

Fearless

By: Elaine Gabay

Not long after my third birthday, my parents decided to introduce me to the maternal side of my family. My mother, a native Dominican, had not returned to her home country since she left to join my father in the States. It was the mid-Eighties, and though we were Americans, we were not financially wealthy enough to make frequent trips. Since then, it has become a required familial obligation that every so often we climb into an airplane in the wee hours of a Chicago morning, trek through the atmosphere, and alight onto the tarmac, surrounded by verdant flora and fauna. Though I was at a tender age, the experience was so extraordinary that I amaze myself at the plethora of detail I have retained. The colors and touch marked such an indelible impression upon my memory that when I delve into it, I instantly become three years old, and time and place have stood still.

My mother and I have gone to visit her amiga Carmela and her nine-year-old gemelos Orqui and Orquidia. They do not live far from la casa de mis abuelos, and my mother is anxious to introduce me to her childhood friend. The house is a small, one-story contraption where the kitchen takes center stage. Carmela and Mom speak rapid-fire in a language I do not comprehend, but it does not bother me as Carmela feeds us Gonikekas (Johnny-cay-cas) to all of us. The golden bread, deep fried in boiling animal-fat goodness, contains familiar flavors, but stands out as different and delicious.

Happily, I feast on the Gonikekas, when the conversation changes. Orqui abruptly strides out the door, and my mother, switching to a language I can understand, motions me outside. While looking for Orqui, my eyes focus on a large white horse, Orqui by its side.

“Lena,” my mother addresses me, using my pet name, “Do you want to ride the horse with Orqui?”

“Yeah!”

Not even the large size of the horse can quell my enthusiasm. Orqui climbs on first, no saddle to sit on, no stirrup to lead the horse. Mom gathers me in her soft embrace and hoists me up behind Orqui.

“Put your arms around him and hold on!”

I look down at her and nod, squeezing tightly. Suddenly, I am flying; the weight of my hair now light as a feather as it flows straight behind me. Blue, yellow, and green blend into a gallop racing past my eyes. The houses we pass by are woeful tin shacks held together precariously, but stand with a hidden strength, bracing against the elements when needed.

We charge by the bodega my father was visiting with Abuelo. I turn my head to gaze at the small crowd gathered in front. I think I’m waving. *(I had no idea at the time, but my poor dad almost had a heart attack watching his baby girl ride bareback on a galloping horse, gigantic smile on her face.)* I quickly turn my attention back to Orqui, and the horse, reveling in the moment.

I can’t stop laughing. This is truly the most wonderful feeling. I am fearless, no feeling of danger, no concept of what-ifs, no worry over possible injuries. Just Orqui, the horse, and I, racing around the neighborhood under the warm tropical sun.