

## Chicahua

by J. A. Williams

Chicahua left the office as the new head of PR for Green Corp. an international corporation that had its factory here in Mexico. She went to the bank, deposited her signing bonus, and withdrew some cash for she had a plan, but there was something that she needed to take care of first. She drove home, parked her compact sedan in the underground parking of her complex then took the Metro to a car lot she knew of. As she sat in the train car, she thought back. Back to the beginning of her journey...

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It had been a long road for she had pulled herself up out of the poverty of the lowest class in Mexico. She was a pureblood indigenous woman. She was proud of her heritage in fact, but as a pureblood Aztec, she had fought racism her whole life. The mestizos ran the country for the most part. This did not bother her in itself, they were after all the majority in Mexico, and she was a strong believer in democracy. They were, in definable ways her brothers and sisters, for mestizo means a mix. In their veins, flows the same proud blood as in hers.

Well had her parents named her, for Chicahua, means strong in Nahuatl, her ancestral language. It had turned out to be prophetic. Many indigenous children never get past elementary school, for at times, their families must send them out of the village to a nearby town to go to secondary school. While schooling is paid for by the state, one must provide ones own uniform and transportation. Her family had money for neither, being subsistence farmers, but she was a determined child. She found a neighbour with a tattered, outdated school uniform and convinced her to pass it on. With help from her mother, who had much practice mending, she fixed it up as best she was able. At six thirty in the morning, she set out on the one and a half hour walk to town and the secondary school that was situated there. She arrived a few minutes before the opening bell rang and went inside to register.

“Name and address,” asked the kind-faced lady?

She gave it to her.

“For your first year, you will have to pay one thousand, six hundred pesos for your text books.”

Her mouth fell open and she found herself unable to speak for a few moments. In primary

school, all books had been free; it had not occurred to her that she would have to buy them herself. How could she afford to? She did not have enough money to pay the 25-cent bus fare from the village, much less sixteen hundred pesos for textbooks.

“But we have no money!”

The mestiza lady with the light olive skin looked down at her. Chicahua knew she saw a sturdy, determined, dark skinned twelve-year-old, with an unmistakable, round Aztec face, wearing an old, patched, school uniform. Though worn and patched it was clean and ironed. Like the dirt floor of their hut, it was spotless, and she wore it with pride.

“Well then, we will have to see what can be done. Please go and sit in one of the chairs over there, while I register the other new children. She had pointed to a row of battered chairs near a window. The bell rang, but she stayed where she had been told until the lady had finished with the other children.

The lady crooked a middle finger in her direction.

“Come Chicahua.”

She went over to the counter. The lady stepped out from behind it and took her hand, leading her down the hall.

“My name is doña Inés. How did you get to school this morning child?”

“I walked doña Inés,” she had replied.

“Walked, it must have taken you two hours!”

“Close to an hour and a half.”

“You must walk fast.”

“I walk a lot doña Inés.”

“Yes, I imagine that you do.”

They entered a door, a large closet it turned out. It was inhabited by an ancient man who sat in a corner with a bare bulb hanging over his head on the end of a disreputable looking pair of wires, which illuminated a tattered book that he held beneath it.

He looked up from the book and smiled a yellow smile at the pair.

“Good morning doña Inés,” he said as he stood.

“Good morning don Isaac. This is Chicahua. She has no money for books but has walked from Mecayapan village, for an hour and a half to get to school. I think we should try and help her do you not agree?”

“Indeed I do,” he gave her an impish, toothy, grin. He put the book down on a crumbling, unpainted, grey, crate, and shook her hand. “Hello Chicahua, it is my great pleasure to meet

you.”

“Thank-you don Isaac.” A question burned in her. “Do you live here in this room?”

He laughed. “No this is the janitors closet, and I am the janitor. I sit here and read until the children are in class while I have my morning coffee.”

She now saw a chipped and dented enamel mug beside the book with a sweet roll, which had two or three bites taken from it.

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Don Isaac rummaged through some battered cardboard boxes, which were piled in a corner of the closet, he muttered to himself as he dug through them.

“No, this one is far too outdated. Hmm, no, no, this won’t do, it won’t hold up for the whole school year, it’s falling apart as it is, I should throw it away,” though he didn’t. “Ah, here’s one, a little worse for the wear but it will do I think. Here you go Chicahua, your grade seven math book.”

He continued his search through seven other boxes, each containing textbooks of different subjects and in varying condition. When he had found all the necessary books, he went to another corner of the large closet, and found notebooks, pencils, pens, a compass, and all the other things she would need for her studies. They were used and the notebooks had pages that had been written on but those could be removed. She found herself in absolute astonishment that some children would leave or lose things of such value. It was an early insight into the wealth some possessed.

“Don Isaac, I don’t know how to pay you back for all of this,” she said.

He ignored her, putting his forefinger in the air. “Ahh, somewhere... somewhere... I put it someplace, where was that now,” he said as he turned, keeping the finger raised as if it was a water-witching stick, searching, searching. “Oh yes, I remember now,” he tapped the side of his head. He delved into an untouched corner of the closet. After a few moments, he pulled his head out of an old crate. In his left hand, he raised the most awful, gaudy, florescent green book bag one might imagine. He did a jig, circling and chanting as he did.

“I found it, I found it, I found it!”

Neither Inés nor Chicahua could help smiling at the old man’s glee as he danced, circling the closet with the book bag held aloft.

“The girl who owned it,” he explained, “hated it, and asked me if I could make it disappear her first day of school. She told her parents that she had lost it and though the whole school

searched, it was never found... until now. He gave them both a wink. "That was five years ago... well... goodness, five years ago today!"

It was the most awful, most wonderful, book bag, Chicahua had ever seen. It had been used part of one day, it was as good as if it was brand new. She broke down in tears of happiness to have found friends like these outside the village, and at that on her first day of secondary school.

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Chicahua had problems from the beginning, with the attitudes of fellow students, even some teachers! She was the only pureblood Aztec at the school, and many looked upon her as if she were a piece of excrement... or something worse.

She overheard a soft voice speak from behind her one day. It was a senior boy, talking to another. He spoke loud enough that she could overhear and gave her side-glances to see her reaction.

"No sé porque esa chingada puta, no se queda en su ejido." He asked his friend why the fucking whore did not stay on the farm where she belonged.

She learned to keep her books with her at all times, otherwise they would go missing and end up in the trash. While some teachers insisted that the children in their classes behave, others encouraged the misbehaviour toward her. The usual method was to ignore the miscreants or laugh at the 'joke.' There were times on the long walk home that the path before her was blurred by the tears that she refused to shed at school. When things were at their worst, she could take recess or lunch with don Isaac in the janitor's closet. He found an old table and a rickety chair that had been discarded, and after fixing them up with a few nails and bits of twine, he made room for them in his closet so she would have a refuge and a place to study, under the dim light of the yellow bulb.

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That was primary school. That was then. Now, she was to head up the PR department at an international corporation founded to better the environment. She was pleased with herself. With the large salary, came a company vehicle. She had to go and pick it out herself, as there had not been time to purchase one, in fact there was no one in charge of doing so, which was why she was on the Metro heading to a car dealership. The company was young with forty odd employees here in Mexico and less than twenty more in the USA and Canada.

She would need a sturdy vehicle that could be driven in most road conditions in Mexico and the US. She purchased a four-wheel drive hybrid, in keeping with both her needs and the goals of the company that now employed her. The first two salesmen had refused to speak with her.

“What is an Indian woman doing buying a new truck?” The first had asked the second.

“Even if she could afford it, she has no right to own one,” the second had agreed.

The third salesman, dark-skinned, though a mestizo, was hungrier and less biased than the first two.

“I am the new head of public relations for Green Corp.” She explained to him. “They are purchasing the vehicle for my exclusive use.”

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He nodded. He saw an Aztec woman dressed in the latest fashions. “Your heritage will be an advantage on the international stage, but here in Mexico it will be a drawback.”

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She liked his directness and honesty. “Yes it has been an obstacle here, both going to school and getting work.”

“Your new employer doesn’t mind then?”

“In fact they are happy to have an indigenous person on the team.”

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Her first stop for the plan was the stationary shop. A young mestizo that worked there helped her to the new SUV carrying the boxes with her purchases. She climbed back into the vehicle and sat for a moment. Her plan brought back memories of her struggles to educate herself...and of those who had helped her...

Her next great hurdle had been preparatory school. In Mexico, all children that wish to go to college or university must go to preparatory school to ready themselves. There was a prep school in the city of Acayuacan. Doña Inés was retiring there the same year, as she would enter grade ten, she, and her husband made room for Chicahua in their small house. She found a job, though they were scarce for indigenous girls, worked, and went to school. When she entered university, she was surprised that there were scholarships set aside for indigenous citizens. This not only made going to university easier, but possible.

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She started the vehicle, then drove the shiny new SUV five hours to the town where she had gone to secondary school. She stopped at her old school and went to knock on the door to the janitor's closet. An old mestizo man opened the door.

"Buenos días señorita," he said.

Of course, it was not don Isaac; she had not expected it to be. She saw her decrepit desk in the corner where she had left it. It now held a wide-eyed Aztec boy, who jumped up and greeted her.

"You must be doña Chicahua!"

"Yes I am." She gave him an earthy smile, and then turned her attention back to the older man. "Do you collect textbooks and school supplies for the children as don Isaac did sir?"

"Yes I do," he smiled.

She took them to her vehicle and they carried two boxes of brand new supplies back to the closet. Next, she went to administration, purchased three sets of brand new books, and gave them into the old man's care. He placed each textbook in one of eight tattered cartons.

"I gave out three textbooks at the beginning of the year that were incomplete. I can now give those children complete ones to replace them, thank-you doña Chicahua."

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On her way out of town, she stopped, got out of her shiny car and looked back at the small town and the memories, good and bad that it held for her. With a sigh, she climbed back in, then she drove to Mecayapan, to see her elderly parents, and her family, to visit with them, tell them of her most recent success... and to find out who the boy in the closet was.

The road was 'improved,' and she could remember the time that she had thought it wonderful, for in her daily trek to school she did not have to worry about mud, which made the road impassable during much of the rainy season before it had been gravelled. The arroyos had concrete beds and vehicles could pass through them except on days when the water was a torrent. In the truck, it was a challenge and she was happy she had decided to buy a high four-wheel drive, for the roadbed was topped with river gravel, and while this made it passable in the wet season, it was a bumpy ride, for many of the rocks were the size of softballs... some even larger. She knew that was because the road crews excavated the gravel from a nearby riverbed to help keep costs within budget.

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The entire village was astonished to find her driving such a vehicle and a brand new one at that! She drove her parents, a sister, niece, and a cousin into town for some shopping on Wednesday. It felt good to be able to treat them all to lunch, and buy her parents some needed clothes.

They now had electricity in their hut and the floor was concrete rather than dirt. These were all improvements she had made, in addition, she sent them money each month to cover the hydro bill, with enough extra that they could afford small treats. She would have been glad to build them a new house as her career had advanced, but they were happy in their hut. This trip to town, she did insist on buying her mother an automatic washing machine, though she was not sure how they would drain it. They would figure out something she knew, it was the Aztec way. One thing was certain; mother was too old for the scrub board.

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“So,” her mother began after they returned from shopping and lunch and they settled under the shade of the ancient avocado tree in the back yard, “your new employers, this Prado-Moore couple is very rich.”

She opened a bottle of beer for her father, and then one for her mother. “They are richer than you can imagine.”

“Though not richer than you might imagine,” her mother said with a mocking tone in her voice.

Chichahua knew that at times she came across as superior, though she did not intend to, in particular with her family. “No mom, I cannot imagine how great their wealth is any more than the smallest child in Mecayapan could. They have more money than some countries.

“They must have big boats and fancy cars and haciendas and planes and everything,” her dad said.

She wasn’t sure about the big boat. Yacht, it would be in English but they were speaking in Nahuatl, rather her native dialect of it. It was best to let these minor things go by and focus on what she knew.

“They own two houses, I understand, and two haciendas, one in Canada and one in Campeche. I don’t know about the cars or the big boat, but they do have an aeroplane. They plan to take me to Vermont in it when they go back, I might even get a chance to see one of

their haciendas. If I do, I will take photographs for you.”

“Ha,” her dad laughed, “to see you in two metres of snow, that would be a good photograph!”

“I saw a boy at the school, he looks like he was from the village. Do you know who he is?”

“Ah,” her mother nodded, “that would be Coyotl, he is one of your cousins’ nephews, and he is like a coyote as his name attests, for he flourishes surrounded by the civilization of the mestizos but never becomes a part of it. He is a strong one like you my love. He will grow up to beat the conquerors at their own game as you have.

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Thursday morning, Chichahua, headed back to Mexico City in the SUV, it had been a fun and useful trip. She would begin work in earnest on Friday.

Though in charge of PR here in Mexico, she had been told that she would be a part of the international PR team and would need to travel between Mexico, the USA, and Canada. It looked like that would be in a private jet much of the time. She could accustom herself to the onerous duty she thought, smiling to herself.

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