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**ANITA
de MONTE
LAUGHS
LAST**

Xochitl Gonzalez

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FALLING

Anita

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If it weren't for what happened later, everyone would have forgotten that night entirely. It wasn't like the '70s, you know? Nights when you never knew what could happen; what to expect. No, by 1985, the parties in New York were all the same. One night, one party, bleeding into the next. Nothing specific or momentous enough to press itself into your memory. The guests, the conversations, the taste of the fucking wine on your lips, all more or less the same. *Especially* Tilly's parties. Formulaic; interchangeable. Some felt that's what made them work, but for me? It depressed me—that impossible distinction of the passage of time.

The drinks were always set in her claustrophobic galley kitchen. To force intimacy. The food—what little there was—WASPs hate feeding people—set atop the piano in the center of her massive loft. The poor young artists hovering while it lasted. The music just loud enough to soften silences, but too muted to inspire true revelry. Over the years, Philip Glass was replaced with Sun Ra. The “hot new” artists aging into establishment figures or disappearing altogether; replaced by other, younger faces. All the big museum people were always invited, naturally. Tilly enjoyed the thirst shared between those two groups in particular: the haves dangling their opportunities tantalizingly before the have-nots. It created a great “friction in the room,” she'd

remarked once. After years where I was the only brown speck in attendance, lately there'd been a noted effort to populate the guest list with more "Third World Artists." This sudden concern for diversity coinciding with the Met hiring their first Black senior curator. I'm not being cynical, just honest; it would be embarrassing to invite Rory to a party and have her see only white people there. But, outside of that, in all the years of these fetes, very little had changed.

Except, I suppose, for me.

If you were in New York and in the art world, you did not refuse an invitation from Tilly Barber. And, for whatever reason, that night was particularly crowded. Bodies and conversation packed close enough to create a hum. I remember feeling a restless excitement when I arrived. The kind you feel when you're giddy from holding a secret; one with wings that flap furiously against your palms. Knowing that, any moment now, it could fly up! Out into the world. Its motion changing fortunes and futures, oceans or even lifetimes away. And I, the only one containing it. Such a power! Giancarlo, raconteur that he was, was telling me a story. I was listening, but not. He always came back from Rome with the longest stories. I was distracted; knowing that at any moment, *he'd* arrive! Jack Martin. My husband.

And then, as if I willed it by simply glaring at the doorway, he did.

Jack likes to enter rooms slowly. To stand and hover before he makes his way, glacially, into a space. Some people think this is because of his size; he's become quite mammoth these last years. His physical form expanded, I think, intentionally to match his scale of import in the world of art. The more generous attributed Jack's heavy footedness to the rumored injuries sustained from years of lifting rods of iron and setting down plates of steel. "Each and every piece of art that's ever bore my name," he will tell you within breaths of meeting him, "was installed by me and me alone." That explanation is, for me, the most ripe—picked with callus-free hands from the vine of Jack's decades-old propaganda tree about working-class roots. But here is the truth, the kind of truth only a wife can really know: Jack enters the room slowly so that people will notice him. Plants himself like a lighting rod, drawing the kinetic energy of everything and everybody his

way. Still and quiet so that, for a moment at least, the attention of the revelers is pulled from whatever conversation they were having or joint they were smoking or person they were trying to fuck and drawn instead toward him. The party, if not the world, spinning around Jack Martin.

So it was that night. From the corner of my eye, I watched him enter the loft and linger. Waiting. Around me, conversations, bright and raucous just seconds before, suddenly muted as people noticed his presence. All mentally calculating if and how and when they could talk to him. Even Giancarlo's voice trailed off. I stole a cigarette from him and pretended not to notice as Jack, finally feeling acknowledged, crossed the room toward the kitchen. I didn't need to look up to know that's where Tilly was.

Normally, this would have annoyed me: that he always sought her out before he ever even looked for me. That she was, in my opinion, the only one he genuinely respected, far more than for being one of the best art dealers in the world. For more than even making his career. Really, I think, just for being her. Steely. New England elegant. Any other day, this would have driven me up a wall. Drawn out my sharp cat claws. But on this night, I had the flapping wings of secrets, restless in my hands. I was excited—delighted, even—that he'd finally arrived. I was wearing my favorite dress, the one I'd bought in Iowa from a secondhand store. It was from the '60s, with big silver paillettes, each as large and round as the eye of a cow. Clustered so tight and voluminously, they tinkled, soft, like wind chimes when they rustled together. I had put on the only heels I wore anymore. Artists, when they are working, should have little need for heels. I wore the red lipstick from Guerlain I had gotten in Paris. Tonight was an occasion: the close of a special day and also the opening of . . . I did not know in that moment what. But it was going to be something new.

I was ready to start the adventure.

"Giancarlo," I said, as I grabbed his hand, "my husband is here. Let's go and tell him our good news!"

We wound our way through women in black dresses and seductions in progress and scrawny boys with paint-stained pants, arguing

about nothing, until we finally reached the kitchen. I paused in the doorway for a second and watched them. Together. Tilly ruminating, cigarette in hand, lips parsed to say something thoughtful. Tactful. Jack, midway through opening a fresh bottle of champagne, the festive gesture in chiaroscuro to his dour expression. Both so wrapped in what they were talking about, in each other, neither of them noticed me.

"Perfect timing!" I finally said. Giancarlo, behind me, pushed his way into the tiny cookery. "We need a refill! To toast my wonderful news."

Jack looked me up and down, a closed smile curling up, tight against his teeth. He hated this dress. He thought it looked cheap. Like New Year's Eve in Times Square. Hated the racket it made. The way the paillettes shed like snake scales if I moved too quickly. Hated that I moved too quickly.

"Tilly was just telling me," Jack said, as he refilled our glasses, the grin still taut on his face. "A dozen prints sold to the Met. Not bad for my little orphan Anita."

"Anita!" Giancarlo exclaimed. "All night talking and you didn't even tell me! Well, that will definitely build buzz around your show."

I raised my glass and ignored the shock that seized Jack's countenance. Didn't even look at Tilly, lest she ruin my mood.

"Giancarlo is going to show me in Rome," I announced. "Solo."

"Congratulations, Anita!" Tilly said, genuinely impressed. The fact of which almost annoyed me more than if she'd treated it like garden variety information.

"What's the expression, Tilly?" Giancarlo offered. "A no-brainer! Have you seen her new sculptures?"

"Nobody has," Jack said, his voice strained and the smile, finally faded.

"I haven't," Tilly said, disregarding Jack. She averted my gaze. Her manners masked her cowardice.

"Tilly hasn't asked to see my work since 1979," I said to Giancarlo, "and even then, it was only as a favor to Jack. Isn't that right, darling?"

Jack pulled me tight to him, the sequins and my lungs crunching together as he did. He raised his glass.

“Well, cheers! Quite the lucky day for our shooting star,” Jack said, saccharine dripping from his voice.

Human will is a particularly powerful magic. Alchemy happens when a person truly decides something; when a mind is changed. We’d shared exchanges like this hundreds of times before, my husband and I. Tiny acts of violence enacted with words. Exchanges that had cut and left me bleeding, with my best stuff—confidence, clarity—pooling down, away from me, onto the floor. But not that night. No. Because that day I had decided to reclaim my might; to cease to be shrunk. And in my decision, I’d grown a new version of myself. My new skin thick like coconut shells, impervious to his attempts to crack my joy. My triumph at my accomplishments, my exultation with my own art, euphoria at this new power I’d discovered in simply deciding to change my mind. All of it now in safekeeping, deep inside my new self. I pulled from his embrace and turned to him, with a smile so genuine on my face, and I said:

“Jack, the night is still young.”

And it was.

Later, when I saw him across the room, practically entangled con esa cabrona gigante—Inga or Ingrid or whatever her name was—it wasn’t that I didn’t feel rage. No, it was that in my decision to strip him of his power, I was able to transmute that anger into joy. The specific type of joy one can only feel by really fucking with someone’s head. Poking at exactly the right tender spots. The spots only a lover, and surely a wife, can really find. So, yes, I saw them—her, with her long blond hair hanging down like a sheet, leaning against the glass window; him, with his arms braced on either side of her, their faces practically touching—and my first feeling was anger. Resentment. Not just that we were in a room where everyone knew us—because I am someone too!—but because she wasn’t even a good artist! She made derivative, exhausted, color-field shit that he would have pissed all over had it been done by someone with a cock. Instead, he bought three of them and hung them in his fucking living room. At least if he

was going to carry on this way, he could do it with someone with real fucking talent! But, of course, talent scared Jack.

Then, like finding a five-dollar bill in an old coat pocket, I remembered my thick, coconut-shell skin and that I had changed my mind.

"Quimbara" trumpeted from the stereo, and I turned to my friend Jomar and suggested, loudly, that it seemed like a great time to dance.

"Someone turn the music up," I commanded. The boy Giancarlo was trying to seduce eagerly obliged.

Tilly's parties were not dancing affairs. They were more gatherings than celebrations. Openings without the art. While I knew this was not something she'd like, it was something she'd tolerate. Americans love to see Latins dance. Dance, fuck, fight. Anything, really, that's meant to be done with passion. And besides, the guests who remained by this point were the most drunk, the most high, the most bored. Thirsty for entertainment. Jomar was an amazing dancer, the kind who knows how to make his partner look better than she is. As we moved, I could feel the attention of the room now pull toward me. Not as a lightning rod, but as a wind, a wave. Something in perpetual motion that touched everyone gathered. Around me, I could feel their thoughts and assessments and presumptions. Anita de Monte, art star on the rise. Anita de Monte, winner of the Rome Prize, winner of the Guggenheim. Anita de Monte, a once-in-a-generation artistic voice. Anita de Monte, a one-trick pony. Anita de Monte, immigrant opportunist. Anita de Monte, wife of the legendary Jack Martin. Anita de Monte, lucky bitch. Anita de Monte, the most miserable bitch alive. No one realizing that I was all these things at once and more.

I remembered my task at hand.

"It's just that I miss dancing," I said to Jomar, with my best stage whisper. "My husband doesn't dance, you see. Not a salsa, not a waltz. He won't even do the twist."

I didn't direct any of this at Jack, of course. I didn't need to. I could feel his gaze on me, hot like fire. He hated a spectacle. Unless it was his. From the corner of my eye, I saw him swat la sueca gigante's hand away, sensed him heading toward me. To "save me" from

embarrassing myself. My hero. I kept up my performance. That night, I should have won an Oscar.

“Did I ever tell you who taught me to dance?” I asked as Jomar guided me smoothly around him in a lasso. “Our servants. Jack hates that I was rich in Cuba. Detests it. It doesn’t fit into his nice vision of us as a cute little Marxist couple. But I assure you, we had servants and they danced with me all the time.”

Around us, those who could hear me were eating it up—these sycophants loved gossip as much as idolatry—but others began to clap to the beat of the music. They cheered us on through lunges and copas and dips. And then Jomar began—slow, and then faster, faster—to spin me. Around once: I saw Tilly stop Jack. Around again: glimpsed the giant Swede storming out. I laughed loudly. I had just ruined his night as he had ruined so many of mine. I felt radiant with delight, felt the flutter of my secrets, knowing soon they would be free! Jomar spun me around and around, again and again and again.

Later, when word got out that I had fallen (jumped? or, could it be, pushed?) out the window, this was what everyone would talk about. How they had just seen her! Anita de Monte. That very night! How she had been laughing. And how she had been dancing. And how, when she spun around and around, the silver sequins of her dress went flying. Up and into the air. Like the feathers of a molting bird.

Raquel

PROVIDENCE • SPRING 1998

Raquel Toro walked into Professor Temple's light-filled office and, for the first time, did not feel herself shrink. She'd woken up that morning and, admittedly, after a night of two-for-one cosmos with Mavette downtown, looked like shit. But she felt proud. Ready to meet the day, and Joÿ Temple, unintimidated. Neither by the mountains of books—catalogs, academic texts, tomes of criticism—that he not only owned but had, at least in part, authored. Nor by the exhibition posters lining the walls, featuring shows he had mounted or had a major hand in. Today, Raquel walked in feeling worthy, not just of the company of his brilliance but of her very place in this school.

Before arriving at Brown, Raquel hadn't spent much time pondering what an Ivy League college would be like. She'd been too grateful for the opportunity to have expectations. But during her sophomore year, when Joÿ Temple called Raquel to his office hours for the first time and she saw him behind his vast desk, she knew that this was it. This was what the "Ivy League" was all about: wool blazers and expensive, but understated, watches; salt-and-pepper beards stroked for effect while holding court for enraptured students. The Ivy League was Joÿ Temple, whose name held no meaning to the average or even above-average person, but whose work had the power to shape institutions, markets, and culture in its most erudite of forms. He was

A Man of Great Importance in the World. And in such proximity to that, despite the “brilliantly drawn constellations” he commended her on during his seminars, or the “incisive, yet accessible” papers that he praised her for, she had always felt deeply insignificant.

Until today.

“I got the fellowship,” she said, noting the confidence in her own voice. “I’m going to be a curatorial fellow in the Contemporary Art Department this summer.”

Joÿ Temple’s handsome face broke into a smile, revealing his perfect teeth. He pushed the Eames chair away from his desk to fully face her.

“Brava, Raquel! Brava! Though I had no doubt.”

She felt the flush coming up her neck and tried to contain her grin in a way that would seem less obviously delighted by his approval.

“Your recommendation put it over the top.”

“Nonsense! It was a solid application across the board. It seems small, but the RISD Museum is a jewel box; their work has a lot of implications in the art world.”

“Oh, I’m very aware. Three of the fellows are from Harvard and Yale.”

Professor Temple looked impressed. He had, she then remembered, gone to Yale.

“Competitive field. Even better.” He smiled again, leaning in toward Raquel. “A long way from selling sandwiches at the Met, huh?” he said, pleased.

She felt herself—her equalness—evaporate. Quick and sudden. A red flush of shame replaced it, the kind that morphed fast into anger. Raquel simpered, fought hard to suppress the *What the fuck does that mean?* that he would’ve gotten had he come at her with this bullshit back home. She reminded herself that he couldn’t have meant it as an insult, even if it felt that way. This was not Brooklyn. This was Brown. Here was a place of measured tones and intellectual rivalries. Here was not a place where necks were rolled, nor teeth sucked, nor fucks flung around willy-nilly. Here was not, he just reminded her, a place for girls who worked concessions at the Met.

(Which wasn't even factually correct; he hadn't even remembered her story right.)

She had mentioned it during their first meeting, offhandedly. Before she'd learned to cautiously manicure her background. She'd been enrolled in his wildly popular course, American Art, 1940 to Today. The midterm was a paper examining art as social commentary using works they covered in class. Raquel wrote about Philip Guston and his paintings from the later '60s; the strange smoking Klansman stuff that, in the context of the era, was clearly meant to be a white man's tongue-in-cheek commentary on the absurdity of white supremacy. In passive protest of never getting to study artwork remotely connected to her life experience, she offhandedly lamented that, in respecting the assignments provision to confine her discussion to work from the syllabus, she was unable to *also* discuss Betye Saar or other minority artists directly affected by the civil rights movement. Raquel's TA was about to give her paper a B but thought it important to put her critique on Professor Temple's radar. (It was always unclear if their objective was supportive or an attempt to squelch dissent.) Joÿ Temple reggraded it to an A- and left a note that Raquel should come to his next office hours.

His first question had been what drew her to art history, and she'd answered honestly: her mother worked in the Met cafeteria and Raquel had spent long hours there studying. Then, the summer after her freshman year, her mom hooked her up with a job at the gift shop. Armed with her staff ID and her mother's proud introductions to the curators and administrators she'd long been serving food to—"This is my Ivy League baby!"—Raquel saw before her a career path. One that could lead her to being the person responsible for what people saw on those walls. She never imagined that he'd remembered that story, her casual confession. No, it wasn't even a confession at the time, it was simply a fact of what had happened. A detail that, to her, was so innocuous. And yet, now, he'd weaponized it. Transformed it into a blunt reminder of just how irregular to this place, to this world, to this corner office, she was.

She composed herself.

"I'm grateful for the recommendation."

She stood to leave, picking up her knockoff Prada that she'd gotten on Canal Street during spring break. Joÿ Temple rose also, retrieved his pack of Dunhills from the desk, and inched closer to her.

"I'll walk out with you, have a smoke."

The only thing that made Raquel more uncomfortable than being with Professor Temple in his office was being with Professor Temple in any setting that was not the classroom. She knew there were students—like her freshman roommate, or the Art History Girls—who easily conversed with their professors. She remembered having that kind of ease with her teachers in high school, but that was just it. They were teachers, these were *faculty*. Doctors of Letters. She didn't admire her fellow students for being comfortable with their professors; she found it, frankly, disrespectful. But, in these random instances where someone like Joÿ Temple asked to engage with her in a basic human activity like walking to have a cigarette, wasn't it more discourteous to say no? Unsure of how to be, she feigned indifference, shrugging her shoulders, and headed out to the hall.

She pushed the button on the freight-sized elevator.

"So," he said, "who will you be working with?"

"Belinda Kim!" she said, her excitement a momentary distraction from her discomfort. "She's putting together an exhibition on the figurative in art."

The short elevator ride felt infinitely longer under the weight of Professor Temple's silent judgment.

"You don't like Dr. Kim?" she asked, more perplexed than anything.

He sighed and she noted a sense of apprehension. The elevator doors opened. For a second, he seemed the sheepish one, heading out of the elevator with his head down.

"Like? Don't like? These things don't mean much in academia, Raquel. Belinda and I just have diametrically opposite approaches to thinking about contemporary art. To me, biography is unimportant; for her, it's everything."

Raquel remembered his lecture on Cézanne and the inextricable