

Homecoming

When my cousin Carmen married, the guards at her father's *festa* took the guests' bracelets and wedding rings and put them in an armored truck for safekeeping while wealthy, dark-skinned men, their plump, white women and spoiled children bathed in a river whose bottom had been cleaned for the occasion. She was Tío's only daughter, and he wanted to show her husband's family, a bewildered group of sunburnt Minnesotans, that she was valued. He sat me at their table to show off my English, and when he danced with me, fondling my shoulder blades beneath my bridesmaid's gown as if they were breasts, he found me skinny but pretty at seventeen, and clever.

Come back from that cold place, Vermont, he said, *all this is yours!* Over his shoulder a dozen workmen hauled in blocks of ice to keep the champagne lukewarm and stole glances at the wedding cake, a dollhouse duplicate of the family *ranchito*, the shutters marzipan, the cobbles almonds. A maiden aunt housekept, touching up whipped cream roses with a syringe of eggwhites, rescuing the groom when the heat melted his chocolate shoes into the frosting. On too much rum Tío led me across the dance floor, dusted with talcum for easy gliding, a smell of babies underfoot. He twirled me often, excited by my pleas of dizziness, teasing me that my merengue had lost its Caribbean. Above us, Chinese lanterns strung between posts came on and one snapped off and rose into a purple postcard sky.

A grandmother cried: *The children all grow up too fast.* The Minnesotans finally broke loose and danced a Charleston and were pronounced good gringos with latino hearts. The little sister, freckled with a week of beach, her hair as blonde as movie stars, was asked by maids if they could touch her hair or skin, and she backed off, until it was explained to her, they meant no harm. *This is all yours,*

Tío whispered, pressing himself into my dress. The workmen costumed in their workclothes danced a workman's jig. The maids went by with trays of wedding bells and matchbooks monogrammed with Dick's and Carmen's names. It would be years before I took the courses that would change my mind in schools paid for by sugar from the fields around us, years before I could begin to comprehend how one does not see the maids when they pass by with trays of deviled eggs arranged in daisy wheels.

—It was too late, or early, to be wise—
The sun was coming up beyond the amber waves of cane, the roosters crowed, the band struck up *Las Mañanitas*, a morning serenade. I had a vision that I blamed on the champagne:

the fields around us were burning. At last a yawning bride and groom got up and cut the wedding cake, but everyone was full of drink and eggs, roast pig, and rice and beans. Except the maids and workmen, sitting on stoops behind the sugar house, ate with their fingers from their open palms windows, shutters, walls, pillars, doors, made from the cane they had cut in the fields.

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