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Unity 1947-52

COMMON COUNCIL FOR AMERICAN UNITY

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*Thank - Mrs. Roosevelt
she left for
Geneva to look
at the book to read.*

(personal return)

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I think you might like to have an early look at this story by Beatrice Griffith coming out in the Winter issue of Common Ground, out December 10th. She is working on a book about young Mexican Americans -- doing it under a fellowship grant from Houghton Mifflin. I thought you'd be specially interested in this particular story because of the deep love for President Roosevelt revealed by these underprivileged youngsters.

Cordially yours,

Margaret Anderson

Editor

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
29 Washington Square West
New York 11, New York

ONE WORLD KID

BEATRICE GRIFFITH

THAT afternoon we went drunk to school I was feeling fine. Feeling fine 'cause I was just 16, had a dime, and gave a penny to the Salvation Army. I hadn't felt so fine for a long time, not since I thought one day at Junior High I would be somebody. So I gave myself with respect and dressed like a Square at school, and gave everybody good manners. But nobody would believe that I wanted to make something of myself and they only laughed. And that light-skinned cholo teacher who talked real dainty Spanish, she gave me the reputation of a gangster in that school. She used to ask me, "Wild woman, what alley did you come from?" But when she saw me dressed like a Square and giving myself with respect, she couldn't believe it and laughed too. So it was no go. But I sure felt good for awhile.

Well, this noon we both walked past our vocational school, where all the schools send their bad girls, singing all the way, Jitterbug and me. Only we couldn't walk very good. The girls yelled at us from behind the board fence, so we started back. When we got to the door,

I threw my cigarette away and walked down the hall real fine. But one thing we forgot: we forgot to stop singing. So the principal came out and Jitterbug ran into one of the classrooms and sat down at a desk. But me—I walked straight into her office, I'm that dumb, and started talking. I told that principal I was going to be somebody big, real famous. But she wouldn't listen. She was only crying and calling me honey and asking me, "How could you do this to me, honey? You were my sweetheart girl. Look at the appreciation you give me."

But one thing she didn't know. It wasn't to her—it was to me and my mother I was doing it, being drunk.

I saw Jitterbug coming from the room across the hall, and the teacher talking rough to her, pushing her along the hall, and telling her, "We don't allow drunkards in this school." She was yelling loud enough for another school to hear. Jitterbug never drank before today, and now already they think she is a lost weekend. So I tried to stop talking, 'cause I remembered how fakey they are at this school. You give them the trust and they don't

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keep the truth, so everything is dirty.

The principal was telling me I was a dear sweet girl, and all that jive. And next door Jitterbug was crying and crying, asking them for the favor not to tell her mother. Jitterbug never asked any favors of anybody, only one—just to play Beat Bad Boogie and Ave Maria when she died. That's all. But those teachers would promise not to tell her mother, then would do her dirty and tell everything to the cops and her mother sure.

The principal was talking a lot of talk. "You aren't happy, are you honey? Why do you smoke the marihuana, honey? Tell me where you got the whiskey, honey."

So I told her the truth that a drunk man bought it for us, but she believed it for a lie. Then she looked at me with those missionary eyes and gave me that long-distance embarrassment, and promised her word not to tell my mother.

That day, after school, while we was waiting for the old street car to take us home (all but Jitterbug, and the cop from Juvenile took her home), we tried to buy some ice cream cones at the drug store. But sometimes they wouldn't sell you any. Today was one of those days. We all crowded in there. I wanted to get some aspirin and went back in the store. When I heard them calling the girls, "You dirty Pachucas, get out of this store," I came up front.

"I bought some aspirin, Mister. How about a glass of water?" I asked him.

But he yelled at me, "There's a gas station across the street if you want water. We don't want you Pachucas in here. Now get out."

So I told him some bad words. "And that's for your grandmother, and your great-grandmother's mother's mother, and all their cows and goats. You don't stop to know if we are Pachucas or not, just because we dress this way."

The girls were sore. Everybody was mad, waiting outside that drug store. Mostly when the girls wait for the street-car they talk about that school and the teachers. All the troubles come out on that corner, 'cause we have to wait sometimes a long time. If the conductor sees a big bunch of us, he won't stop, so we hang around.

Fushia was sore today 'cause she got expelled from school, too. "Just 'cause there was a big commotion when Yoyo and Chonto drove by the school, they thought it was me. Always those teachers give the blame some place else. How come they aren't ever fair? They sit me in a room with a pencil and tell me, 'Now honey, write down on that paper why you're bad.' So when I drew a picture of Joan Crawford with a big overlip, old lady Wiggins got real, real mad. Then they gave me a summons, nice and polite from the office. 'Well dearie, that's the last. We've tried our best with you. We're simply fed up. We just can't go on. We can no longer help you,' and all that jive, she told me. But it was dirty not to hear my story."

Some of the guys drove by then and there was a lot of commotion. Simon, Wapa, and Gege all got in the car and drove away downtown. Lola scratched her name on a brick that didn't have none. "Sure those teachers should know how to help girls with their problems, not shut them out because they're hard. Remember Miss Stevanson and those teachers at Lockwood? That other special school? They'd give you chances and chances. That's why we went in there real rugged and came out all squarey, with no overlip, no short skirts, or pompadours or zombie shoes. They didn't try to control our clothes, and no teacher's-pet stuff."

Caledonia lit a cigarette and sat down on the curb. "And they didn't yell at

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you. They were honest and equal. It's not the strictness that counts. I've sat in a lot of principals' offices for hours, with them trying to get me to take down my pompadour. But strictness and nothing else doesn't get control. Some teachers can keep you after school for hours, but couldn't make me mind, ever." She passed me a cigarette then, 'cause another



streetcar had just banged on up the street without stopping.

"Heck yes, if they expect a courteous answer they should set the example for some one to follow, and not yell like you are deaf. Remember that old teacher in Junior High who used to yell at us, 'You stupid B'7,' she'd yell. 'You blockheads.' But that day she called my mother a Mexican dumbbell was too bad for her. She was so surprised when I slapped her she just stared popeyed, while I walked down the stairs to the principal's office. That began all my trouble."

Changa bought some gum across at the grocery store and passed it around. "Sure, I remember her. Deeply, deeply in my heart, to the last inch of my heart, to the deepest part of my heart, I shall always remember that old s.o.b. How could I forget her?"

"Yeah, and Miss Stevanson never threw

it to you that you were a Mexican, and would explain all the big long words, 'cause she came out strong for work. Remember, Changa, it took me two weeks to learn to say vulgar profanity? But if you tried hard she didn't fail you. She was with respect and was fair—and those beautiful hair and eyes. Things would be different here if she was our teacher. She'd have control."

Huera let out a yell at the streetcar that almost stopped, and then it banged the bells and went on. "Cholo Cavrone, why doesn't he stop? I gotta get home."

I told the girls to pipe down, 'cause that old store guy would call the police if he heard so much noise, but it was no use. Everybody was talking at once.

"Why, even if Stevanson wasn't for Roosevelt, she never let a *gabacha* girl say something against him. I bet if Roosevelt was alive this school would be different. Remember the ccc's he gave us, and all those things? And remember when Roosevelt talked on the radio? Man, it was real keen—made you all warm inside, like Kate Smith singing. Let's put his name here by ours real big." Cuata and Vicki started in making a big Roosevelt name on the Coca-Cola sign, standing high on the wall. We watched to see if the drug store boss came out.

"Sure the school would be different. 'Cause Roosevelt knew our language even if he didn't speak Spanish, 'cause he knew the language the poor people talk. He knew the languages of all the people who don't speak American, and the poor people who speak American but not with rich money. We could write him and tell him about what we want in this school, and he'd do something I bet," I told them, "'cause my aunt wrote him when her house was going to be sold, and it wasn't."

"Yeah, but it's different now. With

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Roosevelt you felt safe, like inside the house when it's raining outside. Or you've just had a long drag of tea and everything is comfortable and smooth. 'Cause he would protect you, there was nothing to fear like being hungry. He knew about being hungry I guess, 'cause he gave us the NYA and hospitals and WPA and lots of other things people need when they haven't money and can't speak." Beaver picked up a piece of dirt and threw it smack in the face of the cute little blond chick in the Coca-Cola sign. "Make that name Roosevelt bigger—so everybody can see it."

I remembered what my mother said, "The only thing Roosevelt did to hurt his people was to die. If Americans could give their lives to save him, you'd have to stand in line." But I think my mother isn't so sad that my brother is dead in Germany now, 'cause Roosevelt is with him and all the dead soldiers and sailors. She says she feels more comfortable and I guess she does.

Just then a bunch of high school chicks came by and gave us those looks of theirs. They're so stuck up they probably say they're Spanish and not Mexican. But we did them nothing, not since that day they called us dirty Pachucas and we beat them up.

I sat down on the fireplug. "Come on, let's write a letter to Roosevelt like if he was still alive and tell him what we want for a school."

Changa gave me her notebook. "Sure man, that's it. Let's begin."

I began to write:

Dear President Roosevelt,

The next time one of those old dames asks what will make our school better we're going to tell them what we're telling you. But you'll probably get this letter before they ask us. So here goes!

We want to know out of that school

the things you are supposed to know in life. How to fill out papers for work. How to put money in the bank. To know about the world we're living in. Not to know nothing about nothing. To know about the stars and moon, about shorthand and penmanship and power machine, so we can sew for our kids when we have them. And how to give them the understanding.

We want lots of clubs for all of us, not only honor clubs where you have wings like angels. To know what we're reading about, how to talk with people when they say, "Did you see this and that about Europe or Russia?" and how to say back, "Oh yes. I know. And did you know this and that, about some current events?" And if we could have one period to study health about ourselves, how our organs are made, and what to do if we get sick, that would be good.

And we would like, President Roosevelt, a course in beauty—combing hair, how to fix your make-up, what style and all that. Not this professional grooming course they give us, that means cutting paper dolls out of newspapers.

In grammar school we studied about things that were so fine, all about life in other countries, like you knew about. You know, that one world business. We live in one world too—the Mexican world. But we want to go places and do things everywhere. To get out of these little grapes-of-wrath houses we live in.

But mostly, President Roosevelt, we want to know about the living of life real real good.

Your friends,

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Well, when we got the letter finished, after all the chicks had their say, we didn't know what to do with it. So I said I'd take it home. Until we decided what to do, I'd keep it.

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About then a streetcar stopped 'cause there weren't so many of us left. Some had started walking home by now. When we piled on, scrambling for seats, Cuata and Caledonia ran to the last window. "There's Roosevelt's name—real big. *Que suave!*"

The streetcar clanged and started up with a jerk. I saw Cuca waiting for the bus and yelled her, "Hyah Mexican! Get off the street, you Mexican."

The motorman turned around and yelled, "Sit down and shut up, you Pachucas, or get off."

I told him, "Okay, Mister, okay."

Then I told the chicks not to sass him back 'cause they'd have to wait longer for a streetcar next time.

At home I slipped in real quiet, but it was okay. My sister was over at the settlement house and my mother was out. I took the letter to Roosevelt and put it in the wooden treasure box my brother made in manual training. Everything was in that box, our baptism certificates, my brother's Purple Heart and Silver Star medals, and a letter from his officer when he died; a report card from my school when I got good marks; the old white *maquerna* ribbon from my mother's wedding.

I folded the things and put the rosary and the paper rose back on top the box, then stuck it on the shelf under the Virgin's picture. Roosevelt's letter would be okay there for awhile.

I went in the kitchen and started making *tortillas*, so as to be busy when my mother came in full of mad—if she did—if they told her from school about me. And soon she did come in. She had been crying. I knew from her face she knew. When that old dame called me in before class was over and told me I was free as the air to get a job, and that they didn't want drunks and tea smokers

there, I knew if they expelled me they'd tell my mother. And sure enough, they snitched. But I knew one thing. She wouldn't let them have the satisfaction of seeing her cry. So for them she would



have the smile that took her tears away. But she came home real sad with her sadness.

But for me there was just hell. My mother and dad got too many old-fashioned ideas. She's from another country. I'm from America and I'm not like her. With Mexican girls they want you to sit in the house like dead flies. If you tell them what the teachers say, they say the teachers don't know. And what they tell us will only get me in trouble. They think they know what is good, not the American teachers. And even if we take our parents to school to explain them, our parents don't hear. They only know from Mexico.

I remember when me and my sister

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told my mother we wanted to dress neat and American, they beat us and said no, to dress like they wanted us to in old Mexico. So after awhile it's no use. You can't have any fun, so you get your fun where you find it. Like little Cutdown said to the teacher when she asked her why she drank, "It's the only fun I have, Miss," she told her, and it's true.

My dad hadn't come home yet, so I knew I was going to get the preaching first. I'd rather they beat me silly than give me that preaching. She brings up everything since the day I was born. Gee, what a memory. She tells me I don't appreciate the facts too. But I think she doesn't know the facts for understanding. Most Mexican parents don't. 'Cause it's sure that the strictest homes have the most trouble.

But I hate my mother to be unhappy, man. She was so cute when I bought that little bank and put in some money to start for a washing machine for her. I could kill that teacher. She did real dirty telling my mother all the record about me, piling it up for one time. My mother's old and sick, and when she gets mad she gets all red and out of breath and I'm afraid for her. If anything would happen to her, I'd die.

She yelled at me, "Why do you drink? Why do you smoke those marihuana cigarettes?" and all that.

I'm asking myself the same question sometimes. I can't tell her I drink 'cause I'm scared, I'm afraid I'm going to die. That my boy friend's mother is a *bruja*, and he says she'll put a curse on me since I broke with him, 'cause if he can't win me by the good, he'll win me by the bad. I want to hide the fear inside me, like I want to hide my face when I'm drunk. But I can't tell her that; she doesn't have the understanding.

So I tell her while I make the last little tortillas, "Oh, to have some fun. You

probably did worse when you were a girl in Mexico." Real dirty I was, but real mad too. It's that way—they hurt your feelings and you get mean.

But in my heart I am crying for my mother. I don't really know what's the matter. If I did anything to my mother, I'd kill myself. All Mexican mothers got is a flock of family and too much work, that's why they're old young.

I knew my dad would beat me, so I decided to get away to Changa's house or some place before he come home. I remember how he beat me silly when he saw me on the street talking to a boy, a real decent boy. And it'd be worse now, with him calling me a dirty puta, and street lady. I couldn't stand it and wait for him to chase me out.

So when my mother went in crying to pray to the Virgin, I got my hands washed and took my coat from the closet. Some girls can't go to a friend's house if their mother knows you've got a bad reputation, no matter if you're not really bad but just do some wrong things. So, if I couldn't stay at Changa's, then some place else, or stay the night at the bus station. And tomorrow I could get work at a malt shop, or a sewing factory, or walnut place maybe.

I slipped out the door quiet, and walked in a hurry down the alley, toward town. 'Cause with me, it is to live life. You never live long, so the thing is to take life while you can make it.

Another piece on young Mexican Americans by Beatrice Griffith, "The Pachuco Patois," appeared in the Summer 1947 issue of CG. These will be part of her book on Mexican American youngsters now scheduled for spring publication by Houghton Mifflin.

The illustrations are by Miné Okubo.