

C o l l e r e



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Photography

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Back cover: "The Editors" by Liz Nicklos

Smell the Night

Daniel Chacón

So if love is possible from a photograph, why was it wrong for Vladimir Cruz to feel love for the girl in the velvet pants? After all, his father, a respected man, had fallen in love with a photograph of his mother and had written to her in Cuba promising to come get her, if she would have him. He had gotten off the plane in Havana and saw her standing at the gate in a yellow dress nervously tugging at the collar, and he knew he had done the right thing. So why did Vladimir feel guilty every time he stood at the window hoping to see the girl in the velvet pants coming out of her house and walking to her white van? Why did he feel like a peeping tom, why not just go downstairs, walk across the street, and introduce himself?

One evening after he took off his gun and set it on the kitchen counter, next to a bottle of wine, he started to cook the evening's meal, chicken breasts in garlic and lemon, and he thought that maybe he felt so guilty because he wasn't really in love. Still, he remembered that image so clearly--as if he himself held a photo--that one time he saw her coming out of the big white house, and he thought that she was the most beautiful and refreshing person he had seen since moving to rural Minnesota. As he lifted fingers full of chopped garlic, he thought that perhaps he was projecting his hatred for his new life in rural Minnesota by this attachment to her. He sprinkled the pieces of garlic into the hot olive oil--hissing like a secret. He added onions, which sizzled, and then the two breasts, and he moved them around the sticky pan with a wooden spoon. He squeezed lemon into the hot oil.

His parents knew how to love, but he was being selfish, childish. He couldn't love the girl in the velvet pants; in fact, the fact that he thought of her with that name, "the girl in the velvet pants," as if that were her only identity, showed him that he had fallen in love with an image, an icon framed by wood, like a painting on the wall.

When the chicken breasts were cooked white and moist in the middle, he spooned a bed of orzo onto his plate and lay a breast on it. He grabbed the bottle of wine next to his gun, and he went into the large dining room, almost empty. He sat next to the window at the little eating table, which reflected on the shiny wooden floors. He looked out into the sun as he ate, at her big white house surrounded by oak trees, like hairy ogres.

The Somali lady led Vladimir into her dark living room. The curtains were drawn and the smell of coffee beans boiling in butter came from the kitchen. She sat on her couch and Vladimir sat across from her on an arm chair. She slowly lifted her long, black fingers to her hair and said, "He beats me." She pulled the collar of her *gunbiuo*, a white sari-like dress, and showed him the bruises on her neck. Then she pulled the garment up her sleeve and revealed the purple blotches on her arm.

"Can I have him arrested?" she asked.