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The History of Her Depression

by Mariana Romo-Carmona

Sit down. I have something to tell you.

Standing at the doorway of this story was a woman who opened the green frame of the farmhouse as though she had signaled the time for me to arrive, and for there to be a story at all.

Are you sure you want to rent a room here? she asked, and immediately took a deep drag of her cigarette while she looked me up and down. I put my suitcase down on the gravelly path and looked around at the overgrown grass and bushes surrounding the house. It was a reflex reaction, I didn't have the option of hitching a ride back to the university. The woman chuckled and moved aside for me to go in, taking another drag while I pulled in the suitcase, then closed the door. A sudden dizziness made me blush at the ease of her manipulation, but amazed and resentful, I determined to stand firm.

Her hair was auburn and as long as my own black hair, but she looked experienced and smart, and I could never stop looking naive. She showed me a dilapidated purple sofa to sit on, started rolling a joint from the open baggie on a burgundy milk crate, and lit another cigarette for herself. So, why did you get kicked out of the dorm? She asked the question so quickly I had no time to react. I drew in my breath and stared at her while a smile emerged on her face, mouth first, her eyes next, and handed me the joint. This time I chuckled and she followed by coughing and releasing the mouthful of smoke she'd taken in.

In a few minutes she'd gotten a quick life story out of me and I'd added many details willingly. We smoked and giggled comfortably, and when her boyfriend strolled in to smoke a joint she repeated the story to him. Her version. The housefrau kicked her out of the dorm, she told the blond boy, for kissing a girl.

Housemother, I told him, passing the joint. Same thing, he answered, no? Yes, I suppose, I laughed along with Reesa, completely stoned, but-- I insisted, I didn't kiss her. We were studying in the piano room, smoking a joint out the window, when she got up and came close to me.

How close? They both asked, and I recalled the girl's face, black eyes with curly lashes on a brown face, the only Black girl in the dorm, which made us natural allies. I'm a foreign student, I began to explain, then thought how ridiculous it was, since I was a foreign everything. But the girl was nice to me and she had stood close, very close, and just then, the Housemother opened the door.

Show him how she clutched her pearls, coaxed Reesa, and I did. The Housemother shouted her question at both of us, hand on her bosom, in the classic matronly pose, her small eyes peering first at Alicia, and then at me. But Alicia recovered and flung her accusation with a trembling finger towards me, and it was done. I was formally unhousted, escorted out in shame through the lobby and driven to the infirmary because I had no other place to go.

There, nodded Reesa, satisfied, with my story effectively diminished and rendered so harmless, I glowed with gratitude.

I'll show you the room, she concluded. A week later, she invited me to dinner with her and Matthew at the house of some friends in town.

Reesa was the investigator for every kind of lugubrious history there might have been to unearth in that town. She went after all the facts as if they concerned everyone else, and with an air of proprietary interest that submerged any question the listener might have about why we were hearing about such histories

and incidents at all.

This is how Reesa began her story about the people we were about to visit that evening, and as she told, everything that we passed on our way there became part of the portrait we had of them. They were older than Reesa by about twenty or twenty-five years, which is to say they were in their fifties and had some gray hair, and were, therefore, bona fide old. Having climbed into her 1966 VW bug, Matthew and I listened to Reesa talk on and on as she drove to the Stanley's house. We passed willow branches on the High Street, white fences that indicated horse stables somewhere back in the properties, we passed stone walls becoming visible under the headlights, deer crossing signs, and election posters in bright blue and red, followed by the brown Nathan Hale historical marker, pointing to nowhere in particular.

The Stanley's, she told us, were very left wing, further to the left than the town's Democratic Club, but there being no socialist group around, they had joined the *Dems* to do whatever campaigning needed to be done. They're old, they've been around, you can see the mane of gray hair that Roger has, and Lisbeth wears her hair long, but it is still gray. Roger is the interesting one; he is from a branch of the Jamaican Stanley's, you know the ones who went into exile in the 50s? Or, maybe 60s. Those are the ones, and yes, Roger is part black, she finished, presuming we would ask.

Reesa sucked on her cigarette and Matthew wondered aloud what his other parts were, before lighting his own cigarette with the nervous hands of a pianist. I sat in the back and smiled to myself.

These were all facts only significant to Reesa (I knew something about exile, but I was still a blank slate about race). That's just it, you can't tell, continued Reesa, talking mostly to me as if I'd asked the questions, and not only that, Lisbeth had to leave her New England family to marry him. All that you see here, the estate, the stables, it's all her family's before they disowned her— Roger lost all his money.

We had stopped under an archway of wisteria and fragrant jasmine bushes that stirred as Reesa blew smoke into them and shoved them out of the way with her car door. A light came on, and only then could we see the darkened house beyond the arbored entrance, stone house, stone pillars, stone benches under the willows, rusted wheelbarrow full of cement blocks, and a large doghouse made of stones and wooden planks, big enough to house a mule. A black dog emerged from it, barking over Reesa's words which she finished while she ground her cigarette in the sandy driveway, and they're swingers, too; they sleep with half the town, although I hear that Roger is homosexual and Lisbeth brings home younger women just to please him. So, watch what you say, Reesa said to me before she knocked on the door, and her boyfriend whispered the only question that made sense that night, which was, why would she do that, young women, and not young men— but Reesa shut him down with an auburn mane toss-and-stare.

Past the doorway was the kind of room where people take off their winter boots and coats and hang them up to dry, which I would later learn was called a mud room. This one had a washer in it, avocado green, bowls of food and water for several dogs, but this being late September, there was no mud or snow nor storm coats of any kind. I looked behind me before proceeding because I had thought that this would be a front entryway into the large stone house, but its disheveled preamble only led to a large kitchen where Roger met us wearing an apron and holding a wooden spoon covered with tomato sauce, even though he was not preparing anything in the kitchen. It was Lisbeth, with long grayish hair braided to the side and no apron, who then came in from the dining room and shoed Roger and his guests away so that she may continue preparing dinner. There was no spaghetti or lasagne or any dish requiring tomato sauce, I do remember. Lisbeth was making a vegetable casserole of gigantic proportions.

Roger, I assumed, had simply been eating leftover sauce with a wooden spoon and now wiped his mouth and his white mustache with the apron he wore, and took it off as we arrived in the dining room. Finally, we stopped.

And we sat in a collection of wooden chairs, some painted, some varnished, around an oval table covered with with an olive green oilcloth beneath a white tablecloth with crocheted edges and matching napkins. Reesa and Roger talked as if they'd always known each other while her boyfriend and I moved some books and papers off two of the chairs and sat down. One side of the table was covered with stacks of books and papers, so that we all sat in a row looking at the clutter. Soon, Roger called to Lisbeth who brought in a bag of weed and rolling papers, and we were engaged in the daily ritual of those days, crumbling the cannabis over a record album, preferably a double one, so that the seeds and the sticks would roll down the cover and the person rolling the joints would have an easier time picking up handfuls of marijuana to roll. At times like these, chronicled time hit a wrinkle and pieces of things that happened got folded in with stationary time spent observing and musing.

I didn't have to smoke much; a toké or two was enough and the rest was a contact high. There were ashtrays for cigarettes and roach clips for the joints, wine served in etched wine glasses and a bowl of orange jellies which I eyed with desire. But preoccupied as I was with keeping the entirety of the evening in my head, I discovered that the gloomy room we sat in opened out to the living room where a fire glowed in the fire place and three dogs lay about, growling softly at times, while chewing on big chunks of rawhide. There was a black lab, a golden retriever, and an Irish setter, and I noted to myself that these seemed to be de rigueur in New England— if not one of these, then the other breed would be sure to come bounding out of a house, and here were all three. I was afraid of all dogs, but having made the mistake of getting up and going to look at the fire, they'd seen me and were surely going to come and sniff at me and lick my hands, or maybe even bite me in a trice. I backed up breathlessly against the wall the way we came and ended up in the kitchen, where I fell immediately into helping Lisbeth finish dinner.

That is how I learned about the size of the casserole she'd prepared, and that Roger had been ladling sauce into his mouth from a cast iron pot. This is also how I had the opportunity to muse about several things; that in New England the back of the house is in the front, and everyone visits through the kitchen, and that this custom had nothing to do with class or the size of the house, but rather with weather, and the impracticality of receiving guests with snowy gear and mud on their boots through the front room. And how at 19 I thought it was odd that adults who— after all, sat around listening to Abraxas and smoking pot every night— should wish to spend time preparing food in large pots and dirtying dishes. But there was Lisbeth, nearly 58, she told me, apparently enjoying having guests over so she could toil. I tossed the salad for her in a large wooden bowl with wooden pallets and dropped walnuts and cubes of apple into it, as she instructed me, oh, and sunflower seeds, she also said, because Roger loved them. I had also, despite the dogs, gone bravely back to the dining room to bring her back a lit joint, which she puffed on with one hand while her other hand remained akimbo, inside her oven mitt, on her left hip.

The rest of the evening there was no evidence of the swinging life that Reesa had ascribed to the Stanley's, and Lisbeth never once became a lesbian while she ate, drank, or smoked. Roger never spoke about Jamaica; his face only got redder and his hair whiter as it was illuminated by the fire. I'm tired of teaching those bastard kids in the community college, he said at one point, and Reesa's boyfriend asked if he could play the piano. It's a little out of tune, Lisbeth told him, but Lisbeth enlisted my help to remove more stacks of books and papers so that Matthew could sit down at the bench and play. I'm changing my name to Joni, he told us, and I mean legally, and proceeded to play every single Joni Mitchell song all of us combined could think of. He took his blond hair out of his pony tail and shook it loose to show Lisbeth how long it was, while Reesa, still chain-smoking

her Winstons in between weed, wine, and casserole, began to get testy and made her hair redder, blue eyes sharper, and orchestrated a personal imperative so we could leave before dessert.

Dessert. That's all I would have offered my guests if they had cared to come and visit me in such a large farmhouse in the Fall of 1971. That was the only thing I had eaten for a year, happily enough while living in the dorms two towns away, and I'd never had a sink full of dishes to clean up at the end of it, although Roger, to give him credit, would eventually wash and tidy away completely on his own, while Lisbeth smoked some more marijuana and played in front of the fire with the dogs. That is how we left them, Roger in the kitchen with his apron, the house quiet after Matthew was finished playing, the fire burning, and outside the air a bit colder as we rode home in Reesa's Volkswagon.

I know they argued. We rode back to our own farmhouse, a gray clapboard, ramshackle house inhabited exclusively by college students from UConn, not the community college that Roger hated, and by people like Reesa Ryan and Matthew Torrkelson who lived in the town all their lives but were so unlike any of the ordinary people who lived in Coventry that no landlord would rent to them, pot-smoking liberals with long hair and Indian-print dresses, who wore sandals in the winter and had once driven clear across to Colorado and seemed no longer bound by ordinary rules. They argued about fidelity and infidelity, love and non monogamy and how Roger and Lisbeth had managed to have an open marriage, three dogs, a house full of weed and visitors who left before helping to do the dishes. I sat in the back seat listening to Joni Mitchell in my head, feeling very young for understanding little, and feeling mystified by so much, a little nauseous for mixing wine and marijuana and not being able to keep my eyes on the horizon in the dark while Reesa drove through twisted country lanes.

She pulled into the long driveway where every car belonging to an occupant of the gray farmhouse was already parked. It was late. She found her usual uphill spot by the ash tree and pulled on the emergency brake. Matthew sulked, you two bitches can go in your room and talk about me, I'm going to the pub, and Reesa threw a dollar at him to get her a couple of packs of Winstons. A pack was thirty-five cents. She kept her money crumpled in a black crocheted pouch, it's a pretty bag, I told her, it has, it has— what are those shiny things, what do you call them in English? I remember asking her that because I was thinking of *mostacillas* in Spanish, and she said, sequins, they're called sequins. She walked to her part of the house and I to mine, pondering the word which sounded like sequence, of course, so I repeated it to myself. And she told me then, it's not your accent, you know, but the way you look that I noticed first when you moved in. You looked so exotic. I looked at her, all dressed in maroon velvet with her black crochet and sequined bag. She leaned on the green frame of her outer door, where the mosquito netting had ripped off and flapped like a heavy veil. I thought you were French-Vietnamese, she said, and my head spun to the parts of the world she had brought to mind.

We were barely over the Vietnam war, and I, in my adopted country felt just as distant from the former French territory as I felt from my own home city of Santiago. In my room there was a handmade iron nail rescued from the barn that the previous occupant had hammered into the wall, and that's where I hung my army coat. Dropping down onto my unmade bed, a mattress on the floor, I felt all the romance of living in the farmhouse drain away.

On the other hand, I was free.

Indochina, I thought. I looked at my brown, almond shaped eyes and tried to see what Reesa saw— I was South America, not South East Asia. Gathering my knees together I rocked back, then forward, then put my face down as tears

pooled up in my throat. Would I be allowed back home, and, was it really so important to have a home? I was more afraid of how callous I felt, yet the evening was over and I was alone again.

Hours later, it seemed, a slight knock on the door woke me through my dreamless sleep, and the constant chirping of the crickets outside. Amalia, whispered Matthew's voice, and the door creaked slowly open. Matthew's blond head appeared and bobbed as he made his way to the mattress where he sat next to me, kneeling down first, demurely, and impulsively brushing his hair off his forehead. Amalia, he repeated, and I sat up, pushing my pillow against the wall. Yeah, I'm awake-- what is it?

She's kicked me out again, he whispered, lowering himself down and covering his legs with my bedspread. Nice, he added, touching the texture, *metallissé*. Why did she kick you out-- I mean, Reesa kicked you out? Oh, yes, sighed Matthew, removing his gold wire-rims, and closing his eyes. She has all the power in the relationship.

Today it seems unlikely that we could have slept at all, then. I remember leaning against my pillow for a few seconds, pondering Matthew's words and the terms he used, which seemed to explain so much, so quickly. I thought that I would never be able to speak English like that. I couldn't even speak Spanish like that, not having ever had a relationship of any sort to categorize. I slid down and lay in the semi-darkness with my eyes open, considering only briefly the slight discomfort of having the boy I'd just met lying down-- already asleep-- lying next to me; but soon I rolled onto my side with Matthew at my back and I slept quite soundly until morning.

Reesa burst into my room around 8, coffee and cigarette in hand, adjusting her vintage green satin robe with her other, nervous hand. She prepared to launch onto a dramatic and sarcastic monologue of her own creation, I realized. I must have hesitated, but surprising no one more than myself, I dispensed with my cultivated Chilean manners to jump out of bed and get dressed for school. In two minutes I had on jeans, sweater, boots, toothbrush in one hand and my book bag in the other.

I'm late, you guys, I called out in my most American accent, grabbing my coat off the nail and dashing out to the bathroom. Behind me I could hear Reesa's staccato and Matthew's violoncello whining for her to let him sleep. I couldn't help smiling, making room for my toothbrush on the sink where a set of open works crowded around the faucets and bent spoons caked with heroin. These, I knew, belonged to my neighbors in the next room. I dried my face with the blue towel I'd brought and draped along with their yellow ones on the same towel rod by the door. It was a bit more rumpled than when I'd put it there, but it hardly seemed to matter. In the speckled mirror I knotted my hair with a rubber band, nodding distantly at my reflection.

I had grown perhaps, since the previous evening, or in the week that was just ending. Outside the October air was clean. Cars sped by on Route 44, dislodging gold leaves from maple and poplar in their jetstream but I had also grown confident, rooted, experienced. I thumbed for a ride and waved away the first weaving VW bus that slowed in my direction. The next was a red Volvo, faded and muddy, driven by a woman. Lisbeth Stanley, her gray hair loose under a blue bandana and wearing green aviator sunglasses, leaned over to open the passenger door.

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