwich. My first sip of *mate* tastes bitter, but the disappearance of Juanito and the wife who left him feels worse.

Juanito, who in recent months was a lost soul, had always been a calm and hard-working man, that's why my dad hired him to work on a construction project at the house. He did not lay down more than five lines of bricks, but my father, male-chauvinist enough to understand and sympathize with Juanito's pain, never fired him. Nobody called him Juanito anymore, he was *poor* Juanito. Poor Juanito, since the woman left him, he did not eat, he did not work, and he would smoke and drink wine to drown his sorrows. He lost considerable weight, something that was noticeable in the baggy jeans and blue wool sweater he wore. He had grown a beard and walked around like a zombie, smoked non-stop, and was no longer seen with his brothers and friends from the neighborhood. The only thing that had not changed in Juanito was his friendly smile when he said hello, the same friendly smile as his mother's. Juanito was so calm and kind that it made one forget the complaints of violence filed against him by his wife, who, after years of abuse, had decided to report him and leave him and take the three children with her. The judge decreed a restraining order for Juanito to not come near his ex-wife Isolda. However, the rumors of her affair with a construction worker had driven him crazy. He disregarded the restraining order and the little money he gave her for the children was enough to ignore any decision from the judge. —I always give her some money for the house, Juanito remarked in his most tearful moments, after a few glasses of wine at the *Gato Negro*, the canteen where downing a shot could start at eleven in the morning. Seeing himself as a provider and a good father, Juanito couldn't understand his wife's departure. The physical, verbal, and psychological abuse were irrelevant, they were outbursts that happened from time to time. In Juanito's words, that's what they were married for, to be together through thick and thin.

The *mates* continued and the rain intensified, the sound grew louder on the zinc roof, the drops were thicker and their fall more fluid, discouraging even to stare out the window. But it was inevitable to raise your head and maintain an eternal silence when any car passed by. It's been almost three hours since my father came to get the flashlights and he still hasn't returned. — If it wasn't raining, I would go to *Doña María* to find out if there is any news, my mother tells me. The statement is a way to break the silence that was only interrupted by the sound of the mate, which at that point merged with the song of the rain and the crackling burning embers that were left on the stove.

A car stops, and my mother opens the door before anyone comes calling. My father, without saying a word, goes straight to his workshop, changes his clothes, and comes out with a dry coat; this one navy blue, and black rubber boots. He stands by the stove, asks for a coffee and a sandwich. He is hungry and mentions that he will head out again. My mother hurries to prepare the coffee, while he takes some bread from the basket and adds a piece of cheese while commenting, they found Juanito's car near the dam and the woman inside it. By some instinct, I already know that the woman has been murdered, but I don't ask. As my mother and I stay speechless with the *mate* in our hands, he adds, —she was dead. And he lets out a sob saying, poor Juanito, where may that poor man be? Before saying anything, I pick up my *mate*, say good night, and fall asleep with clenched teeth, listening to the rain to calm my crying. I wake up at dawn hearing new sobs from my father. Juanito, poor Juanito, had been found hanging from a tree, near the dam, with the wires of the construction he never finished.