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The parties at the Tuñóns' house always ended unquestionably late, and since the hosts enjoyed costume parties in particular, it was not unusual to see Chinas Poblanas with their folkloric skirts and ribbons in their hair arrive in the company of a harlequin or a cowboy. Their chauffeurs, rather than waiting outside the Tuñóns' house in vain, had systematized the nights. They would head off to eat tacos at a street stand or even visit a maid who worked in one of the nearby homes, a courtship as delicate as a Victorian melodrama. Some of the chauffeurs would cluster together, sharing cigarettes and stories. A couple took naps. After all, they knew full well that no one was going to abandon that party until after one A.M.

So the couple stepping out of the party at ten P.M. therefore broke convention. What's worse, the man's driver had left to fetch himself dinner and could not be found. The young man looked distressed, trying to determine how to proceed. He had worn a papier-mâché horse's head, a choice that now came back to haunt him as they'd have to make the journey through the city with this cumbersome prop. Noemí had warned him she wanted to win the costume contest, placing ahead of Laura Quezada and her beau, and thus he'd made an effort that now seemed misplaced, since his companion did not dress as she had said she would.

Noemí Taboada had promised she'd rent a jockey outfit, complete with a riding crop. It was supposed to be a clever and slightly scandalous choice, since she'd heard Laura was going to attend as Eve, with a snake wrapped around her neck. In the end, Noemí changed her mind. The jockey costume was ugly and scratched her

skin. So instead she wore a green gown with white appliqué flowers and didn't bother to tell her date about the switch.

"What now?"

"Three blocks from here there's a big avenue. We can find a taxi there," she told Hugo. "Say, do you have a cigarette?"

"Cigarette? I don't even know where I put my wallet," Hugo replied, palming his jacket with one hand. "Besides, don't you always carry cigarettes in your purse? I would think you're cheap and can't buy your own if I didn't know any better."

"It's so much more fun when a gentleman offers a lady a cigarette."

"I can't even offer you a mint tonight. Do you think I might have left my wallet back at the house?"

She did not reply. Hugo was having a difficult time carrying the horse's head under his arm. He almost dropped it when they reached the avenue. Noemí raised a slender arm and hailed a taxi. Once they were inside the car, Hugo was able to put the horse's head down on the seat.

"You could have told me I didn't have to bring this thing after all," he muttered, noticing the smile on the driver's face and assuming he was having fun at his expense.

"You look adorable when you're irritated," she replied, opening her handbag and finding her cigarettes.

Hugo also looked like a younger Pedro Infante, which was a great deal of his appeal. As for the rest—personality, social status, and intelligence—Noemí had not paused to think too much about all of that. When she wanted something she simply wanted it, and lately she had wanted Hugo, though now that his attention had been procured she was likely to dismiss him.

When they arrived at her house, Hugo reached out to her, grasping her hand.

"Give me a kiss good night."

"I've got to run, but you can still have a bit of my lipstick," she replied, taking her cigarette and putting it in his mouth.

Hugo leaned out the window and frowned while Noemí hurried into her home, crossing the inner courtyard and going directly to her father's office. Like the rest of the house, his office was decorated in a modern style, which seemed to echo the newness of the occupants' money. Noemí's father had never been poor, but he had turned a small chemical dye business into a fortune. He knew what he liked and he wasn't afraid to show it: bold colors and clean lines. His chairs were upholstered in a vibrant red, and luxuriant plants added splashes of green to every room.

The door to the office was open, and Noemí did not bother knocking, breezily walking in, her high heels clacking on the hardwood floor. She brushed one of the orchids in her hair with her fingertips and sat down in the chair in front of her father's desk with a loud sigh, tossing her little handbag on the floor. She also knew what *she* liked, and she did not like being summoned home early.

Her father had waved her in—those high heels of hers were loud, signaling her arrival as surely as any greeting—but had not looked at her, as he was too busy examining a document.

"I cannot believe you telephoned me at the Tuñóns'," she said, tugging at her white gloves. "I know you weren't exactly happy that Hugo—"

"This is not about Hugo," her father replied, cutting her short.

Noemí frowned. She held one of the gloves in her right hand. "It's not?"

She had asked for permission to attend the party, but she had not specified she'd go with Hugo Duarte, and she knew how her father felt about him. Father was concerned that Hugo might propose marriage and she'd accept. Noemí did not intend to marry Hugo and had told her parents so, but Father did not believe her.

Noemí, like any good socialite, shopped at the Palacio de Hierro, painted her lips with Elizabeth Arden lipstick, owned a couple of very fine furs, spoke English with remarkable ease, courtesy of the nuns at the Monserrat—a private school, of course—and was expected to devote her time to the twin pursuits of leisure and husband hunting.

Therefore, to her father, any pleasant activity must also involve the acquisition of a spouse. That is, she should never have fun for the sake of having fun, but only as a way to obtain a husband. Which would have been fine and well if Father had actually liked Hugo, but Hugo was a mere junior architect, and Noemí was expected to aspire higher.

“No, although we’ll have a talk about that later,” he said, leaving Noemí confused.

She had been slow dancing when a servant had tapped her on the shoulder and asked if she’d take a call from Mr. Taboada in the studio, disrupting her entire evening. She had assumed Father had found out she was out with Hugo and meant to rip him from her arms and deliver an admonishment. If that was not his intent, then what was all the fuss about?

“It’s nothing bad, is it?” she asked, her tone changing. When she was cross, her voice was higher-pitched, more girlish, rather than the modulated tone she had in recent years perfected.

“I don’t know. You can’t repeat what I’m about to tell you. Not to your mother, not to your brother, not to any friends, understood?” her father said, staring at her until Noemí nodded.

He leaned back in his chair, pressing his hands together in front of his face, and nodded back.

“A few weeks ago I received a letter from your cousin Catalina. In it she made wild statements about her husband. I wrote to Virgil in an attempt to get to the root of the matter.

“Virgil wrote to say that Catalina had been behaving in odd and distressing ways, but he believed she was improving. We wrote back and forth, me insisting that if Catalina was indeed as *distressed* as she seemed to be, it might be best to bring her to Mexico City to speak to a professional. He countered that it was not necessary.”

Noemí took off her other glove and set it on her lap.

“We were at an impasse. I did not think he would budge, but tonight I received a telegram. Here, you can read it.”

Her father grabbed the slip of paper on his desk and handed it to Noemí. It was an invitation for her to visit Catalina. The train didn't run every day through their town, but it did run on Mondays, and a driver would be sent to the station at a certain time to pick her up.

"I want you to go, Noemí. Virgil says she's been asking for you. Besides, I think this is a matter that may be best handled by a woman. It might turn out that this is nothing but exaggerations and marital trouble. It's not as if your cousin hasn't had a tendency toward the melodramatic. It might be a ploy for attention."

"In that case, why would Catalina's marital troubles or her melodrama concern us?" she asked, though she didn't think it was fair that her father label Catalina as melodramatic. She'd lost both of her parents at a young age. One could expect a certain amount of turmoil after that.

"Catalina's letter was very odd. She claimed her husband was poisoning her, she wrote that she'd had visions. I am not saying I am a medical expert, but it was enough to get me asking about good psychiatrists around town."

"Do you have the letter?"

"Yes, here it is."

Noemí had a hard time reading the words, much less making sense of the sentences. The handwriting seemed unsteady, sloppy.

...he is trying to poison me. This house is sick with rot, stinks of decay, brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment. I have tried to hold on to my wits, to keep this foulness away but I cannot and I find myself losing track of time and thoughts. Please. Please. They are cruel and unkind and they will not let me go. I bar my door but still they come, they whisper at nights and I am so afraid of these restless dead, these ghosts, fleshless things. The snake eating its tail, the foul ground beneath our feet, the false faces and false tongues, the web upon which the spider walks making the strings vibrate. I am Catalina Catalina Taboada. CATALINA.

Cata, Cata come out to play. I miss Noemí. I pray I'll see you again. You must come for me, Noemí. You have to save me. I cannot save myself as much as I wish to, I am bound, threads like iron through my mind and my skin and it's there. In the walls. It does not release its hold on me so I must ask you to spring me free, cut it from me, stop them now. For God's sake...

*Hurry,
Catalina*

In the margins of the letter her cousin had scribbled more words, numbers, she'd drawn circles. It was disconcerting.

When was the last time Noemí had spoken to Catalina? It must have been months ago, maybe close to a year. The couple had honeymooned in Pachuca, and Catalina had phoned and sent her a couple of postcards, but after that there had been little else, although telegrams had still arrived wishing happy birthdays to the members of the family at the appropriate times of the year. There must have also been a Christmas letter, because there had been Christmas presents. Or was it Virgil who had written the Christmas letter? It had, in any case, been a bland missive.

They'd all assumed Catalina was enjoying her time as a newlywed and didn't have the inclination to write much. There had also been something about her new home lacking a phone, not exactly unusual in the countryside, and Catalina didn't like to write anyway. Noemí, busy with her social obligations and with school, simply assumed Catalina and her husband would eventually travel to Mexico City for a visit.

The letter she was holding was therefore uncharacteristic in every way she could think of. It was handwritten, though Catalina preferred the typewriter; it was rambling, when Catalina was succinct on paper.

"It is very odd," Noemí admitted. She had been primed to declare her father was exaggerating or using this incident as a handy excuse to distract her from Duarte, but that didn't seem to be the case.

“To say the least. Looking at it, you can probably see why I wrote back to Virgil and asked him to explain himself. And why I was so taken aback when he immediately accused me of being a nuisance.”

“What exactly did you write to him?” she asked, fearing her father had seemed uncivil. He was a serious man and could rub people the wrong way with his unintended brusqueness.

“You must understand I would take no pleasure in putting a niece of mine in a place like La Castañeda—”

“Is that what you said? That you’d take her to the asylum?”

“I mentioned it as a possibility,” her father replied, holding out his hand. Noemí returned the letter to him. “It’s not the only place, but I know people there. She might need professional care, care that she will not find in the countryside. And I fear we are the ones capable of ensuring her best interests are served.”

“You don’t trust Virgil.”

Her father let out a dry chuckle. “Your cousin married quickly, Noemí, and, one might say, thoughtlessly. Now, I’ll be the first to admit Virgil Doyle seemed charming, but who knows if he is reliable.”

He had a point. Catalina’s engagement had been almost scandalously short, and they’d had scant chance to speak to the groom. Noemí wasn’t even sure how the couple met, only that within a few weeks Catalina was issuing wedding invitations. Up until that point Noemí hadn’t even known her cousin had a sweetheart. If she hadn’t been invited to serve as one of the witnesses before the civil judge, Noemí doubted she’d have known Catalina had married at all.

Such secrecy and haste did not go down well with Noemí’s father. He had thrown a wedding breakfast for the couple, but Noemí knew he was offended by Catalina’s behavior. That was another reason why Noemí hadn’t been concerned about Catalina’s scant communication with the family. Their relationship was, for the moment, chilly. She’d assumed it would thaw in a few months, that come November Catalina might arrive in Mexico City with plans for Christmas

shopping and everyone would be merry. Time, it was merely a question of time.

“You must believe she is saying the truth and he is mistreating her,” she concluded, trying to remember her impression of the groom. *Handsome* and *polite* were the two words that came to mind, but then they’d hardly exchanged more than a few sentences.

“She claims, in that letter, that he is not only poisoning her but ghosts walk through walls. Tell me, does that sound like a reliable account?”

Her father stood up and went to the window, looking outside and crossing his arms. The office had a view of her mother’s precious bougainvillea trees, a burst of color now shrouded in darkness.

“She is not well, that is what I know. I also know that if Virgil and Catalina were divorced, he’d have no money. It was pretty clear when they married that his family’s funds have run dry. But as long as they are married, he has access to her bank account. It would be beneficial for him to keep Catalina home, even if she’d be best off in the city or with us.”

“You think he is that mercenary? That he’d put his finances before the welfare of his wife?”

“I don’t know him, Noemí. None of us do. That is the problem. He is a stranger. He says she has good care and is improving, but for all I know Catalina is tied to her bed right now and fed gruel.”

“And she is the melodramatic one?” Noemí asked, examining her orchid corsage and sighing.

“I know what an ill relative can be like. My own mother had a stroke and was confined to her bed for years. I also know a family does not handle such matters well at times.”

“What would you have me do, then?” she asked, daintily placing her hands on her lap.

“Assess the situation. Determine if she should indeed be moved to the city, and attempt to convince him this is the best option if that is the case.”

“How would I manage such a thing?”

Her father smirked. In the smirk and the clever, dark eyes, child and parent greatly resembled each other. “You are flighty. Always changing your mind about everything and anything. First you wanted to study history, then theater, now it’s anthropology. You’ve cycled through every sport imaginable and stuck to none. You date a boy twice then at the third date do not phone him back.”

“That has nothing to do with my question.”

“I’m getting to it. You are flighty, but you are stubborn about all the *wrong* things. Well, it’s time to use that stubbornness and energy to accomplish a useful task. There’s nothing you’ve ever committed to except for the piano lessons.”

“And the English ones,” Noemí countered, but she didn’t bother denying the rest of the accusations because she did indeed cycle through admirers on a regular basis and was quite capable of wearing four outfits in a single day.

But it isn’t like you should have to make up your mind about everything at twenty-two, she thought. There was no point in telling her father that. He’d taken over the family business at nineteen. By his standards, she was on a slow course to nowhere. Noemí’s father gave her a pointed look, and she sighed. “Well, I would be happy to make a visit in a few weeks—”

“Monday, Noemí. That is why I cut your party short. We need to make the arrangements so you’re on the first train to El Triunfo Monday morning.”

“But there’s that recital coming up,” she replied.

It was a weak excuse and they both knew it. She’d been taking piano lessons since she was seven, and twice a year she performed in a small recital. It was no longer absolutely necessary for socialites to play an instrument, as it had been in the days of Noemí’s mother, but it was one of those nice little hobbies that were appreciated among her social circle. Besides, she liked the piano.

“The recital. More likely you made plans with Hugo Duarte to attend it together, and you don’t want him taking another woman as