

Huele Como el Diablo

ANEL FLORES

¡Traje dos tanques de la fábrica!

Flora walked backwards, as her husband passed in through the wood slatted yellow screen door.

“What are we going to do with so much pesticide? We haven’t even planted our garden yet?”

He tried to lean in from behind to give her a kiss on the back of the neck.

“*No tienen nada*. And, they were so light I just rolled them home down the alley.”

She turned around from the stovetop towards him.

“Empty! What are we going to do with empty steel drums?”

“Flora, *chula*, trust me.” Chon smiled, moving in for a kiss on the lips, but Flora waved her hand in front of her nose.

“*Poochi!* Forget the steel drums, did you step in caca? You smell!”

Her husband smelled worse than the dead possum that stewed under the store weeks ago. She could hardly stand to be near him.

Anel I. Flores has received numerous awards, such as Women’s Advocate of the Year 2018, the Chingona in Literature Award 2016, and the Ancinas Award, among others. Flores was named Best Of San Antonio Local Author 2017. Apart from collaborating in various anthologies and magazines, she is co-editor of forthcoming Jota Anthology with Korima Press and author of Lambda literary award nominated book *Empanada: A Lesbiana Story en Probaditas*. Flores holds her MFA in Creative Writing, is a member of the Macondo Writers Workshop, the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa and the National Association of Latina/os in Arts and Culture.

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“¡*Dame un beso, amor!* A kiss for your honey?” Chon smiled and played affectionately. “All I’ve seen are a bunch of ugly old men in blue suits mixing *tanques* of shit colored pesticides all day!”

“¡No!” She ducked her head and squirmed away from his swaying arms, squeezing her nose shut with her thumb and index fingers, trying not to laugh or give in.

“Excuse me, for having to go to work for my *mujer!*” He tried to charm her but it ran out before he even got started.

“Don’t *mujer* me, Chon!” She finally cracked a smile. “You’re not the only one who works around here!” Her smile grew bigger and Flora shook her loosely tied bun, from side to side, over her head.

“You smelled better when you worked at the store with me in the meat freezer. Maybe you should come back and work with the family.”

“*Sí, mi amor, pero* this new place pays better. I got a raise after two weeks, and we got the free *tanques.*”

“*Ojala que tratan a ustedes bien.*”

“¿*Cómo no, amor?* Even the mayor says he approved this company because it would help grow the city, put us on the map, and create more jobs.”

“Those gringos better obey the law! With all the work we’ve been doing to clean up the fields and get people treated right around here, they better, or I’ll call los strikers and tell on them!”

“*Es buen trabajo, lo prometo.* They are a new company, *de Nueva York y son Cristianos*”

Flora scowled at Chon, and wiped the sweat about to drip off her brow with her forearm. One hand carried a broom and the other carried the wooden spoon she was using to mix the *raspa* syrups for the next day at the grocery store. It was stained bright pink, for the strawberry snow cone and so was her entire hand.

“For real, Chon, you stink like the devil. Go outside and take your clothes off.”

“¿*No vas a besarme, primero?*” He tried again to go in again for a kiss.

“No! *¡Salta de aquí, feo!*” She swatted the broom at his feet and he skipped backwards towards the kitchen, making finger devil horns over his head.

“*¡Hueles como el diablo, hombre!*”

Chon laughed, and trotted his boots through their *cocina*, leaving small chunks of dry soil imprinted with the waffle pattern from the bottom of his shoes on their mustard and tan speckled linoleum floor, and out the back door. Through the open window his voice trailed in.

“*Como dije, traje dos tanques a la casa, para que podemos lavar la ropa.*”

“Since when do you help wash the clothes?” Flora said sarcastically to the man who gave up laundry the day after their wedding.

“*Voy a ayudar*, Flora, I’ll help, *lo prometo*. It’s just with this new job.”

She interrupted him, “I have an idea. Get one of your new *tanques*, put your dirty clothes in one of them, and fill it up with water from the *manguera*. You can start with washing your own clothes outside.” Chon bent over to grab the edge of the hose, tossed it over the edge of the *tanque* and twisted the nozzle. He stood up and unbuttoned the top of his coveralls, letting it fold open down below his groin exposing a white v-neck t-shirt and his white underwear. In her peripheral, she saw his skin and ached for a peek, but was still embarrassed, unaccustomed to seeing a man’s naked body. The coveralls fell down to his ankles. He stepped out of one leg, shaking it off, and kicked up his other leg, sending the stinky uniform flying towards the steel barrel, right inside. One of the pant legs hung out off the edge, down the side. Flora hadn’t seen his entire body naked yet. The wedding night was 3 weeks ago and had since slept in her nightdress even if they were trying for a baby. And, the lights were never on. Flora peeked at her husband each time the square curtain blew in with the wind, only showing half of her body and face. A gasp pinched the breath from her lungs. She started at the top of his thighs, crossing over his knees and down to his ankles. She closed her eyes for a moment and went back to sweeping. She shouldn’t be having those thoughts.

Circling back around to quickly stir the *raspa* syrup, she caught another glance of Chon taking off his shirt. The thin line of hair almost invisible is what she felt against her stomach.

“Washing clothes will be a lot easier now.” Chon raised his voice so she could hear him through the window, nodding his head up and down.

“Well, we are going to have more clothes to wash.” Flora said under her breath.

“*Los compadres* said we can also make a *parilla* with the other one, so we can have your parents over for bar-b-q.”

In a low murmur Flora replied, “Well, thank God, because we’ll be having more mouths to feed too.”

She placed the wooden spoon, still dripping with pink sugary syrup, on their *formica* countertop, leaned her straw broom against the dark-green painted wooden window frame, put both hands on either hip, and looked at her husband through the window, straight away this time. He stood in his white baggy calzones and dingy socks, shaded by the small aluminum *techito* he built when they moved in, and blocked from the alley by the mesquite tree that grew like two arms wrestling, close to the ground.

She was fixed on his dark brown eyes, ignoring the pink, orange and red sunset painting the sky behind him. She looked at the expression on his face; the one she fell in love with when they first met, sincere and contemplative. He stood across from her, with his genitals covered by both hands, like he was trying to understand what she just said.

“I haven’t had my cycle, Chon. I think I am pregnant.”

Chon turned around and screamed into the *tanque*. With his face over the cylinder, he banged on the outside of the metal, like a drum and kicked dust up off the ground behind him. The ground vibrated and water splashed up onto his face, cooling Chon off from the sun still warming the air.

“¡Qué brutal!”

“Yes, Chon. We are going to have a baby! We are going to have a baby!”

“¡Vamos a tener un bebé!”

She yelled, “Yes *hombre!*”

The *manguera* was still on and water was overflowing out off the edges, trailing down onto the grey matted dirt of their small backyard, and forming tiny streams of rainbow water following each dip and crack of the flat south Texas terrain. He didn’t take mind to the water and ran back into the house, taking Flora into his bare arms and picking her up.

“If it’s a boy we are going to name him after Remedios. We wouldn’t be together if it wasn’t for him anyways.” They spun around, jumping up and down in the kitchen.

“Chon, we don’t even know if it’s a girl or boy! Don’t name it!”

“Remedia, Remedio, Reme, Remedy!” Chon teased and laughed!

“¡Estás loco, mi amor!” Flora looked up at Chon and rubbed her fingertips against the sprouting fuzz on the side of his cheeks. Their bodies stood still in each other’s arms for a brief second.

“No, I want to name her after the sun, like Sol.”

“Wait, what? Why? That’s a boy’s name. The sun god’s a man!”

“Chon, do you know who you married? All this boy-girl stuff is our parent’s problem!”

“You’re right, you’re right.”

“How about Solitaria, so she can be bright like the sun, but also independent and strong, without having any man’s help?”

“Like you?” Chon said sarcastically and pointed at Flora.

“¡Cállate!” She swatted her hand at the air in front of his face.

“Well, the next one will be Remedio or Remedia, or something like that!”

“Okay, *mi amor!* Okay!”

They continued, hopping around and kissing each other. Chon's eyes started to turn red and they blinked uncontrollably.

"*Te quiero, hermosa*". Flora stared closely at the deep laugh lines that cut into his brown skin.

"Wait, are you crying, Chon?"

"Well, I wanted too but No. *Mis ojos están quemando*." He rubbed and rubbed his eyes but the burn got worse.

"*¡Vete a bañar, ya!* I'll turn off the water outside and start the wash while you clean up."

Chon rushed to their bathroom and turned on the faucet immediately without even closing the door. He couldn't wait and stepped into the tub with his socks still on and his underwear getting soaked. It was freezing cold. Cracking his knees down onto the white, cold porcelain, Chon folded over in fetal position and ladled handful after handful of water up onto his face, groaning and spitting out the bitter taste of dust from the day, mixing with the water dripping into his mouth.

Flora took a twist at the *raspa* syrup, making sure its delicate sugar didn't burn, dropped the wooden spoon to drown under the pink, and grabbed for their bag of Roma detergent under the sink. She took it in her hand, kicked the cabinet shut with her *chancla* and ran outside to start the laundry. She left the washboard inside because she was going to let the clothes soak overnight. Flora ripped the plastic bag with her teeth, inhaling the bitter *polvo* on her tongue, and poured half the bag of white and blue crystal speckled detergent into the *tanque*. Flora came back into the house, leaving the detergent by the edge of the back door and went to check on Chon.

"Chon, Chon? Are you okay?" She stood just outside the open door with her eyes closed.

"*Sí, mi amor, estoy mejor*".

Chon was washed and drying off with the hot wind coming in from outside. He balled his wet *chones* and socks up in the towel, so the smell wouldn't bother Flora again.

"Can I come in?"

"*Estoy desnudo*, no. It's better if you don't."

"Well, then can I bring you some clean clothes?"

"*Sí, mi amor. ¿Por favor me traes unos chones?*"

She walked the two paces back, to their bedroom, opened up his drawer, and grabbed a pair of shorts. Everything was meticulously folded, like she expected.

"I have your shorts, *mi amor*."

His wet hand appeared in front of her face. She placed the shorts in his hand and pulled away.

“Are you hungry?”

“*Sí, tengo hambre, mi amor*”.

“Well, good, *porque está lista la cena*.”

Flora walked back to the kitchen and turned off all the burners, one at a time. Just a tinge of gas floated about the house. She grabbed the brown ceramic plates they received as a wedding gift, off their shelf above the kitchen sink, and served them both a spoonful of *carne picada*, a small serving of grilled onions and rice with *elote*. The smell of *hierbas, comino* and *ajo* rose up into her nose. Chon cautiously came from behind Flora setting the plates down on the table, and grazed his fingertips against her waist.

“¿*Qué olor delicioso?*”

“Thank you! It’s the spices you’re smelling! She inhaled them and turned to finally kiss Chon.

“Better than *la comida*,” he whispered to her, still swaddled in her breath.

“It better not be!”

Chon sat down, barely fitting his legs underneath the small square wooden table, without a shirt on.

“¿*Está bien, que no tengo mi camisa?*” He grabbed the white cloth napkin and covered his chest pretending to wear it for Flora.

“Crazy, that napkin is not a shirt! Put it on your lap!”

Before Chon could put the napkin on his lap, he coughed, covering his face with it. Flora held out a fork in front of her husband and as soon as he stopped coughing, he grabbed the fork and she grabbed the napkin. It was dotted in red spots.

“What are these red spots on the napkin?”

“¿*Sido la raspa?*”

Chon came to the *raspa* counter every day since he was seventeen, for Flora and for her syrup. But, the red on the napkin wasn’t the same red as her strawberry syrup, Flora thought. Chon, yanked the napkin from Flora’s hand and put it on his lap.