

## **Birth of a Poet**

**By Mariel Masque**

“There is something magical about the Jabillo tree,” Rene said facing the spiny evergreen.

Much like her new lover, Alina Fuentes, the tree’s determined personality captured Rene’s attention. Covered with verdant foliage, its bountiful umbrella-shaped branches extended in radial form to offer a generous shade. Although it naturally grew on rolling hills, pasture fields, and along meandering rural roadways in the steam-hot lands of the Venezuelan valleys of Aragua and Yaracuy, in the city, its rompe-acera external root system and wide trunk covered with thick, sharp thorns warned urbanites about its caustic blood. Camouflaged within luscious shades of green, its enigmatic fleshy crimson tassels and dark red flowers concealed the tree’s Aquarian nature which expresses rebelliously every February when ripe hidden seeds detonate, spreading, beginning a new cycle.

“Oiga, poeta, no se me distraiga. We came all the way here to study calculus, compañera,” Camila opened her notebook and sharpened her pencil, “Se me enjuicia, pues.”

“Tall, teeming, strong, and stubborn, its softwood offers a variety of uses, Camila. Uste’ sabe que los nativos build canoes from this arbolito? Pues si hija. And factory workers construct coffins from its wood to bury their dead. Pero estos arquitectos sin oficio plant jabillo trees along sidewalks, y mire como el arbolito rebelde quiebra las aceras. Cuando yo sea arquitecto no voy a permitir plantar estos pobres arbolitos de campo en la ciudad, hija. A ellos les gusta estar libres, tener espacio,” René said while snatching her books out of her backpack.

“Ay si mi amor. And they breathe the fumes of this jodio trafico night and day, pobrecitos. No me joda. Concentrese, poeta. If we don’t pass this calculus test, we don’t graduate.”

“Ay ya va, Camila. Dejeme disfrutar este momentico. Fijese que under that thick bark, highly irritant sap travels, but when properly applied, its viscous milk has medicinal value. Micaela, the barrio’s curandera, still makes a paste made from jabillo juices that serve as an anesthetic. Disque the sap’s chemical composition disintegrates bone. When in need to pull out bad teeth, Micaela still anoints her patients around the piece, waits until the Jabillo paste works its magic, grabs a clean towel and pulls out the tooth. Asi de facil.”

“Uste’ como que esta enamor’a. Si, pues, look at that grin. Deje al arbolito tranquilo, René. You know what las malas lenguas say, mi socia. Un clavo saca a otro clavo,” Camila said to her high school classmate.

While sitting under the shade of the Jabillo tree on the folding beach chair with faded stripes, René opened the calculus book and faced the oncoming traffic.

“What is that formulita again?” Camila asked, opened the glass jar, and took a sip of cafecito.

“Minus b, plus or minus the root of b square, minus 4ac, all divided by 2a,” René said and wrote the equation on the side of Camila’s page.

“René, are you plotting to see Alina again soon?”

“No sé. Es que tengo un problemita.”

“The kind of problem that makes you sharpen your thoughts or the type that makes you sniff glass?”

“Alina lives three hours away, en El Cafetal.”

“No way, mi socia. Did you hook up with a pava de Caracas? You know what those sabiondos say that Caracas is la capital, and the rest of the country is wild grass and snakes.”

“A pues, Camila. Eso no e’ asi. There are friendly people in the Valley.”

“Si, si, like there are monkeys in the sea. At least your jeva is twenty-five and a teacher. She must have wheels.”

“No wheels, comadre. Su familia no tiene ni una matica de aguacate.”

“What are you going to do, mujer?”

“I don’t know. Save unas lochas to take the bus. Pero uste’ sabe. Amor de lejos es amor de pendejos. No’e verda’?”

“Ay mi amor. Where is our irresistible romantic, our poetic bandida? Chivo que se devuelve se ‘esnuca, poeta. An hour ago, you were calling her your Muse and writing love verses to la muchachita.”

“Muses are complicated, mi socia.”

“Si claro and you are easier to pass than a spoonful of flan de coco. ¿No e’ verdad? No me venga con ese cuento, carajita,” Camila said and laughed.

“Don’t you think that loving another woman is odd?”

“No, ‘eñora. En mi mundo, the rest of the world is strange.”

“Cahhh, cahhh, cahhh,” shared the glossy-black pajarito eating a still plantain.

“¿Vistes? Even los cuervos agree,” Camila said while throwing few crumbs to the hungry black bird. ¿Dígame una cosa socia, que la impulso a ser poeta? Uste’ escribe muy ‘onito.”

“Que voy a saber, mi panita. When frogs grow hair and turtles climb trees, I may be able to answer that question,” René said and smiled.

“Yo no me como su cuento. Pa’ mi uste’ va a ser escritora, no arquitecto.”

The eighteen-year-old watched vehicles race on the road. In the depths of René’s mind, a memory bubble burst.

“I may not remember much about life on the island, or know what prompted me to ink, Camilla, but I remember clarito my first obsession.”

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“I will always be on the other side of the sea, were Abuelo José María’s last words at the Rancho Boyeros Airport in Havana back in 1961,” René said. Her brown eyes turned amber when hit by the late afternoon sun.

“I did not want to leave mi adorado viejito with silky white hair and puckered lips who always wore his black beret at a slant,” René said and paused.

“That gloomy day, as the airplane flew away, puffy gray clouds covered the turquoise blue of the Caribbean Sea. The island with an alligator shape vanished. I swallowed. It felt like having a porcupine stuck in my throat. The idea of swimming back to my abuelo’s arms crawled inside my 5-year-old’s mind and nested inside my heart. Y pa’ luego es tarde, mi amor,” René said and closed the textbook.

“Mami always praised my strength. Y si e’ verdad, mi amor. Ella tenía razón. Yo tengo más vidas que un gato montés. But I also had my Achilles’ heel. While living with Mami in a small efficiency en la Sahuesera, en La Florida, the pinching cold melancholy lurking in Doctor Zhivago’s song, “Somewhere My Love,” found a home in my little refugee head as the lonely man living next door played that LP every day.”

“Etched in my viscera, the word ‘volveré’ plunged me into an insatiable quest to return to my homeland,” René said while combing her short brown hair with her fingers. The line of birds standing on the electricity cable listened to her cuento while preening their chests.

“The sands of Cuba still clung to my sandals when I resolved to swim back to my adored Abuelo, to the garden where blue butterflies fluttered in harmony, playing hide and seek, and to the grounding aroma of Abuela Felicia’s creamy tamalitos. I longed to sit on my grandfather’s lap and watch my great-grandfather Rafael, el Mambí, move his hands as he delivered his detailed cuentos about the Cuban Independence War.

“During those first years of exile, the cavalry’s alluring horses and the heroic deeds of the Titan of Bronze and his mother, Mariana Grajales, the real instigator, has el viejo Rafael contaba, swirled in my dreams late at night after the sound of the old sewing machine stopped, and Mamá got in bed by my side, kissed me good night and turned off the lights,” René said and took a sip of cafecito from Camila’s jar.

“At the age of 6, in Crandon Park Beach, a merciful dolphin brought me back to the shore after floating adrift for hours. Wearing my yellow lifesaver and walking oddly like a duck with blue fins strapped to my feet, I returned to the shoreline five miles away from the point where my escape mission had launched. An old bald man with lobster-red chest held my pruned and shaky hand until the lifeguard found my mother.”

The bumper to bumper rush hour traffic flooded la Avenida Principal del Trigal with honks, roaring engines and desesperaditos. Camila rested her face on René’s shoulder. Plastic bags floated in the wind as anemones do under the sea.

“Mami screamed, ‘René, no me vuelvas a hacer esto,’ kissed my forehead a million times, hit me with her pink flip-flop, and cried on the verge of a heart attack. Eso no era todo, Camila. Hay más,” René said and paused.

“Que chimbo, mujer. ¿Cómo es eso que hay más? Suelte la sin hueso.”

“Months later at Biscayne Bay, I sneaked out on a black tube left unattended between green palmetto leaves and palm trees. With my feet up and my ass in the water, muy campante, singing my version of “Guantanamera,” I floated among cruise ships toward the sun.” René said while smiling at the iguana feeding from tender leaves up in the Jabillo tree.

“Y que paso. Suelte el cuento, pues,” Camila said while pulling René’s ‘cerebros exprimidos’ t-shirt.

“Que va a pasar, pues. My escape mission aborted when the loud siren of the rescuing boat approached. A Coast Guard brought me back to the arms of Mamá,” René said.

The crow hopping from branch to branch in the Jabillo tree offered a sweet distraction.

“No me deje guindando con ese cuento. Siga.”

“Ay, pero Camila, estese quieta. Again, Mami compulsively kissed my forehead, hit me with her blue flip-flop this time, cried as if having a nervous breakdown and hollered with a high pitch voice, ‘¡Me vas a matar, niña!’ ¿Cómo le quedo el ojo, mi panita?”

“Cierre pues la jeta, Camila. Le van a entrar moscas,” René said while elbowing her panita.

“My strategy needed revision when Papi, tired of cleaning public bathrooms en Nueva York, finally landed a sales job en este lindo pais, Venezuela.”

“Pero tu papa no vivía con ustedes dos?”

“No mi amor. Ese es otro cuento. Déjeme contarle, pues.”

Camila released a deep sigh.

“En esta segunda patria a la cual quiero tanto, mi Camila querida, one afternoon when I was 9, trying to swim back to the island from Palma Sola Beach, alla cerca del Palito, I got sucked by the riptide. There was no lifeguard on duty, mi jefa. With all the strength a child with Mambí blood possesses, I tried to reach the surface. My legs cramped. The pull of the undertow dragged me to the depths. I watched the last bubble of air leave my mouth and float toward the sun.”

“Y que paso, dígame. Ay Diosito, que susto.”

“Hours later, after being vomited by the sea, I woke up and coughed streams of salt water. Hair entangled with Caribbean seagrass, I greeted life. My scratched tongue wetted the cracks on my lips. I rose from driftwood, diatoms and beach wrack. And wearing the cloak of a starlit night, I walked home sobbing to Mami’s delicious frijoles and a slice of marzipan.”

“Y que dijo su ‘ama?’”

René searched for Camila’s glittering green eyes.

“Que va a decir, mija. ‘Where have you been all day, muchachita?’ She screamed at the top of her lungs.”

“Y uste’ que le contesto a la pure?”

“Que le iba a deci’, mi socia. Le dije que estaba pescando.”

“Esa misma noche, I opened mi cuadernito de cuadritos and wrote my saddest lines. I never went back to the island. Mi abuelito se fue pa’l hoyo few months after that night. I never saw him again, Camila,” René said and returned to her calculus exercise.

“Que cuento más triste esa revolución, mi pana. Ojalá eso nunca pase en este país.”

Con ese cuento, Camila, quien se las daba de arrecha, shed more tears than the Cabriales River durante la época de sequía. And the poor Jabillo tree, con todo y su corrosive blood, prendido en llanto lost all its leaves.