

**An excerpt From *Fiebre Tropical***

**CHAPTER OCHO**  
***CARTAGENA DE INDIAS 1956: LA MUÑECA BRINGS ALL THE BOYS TO THE***  
***BAR.***

Before there was Miami cradling Mami's holy high addiction, before the Sabana Cundiboyancense swallowed everyone's pride and the red brick buildings killed Don Fabito, even before Yours Truly was a lost criolla spermatozoon, there was—drumroll— La Tata hiding in prayer underneath a bed in Cartagena. Every time the dandy lawyer, her fourth suitor this year, knocked on their door she ran up the stairs holding her naguas whispering to her sisters, That hombre *again*? Pero. Dios mío. I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here. But under the wooden bed she was, clutching her rosary. Annoyed, sweating shitless. Our Alba. Just fifteen but a total mujerón with hair so long Rapunzel cried envy tears, hips so smooth and thick Coca-Cola envisioned their bottle after her (they should have!). But silent and shy like a worm. Swimming deep into the cave, diving into the wood of darkness. Some earthworm this niña. Like she'd inherited some bad blood and not the tralala tongue del diablo of the Cartageneras. *Pero what's going with this pela'a? Ajá is she slow muje?* Seemed to be the song sang on repeat around her. The niña was cursed with shyness. Okay, that's not true. Let me rephrase that: a love for solitude misunderstood for shyness.

And there she laid: Eight in the freaking morning and already inhaling all that dust under the bed, inching backwards while her daddy whispered angrily if she didn't not come down a hacerle visita al Don he'd pull her out himself. How dare she. His screams annoyed her but she'd devised a way of keeping them out by always carrying cotton balls in the pockets of her skirt, placing them in her ear and humming while he yelled. Did he think this jeva was some dumb

bitch easily manipulated with bulgy eyes and belts? Of course he did. Pero mi reina, our girl was *re-source-ful*. You wanna yell, papi? Bring it on. I'd be waiting on the other side humming some panchos and filing them nails.

The room smelled of burned candle. Next to the door the long mirror reflected the lit candles emitting a trail of smoke as if there was a thin thread tied to the planks of wood in the ceiling, as if the room were held together by a thin evaporating miracle. Next to the candles estampas of El Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, La Virgen de la Candelaria, La Virgen de Chiquinquirá, La Virgen del Carmen, Santo Tomás. Unopened gifts with love scribbles stacked against the boudoir like shiny green grenades. La persistencia de ese hombre. Is he ever gonna give up so I can listen to my radionovelas in peace? No joda. You'd think any jevita during the 50s would be jumping on one leg if a partidazo like the dandy lawyer approached their fathers with two bottles of whiskey per week, serenaded them with mariachis and gifted a freaking German horse with a red bow and luscious mane. Do you know carajita it took three months for that horse to travel the Atlantic? Albita didn't know and didn't care. Por mi, that horse can die y yo no muevo un dedo. The horse stayed outside in the sizzling sun, shitting so much the Juan's house became known as La Cagada. Oye mi niña tu casa es un cagada. Papi couldn't take the sassy whispering of the vecinas and the condescending pats in the back of the hombres, hermano por favor one can only take so much shit in life, so instead of killing it everyone in La Cagada just let the stunning four-legged beast die. Right outside their windows. Inside the patio. Drooling the water left in him. And every day during breakfast Papi pointed to the patio announcing to the entire family, the groans? Alba's fault. The snorting? Alba's fault. Letting no one else feed the horse but reminding them every morning his oldest daughter care for nothing, had no respect. No soul. Alba shut close the

curtains and placed cotton balls in her ears to avoid the painful moaning but it was only when the radionovelas came on and homegirl turned it all the up that she could refocus, that she could *live*.

Eventually when hearing his gift drowned in mosquito shit the dandy lawyer sent three of his machitos to pick up and a letter to Alba with just one sentence: *Qué tu quiere muje?*

Because nobody rejects a Veléz papá, not your mama, not your papi or your fifteen year old radionovela-driven-muñequita-self. And who did Albita think she was picking and choosing which macho forever humped her?

The cabrón's family owned the Ford dealership in Cartagena carajo, knew the presidente by name. His family dealt emeralds from the moment the Spanish landed in the Nuevo Mundo and said *Aquí me quedo hijueputa!* The warm breeze of Cartagena plus its rhythmical military chants luring every motherfucker willing to make a buck in the ever-growing markets of slave-trade and shiny stones. Cha-ching. The Dandy Lawyer could trace his lineage all the way up Arnoldo Veléz, a famous Spanish jeweler known for his cat fetish who in 1786 jumped in the next boat out of Sevilla chasing El Dorado and found himself switching the top-hat for a guayabera. Papi Veléz fell head over heels hard with the smell of ocean, the cats, the Sinú women who tended his house. Now that, mi reina, is a *real* baller. Two generations after Papi Veléz died asphyxiated from all that cat hair—homeboy brushed his fifteen cats three times a day, yes, I know this because there is a bust in La Ciudad Amurallada of the dude's stony face holding a kitty. Then the Veléz's started losing money big time. What with all-of-the-sudden having to pay their workers, all-of-the-sudden La Ley de Indias protecting people and shit. The Spanish crown couldn't make up its mind cachaco! Are the Sinú people or are they not? Talk about wishy-washy. Por dios, the familia had no patience for this the Dandy Lawyer's grandfather sold the emerald company just when Mr. Yankee Ford looked into expanding his wheels and, madre

santísima, the dough was real. They were right at the port! When closing the deal the Dandy Lawyer's grandfather famous words: this is proof that Jesucristo is part colombiano. Was it not? Everyone wanted a piece of that fancy Yankee cake on wheels. Shiny black machines roaring around Cartagena like futuristic monsters, naguas in and out of cars, hairy hands in and out of naguas. The Veléz's empire known for its harem of beautiful wives smoking outside a terrace with sad looks, fake moles. The Dandy Lawyer needed to continue that tradition with an Albita in a pompous pink dress and French up-do by his side. So he promised land, cars, any number of maids, entry to the country club plus he wasn't even that perro. Only slept with a few guarichas. What else do you want mujer?

But have you learned anything from this story yet? These women ain't gonna fall that easy. Cachaco, por favor. Cars nauseated her. She hated the country club. She hated hairy men in white suits. And, above all, she hated her father's smiling eyes, the cross ring on his pinky serving whiskey and cracking jokes with the dandy lawyer while they waited for her downstairs.

Albita!

She sneezed. It was bug season. It was mosquito fever season. Outside: muddy streets staining long-skirts. Outside: sheets of rain coating Cartagena. The colonial Caribbean beauty once the most important Spanish port through which slaves came in and only gold came out. A boiling pot of riches, Dios te salve Marías and gunpowder.

Alba scratched the red mosquito bites on her legs, enjoying the pain, scratching harder each time checking the bumps until a red head popped and bled. She'd been out in the garden with her radio until late last night even though her sick mama had begged her to come inside before Papi woke up, but no use in begging. Now her legs look more corn than skin.

It was a matter of time before she had to walk down those stairs, our girl knew this. Matter of time before Papi yelled an ultimatum, before her mama's coughing fit, before Lurdes or one of her other sisters teased her, threaten to cut her hair, burn it, break the radio. *Qué tu hace all day with that Crown radio niña?* They knew cachaco, they just *knew* Albita and the shiny brown box had a tight connection all of them secretly wished for but could only dream of having. Our girl did not give the time of day to anyone in that house, anyone but *El Derecho de Nacer, Maruja La Sangrienta* and her complete favorite *Lo Que Nunca Muere*. That Which Never Dies. A murmur trail followed Alba wherever she went. Her very own son y ton, her personal soundtrack. Sometimes her mama found our girl sobbing while plucking chickens and Albita would explain to her with a smile that when trying to escape poor María did not make it to Madrid, they killed her mamá. For wanting a better life mamá, they killed her.

Ay mimi, you do know those stories are not true?

Who cares what's true. That's not important here. And what did her mama know about truth anyway? Would Truth wear a brunette wig in a bun? Or pencil in a mole about her lip? Or, better yet, soak in soap y Clorox a husband's kissed-stained work shirts pretending that rouge it's some spicy ají? Would Truth visit a palanquera begging for some magical happiness potion that had mama locked in the bathroom for hours on end?

Alba snaked out of the cave. She wanted to stretch that time like a piece of Tutti-Fruti gum. Wrap her body in that Tutti-Fruti gum hoping for an invisibility cloak or, if possible, knead it into a thick cocoon around her. A bubble gum nest of infinite time. Pero, mi reina, Tutti-Fruti gum quickly hardens and before you could say *se armó el bololó* she was sitting next to the dandy inhaling its cologne and sweat.

Could you please wear a different cologne next time? She said bothered.

Alba, carajo, how dare you? Papi whispered muy offended.

I can barely breathe next to him Papi and you want me to marry him?

Papi could have slapped that mouth shut, but gente de bien keep their dirty laundry to their family. So he just wiped the sweaty trail of anger around his forehead with a handkerchief, poured the Dandy Lawyer another one on the rocks then yelled at Delsira she could come play with her dolls now.

When Delsira dragged her box of toys Papi clapped and swallowed another shot, Alba grunted and Dandy Lawyer reached for her hand but not before Papi coughed as their fingers touched. Because women are like cars, the moment they step out of the car dealership with a macho inside they lose value by the second.

Come on, hermano. We're almost family now.

Close up the Dandy Lawyer lost 15 points of swag. Alba held his dry hands, suppressing the giggles climbing on her throat when seeing the thick road of bumps and scars mapped on his face. Homeboy was all acne and acne was all makeup. Just for that she held his hand tighter because, whatever, underneath that yes-imported-from-Paris makeup laid the face of a boy beaten up in school for looking like a damn queer. Hidden platforms raised his shoes and by now Albita knew he wore shoulder pads underneath the guayaberas and was never seen shirtless. He smoked cigars and had thick gold necklaces hanging over a carpet of curly hair to compensate. Papi's drunken eyes either knowingly missed or were selective and just saw what everyone five meters away from the man looked into: A testosterone fueled toro. An irresistible Veléz, a loaded bank account, a motherfucker who could have your sister for breakfast, close a deal with some Yankee white dude for lunch and a few whisquisitos with Rojas Pinilla for dinner.

Alba was zero impressed by this. She cared zero for men like him. Actually, she cared zero for men in general and did not understand what was all the fuss about thick curly chest hair that according to Marina, the flower lady outside the Santo Domingo church, drove the jevas *nuts*. For instance, Papi won the man of the barrio contest and was respected among the women in the family *because* he was a real pelo en pecho man with so much chest hair mama sometimes trimmed it in the bathroom, a rain of thick brown flakes covering the white tiles. Women knocked the Juan's door recurrently demanding to see Papi, crying to Alba when she told them he wasn't there. He is not coming. He doesn't want to see you. Her mama served the women tinto, pastelitos, exchanged recipes and discussed the new smell of the Santo Domingo candles, which crept into your clothes and stayed there for months, even after washing it with jabón rey. Some of them brought babies and mama sent Alba for the priest to baptize them and sometimes the priest would refuse to baptize the bastardos so mama lied and said they were her own. Los pobres criaturas, it is not their fault.

What is it that you love so much about Papi? Ay niña, have you *seen* that chest? Alba sometimes imagined gluing the fallen flakes of hair on her chest, walking out of the house into the streets where everybody upon noticing the pillow of brown hair would throw themselves like fan-girls on her wanting to be cast as the new radionovela up and coming voice. Maybe this way someone will take me seriously.

The three of them watched Delsira playing on the floor, chewing on a rag doll.

In a perfect triangle: Papi, Alba and El Dandy. The holy trinity in the pursuit of marriage, happiness and hopefully a discount in a new car. Mama's coughs audible from the next room, that endless phlegm rhythm beating on the walls, reverberating on the flowery couch, the nailed Christ, the life-size statue of the Virgen, the coca-cola bottles, that ca-ca-ca of her throat

infesting every moment of peace, interrupting Papi who just now was about to negotiate a 40% discount on a new auto. Pal diablo. Sister Yamira ran back and forth from the kitchen to the room and back with a boiling pot of water, eucalyptus and what would become the most cherished miracle worker en Colombia: vick-vaporú. The four sets of eyes watering from the intense eucalyptus menthol smell, Papi murmured to the nun to shut the door can't she see he's got important company? I'm doing what I can, she's very sick. Sister Yamira came three, sometimes four times a week with holy water, eucalyptus and a ton of other magical shit to cure Mama's lungs. Pray for your mother, she said to Alba and her sisters.

Is she gonna die?

We're all going to die.

Well, duh. She could have figured that one out. Is Mama going to die soon is what Alba meant, should she be preparing to lay Mama inside a coffin, would the next mamá role be assigned to Alba who didn't want it, who prayed her Mama be kept alive so she wouldn't have to serve pastelitos and tintos to Papi's novias, dress her sisters for church, sew stuffed animals with chicken feathers, draw a fake mole. Sometimes her Mama said she not only had to be strong, Alba you gotta be the strongest one mimi porque cuando yo me vaya you'd be in charge of this house. Me entiende? Mama deja de hablar pendeja'a, you still got plenty of time. Her Mama sighed, plucked more chickens. Our girl did not want to be in charge of the house but how to tell her mother that she had to stay alive so Alba could move to Bogotá to write and record the up-and-coming radionovela sensation. The sickness already a regular in the household, already normalized like the lizards, Papi's notary stamps, the girls' rag dolls, Sister Yamira's churchy smell, the dead chickens. The chicken feathers incubated inside everyone's lungs mixed in with eucalyptus, cigar oil, dust.

Sister Yamira couldn't find the bag of herbs she left in the kitchen. Alba drew her hand away from the dandy's, excused herself, sidestep Delsira's saliva soaked doll and handed Sister Yamira the remaining herbs. From the kitchen she saw Mama take a gulp of whiskey, cross herself. She'd permanently taped black cloth on the bedroom window so nobody from the outside could see her in that state. Yes, mi reina, taped windows in *that* heat. Forty degrees in the shade, nombe, and a tiny white fan the only ventilation. Papi didn't sleep there because he always woke up sancochao, oliendo a tigrillo. But Mama's atrophied internal thermometer allowed her to resist the highest temperatures without a drop of sweat. Papi actually liked this about her. Nobody wants a sweaty female, por favor. The women of Cartagena (las mujeres de bien, that is) suffered terribly because of this because ain't nobody gonna look cute with four layers of pollerines on plus a dress in that infernal heat. And talk about smell. If there's anything memorable about the 50s in Cartagena is the tigrillo-dusty smell. Like stuffing one's head inside the bedroom of a teenage boy.

Alba crossed herself. Sister Yamira then drew out a rosary, held Alba's hands and began praying a few Ave Marías and a Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre, etc. When she was done Sister Yamira told Albita to pray for her mother.

Is she gonna die?

We're all gonna die Alba. Sister Yamira picked up her things and wiped the sweat from her neck with a kitchen towel, which Alba thought disgusting and inappropriate. She will have to wash that kitchen towel later, hang it outside to dry, say hi to the vecinas who always asked about the men coming in and out the house and told her to send some of the machos their way. Suelta eso' hombre jevita. The thought was dreadful. Y la verraca monja continued to wipe, pushing back her habit so that Alba could see her bare hairy arms, the drops, no, the clots of

sweat transplanted to the kitchen towel. Who raised this woman? Alba knew Mama would slap her in no time if she saw her wiping her body with a freaking kitchen towel. She couldn't imagine Sister Yamira as a young woman. Alba imagined all nuns were born nuns, they had no childhood, no youth, they didn't come out of anyone's vagina, they were just *there* being nuns all the time. Sister Yamira sighed, wiped her forehead, *again*. There was no way she could stop this. Sister Yamira handed her the kitchen towel. Gracias mi niña.

Is there anything else besides prayer that I can do hermana? Alba tried hiding her disgust.

You can pick up more holy water from the capilla later on today, she definitely needs it.

How the holy water was going to keep Mama alive so she could be a radionovela star was a mystery to Alba, but she respected the church, respected Sister Yamira and above all this was the holy hope she could cling to. This water.

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Mi reina, but what you really need to know is this: they showed up without any prior warning and sometimes stayed for days. They came from Arjona, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Corosal, from Mompo, Distracción, San Martín de Loba, Turbaco. Muchacho, espérate. They wore top hats, dark mustaches, a scar or two on the face, sometimes a distracting limp, a man purse, a case of cigars and if they were lucky a novia or two waiting for them in the back seat of the car fanning themselves and stealing anything they could. There was Filoberto the skinny shoemaker with an eye tick that salivated every time he talked about glueing shoes together and Manuel Jesús, more corpse than body, a rich terrateniente always interested in knowing if our girl Alba was any good at foot massage and shooting shotguns. She wasn't. Eliécer arrived with three hunting dogs, a pierna de pernil and a note he secretly passed Alba: I'm into you plus your chickens, together. Dare I mention Miguel Angel? The bald moreno from Cali sobbing the entire

time he was there, sweating profusely, refusing to leave the house until someone left with him. Alvaro, Jesús José, Mariano Alberto, Ulises, Carlos Pedro. They knew each other, hated each other, loved each other, shared the tight entrance space to the house while wasting no time and doing business transactions right there, three horses, five cases of whiskey, two new supermarkets, bum bum bum. Some of them knew each other from their wife searching adventures and exchanged anecdotes about fathers willing to give away their daughters too soon or some who inquired way too much about their lives. Que dónde van a vivir, que how many times is she gonna visit, que do you have enough maids to care for her hair, her special feet, her special diet. Cachaco they wanted a wife, period.

Alba's Mama barely able to keep up with all the coffee, palitos de queso, the line at the bathroom, the urine everywhere around the toilet, to the point that she demanded Papi hire someone to tend to all the men's need. Me viste cara de empleada o qué? Mama also wanted Alba to marry but found the spectacle outside their house deplorable. People were *saying things* during mass. At first Mama held her head high, orgullosa of course that her oldest daughter could cause such commotion, that men travelled for days to see her. Pero después it wasn't all that cute. They stank after a few days, drunk from all the whiskey and the sun, cursing at passersby, catcalling the vecinas and even Sister Yamira when she entered the Juan's house. Monjita, pero qué linda está la monjita carajo. But that wasn't the end of it, mi reina. The worst? People setting up puesticos, selling tamarindos, lemonade, fried fish, palenqueras handing fruit salads for a few coins, street kids blasting music— all of it in front of *their* house. The city even sent a few volunteers to help with traffic.

Mama's cough worsened during those times. You're gonna kill me, Alba. None of them good enough for you? Jesucristo is my witness niña, that you are killing me. Get me some vick-

vaporú. Alba didn't bring her the vick-vaporú. She let her cough and cough, closed her door, turned the radio all the way up and when María La Divina started imploring for her life Alba recited by memory the lines before María La Divina was finally killed. But then the weight of the house perched itself on her thoughts. Mierda. Todo en esta vida, a big mierda ride. She remembered God, or God talked to her and told her to stop being such a selfish puta and get the freaking vick-vaporú. Alba crawled around the house, close to the floor, recoiling every time she saw men's shoes, plugging into the dirt swimming deep into the soil, deeper into the soil, watching some of the horses' bones go by, skeletons of children, a lost shoe, emeralds gleaming cutting pieces from her arms that quickly regrew, she swayed from side to side with her mouth open, eating fresh dirt, swallowing fresh dirt, bathing it its misty coolness.

The Dandy was the last man, the last man in that line. The only one who came back one, two, four times, ten times in awe that any woman would even think about not wanting him. Homeboy enjoyed a challenge, a little bump in the wedding road. Many women before had just thrown themselves like free bags of potatoes, secretly placing his hand on their crotch, licking fingers, letting him hump their culos. Pero Alba. Na-nais. The niña sat stone cold hugging that radio like a doll, never softening to his touch, or his words or his German horse. She only seemed to care about that stupid radio. El descaró. He saved himself for last precisely because he knew his blue blood was irresistible and Alba's blood was a mere above average. But now his patience ran thin. Yes, the jeva's body curved like a dream-like goddess, yes he'd be able to brag about conquering the Juan's muñequita to all the other losers, yes that somber aura attracted him gave him a boner, that hot freaking weirdo in those naguas. To pound those naguas. Jesús Cristo. What else was there to do for a rich boy in the 50s but business meetings, whiskey, perfectly trimmed mustache and pounding naguas? That's right cachaco, nada.

But like I said, his patience ran thin. The thought of future bragging ran chills through dandy's hands, but Alba's head buried in the radio buttons killed his mojo. Otra vez Alba con la joda. The Dandy raised his eyebrows, opened-and-closed his hands brusquely in a bueno-whats-up gesture, suggesting Papi should say something. Alba knew what was happening pero se hizo la loca. Papi knew what was happening pero se hizo el loco. The Dandy played with his mustache smiling thinly at Delsira who now turned to him rocking the rag doll, asking him to nurse her. Annoyed homeboy first rejected the extended arms clasping the saliva-soaked doll, but then Delsira's eyes watered—la animaleja, always manipulating people with tears— and the Dandy not only accepted the saliva-soaked doll but rocked the saliva-soaked doll, nursed the saliva-soaked doll with a fake bottle. The three of them— Alba, Papi and Delsira—perplexed at the image. It was the first time our girl saw a man rocking a baby like a mama, there was even some *love* trapped in his brown eyes and it all disgusted her. It reminded her of Octavio a radionovela boy with half his face burned during a fire in Turbaco. A poor boy. A boy obligated to spend his life by his mama's side because she didn't let him out on the streets with that face, she couldn't take the chisme, the burlas, the pointing. So the boy stayed at home taking care of his siblings. He rocked the babies, nursed them, etc. Secretly. He was burned and poor. but *this?*

Y entonce Alba broke the silence: bueno ya, this is stupid. Papi I'm not marrying a man who acts like a—here she turned her hand, raised her pinky— y punto.

The Dandy threw the doll across the living room, broke a flower vase he'd brought that day and stomped out of the house not before calling Alba a buena para nada, you're daughter is *not* a señorita and adding Papi will never own a real car.

When Alba was twelve years old women pulled at her hair for two weeks straight. Sister Yamira, her mother and two vecinas with their own hairs wrapped in plastic bags, hunched over Alba's head in the kitchen. Puro piojo. The women were summoned to their lice killing duty and in they came remangándose las mangas, with vinegar, scissors, filed-nails ready to crush and you guess it, vick-vaporú. Cundía estaba la nena. When she stood still Alba could see brown spots jumping off her head, kamikazes diving into her notebook, dancing on scalp stealing all her blood. Let them steal my blood, she said. Pero niña! Alba was all darks before darks was even a thing. She channeled all that Catholic fervor into her scalp and told the women the insects needed her blood to survive. Let them live inside me. No kidding pela'a. Our girl's real goal was to piss off her Mama because she'd caught her Mama wearing no underwear when the milkman knocked on the door, caught her bent over reaching for bottles of milk and smoking one underneath the mango tree. But Mama was not having it. They chased her around the house. Alba, por favor, how old are you?

Quarantined.

Every piece of cloth washed with boiling water, her sisters' hair braided at all times. Which of course didn't help her already outlawed status amidst the sisterhood. But did she care?

Papi received a passive-aggressive letter from school suggesting the expulsion of Alba for being *unwashed and to some extent dirty and to some extent disgusting and to some extent a threat to the school hygiene* and that was that. For three days straight the women tried smashing, boiling, slapping the lice but the little fuckers set up an entire city with malls and shit in there. The underground Third World for lice.

Until one day after praying to God for guidance Sister Yamira chopped off all of Alba's hair.

Y fue por eso that Alba got a boy's haircut.

Y fue por eso that she got to play Joseph, Jesús and all the men at the school's plays.

Y fue por eso that when Joseph and Mary fall in love they kiss. It's somewhere in the Bible.

Y fue por eso that when María Magdalena threw herself on top of her when she played Jesús.

Y fue por eso that she was darks before you were darks and the girls called her *la niña niño*.

Y fue por eso that sometimes to evade the stares, the pointing, giggling, grabbing of her breasts she'd wear her father's shirts and buy holy water and sit by the park with her radio.

Y fue por eso that Papi confused her with the vecina's son one day and told her she'd actually look pretty good as a man, too bad she was a señorita.

But back to our girl's drama.

He's right Alba, Papi said, You're *not* a señorita. Papi stared into his whiskey, some real sadness concentrated on his face. He played with his mustache in a way Alba knew could only mean Papi was about to do something he didn't want to do. A brush of fingers arched it perfectly around the invisible lips, a sip of whiskey, a brush of fingers arched it perfectly around the invisible lips, a sip of whiskey and so on. Mama yelled from the room but no one paid attention until they all saw her banging shit around the kitchen, until they all smelled the walking vick-vaporú with smeared makeup and only one pink sock getting a glass of water. Jesú Cristo. Papi went up to her, kissed her hand, which only infuriated Mama even more.

I think we can all agree this has gone too far. Esto rebozó la copa, Alba. I think we can all agree that was our best chance at getting you a good, honest man to marry. Don't interrupt me, carajo. I think we can all agree you've cross a line and that line was el Señor Veléz and since el Señor Veléz will not be coming back... Did you even know I was negotiating a discount on a car? I'm out of line? You know what's going to happen now? You're marrying the next huevón

that walks through that door and that's that. The next huevón. That's it mija. I'm down with this circo. You're mother is done with this circo.

Pero papá!

Papá nada, Alba. Papá nada. And while that happens no more radio. Preste pa'cá la radio.

Mama sighed, shut her door. Here they go again. Every time Papi wanted something out of Alba he'd hide her radio. She'd go for days without eating, without showering, without changing her clothes in protest, reeking of tigrillo+ accumulated sweat+concentrated menstruation until she fainted over breakfast one day and the radio was quickly returned. In secrecy Papi apologized patting her back, leaving two cigarettes on her boudoir. That was his way of saying I care for you mamita, stop being such a pain in the ass.

But this time was different. This time there'd be no cigarettes, no paternal comfort for our girl who was so over it, so over Papi behaving all look-at-me look-at-me, I can take your radio and make you miserable because I'm your father, I have dick, you have to follow everything I say. So over it. And her Mama. And her sisters. And the bwak bwak bwak of chickens in the patio, right in the middle of the house pocking at her laced dresses and her miserable body sweating profusely, thighs sticking together, rubbing each other. Over. It.

This time she didn't fight Papi, she didn't hid food in her room, she didn't mentally prepare to colonize the house with her dread, her longing, her frustration and bad smells.

Está bien, papá. Take it.

Está bien? I already did. You know what's *not* all right Alba?

Her sisters giggled from their rooms, Papi shushed them but they wouldn't stop. Alba was a witch and this was the inquisition with lower "i". Papi's inquisition. What will they do with her if she didn't marry? Where else could she go? Papi was not about to house a solterona for the

rest of his life and Alba was no about to pluck feathers from chickens and join Mama's asthmatic fan club.

Anything else, Papi? She stood up firmly, with an air of pride and superiority and dared gaze Papi in the eye. She left the Crown Radio on the couch without even eyeing it one last time. It was all very dramatic. Of course. But this is how our girl wanted it. A background gloomy orchestra, black birds and Albita starring in her own radionovela. Gliding past Papi with an irresistible elegance, asking to be excused, to be forgiven, feeling some sort of boiling energy running through her focused on her liver, lungs, her lower stomach beating with what can only be described as unequivocal desire. Desire for what—who knows. She felt hot and gorgeous and a fucking boss even though the 50s in Cartagena had the missus all up in subjugation mode but the jeva glided through that living, through the patio, up the stairs with a pulsating confidence that began deep inside her pussy and radiated to every bit of her.

Annoyed, Papi waited for a response. Say something, carajo, silence will not save you Alba por favor. Pero Papi se quedó esperando. Then yelling: we need some holy water in this house! Alba please we need you to go get some holy water for your mother.

Her sister Lurdes laid on top of her bed eating grapes, writing letters to her girlfriends. They eyed each other but said nothing. Lurdes knew Alba was not a mosquita muerta like everyone else thought, she knew Alba played lala dumb sometimes to evade dealing with Papi and Mama and Life, something Lurdes couldn't do. Lurdes always felt the need to stand up for herself, whereas Alba played oblivious, played doll house and sometimes—like when Papi hid her radio—starved herself but never actually mutter a word, yelled. To the contrary, mi reina. She swallowed every bit of anger and then some.

Without her sister noticing Albita grabbed the cigarettes hidden in the naguas drawer, some scissors, the new yellow skirt the Dandy sent as a gift long ago that was oh so gorgeous but could not be worn until the mancito was completely out of sight. Like now. Lurdes muttered something before Alba locked herself in the bathroom. Then yelled again.

Alba, just don't leave the bathroom full of hairs!

There was no eye-rolling for our girl in the 50s but if the expression existed her eyes would have circled back twice. She mocked Lurdes in the bathroom. She mocked her father. Everyone in that house—including her younger sister—controlling every bit of her and nothing she could do to stop it. It all felt natural, common sense.

Alba started trimming her pubic hair after she heard the women at church gossiping about stinking during their periods, one suggesting shaving the entire thing off the other one gasping because that clearly had to be a sin. She'd never consciously stared at her pussy, didn't actually *see it per se* but trimming soothe her. She hummed Los Panchos while chopping thick pieces of black hair. Then smoked a cigarette. It was the perfect procrastination combo.

She undressed to her underwear, lit up the cigarette and felt sorry for herself. It really was a waste, this life. She could ran away to her best friend's house but then Marta's mother was so particular about table manners it drove Alba crazy. One time Marta was sent to her room for eating her salad with the wrong fork and Alba was left to small talk with la arpía. No, Marta's house was not an option. Alba touched the rolls of her belly, massaging them, they were few but thick and well proportioned just enough to give her famous muñeca nickname. So stupid, she thought. This body. Cigarettes didn't calm her, didn't give her a peace of mind, didn't make her look cool (although in my head she's a total rock star) but she wanted to damage herself in some way, wanted that energy roaring through her and her pain to coexist where she could see them.

From below she could hear Papi still yelling at her to bring holy water to Mama. Dios mío. Papi, Alba knows and she's not listening.

Outside some other loser getting shot. She'd have to walk pass the mass of gossipers and the mother yelling, pass the men looking, always looking like they have eyes for nothing else, pretend not to see them, smile thinly with dignity, pass more mothers with veils coming out of church, cross herself, showcase her golden rosary because the mothers know Mama and buenas tardes Cleotilde cómo está usted, pass the rivers of red dust and heat pooling between her legs, her armpits, under her tongue. Her lips salty. The guy on the street still dead. And the women and the men and the children because Papi knew everyone and they called her Albita, muñe, niña, pela'a, bombón, angelito caído, calladita, lotería, qué rico puerto rico, culo'e muje— *everyone* guayándole la existencia. She'd have to walk pass the rotting tomato smell of the market mixed with fresh-baked bread, dogs chewing on dead pigeons, baskets full of papaya, mango, coco, plátano, aguacates slightly putrefied by the heat and the gamines disgustingly eating the putrefied scraps with bare hands reminding Alba of the rotting Germanic pony and again of Dandy and thus of Papi's frustration and Mama's anxiety with his frustration and the fact that she won't get married and the fact that she will miss *La Salvadora* just when María and Jacinto were secretly hooking up. Muchacho.

Three kids next to the church begged for money. Alba handed them a few cents then bought a mango from the seño next to them in her square cart. A skeletal dog barked at the woman's feet. Inside the church was cool and dead quiet. Black and white pashmina's on women's bow heads. Christ forever bleeding, forever shinning, forever open-mouthed. Alba searched for the priest but couldn't find him. Papi knew him quite well and she'd been to the back of the church often. She

recognized some of the señoras fanning themselves next to the baptismal fountain, they owed Mama money but no way was Alba walking up to demand cash. Alba hoped Mama didn't expect her to settle business. No way. I mean Mama showed her the ropes, the ins and outs of the stuffed animal business, but Alba never paid attention. One time she let Alba balance the books and three hundred pesos came out missing. No way. Mama probably didn't want her to walk up to these ladies although she'd been complaining about them for months now and although now they had seen Alba, nodded at her and next time they see Mama surely they will let her know they saw Alba who did not care approach them and how was Mama raising her young girls? Malditas. The women had no intention of chatting. She always did this, rattle up, then nothing happened. The three of them nodded at Alba, crossed themselves then exited.

The back of the church empty except for the priest's robes on hangers, packs of long white candles, a gigantic Bible, a few chairs. María and all the other vírgenes. She crossed herself when passing La Virgen del Carmen, kissed her knuckles. Behind the vírgenes another door she'd never seen before. Alba hesitated for a second. She remembered verses of the Bible about conduct repeated many times by Sor Inés that ended with a, when in doubt always ask yourself will El Señor approve? Am I being a Martha or a Mary? She didn't want to be either one. She needed the holy water to sprinkle around the house, make concoctions of ginger and honey for Mama. Dios mío, her mom. She needed to find the priest. She decided to be Martha if that meant finding holy water and so Alba slowly turned the doorknob, the creaking wood against the wind crashing into the stained-glass windows.

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The body on the other side so unlike her own yet so familiar. Brown hips, brown ass, square shoulders with a small hunched-back and a thick scar traversing the back like a white river. Like

homegirl was cut in two and a clumsy kid glued her back together. There was something unusual about the way her back curved to the side reclining on the windowpane, an easiness, like she did this every day and it wasn't a big deal. Alba stood witnessing a routine that was far from what she'd imagine nuns did. Only a head piece decorated the body. A backdrop that still kept the nun's body holy, hidden in some way, closer to God. Alba wanted to judge her, drop every Bible verse condemning the monja but she couldn't stop staring at the body. She concentrated on the hands, roughed, manly, holding a cigarette with two fingers like she'd seen men do. Dios mío. Mi Dios. A naked nun smoking by the window, another fucker shot outside and all you could hear was the cha-cha-cha son y tón of a loud vallenato. Y dice

*Paso volando y no ha cantao*

*Por que lleva el pico apretao*

*Pajarito resabio*

*Suelte ese beso robao*

The nun shook her head in disapproval, crossed the air, then kept sucking on the cigarette. Alba stood in the back of the room, hidden by a movable wardrobe with different colored robes tickly hanged on it and then the life-size Jesucristo, Santo Tomás and María surrounding the robes in a semicircle. It was a perfect hiding spot. She could see the nun from an opening between the incense-smelling robes. Alba felt a rush of shame for eyeing a naked nun even though nobody had explicitly told her not to stare at naked-nuns, but nuns always covered their entire bodies and prayed, washed poor people's feet and rubbed vick-vaporú like Sister Yamira did for her Mama. Nuns didn't smoke naked by a window. And girls like her didn't stare at nuns smoking naked by the window. She knew better. And yet. Papi said she wasn't a señorita no

more and either way Papi was not there so she could stare if she wanted to. And she did. Never in her fifteen year existence had this Cartagenera seen another grown naked body so close, not even her own. She was breaking the rules big time, the unspoken rules. When she was little she used to remove the clothes of all her dolls searching for body but found nothing. Silently, always silent and dumb. The closer she ever got to seeing a body was when María and Carlos hit it off in *La Salvadora*, even then the descriptions were awkward narrated as *they were passionately doing it*. FYI the only dick Alba saw before eventually marrying Fabito (the next man to walk through the door!) was a drunk uncle peeing on the patio during Christmas.

The nun coughed. Alba wanted to freeze that moment. Or at least take a picture. This naked body was a gift she wanted to inspect thoroughly. She wondered how the nun's pussy looked and her armpits and her anus and her right toe. She wanted to swim in the nun's body inspecting every crevice, corner, every scar and mole. She wanted to smell her, remove the headdress then smell her again. She wanted it all. She wanted it so much she could almost feel the texture of the nun's ass on her fingertips, the miniature cellulite potholes covered in tiny invisible hairs. She wanted to kiss the potholes.

Alba closed her eyes. Bible verses flew in and out, Sor Inés at school, her Mama, the radionovelas—but the desire was bigger than all of that together. Bigger than the moral compass, the ethics class, the catechism class, the señorita's class. A darkness swirled inside her, a darkness she knew from her loneliness, her radionovela longing, a darkness almost palpable now. The smooth holy body was certainly sent by God, the nun was holy and Diosito knew what he was doing. No need to question Him, The Lord works in mysterious ways. Amén.

That's when she noticed the shoes. The familiar black shoes.

Worn black shoes with a faded silver buckle on the nun's feet, the same freaking shoes visiting her house every week for the past, I don't know, forever ago. The shoes that asked for boiling water, kneeling at her Mama's side, praying for her. The worn black shoes that just that morning had wiped its sweaty arms and neck with a kitchen towel Alba had yet to wash. Holy shit, mi reina. *Ay Juemadre* is right. Sister Yamira in all como-la-trajo-diosito-al-mundo glory.

She could have yelled at the monja's indecency, the door was, after all, unlocked when Alba came in. She could have waited for Sister Yamira to dress, throw the habit at her, demand an explanation. None of that happen. Why. Alba didn't know she could feel like this. Why. The darkness still roaring.

Once she showed me the only picture anyone owned of Sister Yamira. It was Alba's sixteen birthday party, right before she married Don Fabito, there is cake and flowers and pompous laced dresses. Sister Yamira at the corner of the table trying to look over the crowd at Alba's face as Alba blows the candles. Sister Yamira's bare arms. Alba saved the photograph because it reminded her of that time her darkness ate her, a piñata explosion that left her exhausted and overwhelmed.

Alba left a note outside the church's door: Sister Yamira, I came to get holy water but you were busy. I will come again tomorrow. Alba.