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By Pure Force

María de Lourdes Victoria
Translation by Wendy Call

This short story was originally published in Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry in the Special Mexico Issue in Spring of 2009.

Now, at the ripe old age of seventy-three, I finally understand that my father was wrong when he said, “Nothing ever fits by pure force, *m’hija*. Not even old shoes.” So he warned me when I was a child, lulling me to sleep in the hammock, under the flamboyant tree, at dusk. Tired after another day hacking at sugarcane—that ungrateful bush that crushed his spirit, broke his back and his dreams—for a fistful of beans. There, swinging in the hammock he counseled me, at the hour when the mosquitoes hold sway. Today, I still hear his rasping voice, hardened by too much liquor and tobacco—neither of which, in the end, managed to assuage his sadness. “Not even shoes fit by pure force, *m’hija*,” he would murmur, and I, that little girl nodding off in his arms, believed him. I believed him until I was thirteen, until that dreadful day that he took me to the city and delivered me to the rich people. After all, it was time for me to earn a living, and furthermore, “Here, you will want for nothing, *m’hija*, take good advantage of what these people give you; remember, not even shoes...will fit by pure force.” I finished the old saying, because his voice caught in his throat and tears flooded his eyes. I promised to do my best in this new life, though I had never needed anything other than his scent of wood smoke and wet earth. As it happened, in the rich people’s house, everything did fit. It all came in by pure force. The *señora*’s screams pierced me, for not picking over the lentils well enough, for failing to get all the stains out of the soiled underwear, for washing the dishes poorly, for speaking like an Indian

peasant. The slaps crossed the threshold from all directions, especially from the cook, for getting in her way in the kitchen, for messing up the pantry, for poking my nose around and spying on her when she was necking with the gardener. The pinches from the spoiled girls also came in, unbridled, for not having made up the beds, not having braided their hair perfectly, or simply because they were bored and had nothing else to do. The *patrón* entered my room one day, without knocking. He came in drunk and vehement, to teach me that by pure force, everything could enter—of course it could! With just a shove and a smack or two. By pure force, *the shoe will fit*. By pure force, even Cinderella's glass slipper fits the calloused foot of a sleazy Indian like me. No point in being stubborn. Better to close one's eyes and go limp. Better to let *everything* go limp—most of all, one's conscience. I wanted to show my father his mistake. I returned barefoot, walked all the way to my village, but I arrived too late. In the hammock, in the shade of the flamboyant, I waited for him until dusk fell. I waited for him all that night and many more. I waited until all the nights fell, at once, on my broken body. When the cane-burning began, I ran over the cloak of ashes, ferreting through desert rubble. I overturned rocks, scratching at fire scars and clearing away scorched roots, without finding him. The dusty rumor that clung to my footprints swore to have just seen him, dead in some ravine. *The cane—and the drink—took him away*, it whispered. *He was taken kicking and screaming*. By pure force.

I set out again headed north, barefoot, walking on my charred soles, chasing that fistful of beans that had so eluded my father. I crossed mountains, rivers and borders, doggedly pushing ahead, my punctured body my only shield—the same shield that so deftly deflected misfortune and mishap. And so I arrived here, intact, on the other side. To lush, irrigated valleys. Abundant orchards. It was then that I, a pierced woman, demanded everything from life. *Yes it can, damn right it can*, has been my motto. With my eyes closed and my conscience stifled—but lucid—I earned it all: my living, a roof over my head, a full pantry and a pile of children and

grandchildren, who I never gave away to anyone. I surrendered my life to the apple—that ungrateful fruit that has left my back bent but my dreams intact. And now, though these prison bars would detain me, my essence flees. Like sand through a sieve, my old age slips through the cracks. And I walk free, leisurely, through rich fields. I walk barefoot, a dark-skinned Cinderella, smelling of wood smoke and wet earth, which I reclaim day by day, with this arthritic fist, by pure force.