

## Barrio Blues

That rancid whore smell made Gloria Rosa want to puke. She looked around the steamy cabin of the old '68 Chevy. Gloria scrutinized the man grunting over her, decided it was too much effort, and looked away.

Her ugly cotton underwear hung limply on the stick shift. This was all Whoring Juana's fault. Whoring Juana didn't bother drinking enough tequila. Gloria wasn't drunk anymore and the cramped position and dead exhilaration were pissing her off. She looked to the stranger's contorted face. He was probably cramping up too or out of practice. Way out of practice.

He wheezed, "Are you uncomfortable Juana?"

Whoring Juana, who rarely came out to play at 35, had pulled a number on her.

"Not really. My ass is starting to cramp up."

She struggled to remember his name.

"I'm almost done."

Gloria watched his expression in amusement. He had the look of happy fat ceramic cherubs. She thought again. It was more the drunk gnomes in her backyard with their red shining faces. Remembering her old Tío Tomas's wisdom, she bit down on her hand and choked down a laugh. *Never be unkind to people. They might take revenge on you.*

He smiled. Leaking all over the seat, she adjusted herself, put on her panties, and crumpled smoked dress. It wasn't her truck, but she cleaned up the mess with a snotty Kleenex from the dashboard.

"Where are we?"

Confused, he responded, "We're outside your house Juana."

Gloria lowered the window and looked around. The moon made her brick wall look dark and dirty. She turned back, smiled briefly trying to fake gratitude, and struggled out of the truck.

A minor surge of guilt made her ask, “Are you OK to drive home?”

He frowned at her spiking up the plastered hair on his forehead.

“Yeah but. . .I live right next door, remember?”

Gloria examined his upper body. She had misjudged him somewhat. With a shower, she supposed, he could pass. For sure, he was in much better shape than she was at 5’ 3” and 150 lbs.

“Then why the hell didn’t we go to your place?”

“Because you said it would be romantic to have sex outside your gate.”

Damn Whoring Juana. From that day on, Gloria resolved never to drink again. No more rum and cokes. No more calientitos on New Years. No more martinis with sweet onions.

Gloria stumbled to her gate. For a moment she panicked. What if her father was waiting up? What if he had the rifle he claimed Emiliano Zapata used in battle? She stopped and remembered.

Her parents had died in a bus accident on the way to Los Mochis three years ago. They had died in the high hell of the Sonora Desert in a giant metal beast. Some of the passengers died from heat exhaustion, she supposed. But deep down, she knew her parents had died instantly. Slass, a quick rattle snake strike, too soon to mutter a half assed act of contrition. Slass, slam, slass. All 39 passengers and two chickens dead and alone. All her plans to take care of her parents and watch them age joyfully. Slass-gone.

Her house was empty now. She rarely had guests anymore and had more conversations with her old cat Mr. Rogers than with anyone in the neighborhood.

“Man, scotch would be good right now.”

“Juana! Hey Juana.”

He brought her purse and gave her a tight hug that killed any thoughts for Scotch.

“I’ll see you later, OK?”

She blurted, panicked, “What? Why?”

He cocked his head to the side.

“Juana, how much *did* you have to drink?”

Gloria shrugged her shoulders and headed home. She was coming down hard and her stomach was killing her. The perfect solution was waiting for her underneath her kitchen sink. She stepped through the door and slammed it behind her. When her parents were alive, they would always yell at her for slamming the door. –¡Was a quebrar la puerta, hija!- It was an endless fight because she never thought about the door, just where she needed to go and how fast she needed to get there.

The suffocating dusty dark greeted her. Every time she came home, the house had the feel of extended absence. She struggled to find the light switch and a loud screech made her scream. He had been waiting for her next to the door.

“I’m sorry Mr. Rogers.”

She turned on the light.

“Did I break anything?”

He gave a mean hiss and turned away. Snorting in contempt, Gloria made her way to the kitchen. A loud knock spun her around. She teetered and nearly fell back.

“Are you OK? I heard a scream?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! I’m fine! Go home already! This ain’t Jack in the box. You’re not getting a refill.”

Long minutes later, Gloria struggled to light her prize. She couldn't quite coordinate the lighter and her shit. A poor Mexican farmer's dream-mobile. Green, green and smooth. In desperation, she lit the gas stove, knowing there was no way she would miss the large flame.

Ideally, she should have been sitting under the stars trying to remember old constellations, but she didn't know this new neighbor, Mr. Funk Grunt. He could be a narc or worse, a transfer border patrol agent. That's how he struck her. Stiff and formal, down to the orgasmic announcement.

She looked around for Mr. Rogers. He liked an occasional puff in his ear. Helped with the arthritis. Gloria sighed a long sigh and looked out the window for stars. Two large eyes peered inside. She jumped back, sticking her right hand in the flame.

“Sonofafuckingwhorebitch!”

The joint landed on her large cleavage and lit her cheap dress. She slapped her chest with her good hand and jumped around. The man ran in through the living room and poured water from a ceramic jug on the table.

“Ah! Not the joint!”

Gloria was usually kind and generous. She gave rides to old people and sometimes bought school supplies for the snotty little bastards in her barrio. They missed her mother too and would come around looking for a free meal after dusty baseball games. They would wait outside until she would bring a half burnt hotdog and a cheap soda. Yeah, she had her angelic moments.

“Let me look at your hand.”

She stammered furiously, “Why the hell were you spying on me?”

“I was making sure you were OK.”

He ran her hand under cold water. She was fuming. Her last joint was a spent dick. She was broke and damnit, she needed to get high.

“Oh, don’t be such a cry baby. It’ll dry up.”

Gloria pouted.

“If you really want, I’ll get you a replacement from my place.”

Her lips turned up slightly thinking maybe he was a dealer. Not that the barrio needed one, but it would be convenient to have one next door. She smiled, “So what do you do for a living? Do you deal?”

Flabbergasted he exclaimed, “Christ woman? Don’t you remember anything we talked about tonight?”

She fidgeted and looked at her hand closely. Blisters were beginning to form.

“Do you remember my name?”

She inspected him quickly. Oddly, he had grey eyes, and his hair was curly, light brown, not the black straight spikes she had seen in the truck.

“Steven?”

“Pancho! Pancho Salazar Vega.”

He poured her a large glass of water, pushed it into her left hand and went home.

“Good riddance, you lousy fuck. And bring back my joint. . . You pussy.”

Mr. Rogers began rubbing her leg in reconciliation. Sitting on the closest chair, she placed Mr. Rogers on her lap and stroked his lumpy fur.

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She wasn't hungry. That was a bad sign. She would be vomiting uncontrollably in no time, which would have been prevented had she smoked last night. Slamming her hand on the table, she yelled.

“Ow! Oh owy ow.”

Her head pounded as she made her way to the bathroom and kneeled carefully. Once she was so disoriented from a crazy night, she nearly dunked her head in the toilet. Her father, had witnessed that morning, and he never stopped giving it to her and exaggerating the event.

-Cuando vi, tenia la pinche cabeza metida en el toilet con cagada colgando del pelo.-

Soon the legend grew among her parents' friends about the time Gloria had a dangling turd on her long bangs. He failed to mention that he had challenged her to a tequila-drinking contest and had taken all her petty cash at cutthroat dominos. But, he cheated even his best friends, a quality she loved in him.

The yellowed rings were her target, “Come out. Come out, damnit.”

It was going to be a bad day, and it was all Pancho's fault.

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The cat was amused by her repetitive yakking. Six hours had passed, and she was still throwing up. Because she had missed his morning feed, he meowed at her impatiently.

“Go fetch mommy a shot of tequila, Mr. Rogers.”

The cat smiled at her and blinked lazily, meowing another protest.

“No? Well fuck you, you furry man-cat. You're a credit to your sex—” she hurled again, this time a torrent of hot yellow stench. If her mother had been around, she would have made some herbal cure and homemade Gatorade. She thought back to all her drunken recoveries and

couldn't remember ever being so sick. Gloria hated to think that she was losing her edge and destined to be an old lady with a cranky cat.

Resting her check against the toilet she murmured, "I'm never drinking again. I swear on the head of St. Francis. Never ever. I'm too old for this shit. Whoring Juana dies today."

Gloria thought back to the last time she had been sitting in between her parents on a worn pew. Their church had been sweltering in that dry summer heat, the parish too poor for air conditioning. She recalled that last time a young man had passed out during the Our Father, something that caused great amusement to her father and scandal to her mother. After the incident, her father, with mischievous black eyes, began whispering jokes to her during the offertory.

-¿Como se dice viudo en Chino? ¡Chin chu mechon!-

Every time she would giggle, her mother would shush and pinch her left leg. On occasion, her mother, who always insisted on wearing an outdated black veil over her head, would nudge her to point out a young bachelor. Sometimes they looked to be ten years too young, and Gloria would suddenly look for lost change and give her feet a silent laugh. Not wanting to help the situation, her father would jokingly admonish her in a broken English, "Your going to fart! Pedos para todos."

A soft knock made her turn. It was him. He looked stunning in his white dress shirt and brown slacks, but she was too sick and ugly to be charming.

"How are you?"

She dry heaved and stared at the ring in the toilet expecting another acid upsurge. A painful hunger pang made her smile.

"Oh, I'm just fine now."

Gloria stripped out of her rank dress, threw away her panties, thought twice, threw away her dress, and hopped into the shower. The door closed.

“Good. Go make me some breakfast, you nosy bastard.”

Five minutes later, she dried off and marched to her room sniffing the air.

“Nope.”

It was Sunday. Sometimes they would watch a matinee with her giving a soft, rapid, translation of the movie. They would maybe even have a late lunch at the Long John’s Silver and later complain about indigestion. Those times were dead too. Her father was probably looking down on her now with great disappointment, but she doubted that. Just in case, she apologized briefly to old memories. On her old wooden chair was her mother’s red rayon housedress with loud unnatural orchids. She put it on and considered for some time what she would tell this stranger.

No one had ever come home with her after a drunken bout before. The truth was that she couldn’t remember a damn thing about Pancho. Gloria decided that she was too tired to be cordial.

Patient Pancho was sitting at the table with a nestled Mr. Rogers on his lap.

“Fucking traitor.”

He looked up, “I know. I’m sorry I left you alone last night. I didn’t realize how drunk you were, and I think I had a few too many—“

“Not you. The cat.”

“Well, Juana I’m—“

Gloria put up her hand and explained, “Whoring Juana, only comes out to play when I’m plastered. It’s my party name. Untraceable Whoring Juana Dominguez. My real name is Gloria.”

Pancho held out his hand. It was a decent gesture, but it annoyed her. She had no intentions of doing more than kicking him out. Besides, what was the point of being formal after last night? Reluctantly, she shook his hand and winced.

“I’m so sorry!”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“Well, then, make me some damn breakfast. I want scrambled eggs and coffee like I like my men. Strong and black.”

Pancho amused her even more when he wasn’t fucking her. She pointed to the fridge then the pans and the oil. This was much better than watching Saturday night boxing matches, but she didn’t watch those anymore because, if she wasn’t careful, she’d cry a whiny cry after the second round. Pancho was practically dancing circles for her, and the eggs and coffee were better than hers. Almost as good as her mother’s.

“You don’t want any?”

He shook his head and stroked her right hand. Mr. Roger’s meowed impatiently.

“Hey, would you feed your new friend, please?” She pointed to the counter. There was only one container, an old ceramic container she had made in high school. Back when she thought she would be an artist, the new Frida, her parents had worried every night. They had only seen starving street artists with faded charcoals on dirty cardboard. Gasoline swallows and degenerate heroine addicts muttering from grimy sidewalks to pale faced tourists with a “Make your picture?” forced out in weak English. Handsome men and broken boys spinning lies upon lies about dying grandmothers and pregnant girlfriends.

Pancho tried to get her attention, “I take it that you’re not much of a cook. There’s hardly no food in your fridge.”

Gloria suddenly remembered that he had *just* walked into her house that morning. If there was one thing she hated above all, it was when people came into homes without knocking or announcing their visit. Gloria could have been dying on the toilet and still would have gotten mad if some trespassing neighbor kid came in and called the ambulance.

“Well, do you think you’ll be able to go out tonight?”

Gloria looked at him quizzically, “What?”

“You said you would be my date tonight.”

-¡Pinche Juana, hija de puta!-

Pancho laughed loudly.

He smiled, “This could be fun.”

“Fuck you,” Gloria glared at him, “I know that’s bullshit. . .I never go out on a second date.”

Pancho paused losing his confident expression. He was confused again, something Gloria noticed he suffered from often. It was not his fault of course. After all, she insisted on leading her bogus double life that she couldn’t manage anymore.

“Where are you from?”

“Buckeye, AZ. My parents from Guadalajara. No I’ve never been there. Don’t speak a lick of Spanish. Used to work at the Phoenix County Hospital. Hated the city, now I work at the clinic in Somerton. I’m widowed. Going of five years now. No debt. No kids. Few bad habits. One dog.”

Stifling a laugh, she turned to Mr. Rogers. Pancho reminded her of desperate book vendors who toured the barrio. They would come on hot summer days desperately trying to make a sale among people who could barely afford to eat let alone read. Once, her father bought an encyclopedia set, because he felt sorry for a short stubbly man. They ate beans and tortillas for two weeks, and instead of complaining, Gloria would read articles on the founding fathers to her parents or strange facts that they had never learned about. Her parents were especially intrigued by Kennedy's sex exploits which were briefly indexed in the large brown K volume.

“What do you do?”

“I'm a doctor.”

She leaned towards him, “You won't believe what I do for a living.”

Gloria remembered the proud expression on her mother's round face. Her Mami had worn a crisp blue denim dress from JC Penny. Her daughter was getting a master's degree in psychology from the Northern Arizona University branch campus. Although she had a full ride at the main branch, she chose to stay with her parents and work in her community. It was what they wanted but hadn't asked for her. Unfortunately, the pay was shit and the job satisfaction wasn't all she had hoped for. She had too many clients who didn't want to get better and not enough gratitude from anyone.

Just last month, one of her quiet clients had slammed a Spanish/English dictionary against the left side of her face. He was a shy man in his mid fifties. Sometimes he brought her a bag of oranges, but every night, he drank a death man's wish. Beat his wife and had broken his five-year-old's nose the week before. Out of frustration, she finally told him to quit fucking around and spend his booze cash on his five hungry children. He ran out, slam and run, leaving her with a four-inch paper cut on her left cheek and a large bruise.

“You’re the counselor at one of the parishes in Yuma. God help it.”

“Juana—“

“Nah, I saw the diploma temple on the wall and your mail on the kitchen table.

According to Juana told me you’re an exotic lap dancer from Brazil. In fact, you did an interesting lap dance for me that was very convincing.”

Gloria blushed uncontrollably. She looked away and back at him taking in the gorgeous Adam’s apple and well defined chin. Her mother would have loved watching them sit together. And her father would have loved his manners and profession.

He cleared his throat, “So are you really single?”

She looked at the ceiling. Dangling spider webs waved slowly. Gloria hadn’t gotten laid in 4 and ½ years, at least. She hadn’t had a boyfriend in longer than that, a fact that vexed her mother until her dying day.

“No,” she looked at him straight in the face, “I have a steady boyfriend who teaches at the high school. Math teacher. He’s out of town.”

“Oh.” It was his turn to blush and grow awkward. He got up to go, knocking a Tabasco bottle over. Pancho gave her a warm kiss on the cheek that left too much spit.

“Well, I had fun.”

She smiled and watched him go. He left the door half way open. It reminded her of her father who always left the door that way when he was in a rush. Then her mother would waddle over and close it softly. She missed them something awful. Missed their stupid jokes at her expense. Missed how they resented her for not having grandchildren.

Mr. Rogers did an uncharacteristic jump onto her lap and comforted her. He was getting old, and she knew the arthritis was painful. She stroked his white matted fur and scratched his tiny nose.

“I’ll put you to sleep soon. I promise.”

She pet him as he looked at her with penetrating eyes. Stroking him methodically, Gloria thought back to how she had begged and gesticulated outside the super market so many years ago. Her parents had been adamant, but she argued that the cat would eat snakes and poisonous animals that could maybe kill all the chickens if the cat wasn’t around to defend. When that didn’t work, she threw a tantrum. As her skin turned a sick green, her father handed a dollar to the little girl with red ringlets. That was the only time she remembered having a fit and winning. Mr. Rogers wasn’t purring anymore and she realized that he had peed on her slightly.

“Damnit. You little shit!”

Placing him on the floor, she went to the sink for a rag. It was only a small stain, and it didn’t smell much. Cursing Mr. Rogers she walked over to give him a play spank. Mr. Rogers knew that march, and he would at least try to get away, but this time, he stayed with his silly cat smile. Gloria stared at Mr. Rogers for a long time, then put her hand over his mouth. Pressing down on his chest, she let out a long sigh and gave him a final spank.

“Typical.”

On the kitchen table, she spotted the joint. It was misshapen and the water stains weakened the paper. She lit the stove and took a long drag. Out the window, she spied Pancho sitting on a white whicker chair staring at the horizon. Holding back a laugh, she took out an old paper bag, stuffed Mr. Rogers in it, and took him out to the trash.