

# Chola

SALVATION



ESTELLA GONZALEZ

## Advance praise for *Chola Salvation*

“In her first collection of stories set mostly in her hometown of East Los Angeles, Gonzalez unfurls the preoccupations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and conveys an array of emotions they feel stemming from their blue-collar jobs, cultural heritage, faith and poverty. Her use of Mexican slang adds a distinctive flavor that enhances the atmospheric setting. Beneath the machismo and the matriarchal dominance that reverberate in Gonzalez’s stories is a thriving Chicano/a pride that unites and rewards these flawed but resilient characters as they achieve bittersweet triumph over steep odds.”  
—*Booklist*

“Gonzalez’s debut collection delivers a layered portrait of Mexican American life rooted in 1980s East Los Angeles. An inviting tapestry.”  
—*Publishers Weekly*

“Smoldering stories that center the lives of Mexican Americans by complicating common tropes and conceptions. This debut collection of interlocking short stories turns an unflinching eye on the small tragedies, gut-wrenching betrayals and enduring courage of working-class Latinx folks in East Los Angeles and the borderlands. Imagine *Winesburg, Ohio* featuring Chicanx of East Los Angeles with a touch of mystical realism.”  
—*Kirkus*

“What is most astonishing about *Chola Salvation* is Estella Gonzalez’s skill in dropping the reader right into the action. Each story’s razor-sharp characterizations allow us to recognize the bravada these *mujeres* live by, for better or for worse, or to root for queer love sought by *hombres*. With its bars, churches, hair salons and neighbors, this collection is East Los in its beautiful, aggrieved, celebratory finest.”

—Helena María Viramontes, author of *Their Dogs Came with Them* and *The Moths and Other Stories*

**Estella Gonzalez**'s work has appeared in *Kweli Journal*, *The Acentos Review* and *Huizache* and has been anthologized in *Latinos in Lotusland: An Anthology of Contemporary Southern California Literature* (Bilingual Press, 2008) and *Nasty Women Poets: An Unapologetic Anthology of Subversive Verse* (Lost Horse Press, 2017). She received a Pushcart Prize "Special Mention" and was selected a "Reading Notable" for *The Best American Non-Required Reading*. Her story, "Chola Salvation," won first-place in the Pima Community College Martindale Literary Prize and she was a finalist for the Louise Meriwether Book Prize for a collection of short fiction. She received her BA in English from Northwestern University and her MFA in fiction from Cornell University.

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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These *cuentitos* are for all the fierce chingonx  
in and outside East Los. ¡Órale!

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## Chola Salvation

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I'm just kicking back, drinking my dad's Schlitz when Frida Kahlo and the Virgen de Guadalupe walk into our restaurant. La Frida is in a man's suit, a big baggy one like the guy from the Talking Heads but this one's black, not white. All her hair is cut off so she isn't wearing no braids, no ribbons, no nothin'. The only woman thing she has on are those hand earrings. I read in Mrs. Herrera's class that Pablo Picasso gave her those earrings because he thought she was a better painter than her husband.

La Virgen looks like my *tía* Rosa in the picture she sent to Dad. She has blonde hair, lots of white eyeshadow, and she's wearing chola clothes. You know, tank top with those skinny little straps, baggy pants and black Hush Puppy shoes. And she has on this lipstick like she just bit a chocolate cake. Her hair is so long, it touches the back of her feet. Her bangs are all sprayed up, like a regular chola, but she wears a little gold crown. A bad-ass *vata loca* sitting at the counter right in front of me.

At first, I don't recognize them but the moment I see Frida's unibrow and La Virgen's crown, I know. I really know for sure the moment Frida gives me a cigarette, even though there's this big ol' sign right at the counter saying, "Thank you



for not smoking.” I suck on it while La Virgen holds up a lighter.

“¿*Qué ondas, comadre?*” Frida says, smiling. “Whassup?”

One of her teeth is missing and some of the others are all brown. No wonder she never smiles in her paintings. I don’t know what to say, so I just take another swig from the beer I have behind the counter.

“Are you a shy girl?” La Virgen says. “Don’t you know us, *esa?*”

“Man, sure I know you guys,” I shout. I always shout when I’m a little buzzed. “You want some coffee or something?”

“*Un cafecito y un platillo de menudo.*”

“¿*Y tú, Friducha?*”

“How about some *pozole y unas cuantas tortillas de maíz,*” she says.

So, I serve them their menudo, pozole, tortillas and coffee. They tell me they’re here to give me some advice: *unos consejos.*

“And believe me, you’re going to need the advice, *preciosa,*” Frida says. “Because your crazy Mami is going to let you have it with this whole *quinceañera* bullshit real soon.”

La Virgen nods and takes another puff.

“We’re here to tell you, you better watch out,” La Virgen says. “So we have some rules for you to live by. You know, like those Ten Commandments Father Jorge taught you.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t about God, Jesus or some other Catholic laws,” Frida says, ripping up her last tortilla.

“It’s about you, homegirl, and about your *pinche* parents and this *quinceañera* they wanna force down your throat,” La Virgen tells me. “You probably don’t wanna hear it from me, especially since your mom is always throwing me in your face, saying how much you’re hurting me every time you

don't listen to her . . . but I want you to hear it from me, not something your mom picked up from your *abuela*."

I pull up a chair. I'm puffing away, the smoke relaxing me. I don't even feel sick, like those stupid films at school say you're supposed to. It's Sunday and Mom has been at church since 6 am. She usually stays away until about 10, because she sells *buñuelos* and tamales out in front of the church to people getting out of Mass. The restaurant's empty except for the three of us. I go over and lock the door, close the blinds, turn over the "Closed" sign and scooch a chair in between my *comadres*.

Frida leans over to me and takes my hand. La Virgen smiles with her chocolate brown lips.

"*Hermosa* Isabela, your parents say they just want you to be a 'decent' girl," Frida says. "They want you to grow up with all those bourgeoisie ideas. If you have to drink to protect your soul, then do it. Just stop with the cheap beer. You're better off drinking your father's *tequila*."

Then she pulls out a bottle of El Patrón Silver and three shot glasses. She fills the little glass to the top for me. I take it down in one gulp, and it burns at first, but soon I'm on my second shot, trying to keep up with La Purísima Virgen who's drinking the stuff like it's water.

"How 'bout another?" she asks, handing me another cigarette.

I notice her nails. They're painted blue, covered with little gold stars. It looks like she's holding a galaxy in her hands.

"How about taking up smoking?" Frida says. "Sí, I know I'm encouraging vices, but at your age you need all the help you can get. How about drinking? I have no idea when I started but before I knew it, I was challenging Leon Trotsky to tequila shots. *Pobre cabrón*, he was no match for me. Not even in bed."

Then she asks me if I'm still a virgin. When I tell her I am, she shakes her head.

"*Pobrecita* shy girl," La Virgen says. "What? Did your *mamita* tell you to wait 'til your husband popped your cherry?"

Man, she's rough. If she wasn't La Virgen, I'd just think she was another one of those high school skanks. But she's La Virgen. She knows everything and she's just telling it like it is.

"She told me only sluts had sex before they got married," I say. "Those types of women end up pregnant or *putas*."

They both look at each other and laugh again. Frida laughs so hard, she starts rolling around on the floor, kicking her feet. When she gets up, she's wiping tears from her eyes.

"Listen, *preciosa*," La Virgen says. "I don't know if you know this, but your little *pinche* saint of a mother had already started fucking your dad when she was fourteen. But she made the mistake of getting pregnant. Her *mamá*, *tu abuela*, hadn't bothered to tell her about what girls and boys can do when they're hot for each other."

"If you decide to take up with men, be careful!" Frida says. "Capitalist, communist, they're all the same. If you're not careful, you'll end up like me or, even worse, your mother. I loved a man, a great artist, who just couldn't respect me as a wife. 'Fidelity is for the bourgeoisie,' Diego would say. Well, thanks to the bourgeoisie, I painted the most miserable pieces of art ever. Maybe men aren't so bad . . . now that I think about it. Yes, men are another worthy vice."

Just then, the two of them start arguing over who's fucked the most men.

"Well, *cabrona*, you started like three thousand years before me," Frida gives in.

La Virgen smiles, sucks on her teeth and says, “Yeah, way before Johnny Cortez, I’d already had about 50,000 *papacitos*. Mmmm, maybe more.”

“At least I had Trotsky,” Frida says.

“And you’re proud of that?”

Frida’s unibrow scrunches up, and I think for sure she’s going to throw her cigarette in La Virgen’s face. La Virgen ignores her, makes a toast to men.

“*Ya, cállate*,” Frida tries to shut her up. “Can we get back to helping Isabel?”

La Virgen laughs like she’s won this one.

“Here are some more tips, homegirl,” La Virgen says. “Listen up, *chica*, because we made them up especially for you.”

Rule #1: Don’t get pregnant. Have as much sex as you like, but don’t get pregnant. Not until you really, really wanna. Believe me, I had four hundred sons and a daughter. That was a lot of work. What’s worse is that this gang of three, some father, son and ghost, took over my gang while I was spending all my time raising these kids. Now look at this mess!

Rule #2: Go to school. You’re gonna have to work the system. Why do you think I appeared like this little *virgencita* with the cutie pie face to Juan Diego and that fat bishop? I’m working this game, *chica*. Now, look at me. From Chiapas to Chicago, you see me everywhere: murals, tattoos, books, art. Yeah, Lupé’s Ladies are all over. Like that crazy *vato* John Lennon once said about Los Beatles, “We’re bigger than Jesus Christ.”

Rule #3: You're in charge of your *panocha* and don't be afraid to protect it! Some guy is always gonna try to get into your pants, no matter how much you don't wanna. Even your sweet *papacito*. Yeah, don't think we don't know about him. If you have to kick some ass to teach him some respect, do it.

Rule #4: Spread the word. We need to get the word out to all our homegirls and our homeboys, especially the homeboys. Maybe they'll quit with all this macho shit they keep hearing from their families. I think Chuy and his *papá* may be causing all this.

Rule #5: We're all *indias*. Don't let your mom fool you. No one's a hundred percent. Be proud of the *indígena* inside of you. I know your old lady is down on you for behaving like an Apache, but believe me, we can't all be blonde and blue-eyed. Your mom heard the same lies about the white girls being the only ones worth anything from her own *mami*, a pure blood Tarahumara. Morena, you're beautiful too. Check my little brown self out one of these days, hanging in my gold frame right near the altar. I have the place of honor, not these other little wimpy Mariás."

I'm wasted but I get the rules down. Suddenly, Frida puts her arm around me. She points to the paper skeletons I hung in a corner for Día de los Muertos.

"Look at those skeletons dancing. They're waiting for you, you know. Before you know it, you'll be fifty instead of fifteen and you'll wonder where your life went. Don't listen to those crazy sons of bitches you call your parents. You better start

fighting them off now before you end up like those baby rats your mother found and drowned.

“Don’t you have any friends, *muñeca*? That’s strange for a girl your age, you know. At your age, I already had a boyfriend and was hanging out with my *clica*. If you had more vices, you wouldn’t care so much.”

Frida downs another shot of Patrón. Man, she wasn’t even sweating.

“This is the most important thing I wanted to tell you: Ms. Herrera thinks you have a good eye for art. I bet you draw circles around your classmates. What do you think? Maybe art should be your vice. That would really drive your parents crazy, because they wouldn’t understand. Smoking, drinking and fucking—those things they understand, because that’s what they grew up with, that’s what they lived. Art will be your world. You can create your own reality. Then you can escape this capitalistic quinceañera caca they’re trying to feed you.”

Frida lifts the bowl to her mouth and slurps the rest of her pozole. La Virgen takes another drag from her cigarette, drops it on the floor and stubs it out with her foot.

“Listen, *preciosa*, you’ll probably think I’m a miserable pig, but you have to do something before your parents destroy you. Take this advice from me, La Friducha, whom you say you admire so much. Just forget about Father Jorge, all the *tías* and *tíos*, and just go with your gut. Believe me, you don’t want the Pelona to get you while you’re living some kind of middle-class hell. You’ll thank me for it later.”

Frida stands up and looks at her watch.

“Wait for me, *cabrona*,” La Virgen says as she pulls out her compact mirror and puts on more chocolate brown lipstick.

“Just because you like going around painted like Bozo, doesn’t mean I have to wait,” Frida says. “We have other *car-nalas* we gotta help.”

“Hey, I’m not the one going around with a mustache over my lip and eyes.”

“*Pinche puta*. You wanna take it outside?”

“*Tranquila*,” La Virgen says. “I’m just kidding, homes.”

They’re leaving. I know if I ask them to stay, they won’t. If they meet Mom, they’ll kill her.

“We have to go,” La Virgen says. “Another *carnal* needs our help. What? You never knew about my bad-ass chola side? Chica, in this crazy world sometimes you don’t have a choice.”

Before they leave, they both kiss me on the cheek. Frida hugs me real hard. La Virgen leaves me her last cigarette so I can remember her whenever I look at it. I see the brown lip-stick mark where she sucked on it.

“*Adiós, muñeca*,” Frida says. “Don’t forget the rules.”

I cry so hard after they leave because I know I won’t see them for a long time. Just after they disappear, Mom shows up holding a white dress.

“*M’ija*, look what I bought you. Isn’t it beautiful?” she says.

Mom’s been shoving the whole thing in my face since I turned fourteen. She even gets the *tías* to nag me about it. Dad doesn’t do it so much but he’s starting to get on me about my weight. It never bothered him before, but now it’s always, “Why can’t you fix yourself up? Get out and do something. Pluck your eyebrows. What man is gonna want you?”

Yeah, I’m too fat and ugly for other guys, but not for him when he starts touching me in the shower or when he feels me up in the car. He never says nothing. He just looks at me

the way other guys look at the girls at school. La Virgen's right. I have to protect my *panocha* even from my own dad.

Then, here comes Mom with her stupid quinceañera dress and all her dumb ideas about a big party with *mariachis* and everything. All that stuff costs, and I know they don't have the money. Even I know our crummy restaurant barely cuts it every month, now that there's a Pollo Loco on the corner.

Frida and La Virgen were right. Mom just wants to show off how well she raised me. Please. She can shove it. Just like that stupid white dress. Who told her to buy it anyway?

"Mom, I told you I don't want a quinceañera."

"But don't you want to wear this and look beautiful in front of your friends?"

"I don't have any friends."

"Ay, *no seas tan sangrona*," she says, calling me stubborn and shoving the dress at me.

I throw it back at her and run back to the house. Dad doesn't even look up from his soccer game when me and Mom run right between him and the TV. I run into my room but can't lock the door in time. She just pushes the door real hard and busts in.

"*¡Niña malagradecida!*" she says. "Ungrateful brat! This dress cost me \$300! Do you think I'm just going to throw it away?"

She still has the dress with her. As I try to hide in the closet, she grabs me by the shirt and starts slapping me.

Then I slap her back, and that's when she loses it. She takes a step back a little and then punches me in the gut. When I fall doubled over on my bed, she grabs me around the waist and sits me up. That *vieja* is strong for a short woman. It's her Tarahumara Indian blood. She's always bragging about how all her strength comes from her blood.



“A *chingao*, is that cigarette smoke I smell on you?” she grumbles, sniffing like a hound. “Where did you get them? Did you steal them from your father?”

I wait for her to slap me again, but she just picks up the dress and hangs it on the door. I lie down because I feel like barfing.

“You used to be such a good girl, so obedient, and now, *como un pinche apache!*”

She comes right up to me, leans over and tears down my Frida Kahlo poster, “My Birth.” It’s my favorite poster, and she knows it. But it’s always bugged the shit out of her because it’s not one of those pretty pictures of a puppy with big sad eyes or a ballerina girl. No, my poster shows a dead mother with a dead baby hanging out of her between her legs. It shows everything, even the mother’s vagina covered in black pubic hair. What I really like about it is the painting of the Nuestra Señora de Dolores hanging over the bed. She’s the real mother, because like all mothers, she’s always in pain and makes everyone around her feel it. Mom calls it disgusting and starts ripping it into little pieces.

“There,” she says when she’s done. “Maybe you won’t hit your own mother next time.”

Before she leaves, she turns to the little bust of the Virgen de Guadalupe hanging over my door. I hear her say something stupid, like “*Ayúdame, Virgencita.*”

After she leaves, I lock the door, grab the bust and throw it out the window. That stupid dress. I wasn’t about to look like a big white whale for her. Just because her *comadres’* daughters had theirs doesn’t mean I have to go through this. She’s not fooling me. This is about her. She wants to let everybody know her daughter’s like all the other daughters, ready to get fucked. It’s not bad enough that I’m fat and that everybody makes fun of me at home and at school, but now Mom

wants to embarrass me in front of some crowd at church. Anyway, who's going to be stupid enough to be my escort? Tina's my only friend, and she dropped out of school last year and moved out to Coachella with her mom. So, I hardly see her.

Jesus, I haven't been to church for weeks now, so who cares? Dad never goes. He just stays home and watches soccer games. That's why I never take showers on Sundays. 'Cause I know the moment he hears the water running, he'll come right in to feel me up. One time I locked the door, and he got so mad, he almost broke the door down. When Mom got home, he told her some bullshit lie that I shouldn't lock the door because I might slip and fall, and nobody would be able to help me. Of course, Mom believed it. He says it's my fault because I'm fat. He's doing me a favor because no boy is gonna want some fat slob like me. He says it's my fault that Mom gets so mad at me, she won't fuck him. So I have to at least let him touch my tits and pussy. That's the only good thing for him about my being fat. At least I have big tits.

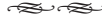
I grab some scissors out of my drawer and I start stabbing the dress. Then, before I know it, I cut it up into little pieces, even the big lace bow on the dress's butt.

I don't care. Just like Mom doesn't care about punching me in the belly or calling me a *pinche apache*. So what if it cost \$300? Who asked her to buy it?

When I see all these little pieces of white on the floor, I freak out. They just sit there all shiny and white, staring up at me. I feel like I killed something.

I know it's a sign from the Virgen because the white shreds remind me of all the little stars on her hands. I've gotta get out. I feel real crazy and macho at the same time, like Dad when he gets drunk. This time I'm not gonna chicken out. This time, it's for real, and I'm not coming back. So I dig out some money from under my bed, pack my duffel bag and

jam to downtown LA. When I get to the Greyhound, I hide out in the bathroom until 2 in the morning and catch the first bus to El Paso.



I wake up the next day to a stinkin' pile of sweat. God does that fat lady smell. Her hair is all stringy and half her ass is over on my side of the seat. Yeah, she's fat like me. Maybe I stink too. That really bums me out. Maybe it's me that's smelling up this whole bus. I look over the seat in front of me. Naaah. Other people look like they stink too. The next stop, I'm gonna wash my pits just to make sure. I could use some of that fancy soap I stole from Mom. She always got pissed when I tried to use it. I loved the way it smelled, like that perfume in J.C. Penney's. It smelled even nicer than Dial.

I look at the fat lady's watch. It's barely 10. The guy at the bus station said we wouldn't get to El Paso until 8. Shit.

When the bus stops, at Blythe this time, I go wash my pits, my feet and my neck. This lady walks in. She's crying, looks like she's been punched in her eye. I pack my stuff up real fast.

"*M'ija*," she says to me, "you have some tissue?"

"Nah," I say. "There's some toilet paper here, though."

"Could you get me some?"

I get her some.

She's wiping her face, and her eye looks Chinese because it's all slanted and almost closed.

"Don't ever get married, sweetie," she says, like she's laughing.

I just try to walk real slow to the door.

"Don't ever marry a guy who drinks," she says. Now she's crying real hard.

“My dad drinks,” I say, then I wish I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Yeah?” She turns to me. “So did mine.”

I just get real scared when she tells me that. She sounds just like Mom. I feel like getting on that bus and driving it to El Paso myself. When I get back on, I sit way in the back, right next to the toilet, so I don’t have to hear that lady cry. Jesus, when the hell are we getting out of here? Outside, it’s just red rocks and hills, sometimes little bushes. There’s barbed wire all over the place, as if anybody would want to climb over that. It’s so fuckin’ hot on the bus, but I won’t take off my sweatshirt. I just have my muscle shirt on, no bra. I’m not trying to be sexy. I just forgot to take any bras with me. Anyway, I see this slimy guy look at me weird. . . . I don’t need anybody hassling me right now. Of course, when the bus gets going and I get up, some asshole has to say something.

“Hey, fat ass, can you get your stomach out of my face?” some old woman says.

“Fuck off,” I say. “I’m just trying to get my duffel bag.”

The stupid lady punches me in the gut. I fall over on the guy who gave me that weird look. He cops a feel when I try to get up. I almost pop him one, when the bus driver stops the bus.

“Hey, you! Don’t start any trouble or I’ll leave you right here.”

I roll my eyes real hard, grab my duffel bag and head back to my seat. *What else can I do?* The last thing I need is for him to leave me here in the middle of nowhere or maybe call the cops. After digging around my bag, I find the picture of Tía Rosa sitting on her boyfriend’s lap. She’s holding a cigarette. Looks like he’s squeezing her. A big margarita glass sits on the table next to them. She’s laughing. Her lips are red-red, like a Crayola crayon, and her hair is short and gold, like Blondie’s.

On the back of the picture she wrote: “*Con mucho cariño y amor para mi sobrina Isabela, de parte de tu Tía Rosa. Aquí estoy con mi novio Pablo en el restaurante Ajúúa! Visítame cuando quieras. Mi número de teléfono es 13-16-57. Mi dirección es Avenida 16 de Septiembre 3555, Juárez. Los espero.*”

That’s her address: Avenida 16 de Septiembre in Juárez. I wonder if she wanted to invite all of us, or just me. I guess she thought I’d be coming with Mom and Dad. I don’t think she really liked Mom, though. One time, at a party, Tía was dancing to a *cumbia*, “*Tiburón, Tiburón,*” with Uncle Beto. She looked like that statue of Our Lady of Fatima with her small angel lips, dark eyes and pale skin. She wore her short blue dress. Mom was in the kitchen serving the *carne asada* Dad had just cooked up outside.

“*Vieja sinvergüenza,*” she said when I walked in with all the paper plates. “Your aunt just likes shaking her butt in front of everybody.”

“She’s a good dancer.”

“She should be helping me in the kitchen.”

“Where’s Tía Amelia?”

“She’s helping your father cook the steaks.”

A little while later, I saw Uncle Beto taking Mom by the hand and trying to make her dance. Mom laughed, shook her head. Dad tried to take out Tía Rosa, but she said no and walked outside to the patio. Instead of going back to the party, he came after me, but I split into the patio with Tía Rosa. She was sitting there smoking and singing, “*Zandunga.*”

“*¿Qué pasa, muñeca?*” she said.

I could smell her Coco Chanel perfume mixing with the smoke. “Nothing.”

“Want a cigarette?”

“Yeah!”