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The Last Salsa Singer (novel excerpt)

By Ivelisse Rodriguez

All of them thought they could cut her down because they were men. Vicente and the *orquesta* made the *Palomita* song really to destroy Lucy—who would not fall into the arms open for her. They made the song full of no cares with grins in their voices and daggers on their faces. Richie listened for Lucy’s heartbeat on the radio whenever the *Palomita* song played. After all these years, Richie swears he never hears it. So he doesn’t know what Vicente heard. But Lucy gave Vicente a life without freedom, left him a body without spirit. And then she just went away, singing to the ocean.

All those years ago, Richie picked Lucy up at noon, timed it so he could get there exactly at 12. He didn’t want to fidget there, staring at her door, willing her to come out; he wanted a semblance of control over what he already knew was out of control, and when she materialized outside of her house, she was a movie star strolling. Big tortoise shell sunglasses, a black headband holding her hair back, and a white strapless dress that looked like her mother had worn it in the fifties.

His heart, illuminated, commanding the whole of him, relished her promenading towards him. In the following weeks, and then in the years to come, as proof of her one-time open-heartedness, he revives Lucy at this moment.

When she reached him, he put his hand on her back when what he really wanted was to pick her up, press her and his body against the car, and stay there until the sun went down. But he kept it chaste lest her father Lolo tumble out the door after him.

The way she stood on her tiptoes to reach up to kiss him on the cheek. That spot throbbing for precious seconds like her lips were tattooed on his cheek; and sometimes, he could call up that memory and that throbbing on his cheek. Richie peeked toward the house, saw Lolo in the window. Pulled himself together, and he opened the door to the white convertible. It creaked open, but Lucy effortlessly slid into the deep red leather seat. Lingered, hands on the door frame, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, he beheld her thick, caramel legs. Richie was amazed by how at ease Lucy looked at this moment, like she belonged in this seat, being driven by her boyfriend. Other girls were sucking on *limbers* down at the *pueblo’s* plaza, other girls were grouped together ironing each other’s hair, preparing outfits for school the next day. But Lucy belonged here in this car. Her largess: aspirational.

They lay on the beach, the grainy sand underneath them, the heartwarming sun above them. A thin strip of sand separated their towels. She held his hand across this crumbling divide, lying in the silence, but her head was turned away from him as she stared up at the sky. He gazed at her through his dark lenses. He wanted to throw his leg over her. But there were families, there were neighbors, there were friends. Richie and Lucy could not endlessly touch each other.

“Why did you say yes?” he asked, but it was so he could inch toward her, speak closer to her mouth, so her words could send rivers through him. He wanted to hear these things about himself; he wanted to devour how much she liked him.

“I like you. Like you like you,” she said. “My boyfriend,” she kept calling him whenever she could.

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He flushed. The sun was no match for Lucy. He nuzzled his nose against hers; he couldn't get too too close; he couldn't get close enough.

"Say it, again."

She did. And she said it countless times that day and for so many days to come. And he knows she meant it, and he recalls the way her pink glossy lips parted every time she said it.

"Do you play anything?" he asked her.

She shook her curly hair, immaculately done for a beach trip.

He touched her arm when she talked. Her skin seared into his fingers.

Richie never forgot what his Uncle Tito told him about the personality associated with each instrument, and Richie wasn't sure if it was he who was changing and becoming the sax player, or if his uncle's words had moved him so much that every day the sax player was intrinsically emerging. He could feel the vibration of his heart on his sleeve, every day transforming him.

"My uncle, he taught me to play, he told me this story...." Richie wondered if he was babbling. If he should be telling this story. "He told me about each instrument, he told me what kind of person the sax player is, what kind of person the salsa singer is, but he didn't tell me how to read people who don't play. So I don't know what kind of person you could be."

"I sing a little, but I won't be in a band. I just sing for myself, around the house. So what kind of person is the singer?"

"She needs to be seen."

Lucy tilted her head and flashed him a boy-melting smile.

"Is that true?" he said shifting towards her.

She moved back and said, "We'll just have to wait and see."

The clouds rolled in, and they waited. They were the last ones on the beach. And they stayed there after the drizzle, until they knew that this wasn't one of those Puerto Rican showers—furious, driving sheets of rain that rolled through, soaked and pounded everything in its path, and then left like it had never come. When he knew it wasn't that, but an enduring rainstorm, they left. Running in the rain, towels over their heads, but, really shielded from the rain by their laughter, their ecstasy, their running into a spectacular future.

And there is more. More that Richie would tell. A fishnet overflowing with remembrances. Decadent fish exploding out of the net. Because what is love? If not the best of times.

When they made the *Palomita* song, it was spontaneous. Hector, their manager, came up with the phrase and captured the song when they spewed it.

"I feel bad for Richie. He doesn't know what kind of girl he has," Hector said.

"What kind of girl is that?" Vicente asked.

"A straight *palomita*, man," Hector said.

"What the fuck is that?" Turo asked.

"Man, she's like a *palomita*—pretty to look at, comes to you when she wants, but flies away whenever she feels like it." Hector was a visionary, always trying to push ahead. Always trying to distinguish them with catch phrases and unique beats from all the other bands that came out that year and the years before.

The band members looked at each other and laughed. Finally, a clear word to pin her down and encase her.

Hector sang "shoo, shoo" and raked the *güiro* at the same time.

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Lyrics laced with laughter punched the sky.

Fingers clipping cigarettes, smoke snaking, whiskey's ice musically clinking: the men laughed to their hands.

They had cycled through the stages of listening to grief: empathy, platitudes, impatience and annoyance. Some taking positions at different points in the cycle, but they all had to jump to humiliation together.

Empathy. They understood at first—they respected grief—some moments allow us to hurt for ours. Richie's bereavement was natural and supported at first, and it invariably turned to this topic during the smoky, late nights, becoming a conversation opener and closer, depending on everyone's attitude. Talk about Richie's relationship turned into a precursor for talk about their own hurts and remembering their own sorrows. Lucy was always the gateway.

As they had all done when they were younger men, they thought Richie would put this away, that the seepage would turn into a slow drip until there was nothing left.

No one told Richie empathy had an end date.

Platitudes. On auto-pilot, they came with their trite sayings: you'll get over it, she didn't deserve you, she doesn't know what she's missing, you're too good for her.

Reusable sayings trotted out to fit every romance.

The words meaningless to both speaker and listener, divorcing Richie from the perceived specialness of his relationship.

Even when he found that some of the sayings were true.

"*Un esclavo saca a otro.*" They brought Richie new girls, and he learned not to ignore them because Lucy would then sidle up to him, release the valve on her attentions, and Richie, he would think the pursuance was over. But inevitably, their mini-fevers would diminish and another girl would have to come into play.

Platitudes: reusable sayings that fit every romance.

Impatience and Annoyance: Truth-telling. After twelve months or so, they all came to him. "She was only your girlfriend for what, a few months?"

Richie's and Lucy's real romance lasted five months, and since then, for almost two years, it's been in this limbo stage where Lucy is neither Richie's girlfriend nor obliterated from his life. Instead, she's a dominating and inescapable specter.

¡*Basta!* Papi, you have to stop this, that one foot in, one foot out business, that never works—that's how she positioned herself, and that's how she's always going to stay," Turo said. In his pressed suit, and sparse mustache, looking like a thinned version of their fathers, he straddled the chair which he always turned around; balancing his elbows on the back of the chair, he would sit there with his suit jacket off, folding his dress shirt neatly on the table furthest away from where they gathered. It was only in these moments, in his wifebeater and dress pants, that he pontificated the best. Relaxed and with a cigarette in his hands, eyes red and beady.

"I love her," Richie's usual defense because this idea of love mollified and made everything acceptable. Love trumped everything and superseded concern for self.

"Love *que* love?" Turo retorted. It's been a year. A year, papi, you are never going to get back. And when it's all said and done, it's going to be all this accumulated time you wasted that you're going to be pissed about, not this girl," Turo punctuated his statement with a perfect stream

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of smoke clouds. “You’re young. A lot to learn. Don’t hang your heart on a woman, on a girl, who doesn’t really want to be here.”

Turo’s need to speak, like everyone else’s, was greater than the need to be heard.

Turo remembers his own wasted years. Divorced from his younger self, he could only look back at himself with disdain. Turo had long ago left love in the dust because he knew too much and mocked anyone who still worshipped at that altar. Though he was the one who often brought up the conversation about Lucy. This altruistic belief that we can save each other, in the end, was really about our superiority. The *orquesta* members had all survived the same and were now on the other side, impatient and not willing to listen to anymore, forgetting that knowledge is more easily gained with distance.

Annoyance and Impatience: Enabling. “You know *que* love,” Marcos responded to Turo. Smoke curling from between Marcos’s meaty, reddish fingers. His other hand tightly grasping a tumbler of whiskey. “Sometimes these things can’t be rushed. Anything could happen, you never know.” Marcos had the fantastic ability to re-construe anything Lucy had done. He was an endless source of optimism when it came to Lucy and Richie, but that’s not how he lived his life. Marcos was knotted about life in general, so he could relate to how Richie felt. Marcos’ tightness shrunk his body. His unknotting: the congas and drink; playing loosened him up, extended his limbs. But he respected grief the most because he lived it constantly. Wrapping Richie up in the coziest excuses allowed Marcos to come into a world where no one knew too much and the future that unfurled before them was populated with more loves to come.

Humiliation. They had told themselves that humiliation was the last resort when they played the *Palomita* song at a concert, surprising Richie. But humiliation was not really the last resort. Humiliation, like anything else, was building—it started slowly. The unceasing ribbing, the lordling over of years of experience, the dismissal of Richie’s story: the path to the *Palomita* song.

“*Para las pollitas, para los pollos, aqui te presento,*” Hector spaced out his words and his pauses. Stepping to and fro, left and right, he smoothed his hand over his shortened afro, making the girls scream even louder. He let out a boisterous laugh. And then like an old radio man who tripled, quadrupled the sound of each letter, he said, “*Teeeeeee Preeeeesssento.*” Then he stopped again, making the crowd gather with delirium. The crowd rousing, begging him to continue. Even Vicente got lost in Hector’s show—dancing, clapping, expectant like the crowd—as he waited in the wings to make his triumphant jaunt onto the stage.

“*¿A quien?*” Hector asked the crowd. The band joining in, also asking who was coming. “*¿A quien?*” Hector asked thrusting left to right. “*¿Y quien soy yo?*” Hector asked the crowd. “*El negro bonito, el negro precioso, el negro saaaabbbrrrrroooooossssoooo.*” Hector was the only man who gave himself three *apodos* and called it one. Hector marched in place, and then his trademark move of stopping and sliding his ass in one elongated move.

“*Te presento,*” he said again, “*tepresento,*” he said it quickly, mashing his words together.

“*El palomito. El hombre mas palomo. El hombre que rompe palomitas.* Viiicccceennntttteeee ‘*El Palomito*’ Martinez.”

Hector danced away in small circles, shuffling his feet like James Brown. Then his steps became diminutive, turning off the spotlight on him. He faded to black, waiting for Vicente to take center stage.

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The fear pulsed in Vicente's throat, and he rushed onstage to try and take back his name. Vicente knew *apodos* were forever. Once you had the *apodo*, you couldn't disentangle yourself from it; it became part of your name. In forty years, the young pic of "El Niño Bonito" would still be carried in Ismael Miranda's back pocket, ready to be flashed because the salsa singer got consecrated, frozen in that moment. Though dead, "El Cantante" would never be wrested from Hector Lavoe's grasp, ensuring that in decades to come, no one else could become the king of salsa, even when Marc Anthony, Hector's heir apparent, comes along.

The *apodo* does not die. It's a double helix with the salsa singer. The only way to get out of this is to never have been given an *apodo* in the first place—like Cheo Feliciano, the first name already a nickname.

Whenever Vicente left the house, there was no telling where he would hear the song, how many times he would hear it. The song had been meant as a one-off, a collective acknowledging of Richie's limping love story with Lucy. At a concert, they played the song after Richie had come to Vicente, proud that he could finally be with Lucy again. He could save her; Lucy was pregnant by another. But Vicente couldn't let Richie bind his life to hers. So six months ago, they played the *Palomita* song, and they have had to play the song ever since.

The song was like a specter bumping around in his world. Down to the *panadería*, cars drove by blasting the song; young people crowded in the car—their arms and hair flying in the wind. They brought the song wherever they could.

Vicente had tried to look away, to not see how the song was rising like an indomitable giant. But the *Palomita* song swelled and like the fuel tank of a rocket, disconnected from the band, now the mere conveyors of the song. And in the years to come, the song would find itself in talent competitions sung by kids too young to really understand the nature of the relationship sung about. There would be a Christmas version, sometimes sung at *parrandas*, with multi-generational neighbors *brindando* with *coquito* in their hand. There would be a Christian version of the song, and in thirty years, there would be a reggaeton version.

The *Palomita* song became *esposas*—wife and handcuffs, both feeling the same.

"*Palomito, palomito,*" the crowd shouted. Vicente tousled his hair, smiled as wide as he could and tried to make himself as infectious as Hector when he stepped to the mic.

Vicente knew the reason for Hector's exaggerated opening. Last night, and for the past three nights, Vicente had jogged up on stage and called himself Vicente "El Verdadero." Vicente had been waiting for the crowd to name him. But the threat of a *palomita*-esque nickname battered in the air. And each night, it was like the crowd did not hear him—unable to bridge together his self-proclaimed *apodo* with any song of his, any character trait, anything they had ever heard of Vicente doing. And it had fallen flat, clearly not catching on.

Vicente held up his hand, and even though they screamed for him, he said, "As some of you know, my grandfather is Estemerio 'El Tigre de los Timbales' Martinez." Vicente paused for their exclamations. "He played with Cortijo y su Combo for decades. And he had named me 'El Verdadero'."

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To be the truth was twofold. One—he told the truth, but he was also “the truth.” Estemerio had named him and expected nothing less than for him to be a *sonero mayor*. To be “*El Palomito*” was to be a singer memorialized as a charlatan. Estemerio thought Vicente would be the next Ismael Rivera or a man who stood as a signpost—one of the markers on a timeline, not one of the men in-between.

“To honor my grandfather...” And here, Vicente did not know what to say. They were still shouts of “*palomito*.” He could not demand to be seen in the way he and Estemerio wanted. It was for the crowd to name him. He was starting to learn how much power the audience had over him. “I hope that I can make him proud,” he acquiesced.

Estemerio “*El Tigre de los Timbales*” (Tito Puente already *El Rey del Timbal*) syncopated and crashed on the cymbals like a young, ecstatic man until the day he died. Named by Cortijo as they regenerated *bomba y plena* for a new generation.

With ruffled rumba shirts tied high on their waists and with effortless smiles, Cortijo y su Combo smoothly danced, sang, and played their instruments on “*La Taberna India*” on Telemundo, where Cortijo y su Combo were the new house band. Estemerio had expected that on that first day and all upcoming days, meaning would finally compound to something. *Bomba y plena—música africana*, music of the poor, now the Puerto Rican music that would be heard in every household that tuned into Channel 2 at 7:00pm every Monday, Wednesday, Friday. They would be bringing their music to the nation—and their black faces would finally grace all the homes of Puerto Rico.

But the moment, like many hoped-for significant moments, was marred. Nothing about their first performance that night belied that they had been introduced by a master of ceremonies in blackface. And that was just the beginning. Ramon Rivero, beloved national hero and comedian, entertained the crowd with his skits as Diplo, a dwarfed-in-comparison character in blackface who too eagerly took money from his Amazonian, black girlfriend. And at times, the camera cut back to Cortijo y su Combo, who did not sing to see clownish entertainers. Cross-cultural jokes moving north and south to all the places where once-Africans had become something else. *Chistes* so unimaginative that they were repeated from land to land like they all had colluded to laugh at the same jokes.

For Estemerio, who was a first getting on stage and entering people’s homes. For Estemerio who was turned away at dances that were for whites only. For Estemerio who had wanted to go to college, but the University of Puerto Rico did not admit blacks then. For Estemerio, there was nothing about his blackness that was not Puerto Rican. So he blackwashed that stage of their mimicry. And he did not bring the tried and tested, he brought what was created from his own hands. A music scrapped together, held together in a sieve, where he bridged together all that makes them new people—no longer African, no longer Taíno, no longer Spanish or European, but an unaccounted for mixing that loosened everyone from their ancestors, bringing them together to form something new, to form something called Puerto Rican. His self-assured hands deliberate as his sticks moved from the cowbell to the *cáscara* of the *timbal* until he created a new style of playing and thereafter called it mozambique just because.

Cortijo tried to cut Estermerio off with a smile and a nod when Estemerio stretched out his solo, halting Ismael Rivera from moving on with his song, forcing the camera to stay on them/him because the crowd was ecstatic by the extension of what Estemerio offered, forgetting Rivero for

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the span of Estemerio's solo, biting into Rivero's timeworn humor for one night. Estemerio played the life out of the *timbales*. Estemerio played like a man who would never play again as part of Cortijo y su Combo, like a man who would never be invited on TV again.

What the actors swept onto the stage was the dying debris of countries tied by parodies that would fall out of fashion while Cortijo y su Combo would endure. And Estemerio swept it away.

And the statement as song paid off for Estemerio. He gained a name. And earned his place with Cortijo. And in the 70s, in Vicente's day, you could hear the effect of Estemerio's statement solo in the music: the shout outs to Africa; the *piropos* to *la negra*; Maelo singing to *las caras lindas de su gente negra*, no longer singing about *el negro bembón*; Ismael Miranda including Africa in a litany of locations that needed to be shouted out. Hector Lavoe singing "Che che cole"—a nursery rhyme from Ghana. The 70s, where men of any Puerto Rican-made hue salute Africa and Estemerio's *timbales*.

Vicente, as a young boy, at the height of love, pressed his olive skin against Estemerio's, constantly drawing a line between Estemerio's forearm and his own, linking them, finding the gap between black and olive. Vicente would be insistent. His connection to his grandfather was pivotal and wholly necessary. He needed to know he sprang from Estemerio. Humble. Extraordinary.

Knowing his legacy could no longer be like Estemerio's, for the crowd, Vicente did what he was supposed to. He sang the *Palomita* song that he had no choice but to sing now, that he was forced to make part of his repertoire. He could never forget about Lucy when the song was meant to engender the exact opposite. He had wanted the song to make a point, and then go quietly in the night, just like Lucy. She would now be with them forever, and she would stick more to Vicente than to Richie.

Vicente realized he absorbed her, and whenever Richie looked at him, Richie would see Lucy.

The *Palomita* song would now be a thing they'd have to tiptoe around, like a revealed affair. A hefty third party in a relationship of two. Indiscriminate in its parsing of shame.