

ONE

AN ACCIDENTAL *FUFÚ*

Somebody else walking past homeboy on Broadway in the summer wouldn't glance twice at him. Even if he was wearing his flamingo dupioni shirt, as pink and textured as a tongue. To somebody else, he would be just another light-brown man with raisin-clumped hair already starting to gray in the sideburns. Three buttons on the sticky shirt unbuttoned. A Santa Bárbara medallion and a gold baby shoe in his chest hair. He was just one more Hispanic male up on the West Side of the isle of Manhattan, height and weight and features all measured by statistics.

But to me, he was a nice-talking, sweet-walking fine *puto* of a Puerto Rican, a guy that spoke to me of men in white shirts and straw hats dancing *bomba*, of palms and mangroves on a regal island that never was. I found him so goddamn irresistible I thought all other women did too, even his daughter that wasn't his daughter.

It's that musician thing. I have, or used to have, a thing for them, the ones that play so sweet it's like they got you in their high and in their hell, all caught up in a net woven by a thousand threads of melody. The thing makes me see something different from what the guy is. It's like I suddenly see what the guy wants to be or what he could be or what I could be if I let his music take me the way it lifts him. It's like I'm what they call *montada*. Possessed. Not by the man but by his music, like his music is more spirit than music. That made sense to me back then because although I pretended to be a witch, and I was

hungry for the unseen to manifest itself to me, in me, it never really had.

My spirit working was more about what people wanted it to be. I was good at making people believe they'd get what they wanted with a little pinch of honey, splashes of Florida water, a ground up tiger's nail from Perla's Botánica thrown over a photo and penciled paper. Yeah, focus their anxieties with the chaos of my creation. Whenever I did a *trabajito*, a *fufú*, people in the hood believed it would work for them. They'd trade in kind, clean my house, get me concert tickets and buy me gift coupons to my favorite Italian restaurants. Life can be comfortable when you got a lot of people's faith behind you. What they believe creates a current; and that current becomes their reality.

But I was still hungry for a spirit that could touch me too.

Maybe music was the god or spirit world that I was looking for.

I was on the tail end of my marriage. My husband Gus was a bus driver, a nice white guy. I think I may have married him because when I was in my twenties his being white and even-tempered seemed to guarantee that he would always be nice. He didn't like it that I called him "white" though. Irish American. Safe. Then.

And then the realization. He slept with another chick. I found out because she called to tell me one afternoon in broken English and a chirpy voice that maybe made Gus dream of pagodas, red silk unfurling, a sinuous great wall winding ever closer, about to wall the motherfucker in his tomb. Anyway, after Gus got back from his shift, I chest bumped him into a corner. I can do that, for I am a big girl. Usually if I move too quick in streets and stores, that's enough for people—the roughest, readiest New Yorkers—to fly out of my way.

Plaster cracked under his head, and he gasped.

"Am I losing my exotic appeal?"

"What?"

I breathed out coffee fumes. "I hear you eating Chinese pussy these days."

He tried to look away, and he didn't say nothing.

“¡Pendejo!” I grabbed him by both shoulders and tried to lift him up against the wall. I couldn't do it, but it was, as they say, a brave effort. He was, at least, trapped.

“Fina, can you stop smashing my windpipe?” He coughed. “Please.”

I pulled my loaf-like arms away, and his feet went flat on the floor. “Why?”

His eyes passed over my long-beaded extensions, which made a rich sound when I moved, like change in my pocket.

“She was different.” His head-to-toe went on. He glanced at the tattooed lovebirds spilling out of my stretchy low-cut top, and finally stopped at the jelly belly that didn't like to stay under nothing. “You know, thin.”

I yelled, “I'll find my own exotic lover!” And then I pushed my fist through the wall. Or maybe I punched and then yelled, but Gus was ready this time, and he ducked. The pain as if my knuckle bones had been pulverized was a great distraction for me.

I ranted about how he could fly off to China with his little geisha girl and leave me alone. And don't think I'm an ignorant fuck, I know geishas aren't Chinese, but I was trying to make a point.

Gus ran out of the apartment, and spent the night out. I walked up and down the apartment, real annoyed that my boxing hand was hurt and I couldn't punch at the wall again. But then I started to realize that my hand was hurt worse than my heart.

The truth was that after I had started learning *Palo Monte* about a year or so ago, Gus and I had been spending less and less time together. Gus' reaction to *Palo* was, “That stuff freaks me out, man.” And somehow, even though I was real drawn to *Palo*, I always felt as if Gus' baby blues were watching me when I came back from Tata Victor's apartment. Judging. Holding me back.

So it was a relief that I wouldn't have to be held back no more. But I felt bad that I felt good, if that makes any sense.

It ain't so easy to break up with eleven years. The next day Gus brought plaster, paint and purple tulips, which we both thought I liked. He said he had told Chirpy to take a hike.

I didn't look him in the eye, but I accepted the tulips with the hand that wasn't bandaged. I pressed them to my nose. Tulips have a deep green smell, which I appreciate. I may be a big girl, but I have a refined soul.

A week later when he was out driving the bus, I saw flyers posted on the bulletin board in our building lobby next to the laminated sheet with contact numbers for the 24th precinct.

There was a photo shop picture of Chico, my upstairs neighbor, back arched like a windblown sapling. He was blowing into his trumpet, and his eyes were closed like he was praying.

I didn't know him real well, just from his rushed "Hey, Fina!" as he flew down our building's front steps in his clown-bright clothes. Sometimes the bumping of his trumpet and flute cases on the floors in the apartment above woke me from dreams of thunder hitting the zinc-roofed shack of my childhood. My waking screams prompted Gus to say that the music cases had to be Chico's front for a deeper passion, which involved the carting around of body parts.

Below the picture:

ESCAPE TO THE COPA,
THE RENOWNED COPACABANA! 563 W. 34th St.
WHERE CHICO
ENCHANTS LOVERS
OF SALSA AND BOLERO

And just like that, I suddenly didn't like tulips or that mortuary shade of purple.

Chico was standing in green track lighting way in front of the band, next to the singer, a bald guy in white satin whose *voz de vieja* couldn't compete with Chico's trumpet, which trilled as

clear as crystal breaking; and then broke into a freer, jazzier web over the beating of the congas.

A man whose face I barely saw grabbed hold of my waist and spun me into the sea of dancers. The music lassoed me out of my fat girl avatar and into sweaty J.Lo turns against my faceless partner's jeans. I danced to a solo sharp as the blue of the skies over El Combate beach, and then one where I was falling, falling, falling into the black water of the Puerto Rico trench. I finally noticed that the thin guy was slapping my butt after every turn, and trying to lick my lovebirds. Worse: he had a pizza face, so I skipped to the ladies' room.

On my way back, I stopped by the bandstand. The music was taking Chico to a place I wanted to go. He was like a cherub with a piccolo, a child starting or ending the world with melody. I could barely stand the way his lips—plump, tender *bembas*—kissed the trumpet and his fingers, like pieces of sticky caramel, caressed the stops as he leaned back, almost overcome. And that made the women come over to the bandstand, panting.

Now a lot of men I know have rear ends as hard as a *chayote*, but Chico de León had real manners to boot. Not only did he sign fifty autographs, he chatted up most of the *fanaticada* that night, even some old lady wrapped from head to toe in black like the Reaper. He didn't seem to favor the younger girls flashing raccoon eyes and winking cleavage.

I did this myself, I admit. When he hugged me, I let my lovebirds peck at him.

He pulled back, and introduced me to a red-haired groupie with flowered press-ons shooting to Guinness fame. "Hey, this is my neighbor, Fina. She's a musician of magic, like I'm a magician of music."

"How'd you know I'm a . . . musician of magic?"

"Everybody knows that about you, just like they know about me."

One of my extensions was hanging over my cheek, and he pushed it behind my ear. Gus hadn't done that in. . . . Had he

ever done that? It worked on me: warmth flooded me from chest to booty.

I pulled out the new Canon that Gus had bought me for my birthday and waved it at him, muttering something about how my best friend liked his playing.

Chico's warm fingers curled around my wrist. "Don't you put no *fufús* on me, Doña Fina, not for anybody, I don't care how much they beg you. I've had enough of people taking pieces off my shirt and spitting on them. I ain't got the time to make that shit bounce back."

"I won't do no harm," I said. "I'll guard it with my life." Then I took his picture like I was taking his soul.

I printed the picture and put it away. I guess cheaters expect their partners to cheat too because Gus started rooting around in my drawer where I kept our birth certificates and passports. He found the picture, waved it under my nose. "I knew you were starting to go sweet on somebody. Can't believe it's that serial killer *conguero!*"

"He's not a *conguero.*"

Gus burned the picture over the stovetop.

It still hurts me to think that I was somehow responsible for what happened to poor Chico. That was the day of the night he went off to play, with a high color in his cheeks, which I mistakenly ascribed to rum and the fact that the Tito Puente Orchestra was featuring him, and he collapsed on the stage right after his solo.

Malanga the ancient Havana *conguero*, who lived upstairs across from Chico, came down the next day and told us what happened. Chico tried to get up after his last solo, but fell back into a sitting position.

The women swarmed the stage and the musicians practically had to yank the feverish Chico out of his jacket and pants, which the women were tearing off his body. A young thing dressed in a black cat suit and wearing one of them spiked Goth collars bit into his hand. One house-sized Latina shouted

“Gonna save you, Papi,” and jumped on both him and the Goth girl.

Then Chico disappeared under the pullulating hill of fat and thin, fly and fugly, sequinned and bejeanned, only his face visible. A photographer took pictures. It took three musicians and two security guards to pull him out. When they did, he was covered with mouth-sized hearts all over his naked arms and torso.

He went to the hospital, and it turned out he had pneumonia and a stomach obstruction. The doctors couldn't cure him for a long time, probably because with so many scraps of his clothing stuck beneath candles, in honey, under water and inside coconuts; or tied up with yarn, hair and money; or sprinkled with blood, gunpowder, sugar, spit and God knows what else, poor Chico's body didn't know if it was being cursed or blessed.

But there was a good side to this accidental *fufú*: Gus said that finding the picture showed him that the two of us were like Sigourney Weaver and the chest-bursting bug, so he was going on vacation to China to think things over.

I didn't need to go on no vacation: I just changed the locks on the door.

Chico got back from the hospital on a Saturday afternoon, and within minutes I shot upstairs with a restorative *caldo*. He opened the door in striped pajamas, his eyes puffy, his skin as pale as brown skin can get. When I offered him the container of soup, he hesitated at first, probably scared of more *fufús*.

But he was even more impressed by my Great Dane enthusiasms. We sat down at his spindly table, and he passed a hand over the stubble on his chin. “Hell if I know what happened that night with the Tito Puente orchestra.”

I muttered something about how he should go easy on the rum.

“Time was when I didn’t have to drink or do lines to get revved.” He shrugged. “But that was fifteen years back. On the island.”

I myself had hazy childhood memories of the island. I imagined Chico facing the ocean, making the waves mount higher and higher to the tune of his horn.

“Why’d you leave?”

His eyes got beady, his lips pouty and an invisible Linus cloud formed over his head. “I had to. One of those island oligarchs had his thugs run me out. Nearly killed my ass.”

“My bad. If you don’t want. . . .”

“I ended up losing my wife.” He looked away and stared into space. “Of course, I deserved that. For fucking around on her.” The Linus cloud was making him hunch over. “My beautiful wife. . . .”

“Wife?”

“Long time ago. My ex,” he said quickly. “She had a baby. My daughter Hilesca. They both came down with a bad fever. This was in the ’90s. Shouldn’t have been that way.”

“My mother died of purpural fever in 1977. Those hospitals out on the island. . . .” I shook my head.

“That’s it, purpural fever. That’s what she had.”

Chico had rented a *carro público* and taken his wife and baby to a private San Juan clinic. He looked for high-paying jobs. But he was poor, a kid with no connections. Worse, he was from some barrio nobody had ever heard of out on the island. In order to pay the bills, he took up gardening full-time in the rich suburbs of San Francisco and Garden Hills, and still did his gigs at night.

At first, he liked gardening because of the exercise and the time to think. Not that homeboy was a great thinker. He said something about the wind and the trees and tried to tie that to some idea of how jazz sounds are born from the breeze—it was musician’s bull, and I had to bite my lip not to laugh.

“Okay, Fina, how’s this?” he said. “I was bending over a hibiscus bush in this big old garden. The breeze was in my ears,

and then outta nowhere I feel a hand grab me. This woman—she goosed me real hard.”

“She” was the mistress of the house as it turned out. A senator’s wife and a former Miss Universe, one with a degree from a college in Massachusetts; and she was too tongue-tied to just make the usual advances! All you need to do to let a man know that you favor him is stare him in the eye and invite him in for a big plate of rice and beans and steak. When’s he’s stuffed, give him an India beer and a flan—a sweet coconut flan is the best for awakening love.

If he can stand up from the meal, you don’t need to be a 200-pound ghetto bitch queen like me to steer his grogginess to the bed. He’ll just collapse, I guarantee it. The rest is easy.

Maybe the senator’s wife didn’t have the time to ask her maid to cook some rice and beans. She had seen Chico play, and for her that was foreplay. The way he closed his eyes when his lips caressed the trumpet made her think he could take a woman with him to the same place he went when he wrestled with demons. And when she saw him trimming each little leaf so carefully, she imagined him fingering his horn. She was seeing how careful a lover of the music he was, how he could turn air and saliva into heaven and earth by lightly feathering mouth and fingers against surfaces: metals, flowers, a woman.

Or maybe she was just a repressed *blanquita*, a nasty horny white girl, tired of the senator’s misfiring hose and looking for a real man. I couldn’t decide.

Chico spun around and stared as she unzipped his pants, and his instrument floated high into the air. The woman tongued him, keeping time as she moved her head from side to side. For weeks, she dismissed her staff, and she and Chico played inspired rhythms in different parts of the mansion and its grounds.

One day, she had just finished blowing a *bolero*-like rhythm with a sudden finish. Chico told me, “Fina, she told me to just pull up my pants, and then went into the house.”

He shook his head. “But I just stood there, Fina. Miss Universe had just gone down on me, and all I could think was ‘Wow!’”

And it was because Chico was so much like a boy jumping into sunlit puddles that things got bad. Out of nowhere, Miss Universe’s husband walked into the patio, home for a late lunch before going back to the Capitol, and what did he see but some jerk hosing off his *pinga* in the garden.

Well, the senator was a known womanizer, and suspicious like all *mujeriegos*, what did he think but “My wife is a whore.”

“I ran out of the house through an opening in the wall she had told me about,” Chico said. “Then I hid out in Llorens Torres. But Senator Ferrera’s thugs looked for me even in the fucking projects. Found me, beat me up real bad. I lost both of those beautiful women. Miss Universe. And my wife. . . .”

He stopped talking and swallowed.

The sunlight slanted through the kitchen window and the medallion and the baby shoe charm dazzled my eyes.

“My daughter died, Fina.” He grabbed the baby shoe charm on his chest. “While I was fooling around in the garden with Miss Universe.”

Hell if I know why charms and a chain glinting like that on a man’s chest can be so sexy to me.