

At the Mouth of the Alley

ANEL FLORES

Up and out the front window, past Yerberia Herradura, three multicolored five-point star piñatas and one wonder-woman piñata hung on ropes from the wood beams and exposed electrical wiring, running from the neon sign, to the store walls. Except for the La Mansion Ballroom, most storefront lights were out, but the small street lamps glowed on every other corner. Two wrought iron wall sconces twinkled a faint yellow on either side of the double glass doors of the ballroom. The small space inside the truck cab filled up with the fragrance from their clothes marinated in *comino* and *ajo* from Rosi's. They sat in the car, ready to go light the candles, with their *panzas* swirling. Sol was nervous about going into the church. She stared outside blankly as Toni fiddled with the keys. Sol fixed her eyes on two glittering flames shining through the windows at Yerberia Herradura.

"From what I remember, the energy inside of La Yerberia was so good, right?"

"I do. Remember, *las monjas* used to tell us they practiced *brujería* and made us walk on the other side of the street. Wait, why are we driving to the church if it's just right there?"

"True. But, I just don't know what people are going to say if they see us walking on the street?"

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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“I’ll hold your hand so the *cucuy* doesn’t get you, Sol.”

“I’m scared for you too, Toni. What if people recognize you?”

“Look, I’ll watch out for you, and you watch out for me, okay.”

Toni dropped their hands from the steering wheel onto their lap, holding onto Sol’s eyes with theirs. Sol reached out and touched the side of Toni’s cheek. Toni turned their face up, more toward Sol and dug deeper into her eyes. She felt ticklish and turned her face away. Their banter spiraled into flirting minute after minute, and although Sol was able to absorb the giddy feelings a little longer than before, she still inevitably interrupted the flirting with an abrupt change in movement. She wanted to stop, but proceeded as usual, and got out of the car. Toni shut the truck off and checked their hair in the hanging crooked visor mirror. Sol stood outside the driver window with her palms spread out on the glass mouthing a compliment to Toni, “*Te ves guapo.*” Then she kissed the glass. As long as there was some space between them, Sol could flirt. Toni’s cheeks reddened and Sol’s did too. When the door began to open, Sol again, took off. Toni wiped their palms up and down on the sides of their jeans. Sol was far away, enthralled at the intricate hand-laid brickwork under her feet.

“Look at Barrera’s Hardware store. I swear it’s the same peach color it was twenty years ago. Nothing’s changed.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Sol stopped in front of the La Mansion Ballroom windows and outlined the swirls of the wrought iron bars with her fingers. She moved her head from left to right, trying to see past the dark glass and reflections.

“My *mami* told me she was going to have my *quince* here, but I told her that I wouldn’t wear a dress, that I wanted to wear what Manolo wore to Reme’s *quince.*”

“What did she wear?”

“She looked like a huge chicken! Her dress was light yellow. How can you forget?”

“Ah yeah! I remember now. Dang, Sol, you’re mean. I thought she looked pretty.”

Sol gave Toni a sarcastic side eye.

“Toni! You thought every girl was pretty!”

“Not true. Not true. I thought you were pretty, first!”

Sol got a tickle in between her legs that straightened her back and made her smile. She didn’t know how to respond to Toni’s compliment, or how to accept compliments. She felt strange and embarrassed.

“But, I wanted to wear what Manolo wore.”

“I definitely don’t remember what Manolo wore.”

“He wore that tight grey suit, and that light yellow tuxedo shirt with the ruffles sticking out of the front!” Sol looked into Toni’s eyes smiling and crinkling up her nose at the memory. Toni looked back at Sol with their top lip half up and their eyes squished, confused.

“I kinda remember!”

“When I told *mami* I wanted to wear a suit, she made a *poochie* face like something smelled bad, and told me I was too *tosca*.”

“Dang, Sol, that’s harsh. I wasn’t that brave back then, at all.”

“I don’t know what got into me, but gone was my hope to be the first girl to wear a suit to her *quinceañera*.”

“Fito made me wear a stupid itchy dress and those plastic white shoes for mine.”

“Those stupid shoes! I had to wear those same shoes to your *quince*, too. And, the white panty hose were so tight they cut into the skin on my waist.”

“Did your *medias* keep rolling down your butt?”

“No, Toni! That happened to you because you’re *flaco*. My *medias* were held up by my ass!”

“Shut up!”

“Stop making me laugh,” Toni covered their mouth. “You’re going to make me throw up my tacos!”

“Want to go check out the old Rio Theater?” Toni stepped off the sidewalk pulling Sol with them. It was quiet out, except for a low clicking simmer of evening *chicharras* echoing from the insides of partially hollowed out mesquite trees and alleyways. Sol skipped to catch up to them, reached her hand across her body, gripped Toni’s forearm and pulled it over her head. Toni let their arm fall over Sol’s shoulder and squeezed in. Toni stood tall enough for Sol to rest her head. She finally made the move, Sol thought.

“I’d like to see you in that suit, Toni.”

“You would.” Toni exhaled out through their nose and relaxed their shoulders. “Maybe there’s something at the Rio Theater we can go to while we’re here.”

“Maybe.”

Piles of wood and broken steel bars leaned against the back walls of Barerra’s Hardware. An abrupt thunder of rocks cracking caught Sol’s ear and she gazed through the chain link gate around what looked like an abandoned auto garage. Sol remembered she and Toni were touching in public and felt suddenly scared.

“I’m kind of weirded out that we are here holding hands.”

“Like scared or weirded out?”

“Like both.”

“Don’t be, or, try not to be. We’ll be okay.”

An empty grocery cart, carried by a gust of wind, crossed the caliche parking lot, into the mouth of the alley.

“Let’s not go down the alley.”

A yellow striped cat jumped right off the edge of a barbed wire fence, running in the opposite direction towards the trees in front of them.

“See! That’s scary.”

“Sol, please.”

“I guess I am scared. All the memories of when I was here last, flashed in my mind when we parked. The last time I saw that alley, I had literally just been exercised of my *demonio*, by Padre Rosario and his crew!”

“Oh shit. That’s awful. I wish it would have been me here to help you.”

“Are you kidding? You were much better off with the *tíos*. Look at you, now!”

The repetitive clicking of what they thought was a dying car engine erupted.

“Someone’s coming.” Solitaria turned her head back, forward, and then left to right, looking out to make sure no one drove up to jump them.

“It’s no one, city-girl! It’s the *chachalaca*. Do you not remember the *chachalaca*?” The clicking sound repeated over and over in the distance, mimicking the grind of metal on metal.

“Oh, it’s that damn scrawny bird.” The memory of the night from twenty years ago started to flash in her head again as the clicking amplified one level at a time, one bird at a time.

“When I was hiding from my dad, in between bird calls, I heard him screaming my name.”

“Your *mami* never told him you left to San Antonio.”

“She didn’t tell him. I finally called home to tell him.”

“He hung up on me and I never saw or heard from him again. Since then, I’ve had this repetitive dream of him calling my name. I thought it meant, my subconscious wanted them to come and find me.”

“And, they never came?”

“Never.”

“Maybe he was too sick.”

“Doubtful.” Sol rolled her eyes back and shook her head agitatedly.

“All right.”

Toni turned their bodies towards Doherty Street. They crossed and walked toward the theater. Toni dug their fingertips into Sol's shoulder and exhaled loudly.

"Tia Chita said *mami* was trying to protect me, 'cause my dad wanted to put me in a hospital, said I was sick and I made them all sick from worry."

"He thought you made them sick?"

"She said Padre Rosario told them I had the curse, and then I spread it to Paloma, which spread to them, and then the whole town."

Toni's throat cracked. Sol looked down at her feet and trusted in Toni's steps to follow. The sky's color was deepening, red, orange and grey in some parts.

"You brought the candle's right."

Sol looked at Toni and knit her brows.

"Of course I did, dude! They're in my bag!"

"All right, all right. Let's get on the sidewalk, in case a car comes."

"Toni, it's a freaking ghost town. No one is coming."

They walked across her old street, hopping over the *verdolagas* growing in between the cracks of the cement and almost feeling like she was reliving some of the steps she took as a kid. They walked towards the mint green stucco entrance of the theater. A couple red ticket stubs torn in half were smashed into the cement, a scattered a few feet from the doorway. Sol brushed her hands against the cool, adobe walls.

"I used to love this place."

"Yeah, it made me feel fancy."

"I never went inside, but I always wanted too."

"Fito and Remedios brought me to an exhibit of skeletons here once. It was Posada's work."

"Seriously? The Mexican artist?"

"Yeah, Jose Guadalupe Posada right in there."

"They are so gay! I'm jealous!"

"Um, so are you Sol!"

Both Sol and Toni laughed and rustled in each other's vibrations.

"It's gorgeous."

The pink building brightened as the sun set, reflecting off the fuchsia sky. The faded hand painted letters, reading Xochil, whispered from the south wall of the building.

"It was called Xochil back then, when the old man's son took over, and brought plays and famous people from Mexico!"

"Really, dang!"

“Who knew all that happened right under our noses, while we were working day and night at the Pulga!”

They slipped off the sidewalk trying to get a good look at the entirety of the theater, and Toni reached out and pushed Sol back on the sidewalk. The ornate trim, still burnt-red, and small square windows were all in place. Where the cement cracked along the edge, small blades of grass grew.

“Ahhhh,” Solitaria looked up at the walls and got closer. “Everything feels so alive.”

Both Toni and Sol placed their hands up on the wall and were close enough to smell the cement.

“It even smells good, like clay.” Toni pressed their nose against the wall with their eyes closed.

“Wow, look at that.” Sol pointed into the windows. A yellow, faded flyer, crisp and wrinkled attached to the inside of the glass with one slip of masking tape read, “Mission: Reality Tour,” with an image of a skull and crossbones rising out of a smoke stack.

“That’s the pollution Fito was talking about; the one that he said has gotten everyone sick.”

“It says for the people of Mission to come share their stories about their work at the factory.”

“I bet you it’s about that lawsuit against the chemical plant, that Tio Fito and Tio Remedios said they sent in their letters for. They were waiting for some settlement check in the mail.”

“There is another one, look. It says ‘Toxic Soup!’”

“And, your father thought he was dying because you cursed him!”

“Yeah. He told the story over and over, about how he started spitting up blood just weeks after they got married.”

“Is that true?”

“Yeah, that was true. It was also true that he started working at the plant a few weeks after they got married.” Solitaria rested her forehead against the cool glass window and tried to see through the thick film of dust clouding her view.

“I never knew how sick he was. No one did, not even him, because he didn’t ever want to go to the doctor.”

“Yeah, I remember how he used to pop pills from his pockets at the pulga all day.”

“Then, one day he didn’t wake up. *Mami* found him cold when she came home for lunch, in bed, with blood on his pillow and on the edges of his mouth.”

“Jesus.”

“That’s what I heard at least, but he swore up and down, even before I left, that I cursed him.”

“He really told you that?”

Toni placed their hand over Solitaria’s, against the glass.

“Things started to get crazy around here when the *monjas* picked up Paloma and brought her to Fito’s. First, all the men started to want to cheat on their wives with her, and then they found out I was the one that ended up with her. It made everything even worse. So, I was the cursed one; not them for being disgusting assholes,” Sol continued through frustrated snickering, “but me, the teenage, demon lesbo!”

Toni held her temples in her hand and started to breath hard, listening to Sol.

“They made themselves believe all this crazy shit that we were all *embrujada* and you were kidnapped by the *joto* hairdressers, possessed by the devil. Crazy shit.”

“Wow. That is some crazy shit. How did he explain the bleeding, the hallucinations, his liver disease?”

“The curse. He blames it on the curse. Even his opioid addiction. He blamed it all on the fucking curse of the homos!”

“I’m not sure if I should laugh or cry.”

“Toni, sweet Toni.” Solitaria turned and leaned on the glass, looking up at Toni’s clean cut profile, “You and me both, *chuleta*.”

“Did you just call me a pork chop?”

“Yeah, your side burn looks like a pork chop, plus I like pork chops, plus I think you are super *chulo*, which sounds like *chuleta*!”

“Is this what you call flirting?”

“I never said I was good at it.”

“All right, I’ll take that. Thank you, Solitaria.”

“You’re welcome, *chuleta*.”

They both smiled at each other. Toni released Solitaria’s hand and walked across each window, reading the different antiquated promotions on the insides of the glass. Sol had enough, took some steps back into the street, hopped over the crooked manhole cover and finally up against a thin, smooth-bark *crespon* tree, growing out of an open square in the sidewalk. It’s once pink, bushy flowers were smashed onto the concrete where people and dogs walked trampling them. She looked over at Toni, captivated and craving. They had the same body she watched run down into the *río*, when they were kids, but now Toni was taller, a little fuller, and sexy. A flux of feelings churned through her veins. She wrapped her fingers around the firm tree, committed her eyes to Toni’s body and clenched down on the trunk. She fixed upon Toni’s body,

from the back of their black, heel-cup of their Stacy's, to the bit of skin exposed before their cuffed jean, around the cinched pleats framing their calves and finally to Toni's ass lunging toward Sol. The only thing she wanted to do more than stare at Toni was walk back over to them, press her body against theirs and stop time. Toni turned and crossed their arms in front of their chest.

"What you looking at?"

"You. I just want to freeze you there."

Toni dropped their arms down, grabbed the edge of their waistband and shoved their black T-shirt tighter into their jeans, showing all of their teeth, in a tough smile.

"Come here."

"But, what if I'm the curse." Toni ran both hands along the top of their hair, slicking it back.

"No way. We're the only ones still standing!"