

HAVE YOUR CAKE

Emma Pérez

“I told you I’d be by early. Aren’t you ready yet?”

I left the door open and sat back on my couch, nuzzling Leche, my cat.

“Eletra, you promised you’d be ready on time.”

“I must have forgotten.”

“Obviously.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, come on. Get dressed. We can’t be late.”

“How should I dress?”

“Just wear your slacks and a T-shirt. It’s nothing formal.”

She gave me the look Artemisa gives that scares me a little. It’s the *sinvergüenza*-Chicana-who-means-business look, and when one of my sisters gives that look, I’m careful. I walk on eggshells, I disappear, I become invisible. But it was too late. She had already given me the look and I wasn’t disappearing.

“You didn’t remember, did you?” she said.

“What?”

“You’re pitiful.”

“What? Why? What’d I do?”

“You’ve forgotten what today is.”

“I haven’t forgotten. It’s the day you and I go out while I’m dressed in my slacks and T-shirt and you wear that cute sundress.”

“First of all, it’s not a sundress. And second, it’s our mother’s birthday and we’re meeting her with our sisters in Atlanta today. You’re not even packed are you?”

“Shit! Why didn’t you tell me?” I ran to the bathroom for a shower. “Damn, damn, damn. What time does our flight leave? And why does our sister have to live in Atlanta anyway? Self-respecting Chicanas don’t live in Atlanta.”

“I wouldn’t talk if I were you. New York City isn’t exactly the heart of Aztlán. The flight’s at 3:00.”

I stood at the bedroom door and frowned at her. “Artemisa, it’s barely 11:00 in the morning.”

She flipped through an *Elle* magazine and ignored me.

“By the way, did I tell you I saw a few Mayas in the subway the other day?”

“That’s what the subway is for, El, to ride.” She continued flipping magazine pages.

I shook my head and returned to the bathroom. I took my time standing under the showerhead as it sprayed hard against my neck, massaging the muscles that were almost always in pain from my self-imposed, free-floating anxiety. I could hear my therapist consoling me in that firm yet calm manner that therapists simulate. “Stop carrying the world on your shoulders, Eletra.” I massaged solid rocks on my shoulders and neck and decided to cancel my next session with my all-knowing therapist. I stepped out of the shower and into my closet, rummaging around for unwrinkled pants.

“Hey, don’t you think there should be more words for the love of the mind?” Artie yelled from the living room.

“Why do you say that?” I was still rummaging in the closet, and wondered where I had heard that before.

“Oh, no reason.”

Then she started to read out loud from a letter. I stomped into the living room and saw her holding a novel by Clarice Lispector. Buried between the pages was a letter from Desdémona. A letter I had long since misplaced.

“This is none of your business.” I grabbed from her hands *The Passion According to G.H.* and the letter fell to the floor. I picked it up, folded it carefully where the creases were ripping from too much unfolding and folding of thin rice paper.

“No need to get your panties in a bundle. Geesh. I only saw the last line anyway.”

My face flushed from sheer embarrassment—and I was not embarrassed

because my own sister had seen me naked, although I tended to be shy when anyone saw my breasts. I had this thing about my breasts. They were obtrusive and she understood that better than most femmes anyway. Most femmes just assumed that all breasts were up for grabs, so to speak. Not Artie. She was perceptive about my discomfort and respected my privacy. About my body, that is, but certainly not about my personal correspondence.

“I only saw the last line.”

With a towel wrapped around me, I held the book, tucked the letter inside, and walked back to my bedroom. I opened the book and unfolded the letter. There it was. In the first few lines. The real meaning of all we had been to each other.

Maybe I use the word “love” and “in love” too lightly. I thought I loved you in a thousand different ways but I realized that kind of love wasn’t possible. Not with you. With you, it was another kind of love. Maybe there should be more words for love of the mind. Isn’t that all we really had?

I wanted to read on but decided it was too depressing. I placed the letter in my underwear drawer beneath my cobalt blue Calvin Klein briefs.

“She’s back in Atlanta, you know,” Artie yelled from the living room.

“I know,” I yelled back.

“Are you going to call her?”

“No.” I slipped on my favorite chinos and a polo shirt. It was my preppy, conservative look. We were, after all, on our way to Georgia. I stood at the

bedroom doorway and waited for her comment.

“Look at you. Going to a frat party?”

I raised my eyebrows, returned to my closet and stuffed a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals in an overnight bag.

“She lives in Linda Xochitl’s neighborhood. With some cute Puerto Rican babe.”

“So?”

“So? So? Why won’t you call her?”

“Didn’t you just say she’s with some cute Puerto Rican babe?”

“So?”

I was silent.

“Don’t forget to bring something a little dressy, you know, just in case.”

I crammed a pair of wrinkle-free black slacks in the bag with a white cotton shirt and tossed in my fancy cufflinks, the ones shaped like Chichen Itza pyramids.

“Let’s go.”

We sat in the taxi to La Guardia earlier than I would have liked.

“The love of the mind, huh? So, you think there are different ways to express that kind of love?”

I glared at her.

“I mean, doesn’t Freud say that the mind is our most active sex organ? If that’s so, we can just have mind fucks, right? Who needs physical sex? It’s just as satisfying to have words, intimate, sexy words that spill out all kinds of unconscious desire buried deep inside the soul.” She gazed out the window at moving cars that moved so slowly I wasn’t sure why I called them moving cars.

“No comment.”

“Come on. I know you read Freud.”

“Not anymore.”

“Well then, give me a Foucauldian rendering of mind fucks.”

“It’s not a mind fuck. It was never a mind fuck and quit calling it that. It was more. Much more but you wouldn’t understand.”

“Whatever kind of fuck you want to call it, you two had something but you both blew it.”

By the time we arrived at the airport, I had started biting my nails.

“What are you so nervous about?”

“I forgot my Xanax.”

“You don’t take that stuff anymore.”

“I know, but I like to travel with it. Just in case. You never know. The plane might go down and I don’t want to be conscious for it.”

“Fine. I’ll just knock you out.”

“Promise?”

“Heck yeah.”

The plane ride was safe enough except for a few bumps, and we arrived in Atlanta by early evening, took a taxi to Linda Xochitl’s in Little Five Points, and began our sister summit. Prissy had arrived from Houston that morning with our mother, La Diva, who was dressed in pearls, a black-and-white linen dress, and black heels. She looked her usual elegant, stunning self, well aware of looking her usual elegant, stunning self. La Diva was in one of those amusing moods when she tells jokes and funny stories from her childhood or better yet, stories about Abuela.

“Hi Mom,” I said.

“Mija, it’s so good to see you.” She hugged me.

Then came the comments.

“Why is your hair so short, mija? I remember your beautiful hair. You look like a boy, it’s so short.”

“Mom, I haven’t had long hair since I was in grade school.”

“No. That’s not true. You had long hair in high school. I have your prom picture and your hair was so long. All the way down your back.”

“Mom, that was over twenty years ago.”

“¿Y eso qué? You’re still my daughter and my daughters look beautiful with long hair.”

“Time for dinner,” said Prissy. “Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

We sat in a booth at Harry and Son’s—five of us squeezed together—La Diva, La X, Prissy, Artie and me. La Diva hated late dinners, but when her daughters insisted that we wanted to celebrate the day of her birthday, she relented.

“I thought we were having Chinese food.”

“This is better for you, Mom,” said Artie.

La Diva picked up a bowl of miso and smelled it. She sipped and nodded her head. “This is good,” she said.

“See. I knew you’d like it,” said Linda Xochitl.

“Where’s the fried rice?” La Diva asked.

“There is no fried rice, only white rice,” said Prissy. She scrunched her nose and looked at La Diva in a way that said, here we go again with the yuppie food.

“Only white rice?”

“Yes, Mom. It’s better for you,” I said.

“Brown rice is better for you,” she repeated. “If I’m going to have rice, give me brown rice.”

“Fried rice is not brown rice,” said Artie.

“Yes it is. Fry it and you’ll have brown rice,” said La Diva.

“It might look brown, but that doesn’t make it brown,” I said.

“How can you look brown and not be brown?” said La Diva.

“Ask Linda Xochitl,” I said.

“Ask yourself,” said Linda Xochitl. She furrowed her brow and threw a chopstick at me.

The waitress reappeared and placed dishes of shrimp tempura and chicken teriyaki at the center of the table along with California rolls and my favorite, spider rolls.

La Diva grabbed a piece of shrimp tempura and bit it. “This is good. And see, it’s fried.”

“Of course it’s fried, it’s tempura,” I said.

“What she means is, why can’t the rice get fried too,” said Prissy.

“Because it’s not fried rice, it’s not supposed to be fried rice, and it would be an

insult to ask them to fry it," said Artie.

"I don't want to insult anybody." La Diva bit into the chicken then put it back down on her plate. "I just want some fried rice, that's all. Why would that be insulting?"

"That's it!" said Artie. She stood and walked to the door.

"Where you going?" asked Linda Xochitl.

"I'll be back."

"What's the matter? Why is she leaving? Mija, come back," La Diva yelled for Artie, who by this time was far out the door and down the street. When she returned, she had a brown paper bag with her. She stopped to whisper to the waitress, who nodded and smiled. Artie plunked the brown paper bag on the table.

"Here."

I opened the bag and took out a Chinese food carton steaming with hot rice.

"Gracias, mija."

La Diva carefully exposed the aromatic fried rice in the carton and put a small spoonful on her plate.

"Is that all you're going to have?" Linda Xochitl said.

"I have to share with my daughters."

“That’s okay. I don’t want any. Anyway, I’m full,” I said. I knew it was still too early to excuse myself, but I couldn’t help it. Mustering courage, I rose to leave.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Prissy.

“Oh. Out. Just out.”

“Not so fast,” said Linda Xochitl. She leaned in and whispered in my ear.

“What about the cake?”

“Shit. I forgot. Okay. I’ll find cake.”

“You better. You know how she loves her sweets.”

“I’ll meet you back at the house.”

“With cake?” said Prissy.

“With cake.”

I passed the Heavenly Bakery, but it was closed. Finding a bakery at this hour was not going to be easy. I kept walking, and that’s when I saw her. Desdémona. She was with the Puerto Rican babe, the one she had told me about when we were still together, and tonight her Puerto Rican babe limped along on crutches. I could easily catch up to them, but I held back as they lingered in front of a window. The Puerto Rican babe leaned the crutch against the window and placed her arm around Desdémona’s waist. I wanted to shout out to her, “Hey, that’s my waist,” but of course I didn’t. Not only because it wasn’t my waist and hadn’t been my waist for a long time, but mostly because had I claimed any rights of possession over Desdémona, she would have been

angry. And I do mean angry. Well, who could blame her? With the U.S. of A. holding her little island in “possession” for over a hundred years, Desdémóna, like her Puerto Rican grandmother, whom she had told me about plenty, did not want to be possessed.

From a safe distance, I could see Desdémóna smiling for this woman. It made me angry, but more than anything, I guess I got a little jealous. Heck, a lot jealous. But who was I to say anything about it. She had caught me over and over again with other women, and I used to act like it was normal. But her, seeing her with someone put me in a rage. Before they could see me, I dodged down an alley and headed for a local supermarket. It would be open and they’d have cakes. Plenty of them.

I managed to find a lemon cake with a light frosting, and as soon as I got back to the house I set the cake down and went into the bedroom and threw myself down on the bed, face down. Artie came in, and she recognized my pouting.

“What did you expect?” she said.

“I don’t know. I expected her to be loyal, faithful, ready for me whenever I wanted her. I expected her to be forgiving of the past, all the things I did. I expected her to say she’d come back with me.”

“¡Qué zonza! You sure like to have your cake, huh?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Yep. Having your cake and eating it whole ’til it makes you sick. That’s you. You live in some kind of fantasy most of the time, you know that? Love of the mind? Zonza.”

EMMA PÉREZ

My face was still buried in a pillow, but I answered her with mumblings that she understood. That's what sisters were for, after all, to understand your mumblings when you cried into a pillow. Not that I was crying.

"Come have some cake. You'll feel better."

"I'm not hungry," I mumbled.

"It's cake. You don't have to be hungry."