



Sexile

by Jaime Cortez

CREDITS:

Written, illustrated and lettered by Jaime Cortez
From biographical interviews with Adela Vazquez
Translation by Omar Baños with consultation by Adela Vazquez
Edited by Pato Hebert

SHOUT OUTS AND LOVE:

- **Adela Vazquez** for living this amazing story and then sharing it.
- **Pato Hebert** for shepherding *Sexile* through to completion and for the world-class love, support and laughs. Post fierce indeed, Duckman.
- **George Ayala** for the leadership, vision and windows of opportunity.
- **AIDS Project Los Angeles** and **Gay Men's Health Crisis** for the willingness to try something scary.
- **Jose Marquez** for initiating the *Sexile* website at KQED, from which this comic sprung forth.

CRITICISM, TECHNICAL TIPS BY:

Tisa Bryant, Pato Hebert, Claire Light, Jose Marquez, Marcia Ochoa, Sarah Patterson, Carolina Ponce de Leon, Lori Wood, Matt Young, Peta-Gay Pottinger.

INSPIRATION BY:

Yoshitoshi, Aubrey Beardsley, Neil Gaiman, Jean Genet, Jae Lee, Frank Miller, Jose Guadalupe Posada, Joe Sacco, David Wojnarowicz, and the diasporic folk of the Proyecto Village. Hope you guys like the new baby.

I SAMPLED:

Yes, I am a hip hop baby that way.

- The fetus image (page 4) was based on a photo from **Lennart Nillson's** *Drama of Life Before Birth*.
- The drawing of outrageous queens at a café table (page 19) was based on a detail from **Paul Cadmus'** 1952 egg tempera painting *Bar Italia*.
- The photo of our bloodied, beat down protagonist (page 25) is based on one of **Carolyn Cole's** 2003 photos from a Haitian food riot.
- The drawings of the refugees crowded onto the boat Lynn Marie (page 33), the boat docking (page 36), and the Point Trumbo Air Force Base hangar (page 37) were based on images found on the **Cuban Information Archives** website (<http://cuban-exile.com>).
- I cribbed the phrase "No drama. Just the truth," (page 48) from author **Reid Gomez**.
- The image of the feet in the bathtub (page 63) was based on a detail of **Frida Kahlo's** painting *What the Water Gave Me*.

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Sexile

Foreword

by Patrick “Pato” Hebert

“To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge.”

—Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

“I ain’t cross over, I just made my own lane.”

—Common, *Electric Circus*

What does it mean to leave what you love in order to become what you love? What does it mean to locate yourself again and again while keeping company with so many tremendous losses? How does that shape your sense of risk? Belonging? Desire? Representations of transgenders far too often consist of mere exotified curves and flattened emotional surfaces. These caricatures tend to be disconnected from truths about how our lives as queer folk intersect. Fortunately, the pages of *Sexile* are considerably more alive, somehow mature and still in the making all at once. *Sexile* reminds us why we matter to each other.

I was blessed to meet both Adela and Jaime when we all lived in San Francisco’s Mission District in the mid-1990’s. By simply and fiercely being themselves, they showed me an example of another world, one full of tremendous queer beauty and perverse creativity. They changed my life with their deep thinking, sharing and immense potential for silliness and pleasure.

Adela once told me a story about a fine Dominican man with whom she’d had a sensational tryst. She was attending a queer Latina/o conference in Puerto Rico and found her special caballero while exploring San Juan:

We stayed up all night messing around. We were high on acid and he fucked me on the balcony of my hotel room as the sun came up over the Caribbean. He fucked me so beautiful. He said things I thought I’d never hear a man say again. He gave me back words I thought I’d lost forever.

I think about the layers in that story. There Adela was, some seventeen years removed from her Marielito departure, dropping TG science on conference participants and cavorting about. She was only an island or two apart from *her* island, but in painful, practical space, Cuba was oceans away. Nevertheless, in Adela’s touch and sounds with a lover, something terribly special came alive. Perhaps that too-brief awakening lives on in *Sexile*, where Jaime confects a fine weave of Adela’s many yarns.

Adela's story is intertwined with compelling meta histories, two that were front page news as the United States stumbled into the 1980's, and a third that unfolded with much less visibility. *Sexile* is Adela's dance through these histories. Shortly after the Marielito refugees began arriving in Florida, small but significant numbers of desperately ill young gay men began to appear in New York and Los Angeles hospitals. These nearly simultaneous cultural waves had no causal connection, but their combined impact was staggering. Adela and thousands of other queer Cubanos struggled to reimagine themselves amidst the confusion of a horrifying new epidemic in a country that was, at best, ambivalent about their presence.

The early 1980's were also an important time for nascent transgender organizing and theorizing. This wasn't the stuff of national headlines, but in bedrooms, bars, and the ubiquitous consciousness-raising sessions of the era, transgender activists began to call gays and lesbians out on their essentialism. Black and brown transfolk helped lead the fight at Stonewall, but this was often forgotten during the gay pride explosion of the 1970s. People worked hard just to be gays and lesbians, and some of them felt rather defensive amidst the assaults of the Reagan years. Fierce debates raged about gender norms, sex roles and identity. AIDS was inspiring tremendous community mobilization, but it was still difficult to develop new models for a hybrid and flexible unity. "Queer" had not yet been reclaimed as a tentative truce and possible utopia. While today's large pride celebrations may publicly tout inclusion for gays, lesbians, bisexuals *and* transgenders, "T" wasn't such an acceptable part of the equation back in the day. Transactivists regularly faced mistrust, rebuke and outright hatred from gay men and lesbians.

Thus *Sexile* is about remembering that all kinds of changes came crashing to the shore in the early 1980's. Since that time, Adela has lost dozens of friends. *Sexile* won't bring them back, but it might help us discern what such histories mean for today. Gay Men's Health Crisis was founded in 1981, AIDS Project Los Angeles in 1982. Two decades later, both organizations have joined forces in a coordinated effort to envision a future of greater health and well-being. But why a comic book when so many pressing AIDS issues are worthy of our resources? In order to reinvigorate prevention, we must continue to innovate our concepts and modalities. AIDS service agencies can learn much by listening to Adela and the very communities that prevention efforts seek to assist. With more people living with HIV than ever before, and communities of color disproportionately affected, we need nothing less than holistic, dynamic approaches to wellness.

In 2001 a 16 year-old two-spirit Navajo named Fred Martinez Jr. was bludgeoned to death in Cortez, Colorado. The story received little national coverage, in marked contrast to the outpouring that surrounded the 1998 murder of gay Wyoming college student Matthew Shepherd. The Shepherd case helped to inspire national hate crime legislation, yet a few years later, even within the Rocky Mountain/Four Corners region, the Martinez case was widely ignored. In 2002, transgender teen Gwen Araujo was viciously murdered by four young men who had previously had sex with her in Newark, California. Press coverage in the relatively progressive Bay Area continues to fixate on notions of "biological", "anatomical" and "true" gender, as defense attorneys argue that the strangling and beating happened in a fit of passion because the defendants felt they had been deceived. In 2003, Sakia Gunn, a 15 year-

old black lesbian, was stabbed to death after rebuffing the advances of a 29 year-old man at a bus stop in Newark, New Jersey. These murders are a grim reminder of the dangers that queers of all ages must contend with in their daily journeys. These cases also remind us of the possibility for dynamic family, community, legal and policy action. *Sexile* is timely without being dogmatic. Considering the failed war on drugs, the intense anti-immigrant profiling nationwide, and the recent debates over drivers licenses for undocumented immigrants in several states, it's clear that Adela lives at the nexus of many of today's most pressing concerns.

HIV prevention is too often preoccupied with tiny pieces of what we do rather than the fullness of what we feel and the vastness of who we are becoming. *Sexile* is special because it reminds us of the power of storytelling, laughter, honesty, mistakes, magic and perseverance. I recall the favored pillow talk of a Mexicana colleague from the border region of Nogales. When she invites a lover into her body, she smiles mischievously and says, "Bienvenido baby!" Welcome to *Sexile* and Adela's story, Jaime's alchemy and our future. Be careful, and have fun.

Introduction

*The woman that I'm going to be
Waits for me across the sea
If you see her, tell her please
Wait my lady, wait for me*
—Traditional transgender nursery rhyme

The life of Adela Vázquez is trans-everything - transnational, transgendered, transformative and fully transfixing. I first interviewed Adela for *I5*, a website designed by Jose Marquez for the PBS station KQED (www.kqed.org/i5). As she recounted her tale of gender exploration, migration and self-discovery, I was quietly stunned by the bawdy humor, pathos and epic quality of her saga. Over a year later, I was talking with Pato Hebert of AIDS Project Los Angeles about Adela's story. We were thrilled and daunted by the idea of creating an HIV prevention publication centered on the life of an unapologetic wildchild with a highly developed taste for sex, adventure and controlled substances. Nevertheless we proceeded, armed with the idea that Adela's life is extraordinarily rich in lessons on being resilient and negotiating risk.

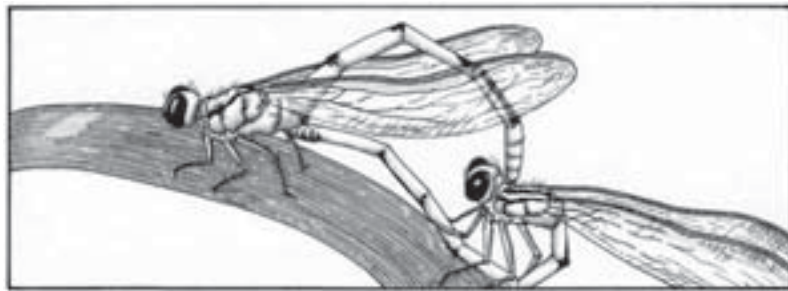
Adela has lost over 65 members of her cohort (i.e. friends, co-workers, acquaintances) to marginalization and its attendant symptoms of AIDS, drug use and violence. She knows from risk, whether that is the risk of being separated from home and family, integrating drugs into one's life or entering the sex industry. Most particularly, Adela knows the risks of trying to be a whole and healthy transgender woman in a world that is frequently indifferent, hostile or violent to the idea that she dares to exist.

This project cost 800 hours of work. The process of drawing, inking, digitizing and lettering is slow, and time and again, I butted up against the limits of my abilities as an illustrator, writer, researcher and theorist. I never did learn to draw hands well. I never became Lord of Photoshop. When the fear and uncertainty came a'knocking, I turned back to the transcripts of my interviews with Adela to remind myself why I need this story to be in the world. Not just because I'm a queer, a child of immigrants, or a lover of both comics and sexual narratives, but because this story is so fucked up, fabulous, raggedy and human that it opens a vast space where we can all ponder our own sense of risk, exile and home.

When it came time to name the project, I decided on *Sexile*. I first saw the word used as the title to a beautiful essay on immigration and HIV by Pedro Bustos, who informed me that it was coined by the Puerto Rican academic Manolo Guzman. Guzman used the term to describe the state of people who had been cast out from the prickly bosom of their birth cultures and families. *Sexile* the word is full of longing, awareness, invention and displacement. I hope that *Sexile* the story evokes that fullness of meaning and possibility. Buen provecho.

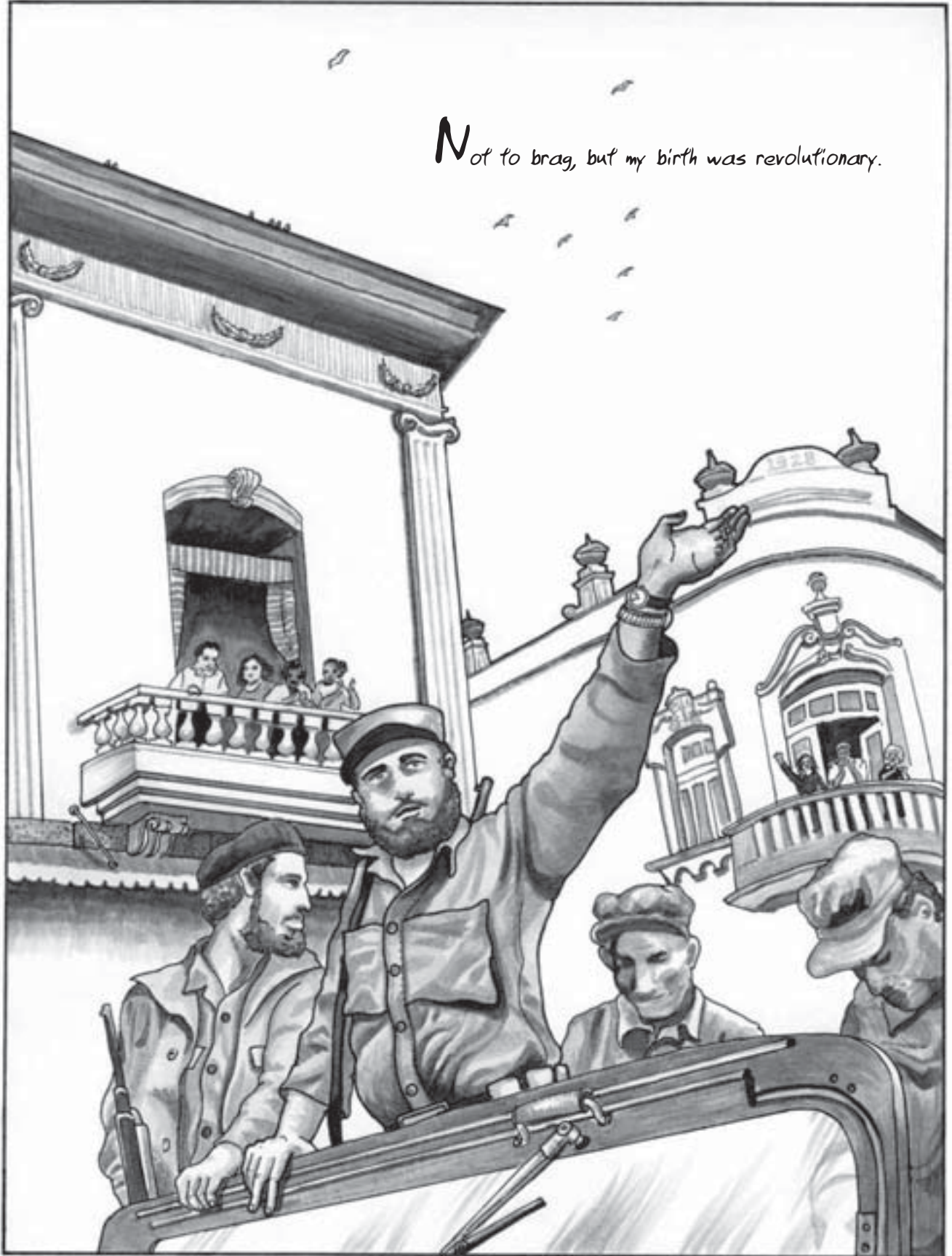
Jaime Cortez
6/1/04
Watsonville, CA

Chapter Uno



La Infanta Caliente

*N*ot to brag, but my birth was revolutionary.



In November of 1958, Castro and the rebels, they were fighting their way across Cuba, kicking ass from East to West.

In Camagüey, they burned the sugar mills and even the trains at the factory. The smell of burnt sugar was the smell of change.



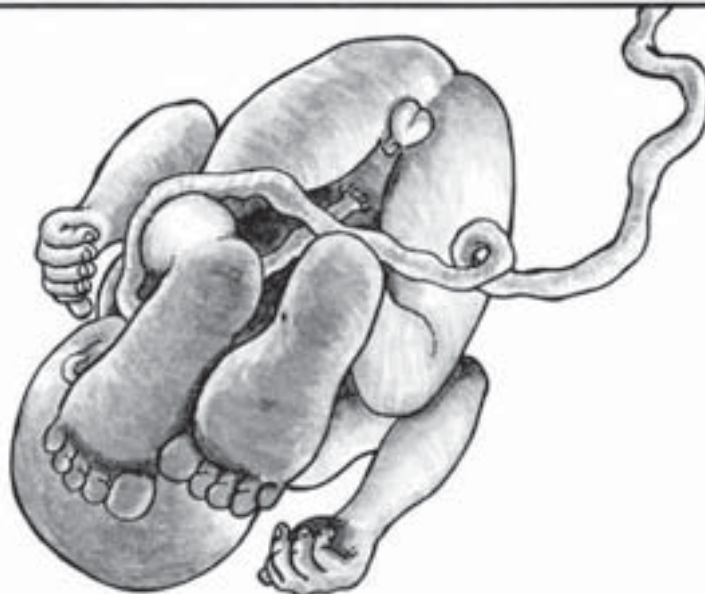
Mami started labor during the fires, so going to the hospital was dangerous.

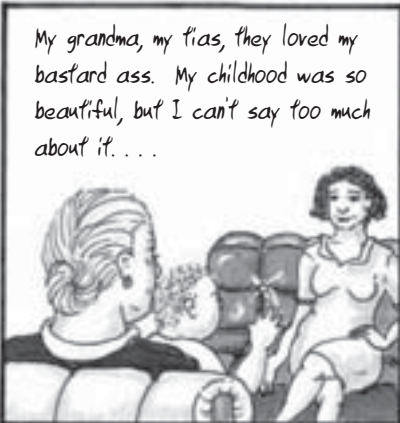
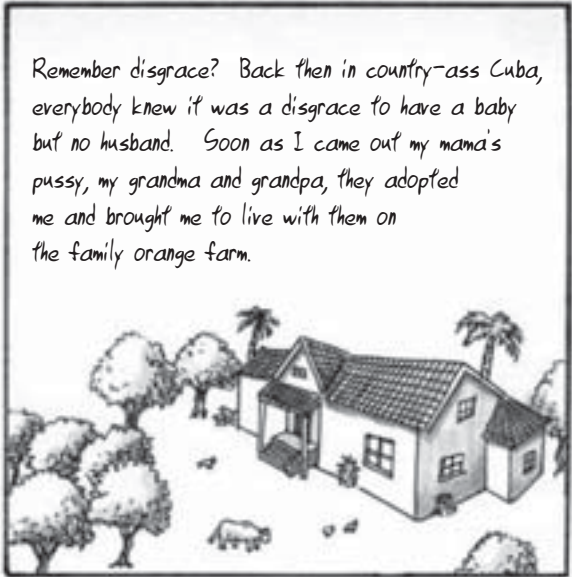


Grandpa went on his bicycle to bring the, what do you call them?
The Comadrona?
Oh yeah, the midwife.
Too old.
Too slow.
Too late.



Besides,
it was time
for my grand entrance.







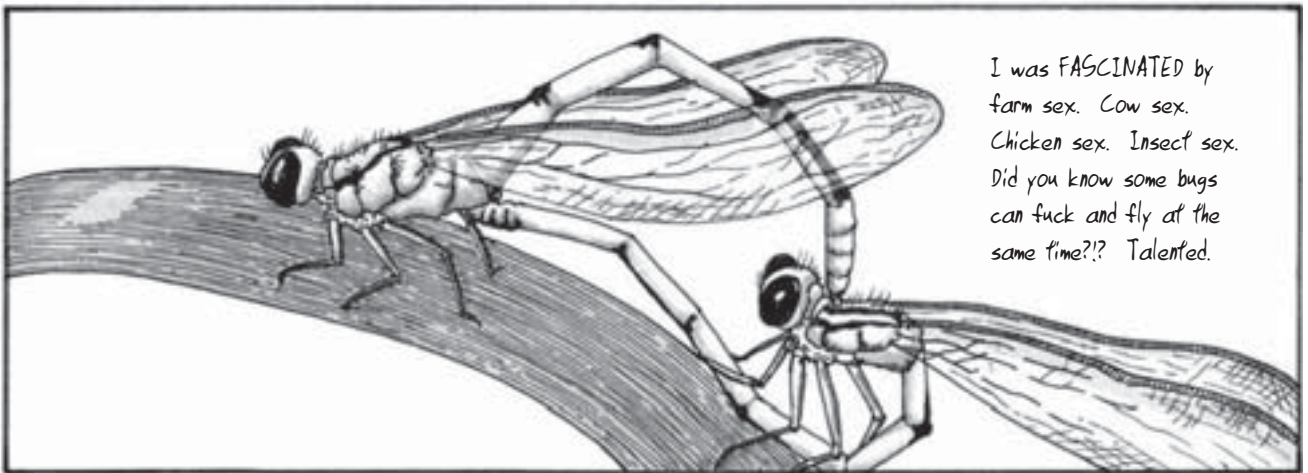
I couldn't wait to grow up because I knew that when I turned 10 . . .



my dick would fall off . . .



my pussy would grow and finally I'd become a complete girl.



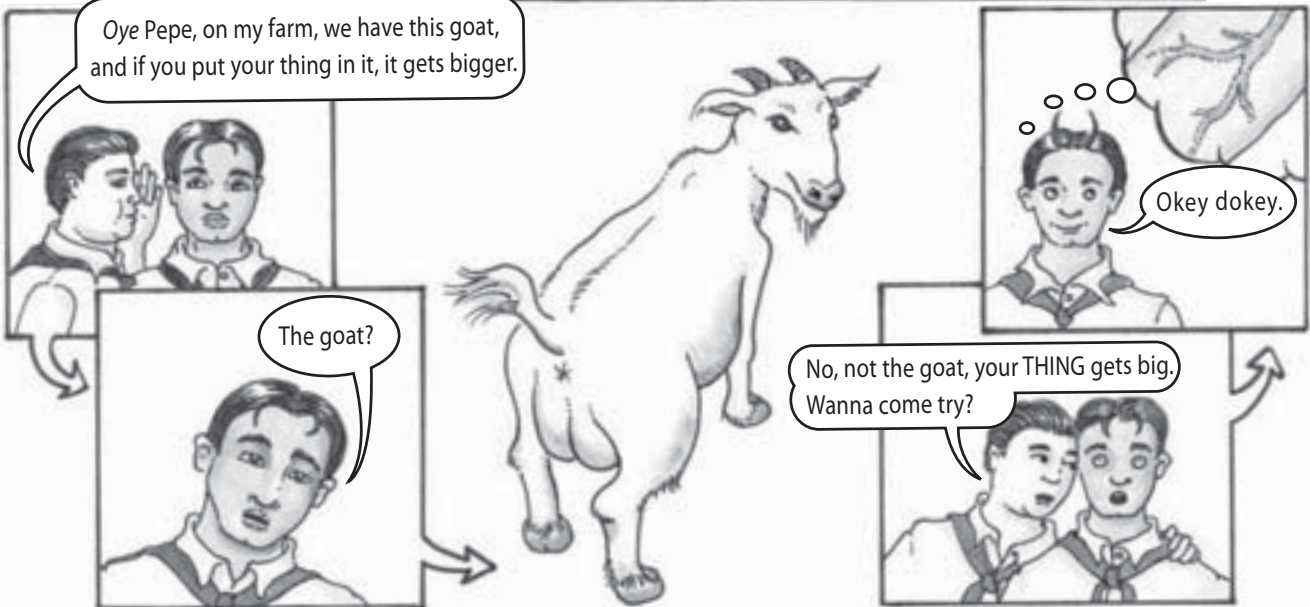
I was FASCINATED by farm sex. Cow sex. Chicken sex. Insect sex. Did you know some bugs can fuck and fly at the same time?!? Talented.



Oh my god, I was the most horniest little kid. I used to fuck this one banana tree. I carved a little round hole in the trunk and child, I hit it HARD!

In the hole, it was warm and wet and nice like inside of a body. It was very tropical, okay? Thank god the banana tree never pressed charges.

The tree got boring and I graduated to humans. I used farm temptations to get sex.



I was a baby queer and some people were so mean. I didn't even understand what I was yet, but the other boys knew. They used the truth like a club, and taught me all my dirty names.

PUTO! Pajaro Pervertido Pato! Maricon

I escaped and started to read my mother's fashion magazines like bibles, and I learned all about couture, makeup and glamour, the fabulous glamour, of America. I knew Americans had cars shaped like women. That even farmers or plumbers can buy them. That you could open a can of soda and it was cold. That you can go buy a pill to make your mustache disappear! That they sent a motherfucker up to the motherfucking moon, okay? That the country is so big that they have to have different times in some states, which is strange from little Cuba. That all countries have their stars, but only the U.S.A. has STAR STARS that eskimos and geishas and pygmies know and want to kiss their feet and their ass if they ever get a chance.

This is a big deal when you are a girly boy in a place where people can't remember steak and people aren't supposed to want special shit if it's only for themselves.



But back to the sex. Yes, mama had plenty, thank you very much.
I had sex with schoolmates, teachers, cousins, truckers, soldiers, etc., etc.



But do NOT call me gay. I never had gay sex. Never will. I'm always the girl, he's always the man. Even when I'm fucking him.

At 11, the revolution did me a big favor.
They sent me to boarding school. By that age,
I'd lost all my baby fat, so mama was looking
real cute. Me and five hundred boys. HELLO!
They all knew about me, and they wanted me.
The students, the teachers, you name it.
I fucked with them all, and that was how I
learned that sex and beauty were power.
My power.

If a bully was
harrasing me,
I'd seduce
him . . .



Then blackmail his ass.
Worked every
time.



I did the same thing
to the teachers.
They were extra nice
to me after that.



At 15, I entered the school drag
pageant. It was supposed to be a
big joke, but I was not playing.



I had these fierce black girlfriends,
and they helped me to take apart a coffee
sack thread-by-thread to make
a fabulous weare.

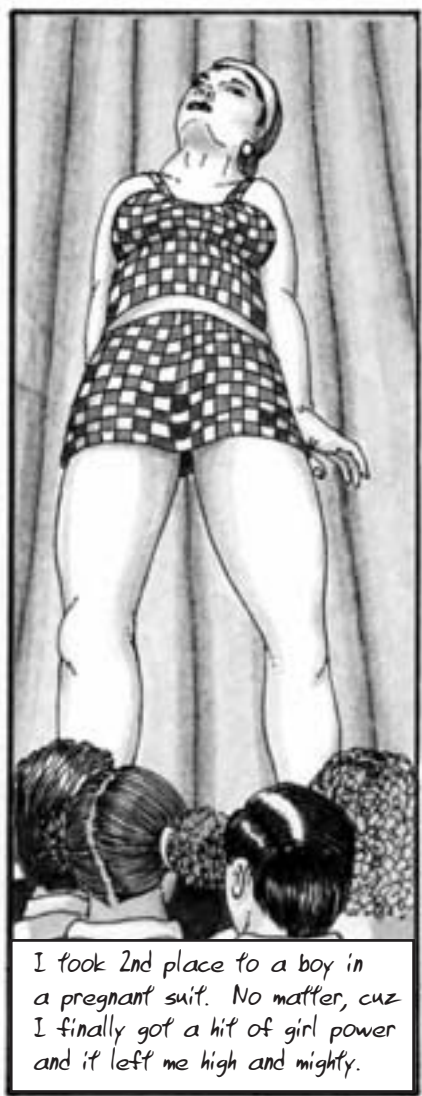




When I stepped on stage,
all my classmates
got real quiet.
My shit was
too real
for them.



Hair. Body. Face.
Mama let them HAVE IT!



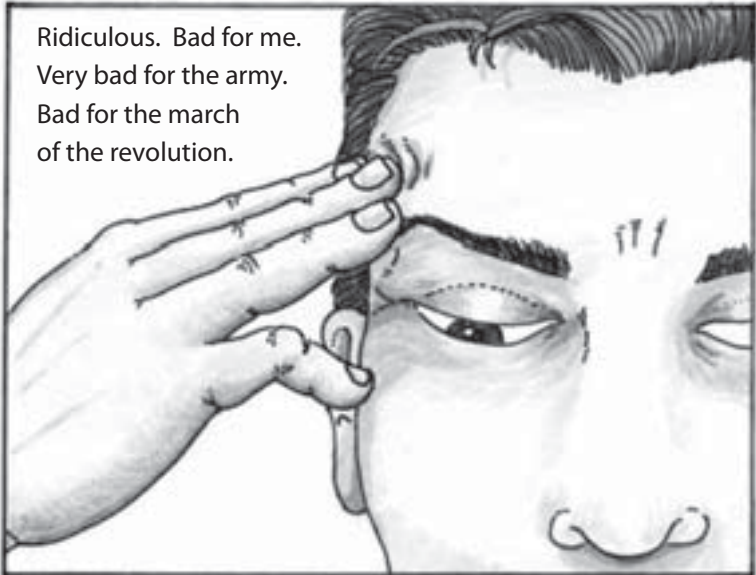
I took 2nd place to a boy in
a pregnant suit. No matter, cuz
I finally got a hit of girl power
and it left me high and mighty.



Cuba is hella complicated, you know?
Dressing as a woman was illegal, and there
I was doing it for a school event. Cuban people,
we're a great people. We have this flava,
this sazón, that is amazing. The beautiful coast.
The sound of our rhythms. We're so mixed and gorgeous.
It should have been heaven, but Cuba had no place for MY
revolution. Only rules and closets and traps for the freaks.
I met queens who were captured in the 60s and forced into
labor camps to get "fixed." Riiight. Fundamentalists do
the same shit everywhere, no?



Funny. The woman I was going to become has been with me all along. She was there when I got my national draft notice from the army. Ms. Thing took charge of the situation right away and saved my life.



Ridiculous. Bad for me.
Very bad for the army.
Bad for the march
of the revolution.



I'll have to go

deep into the closet

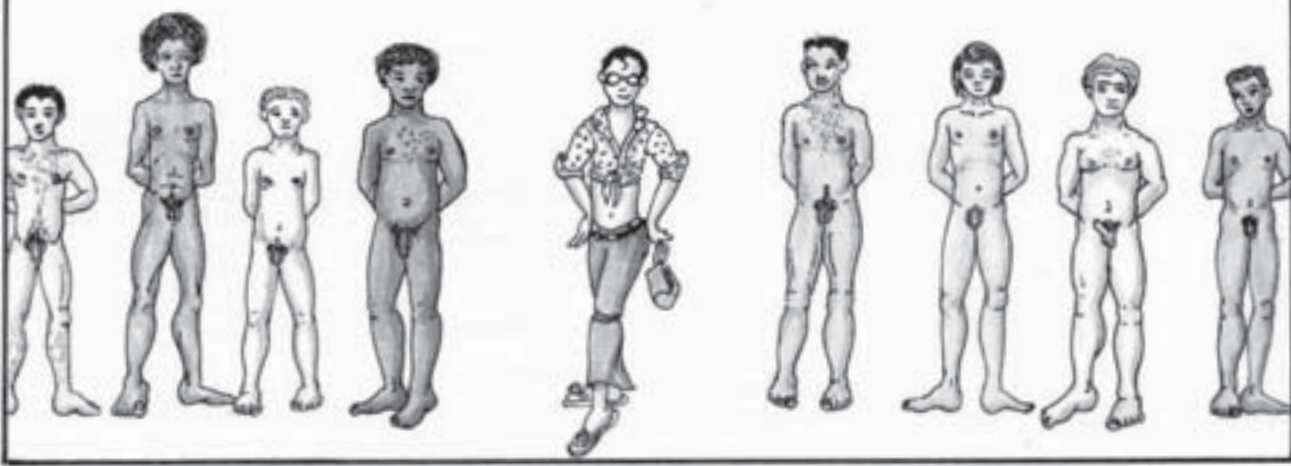
and find the perfect military ensemble.



REMOVE ALL CLOTHING FOR THE PHYSICAL, AND WAIT TO BE CALLED.



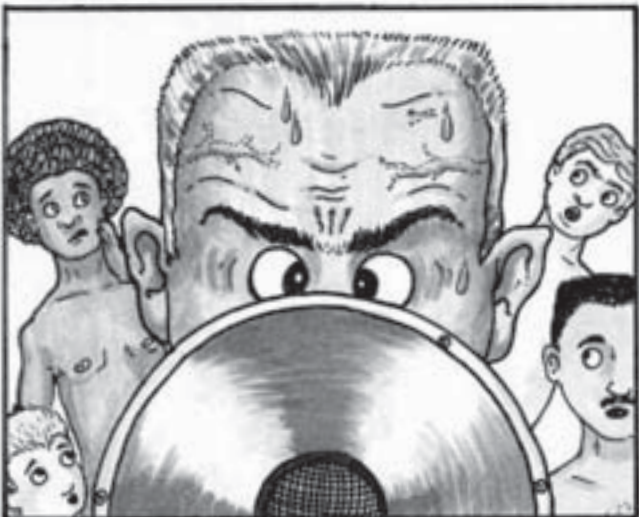
HEY YOU! MS. UNIVERSE!!!



**WHAT'S THE DAMNED DELAY?
GET NAKED NOW!!!**

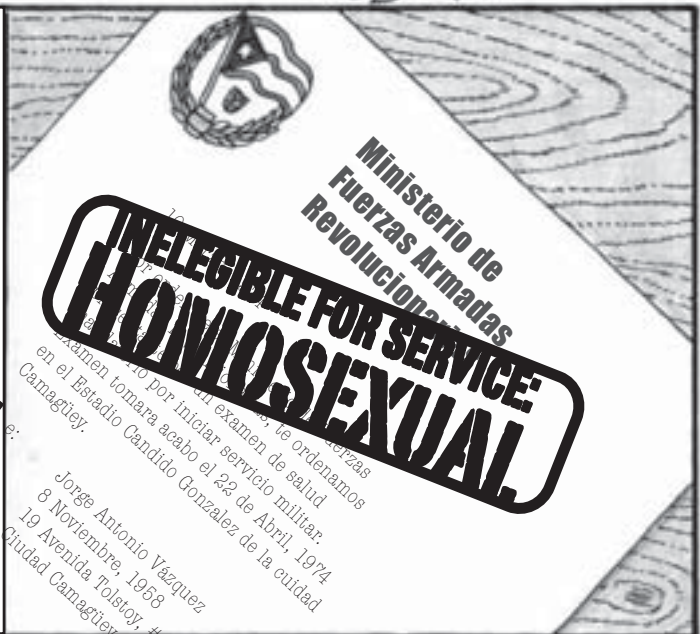
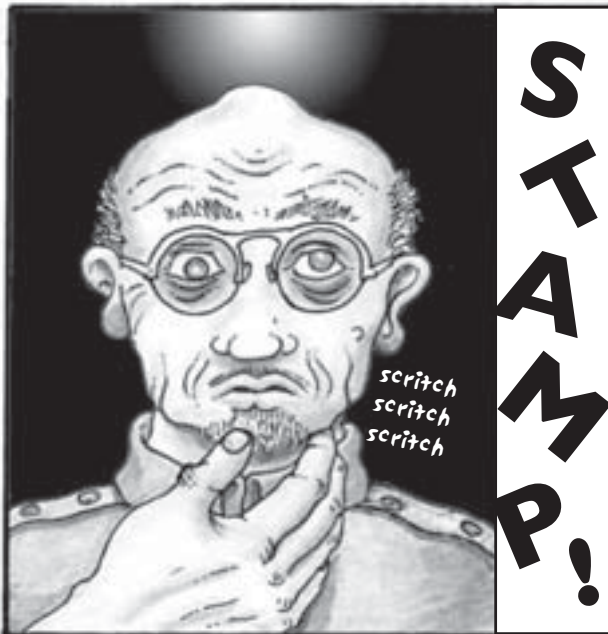
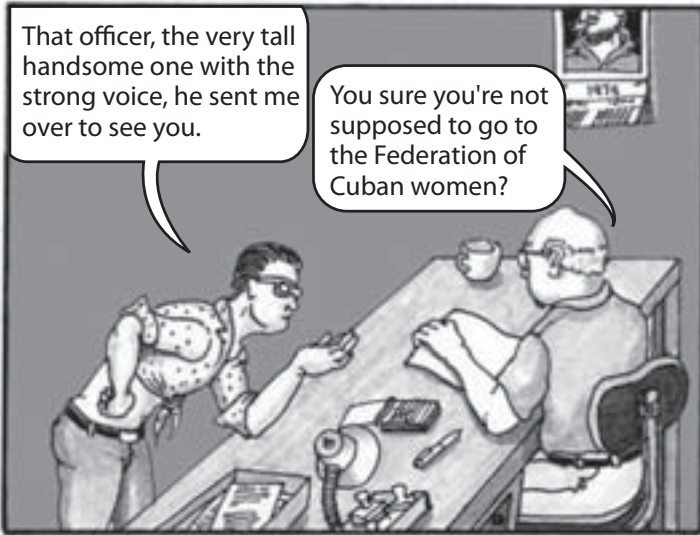


In front of boys?
You CAN'T be serious.

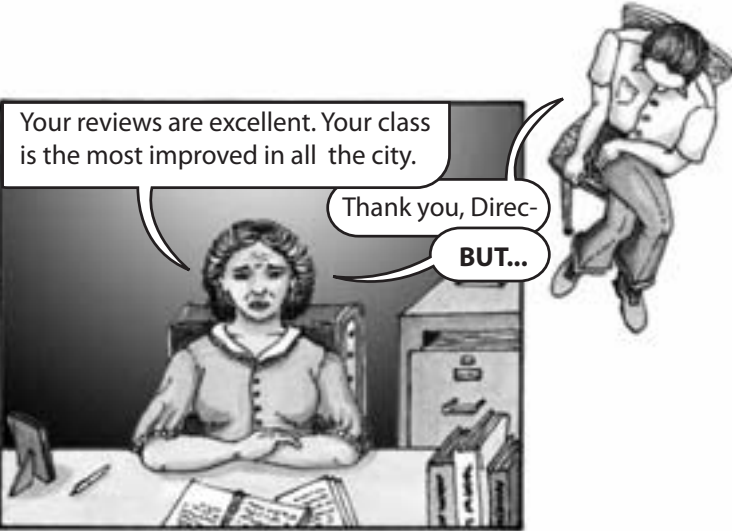
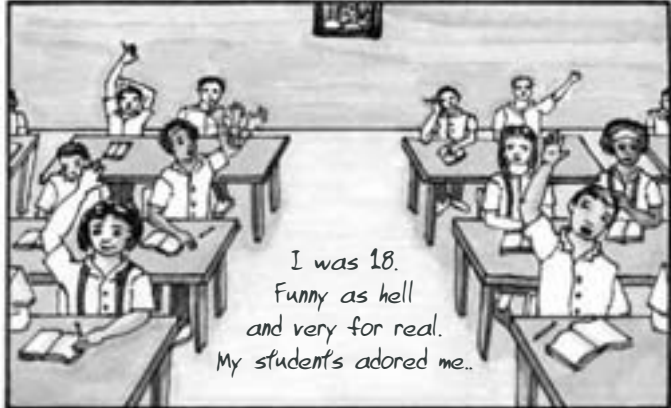


Get outta my face. Right now.
Get your candy ass over to the psychiatrist's office at the rear of the stadium.





One thing about the revolution, they were serious about education. I got to study at the Destacamento Pedagogico Manuel Escunze Domenech for my teaching degree. Baby, we worked like speed freaks. Thirteen months with no breaks, no vacations and you're supposed to learn the latest Russian and Cuban teaching ideas. Mama graduated and I didn't waste no time. I went to work right away.

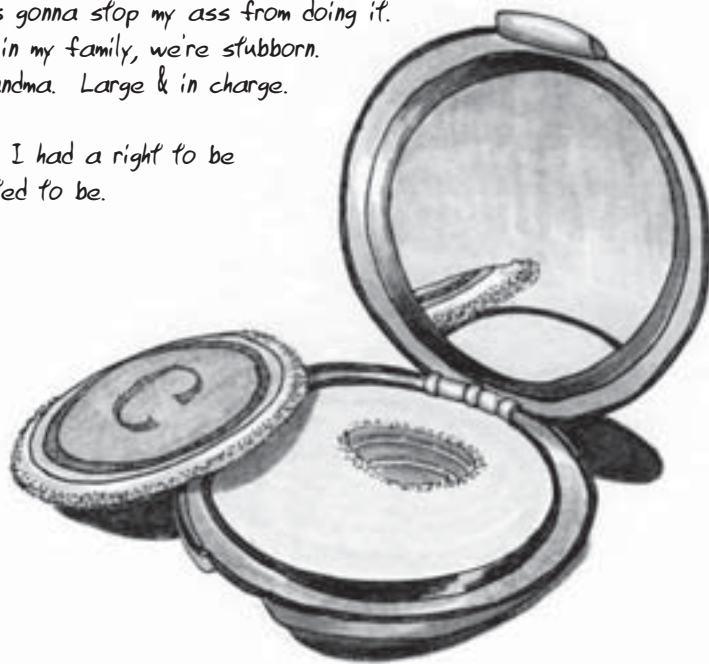


I quit. I had no choice.

No one ever forced me to wear makeup to school.
And no one was gonna stop my ass from doing it.
All the womens in my family, we're stubborn.
My mami, my grandma. Large & in charge.

I just felt like I had a right to be
whoever I wanted to be.

Punto.



Chapter Dos



BREAK THROUGH

My teaching career was over and out, child. But by law we had to work, so I took any job I could get. Drilling motors in a washing machine factory. Yeech. Supervising a labor crew of convicts. Fabulous! I also discovered the gay network of Camaguey.



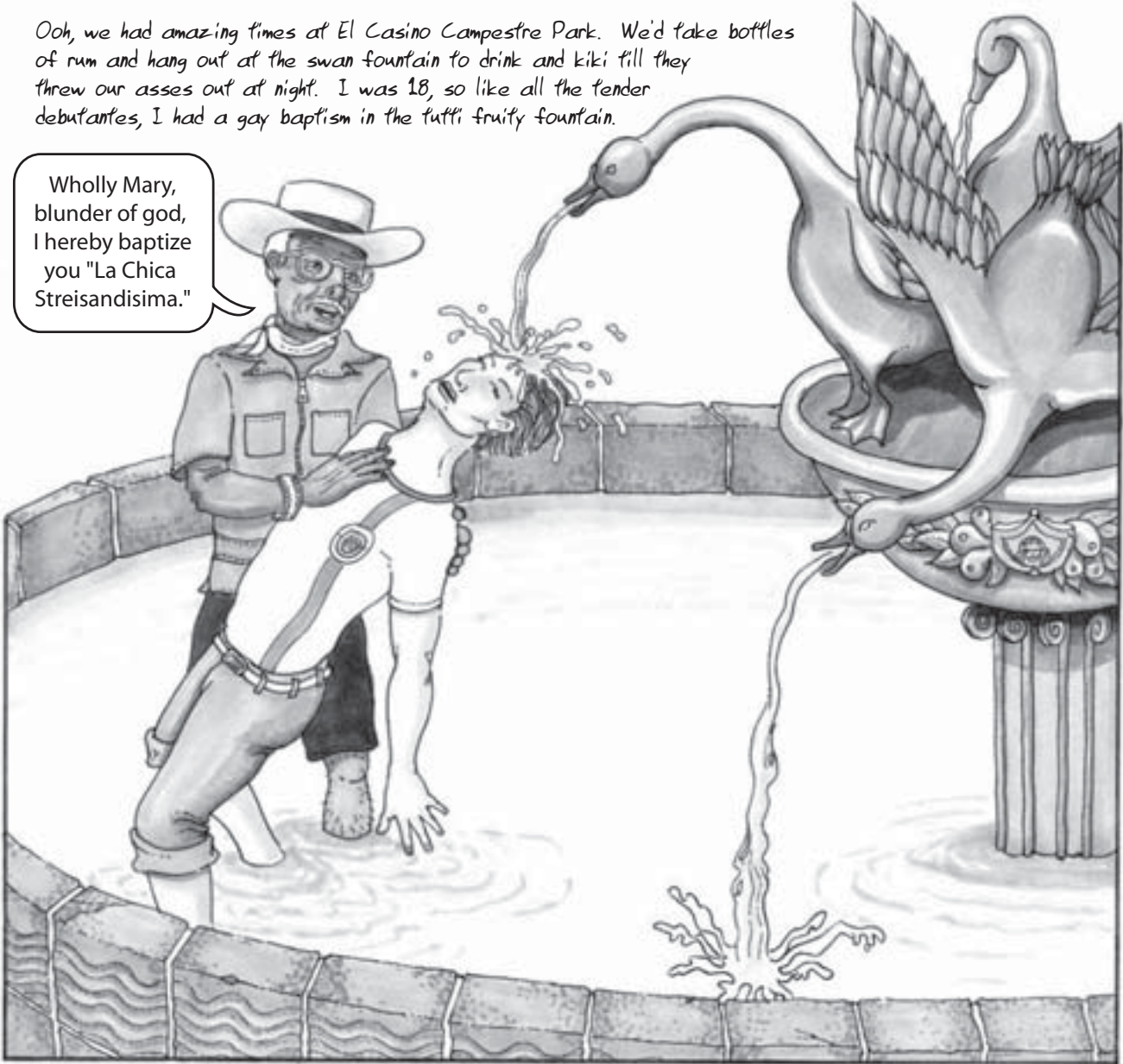
We'd go to the ballet. That was tight.



I found some crazy queens to rage with.

Ooh, we had amazing times at El Casino Campestre Park. We'd take bottles of rum and hang out at the swan fountain to drink and kiki till they threw our asses out at night. I was 18, so like all the tender debutantes, I had a gay baptism in the tutti fruity fountain.

Wholly Mary, blunder of god, I hereby baptize you "La Chica Streisandisima."



Best of all were the fantasy fashion shows in the park.

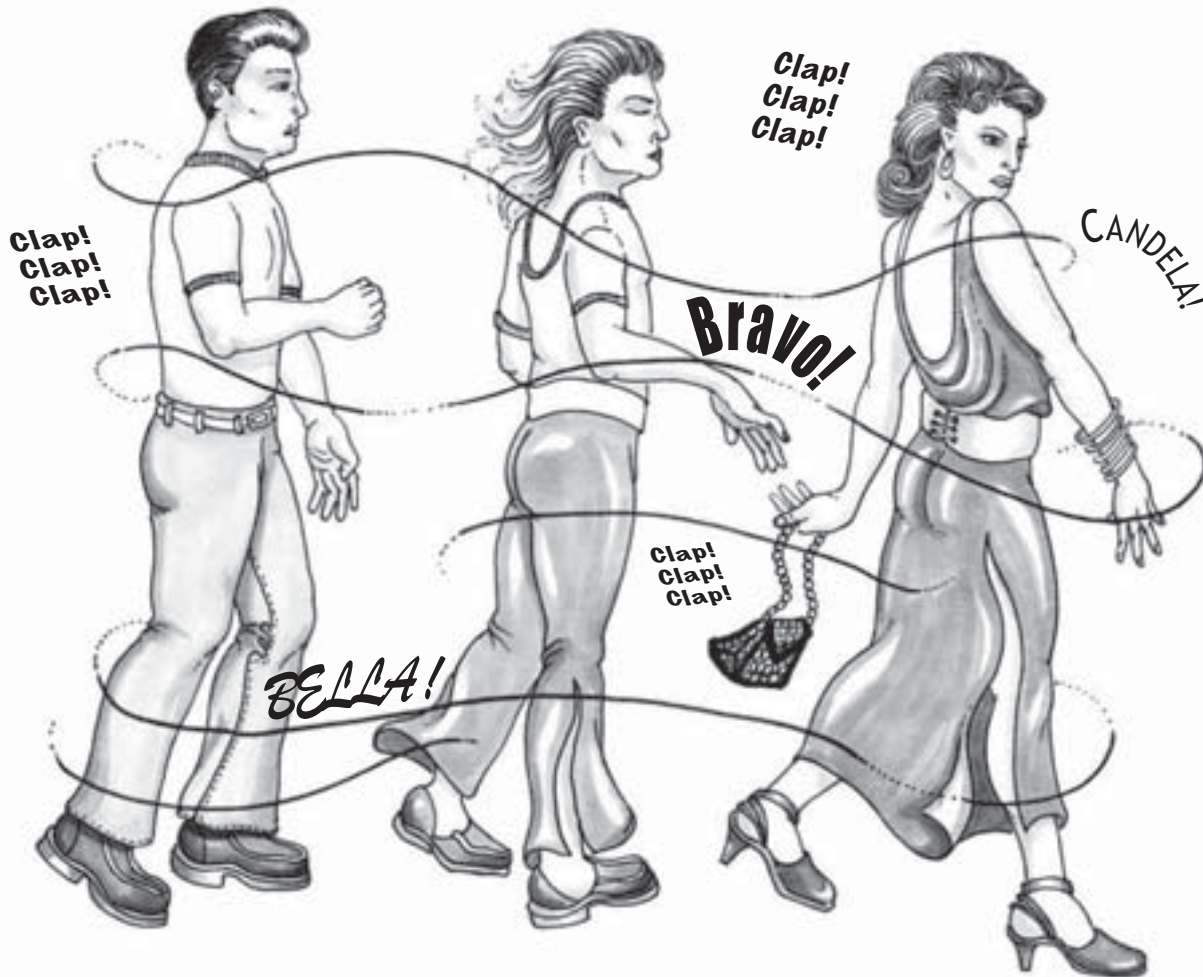


Welcome everyone, to *Cuba Catwalk '79!!*

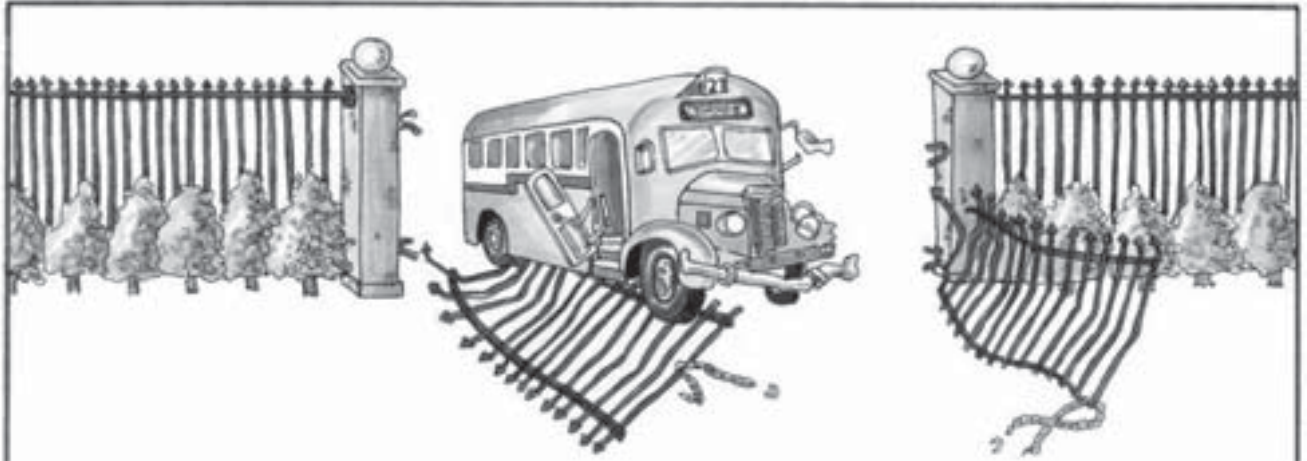
The fashion world has flocked to the fashion Mecca of Camagüey to premiere their lines with top models Blanca, Streisand & Lolo.



International mannequin STREISAND is fresh from a Milan photo shoot with Francesco SCAVULLO. HALSTON has concocted this slit-legged disco delight especially for jet set party girls like STREISAND. Platinum and pearls from TIFFANY'S complete the sexy look. Let's hear it for STREISAND!!!



Of course, I wasn't really wearing no high fashion. But in my mind, I WAS. It was so real with everybody cheering. Just for that moment, I was the girl with everything.



I would still be in Cuba, baptizing queens, but on April fourth of 1980, a bunch of Cubans hijacked a bus. They drove down Havana's 5th Avenue and crashed the bus into the gates of the Embassy of Peru to ask for asylum. Peru gave them asylum and Castro was furious, so he removed the guards from in front of the embassy and told Cubans they could go for asylum if they wanted. Castro didn't imagine that 10,800 Cubans would go and fill up the embassy, the gardens and even the tree branches to get asylum. With so many people up in there, the food ran low and people started to get sick. Total international scandal. President Carter at first said it was a Latin American problem, but Peru was too poor to accept all 10,000 broke-ass Cubans, so they asked the U.N. for help. Venezuela, Spain, Sweden, Belgium and other countries all took some refugees. Then Carter decided the USA would welcome any leftovers with "open arms."

Castro said, "I'm going to turn this shit against the U.S.A." He told island Cubans they could go to Mariel Harbor and leave. He told Miami Cubans to come in their boats and take their bitches home to the U.S.A. He even released some crazies, convicts and political prisoners so they could leave. Let Carter sort them out! Hah! Hundreds of Florida boats came to Mariel Harbor, ready to take refugees. Almost 125,000 men, women and children left their families, friends, jobs, classes and cells for Florida. They were called "Marielitos," just like the Harbor. I was one of them.

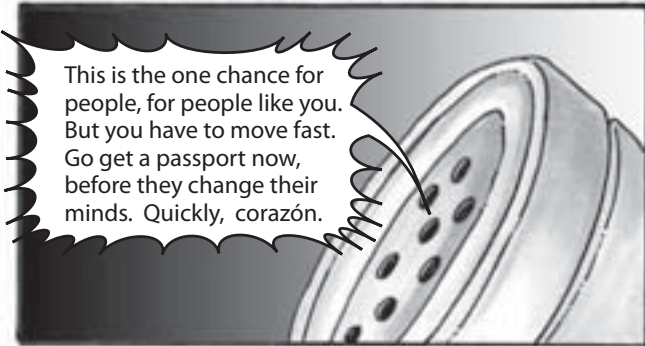


Some people in Cuba say that the day the Marielitos left was the day Cuba flushed the toilet.

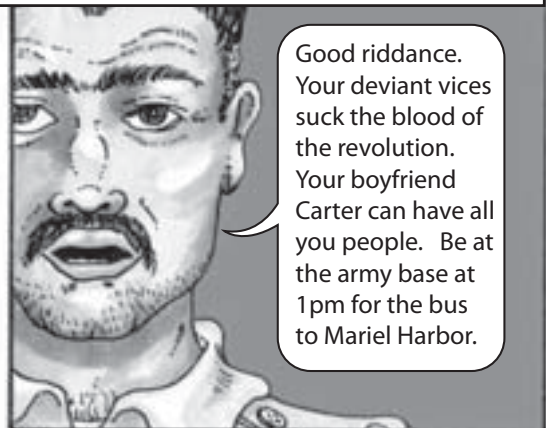
I say flush away, bitch.



The news of Fidel's announcement dropped like a bomb. My mother called as soon as she heard.

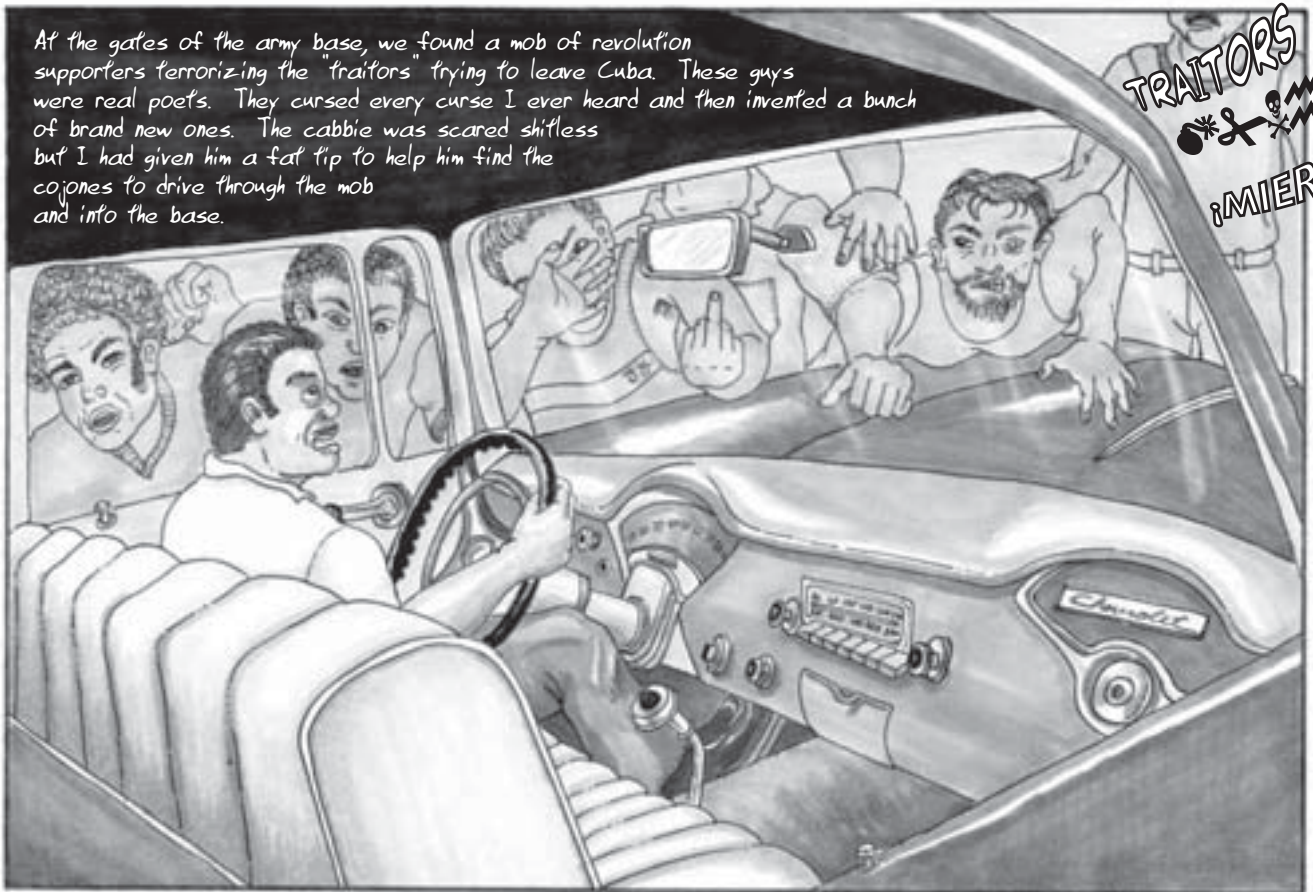


I went the next day, stepped up to the immigration officer and told him I was a fag and wanted to emigrate.





For my trip, mami gave me three kisses, one blessing, and a stack of pesos.



At the gates of the army base, we found a mob of revolution supporters terrorizing the "traitors" trying to leave Cuba. These guys were real poets. They cursed every curse I ever heard and then invented a bunch of brand new ones. The cabbie was scared shitless but I had given him a fat tip to help him find the cojones to drive through the mob and into the base.

TRAITORS
MIERDA



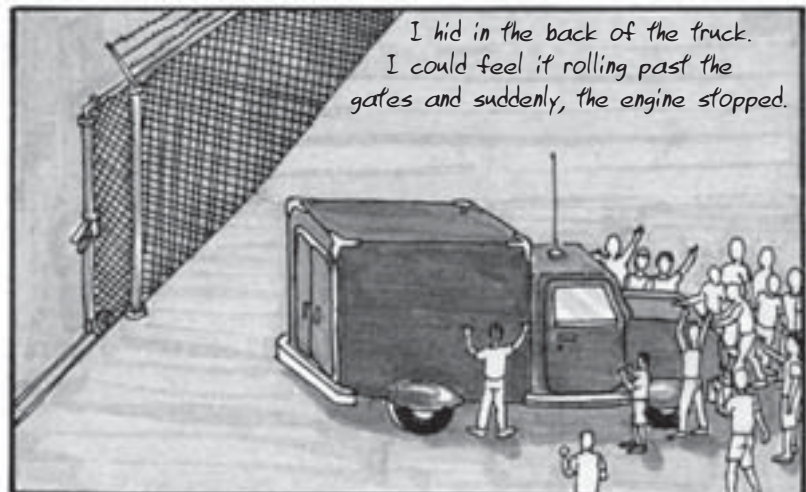
Inside, we found the bus stop & waited

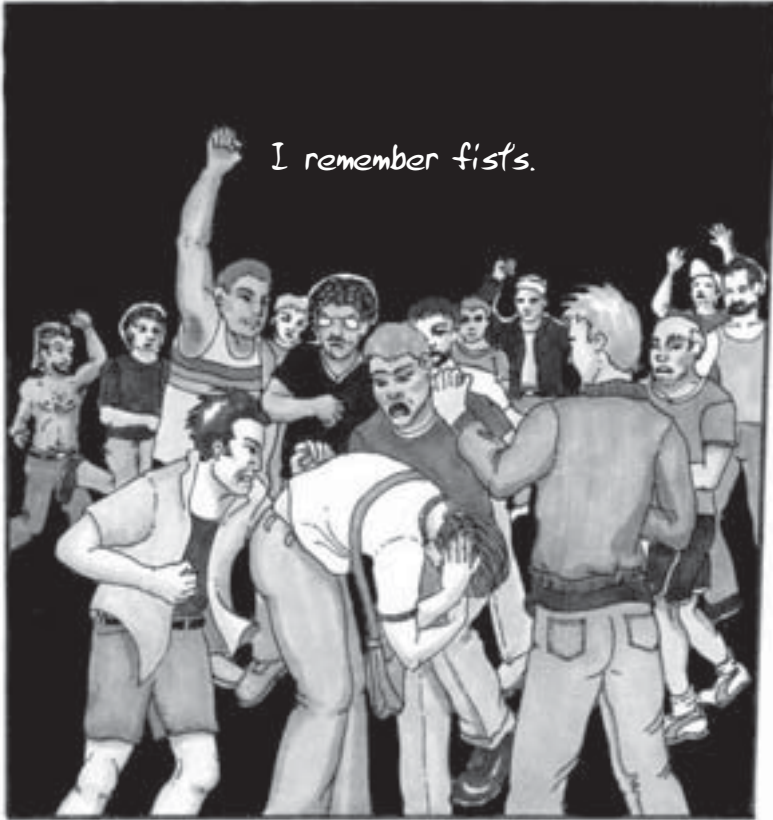


and waited . . .



and waited.

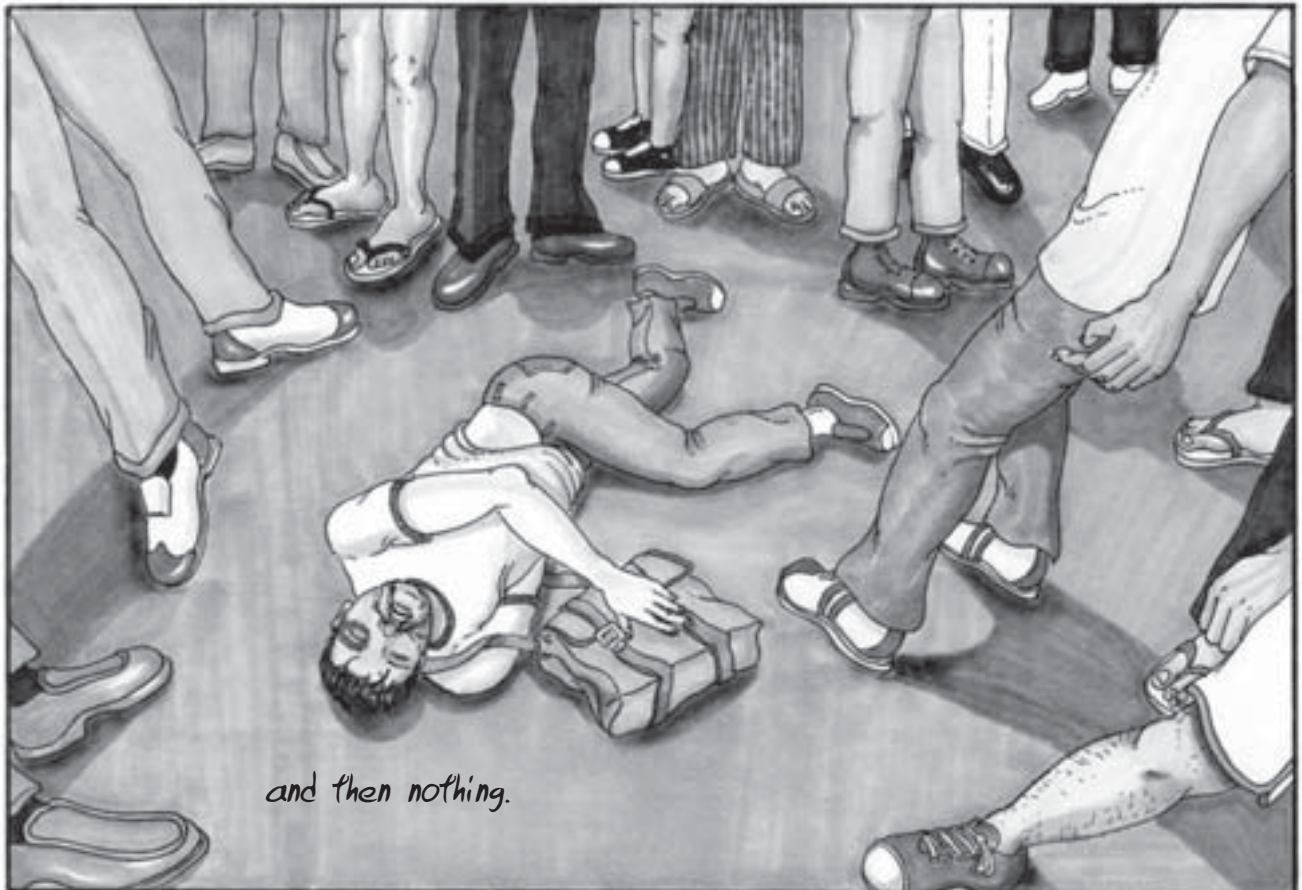




I remember fists.

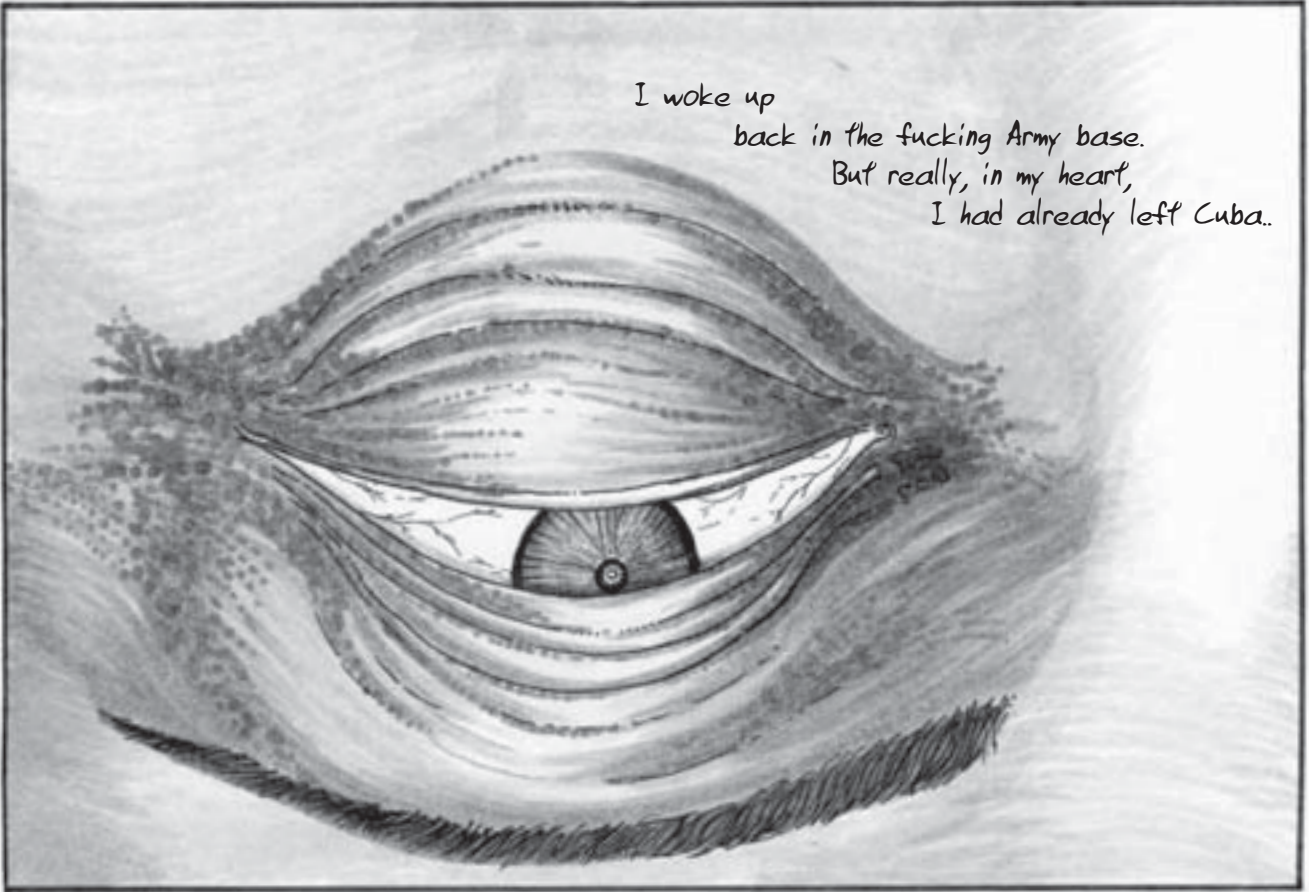


*I remember colors
exploding in my head . . .*



and then nothing.

I woke up
back in the fucking Army base.
But really, in my heart,
I had already left Cuba..



I boarded the 5 a.m. bus
and collapsed in the back.

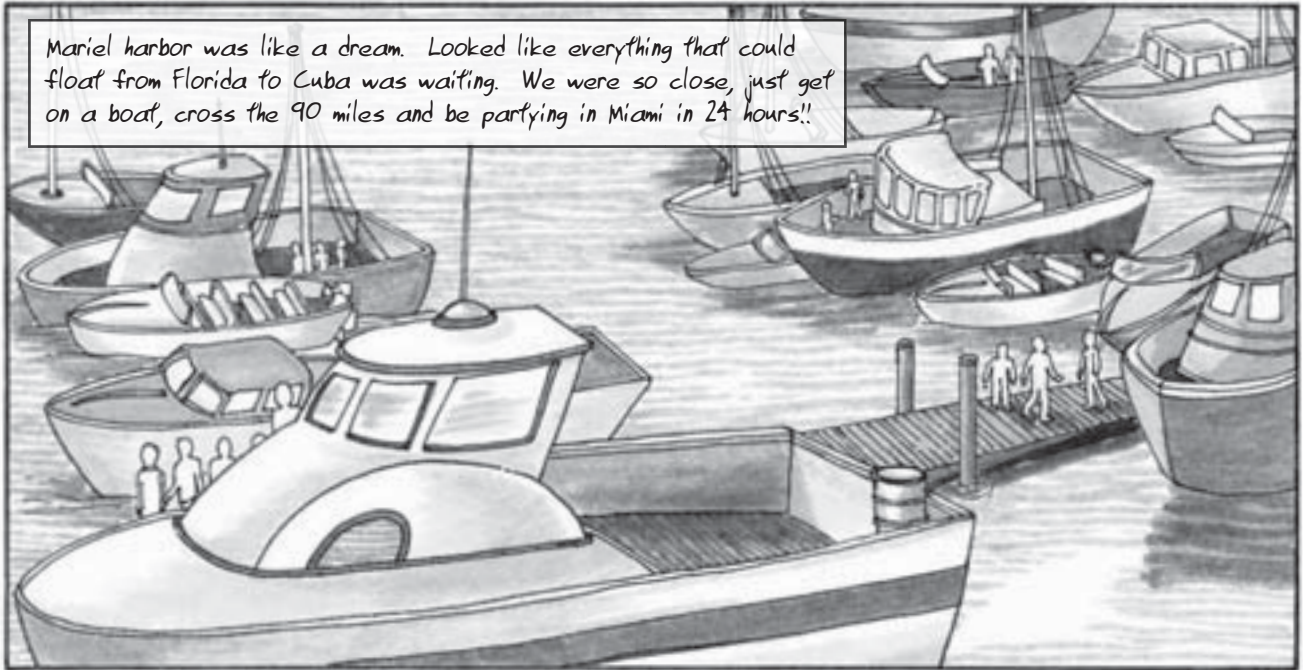


Halfway to Mariel, I grabbed
mami's stack of pesos.

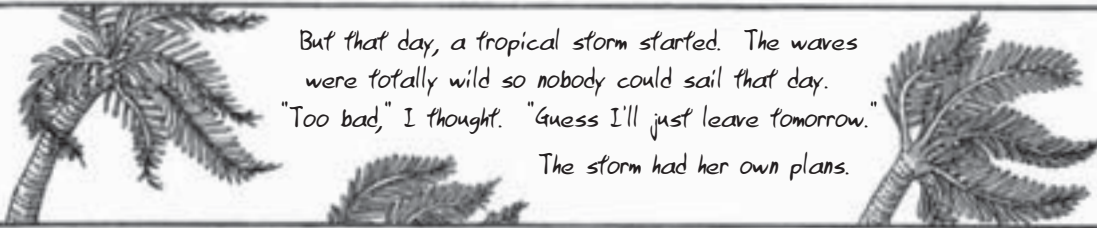




Maribel harbor was like a dream. Looked like everything that could float from Florida to Cuba was waiting. We were so close, just get on a boat, cross the 90 miles and be partying in Miami in 24 hours!!



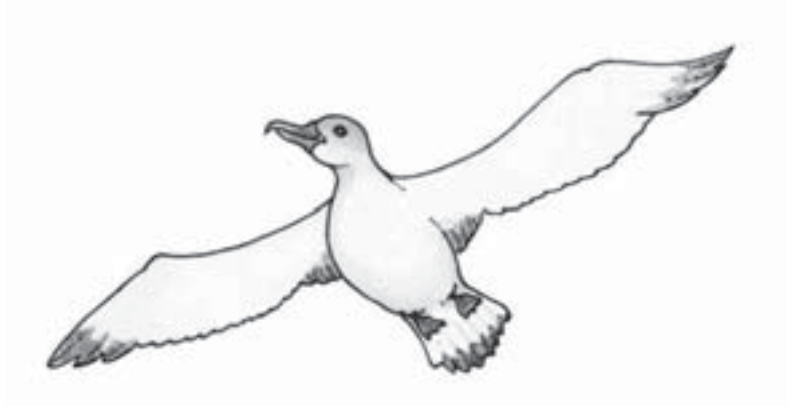
But that day, a tropical storm started. The waves were totally wild so nobody could sail that day. "Too bad," I thought. "Guess I'll just leave tomorrow." The storm had her own plans.



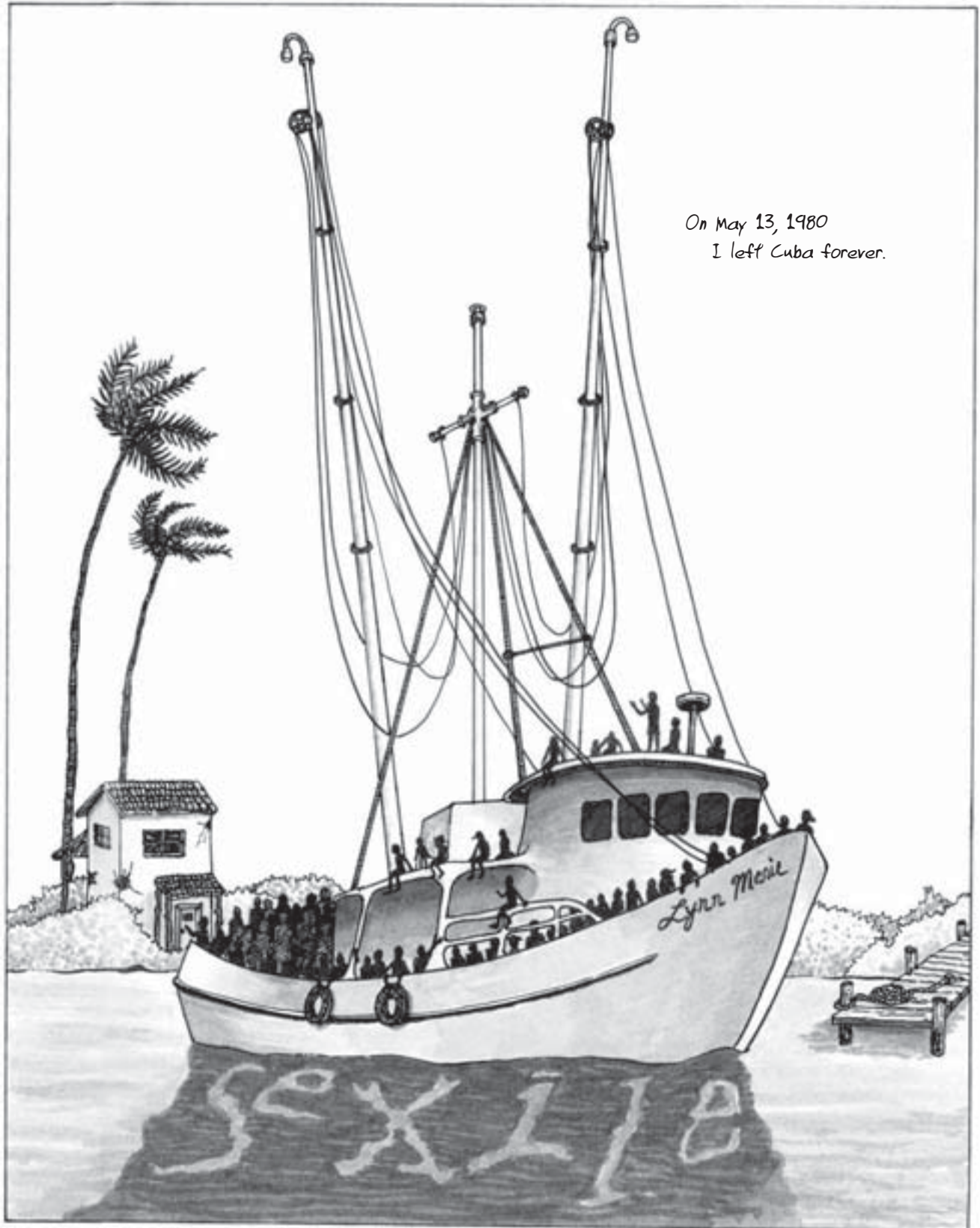
For eight eternal days, we waited on the beach. Mother Nature blasted our asses with 50 mph winds. Sand in my hair, my nose, my crack. Filthy, tired and lonely. But there was no going back. So I waited, and hoped for patience.



Chapter Tres



The Flight

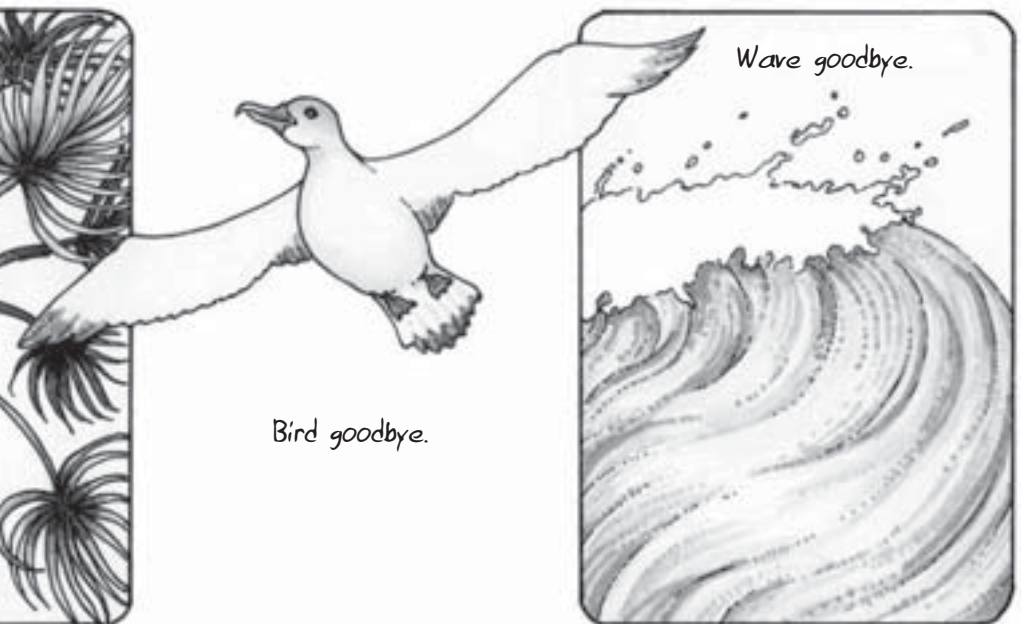




Everything was goodbye.

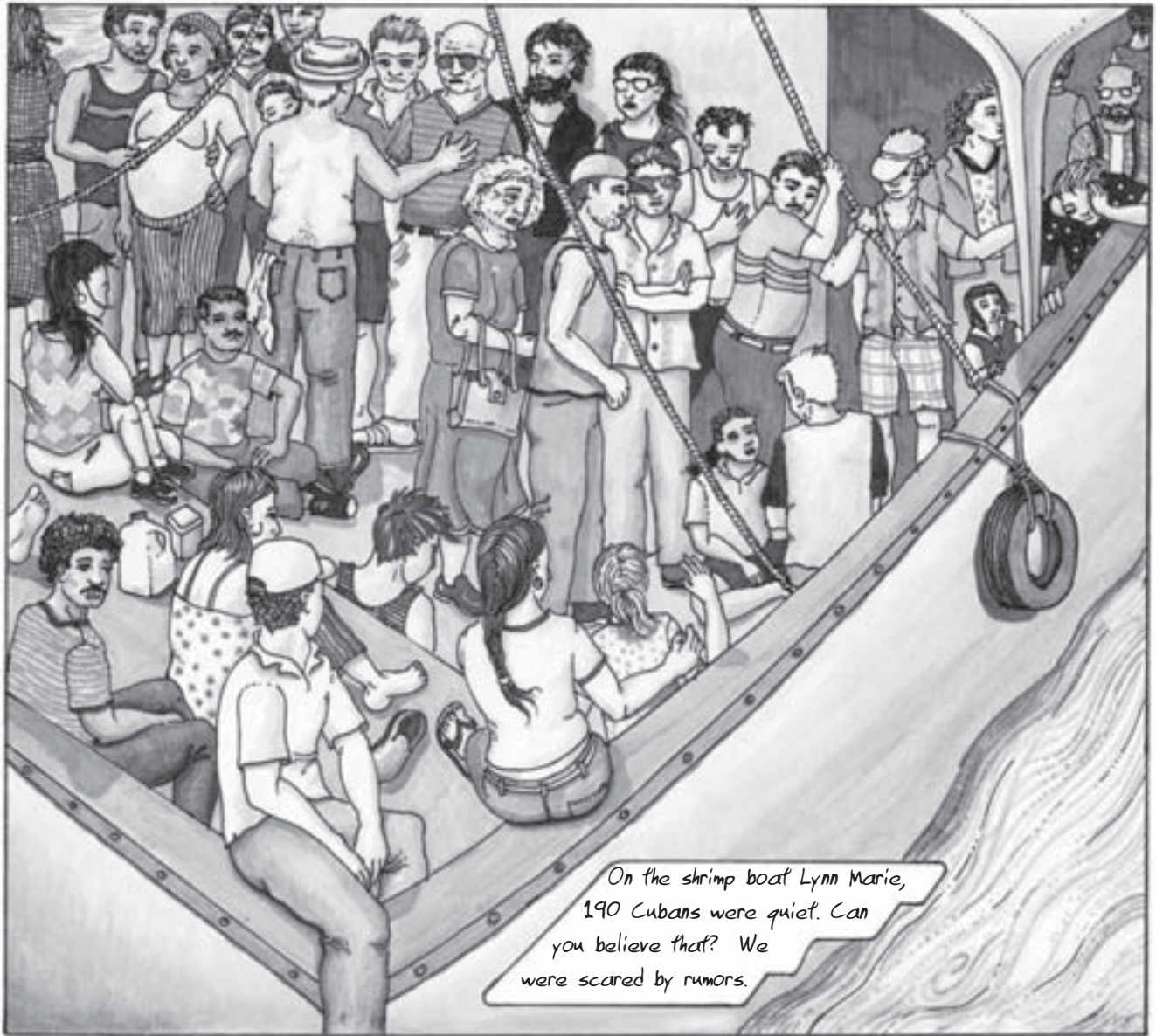


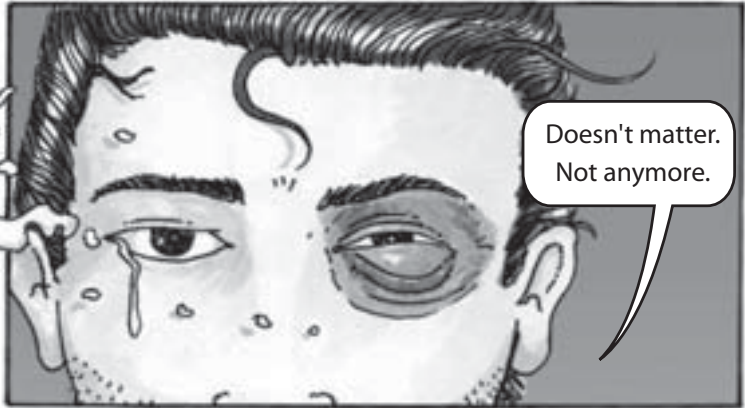
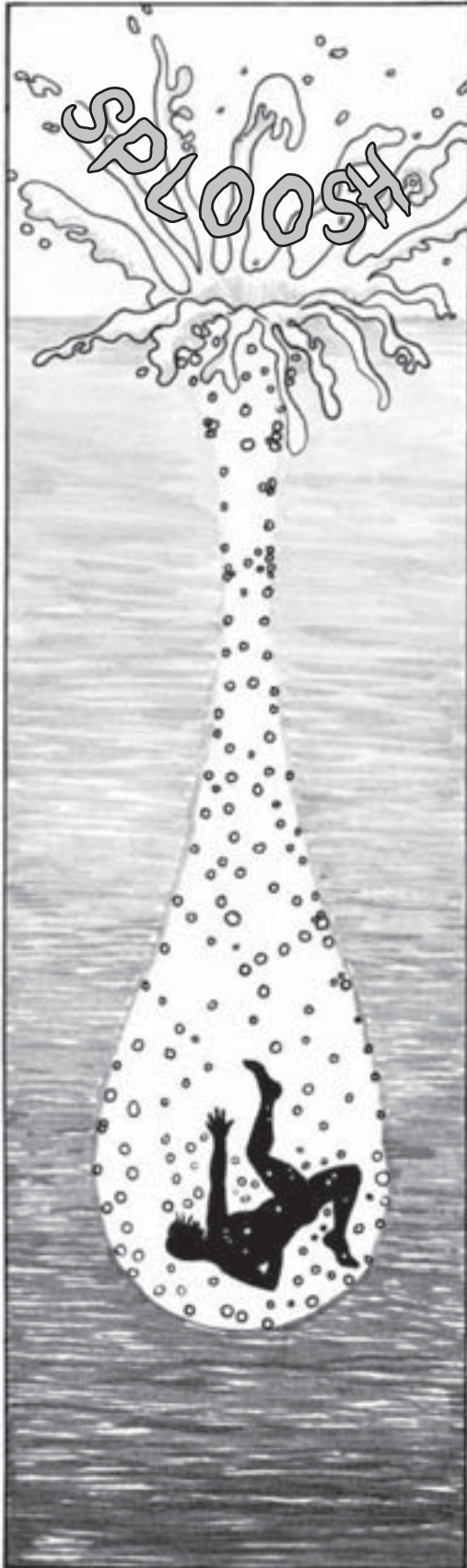
Trees
Goodbye.



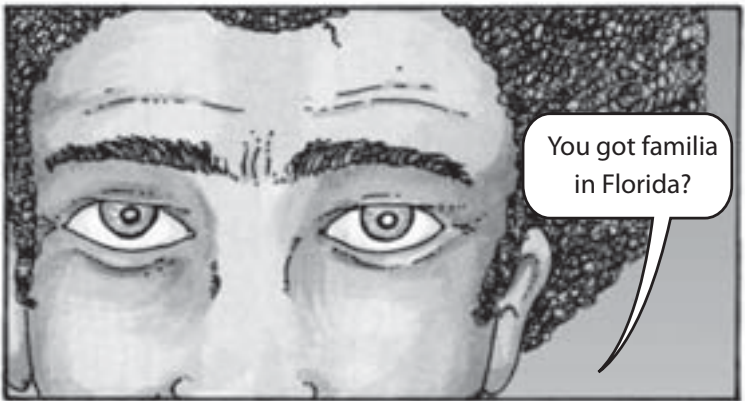
Bird goodbye.

Wave goodbye.

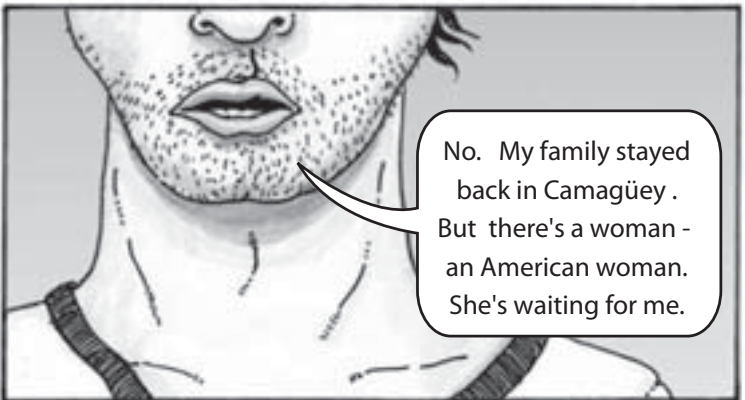




Doesn't matter.
Not anymore.



You got familia
in Florida?



No. My family stayed
back in Camagüey .
But there's a woman -
an American woman.
She's waiting for me.

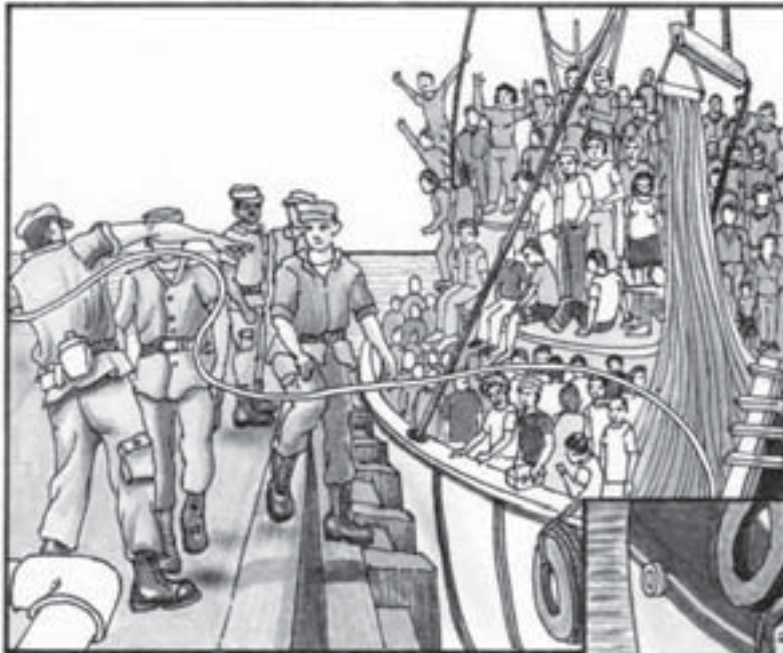


Aaaaaah.
She is very
beautiful,
I bet.



For now, I'll just call her "Beautiful."
Beautiful like everything I ever wanted
but never thought I would have.
You gonna be beautiful, girl.
Like revolution
in the flesh.
Like hope.





Arriving, I was so scared. I looked hard to the shore for a sign saying something American. I thought Castro had faked us out, sending the boat someplace in Cuba to kill us all. But then our boat came in and I saw the soldiers from close. Tall. Beefy like a motherfucker. They been eating real good all their life. No way was that place Cuba.

I made it.

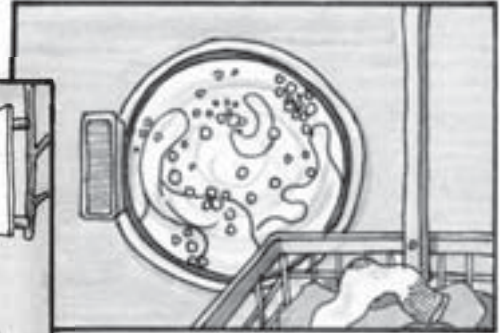


A line of fancy Cuban womens were waiting for us. We got Wrigley's Gum, rosaries and Coke. I asked one about her perfume. It was "Charlie." They gave us tiny plastic USA flags, bibles and the little "Welcome to America" book that showed you the poem to the flag and "Jose Can You See."

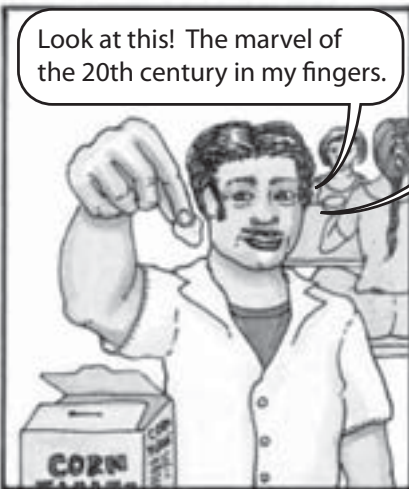
They sent us to an airplane garage. I never seen so many people in one building. It was exciting and scary to think how big Miami must be, then they told us we couldn't go to Miami yet. We had to go instead to a place called Arkansas to wait for a sponsor who can give us a place to stay. Fuck.



Fort Chaffee was a huge old army training camp. Seven thousand acres. Over five hundred buildings. We couldn't leave, so really it was a prison, but a super cute prison. It had churches, paved roads, trees, all the food you could eat and a million things we didn't even know we needed. Not Miami, but not bad.



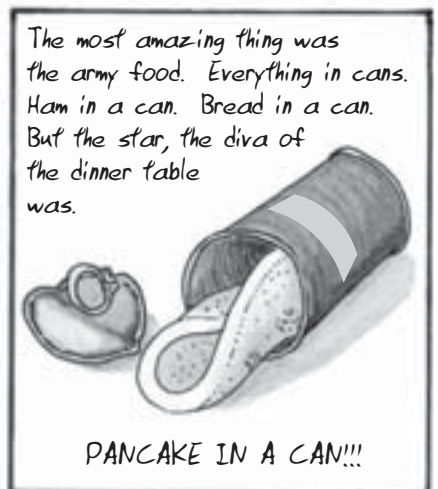
By the time we arrived at Fort Chaffee, it was late. They had already served the hot dinner, so we got cold breakfast food. At that moment, I began to touch capitalism for real. Dinner was like a magic show.



Look at this! The marvel of the 20th century in my fingers.

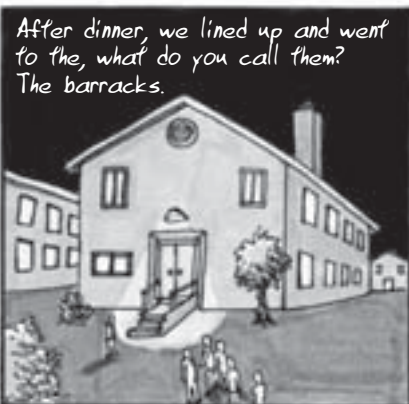


It's corn. It's flaked. It's a corn flake. They FLAKE CORN.



The most amazing thing was the army food. Everything in cans. Ham in a can. Bread in a can. But the star, the diva of the dinner table was.

PANCAKE IN A CAN!!!



After dinner, we lined up and went to the, what do you call them? The barracks.



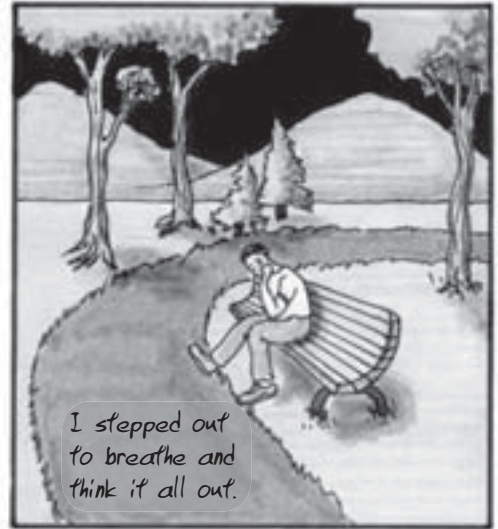
Bienveneedoze. Y'all come in and find yourself a bed, and we'll see you in the morning.



Everyone ran and got a bed.



Every place I looked,
the beds were taken.



I stepped out
to breathe and
think it all out.



No country.
No family.
No bed.



Not the end
of the world. . . .



Right?



Hey, mami.



What's the matter?
Why's that nice
face so sad tonight?

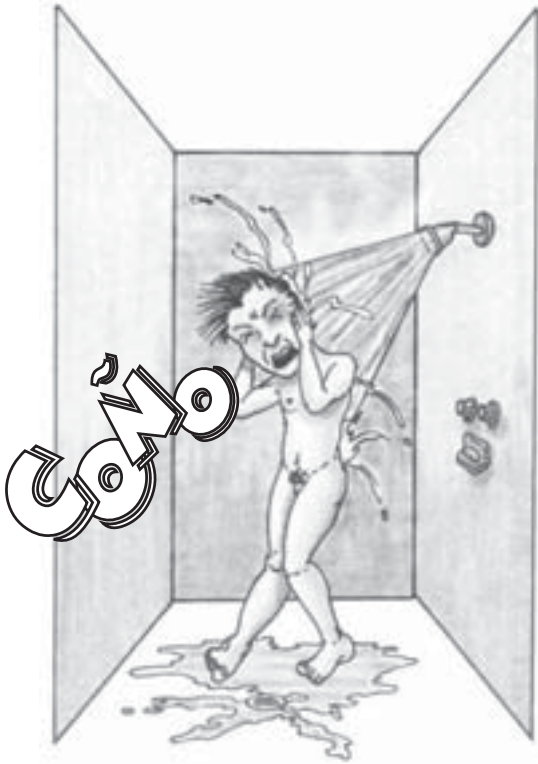


Believe it or not, this is your lucky day! I'm Luis and I'm from Havana. I've been here a month and I speak a little English, so they made me the barracks czar. I don't sleep with the others. I have two private rooms. Very nice. Private shower too.



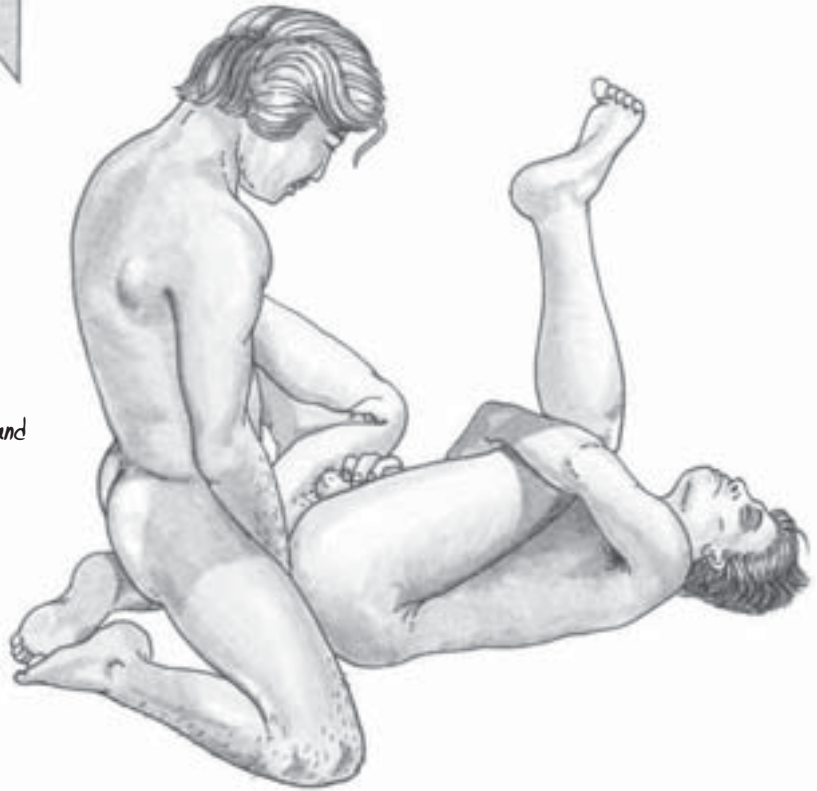
I was a wreck, child. Tore up, beat down, dirty, hungry, tired, but after just forty eight hours in the U.S.A, I had a papi and a private crib. All I needed was a poodle and a picket fence! I was so exhausted, I almost didn't realize he was seducing me, but then I realized and I thought, "I know this. It's beauty and sex getting me what I need." Different country, same exchange. Pussy power, baby, Pussy Power.





I took my first American shower and learned what the "H" on the handles stands for.

I got into bed and paid the rent.



I had a full belly, a hot(!) shower and a comfy bed.
I had an orgasm and a man holding me close.
I had this suspicion that I'd be okay.
I crashed like a junkie.

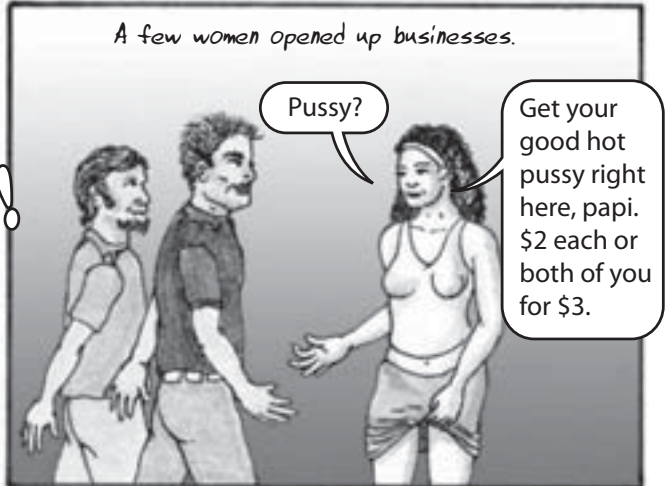


Fort Chaffee, was crazy. We were 14,000 Cubans guarded by hundreds of American soldiers and FBI agents, but at the same time, we were feeling free for the first time. All of the rules we lived with in Cuba were gone. Freedom was like a drug we didn't know how to take, and there was a lot of drama. Families split up. Some of the refugees were busted as spies.

Some couples showed signs of stress.

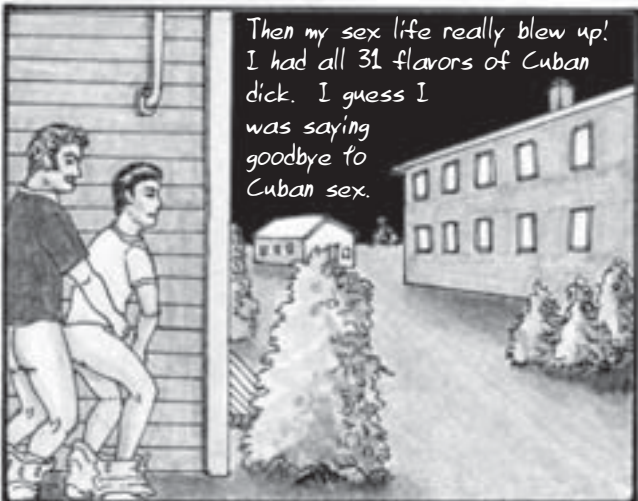


A few women opened up businesses.



My lover made friends with a kitchen employee and then escaped from the fort in the trunk of his car.

Then my sex life really blew up! I had all 31 flavors of Cuban dick. I guess I was saying goodbye to Cuban sex.



I stayed in Fort Chaffee for 75 days. They sent me away with \$110, all the donated clothes I could carry and a ticket to Los Angeles, where I got a gay Cuban sponsor who you won't believe.

Chapter Cuatro



La Victoria Americana

Rolando Victoria. That name is a sentence by itself for a reason, okay? He was the most bitchy, hilarious, faggoty faggot ever. I adored her. He opened his home to me as a sponsor. Rolando was a nurse and he had been a nurse in the United States for twenty one years. He was my alcoholic Angel in America. I stayed with him rent-free for two years. Like a good Cuban mama, and he taught me the six commandments of living in the U.S.A.

I:
STARE NOT AT THE CROTCHES OF
MENFOLK. IT'S BAD MANNERS.

II:
A GOOD GARAGE SALE IS
A GIFT FROM HEAVEN.
DON'T WASTE IT.

III:
ALWAYS, ALWAYS PAY THE
RENT ON TIME.

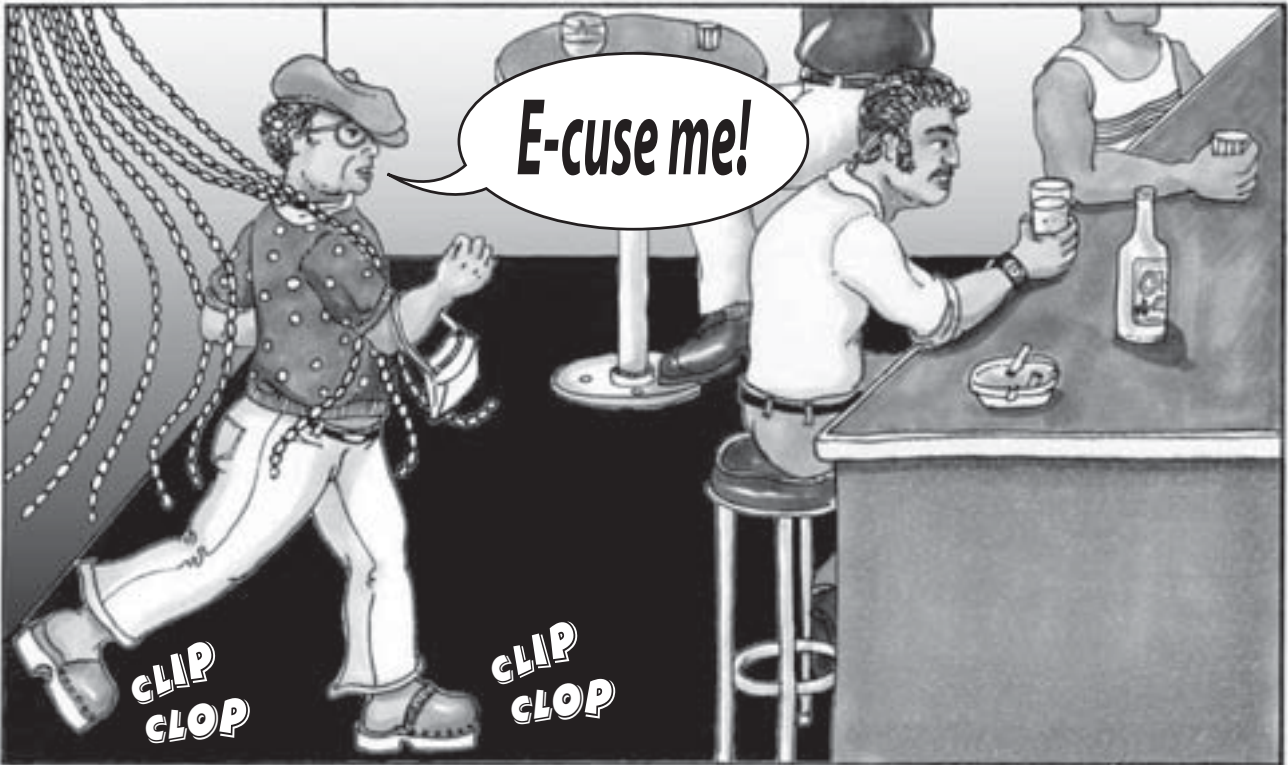
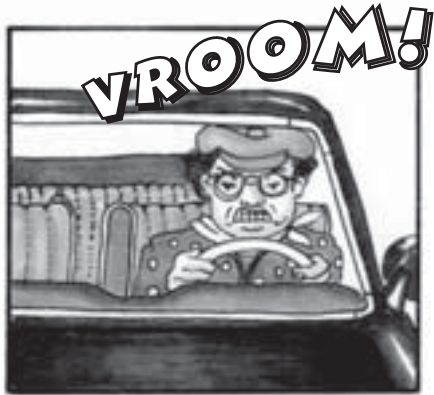
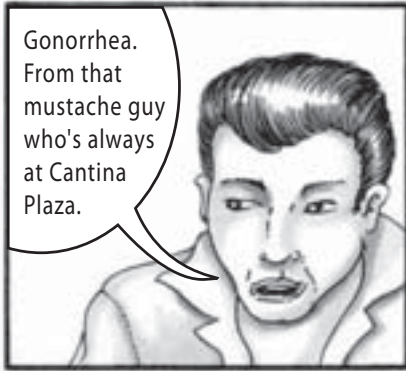
IV:
IN CUBA, WE LEARNED THAT GIVING
HEAD IS LOWLY. THIS IS NOT CUBA.

V:
LEARN ENGLISH.
YESTERDAY.

VI:
YOU ARE FOREVER CROWNED
BY THE PAIN OF EXILE.
GET USED TO IT, GIRL.



Living with Rolando was like living with a mother - if your mother was the Cuban queen of drama. By the spring of 1981, I was running around wild, enjoying the drugs and sex of queer life in Los Angeles. It all seemed like a great big game. That year, I was diagnosed with my first sexually transmitted disease. I mentioned it to Rolando and he went crazy.



After lecturing him about sexual hygiene and sexual disease courtesy, Rolando rushed back home and sat me down for my own STD sermon. It was early in 1981, and sexually transmitted diseases were a joke to the queer world. You got them, you went to the clinic and got meds and that was it. But Rolando had seen something hella serious.



From now on Chiclet, you use a condom **every time** you gonna fuck.

For gonorrhoea? You're joking, right?

It's not just gonorrhoea. At the clinic, we're starting to see something very scary.



Queens. Young queens. They're coming into the hospital sick. They get crazy exotic cancers and infections and then they die.

Horrible, painful deaths, *niña*. Their immune systems collapse and they die and we have no idea how to treat it or even what it is...



but I think it's a sexual disease. So you have to promise me you gonna use condoms every time from now on.



But what if I want to get pregnant and start my own little family?



This is not a joke, loca! Ju promise right now - condoms every time you fuck.



(Sigh)
Yes mother.

It's a total miracle that I obeyed and used condoms, because let me tell you straight up, I LOVE COCK. Just to say the word "cock" makes my mouth feel full. "Cock" is the only word as beautiful as "sista."

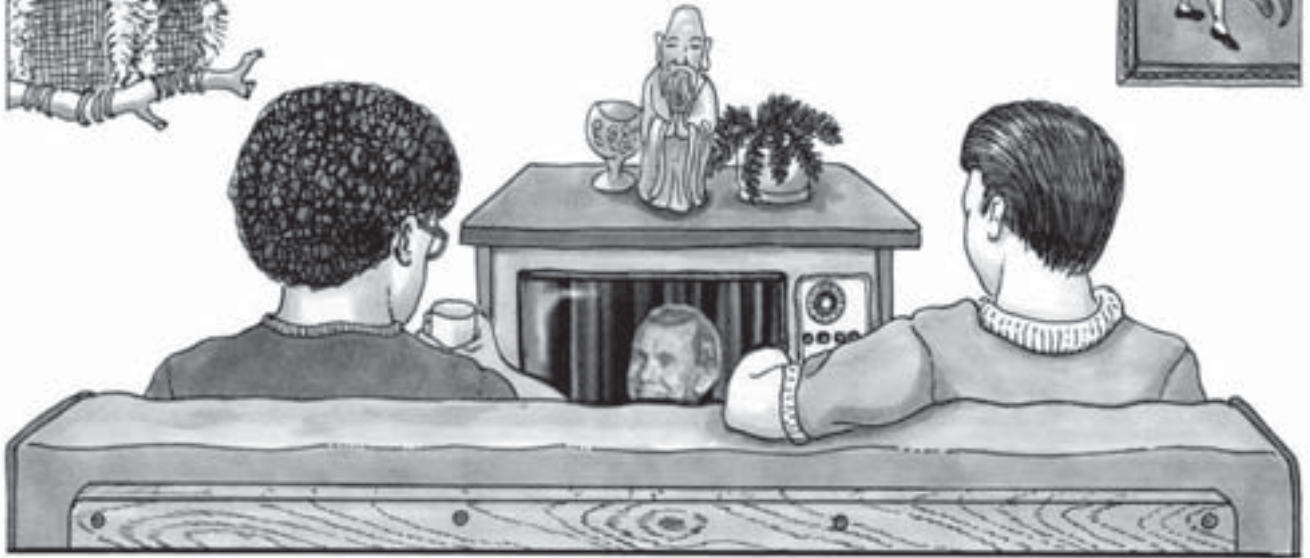
Putting latex between me and good cock was a crazy ass idea to me, negative to me, not sexy to me. I had come to California and I wanted my sexual freedom and Rolando was telling me to use condoms???

That queen was the only person in all the world who could convince me to use a condom. I listened and it saved my life. No drama. Just the truth.



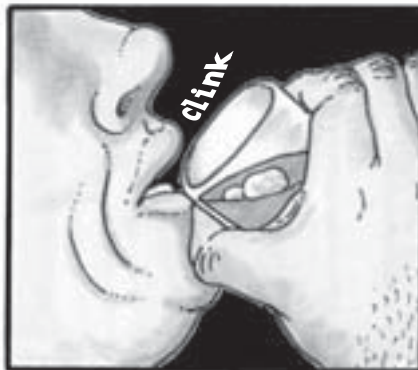


I remember the night we cried together. Rolando was drunk like a motherfucker on his daily half liter of vodka.



Then he said it . . .

23 years.



I haven't seen my own mother in 23 years...

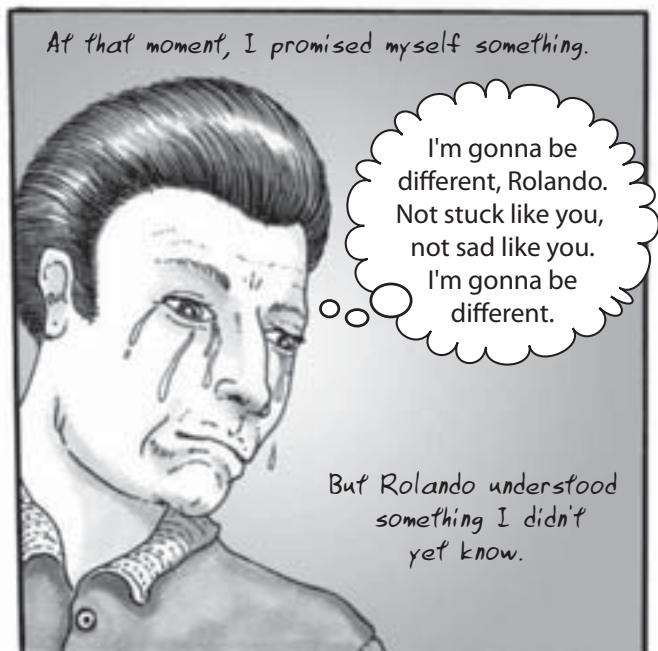


She's still alive, but stuck in Cuba, and I can't travel there.

I miss her like she's already dead.

I miss her every single day.

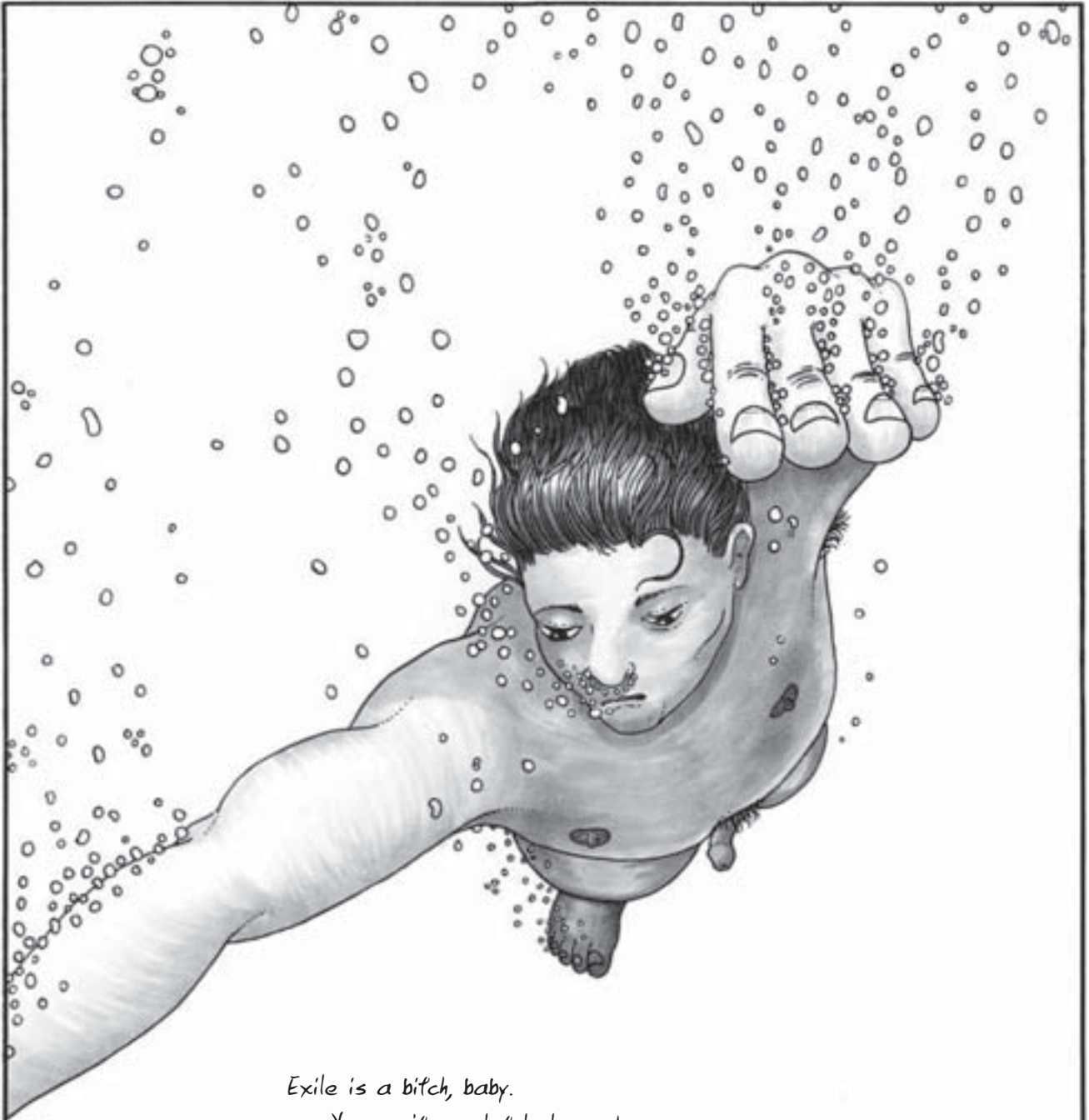
It never stops... this pain.



At that moment, I promised myself something.

I'm gonna be different, Rolando. Not stuck like you, not sad like you. I'm gonna be different.

But Rolando understood something I didn't yet know.



Exile is a bitch, baby.

You can't completely leave home.

You're always still arriving home.

Sometimes at night, you dream

of your tired, lonely body

swimming swimming swimming

and wondering

where the shore went.

Rolando eventually drank himself to death.

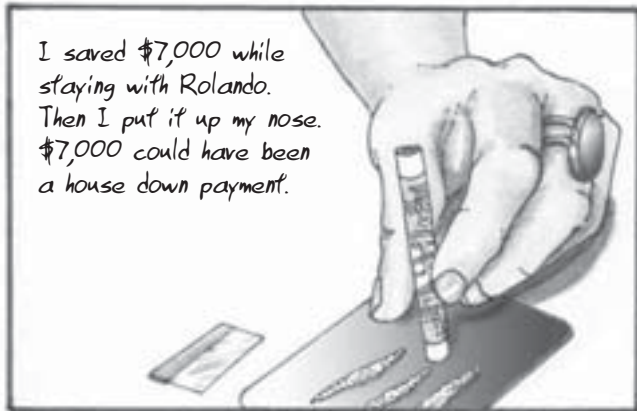
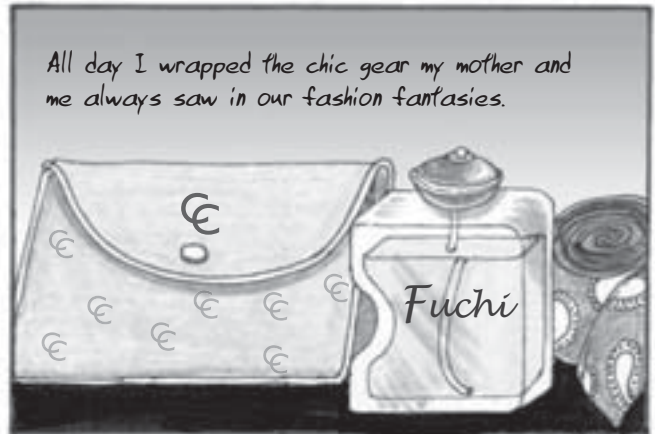
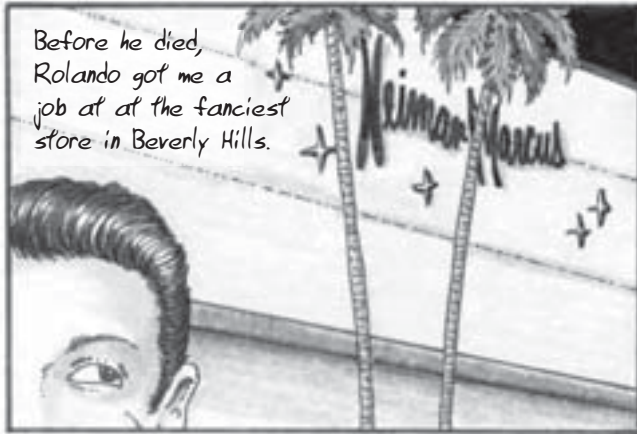
He left behind a big Lincoln full of empty vodka bottles.
He left a hole in my heart and he left me a Buddha.
I keep him on my bedroom altar to protect my fucking.
If I ever have a house fire, the Buddha comes with me.



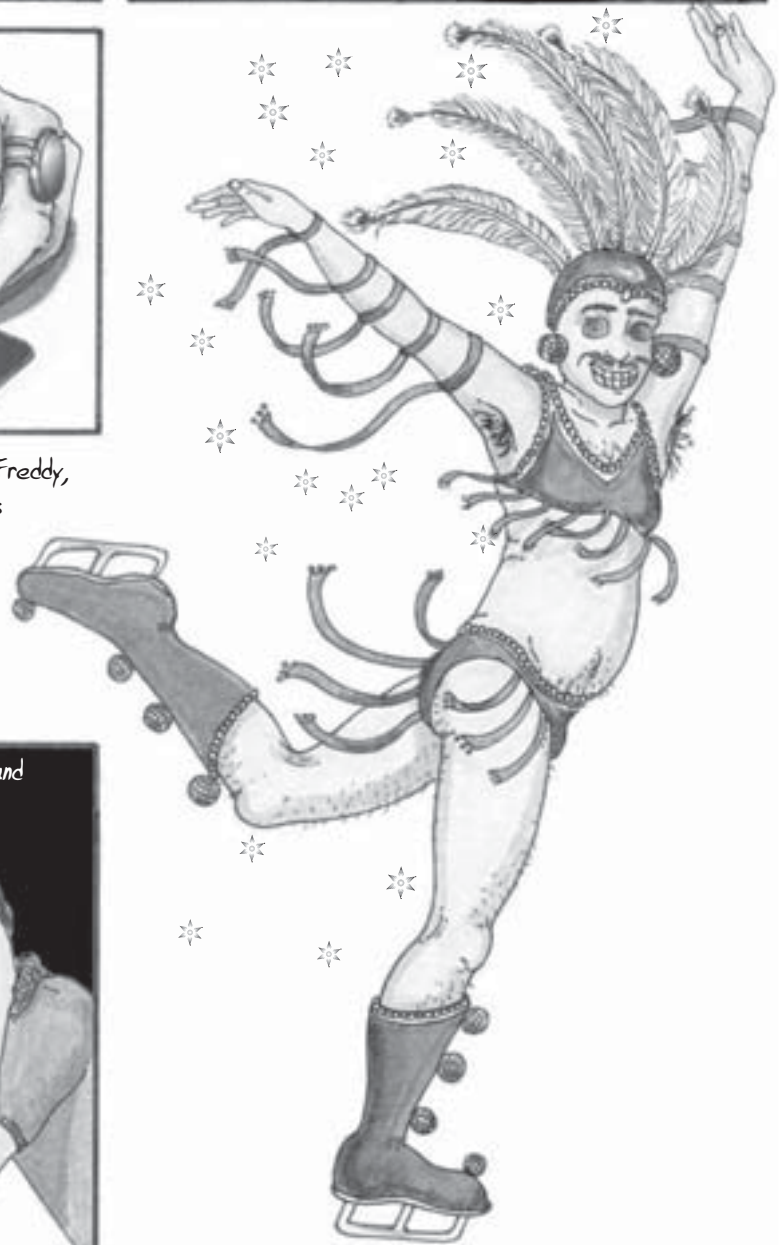
Chapter Cinco



Legal Tender



But no regrets. I had a fabulous time with Freddy, a designer for the Ice Capades. Freddy was my nightlife Fairy Godmother. He got me into all the best parties and clubs and taught me how to use drugs and meet boys. Things got messy. At work, I couldn't do my job and they fired me. No problem, right.



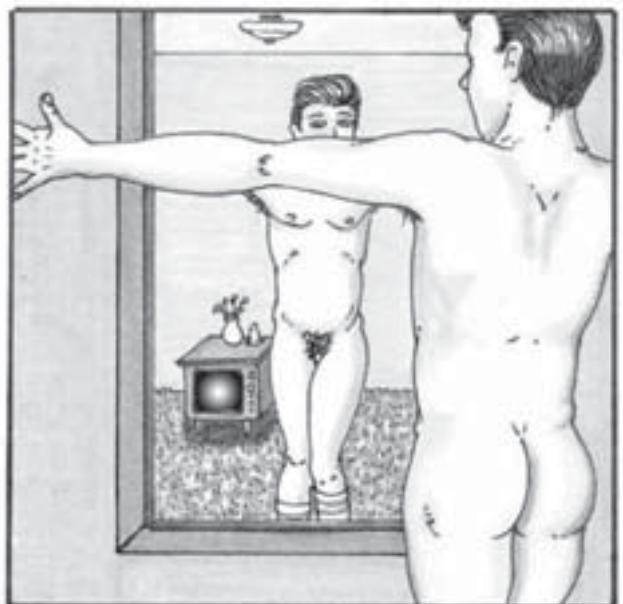
At Cha Cha Cha, we'd watch the transgenders. Their shows were magic.
They turned the shitty clubs into fabulous fairylands.

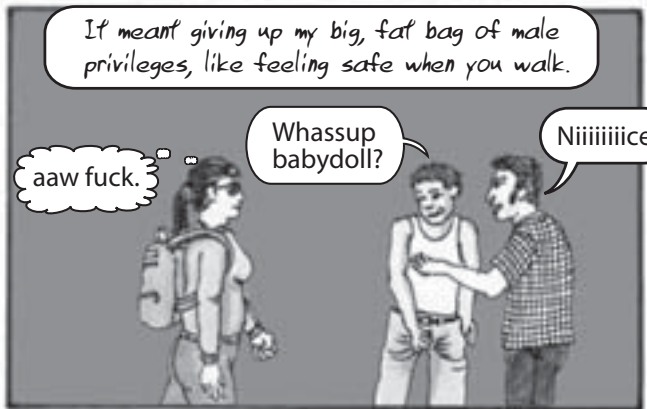
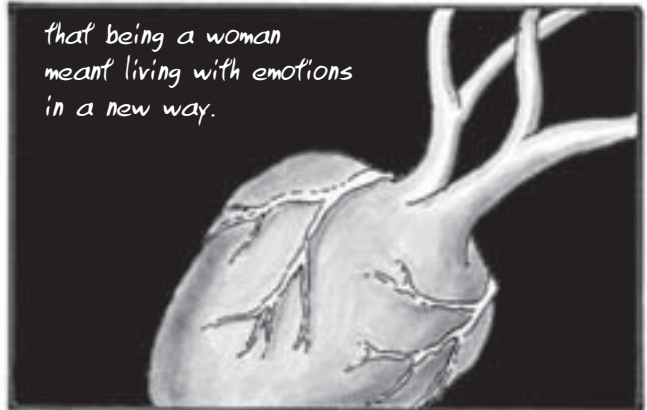
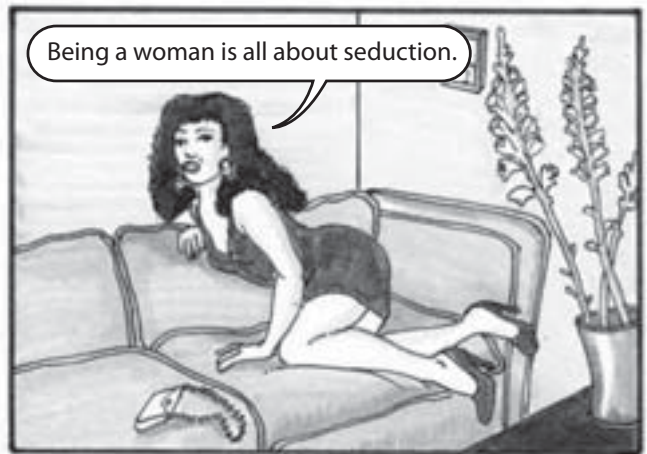


They were L.A. gorgeous. Hair, fit's, shoes,
men and more men. They were teachers too,
bringing HIV information to clubland.

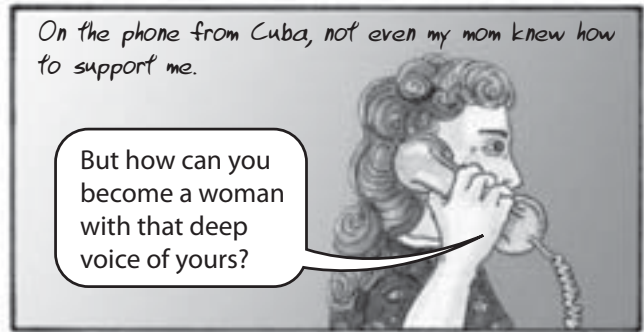
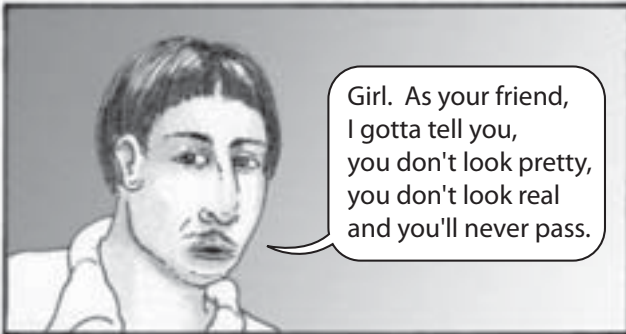


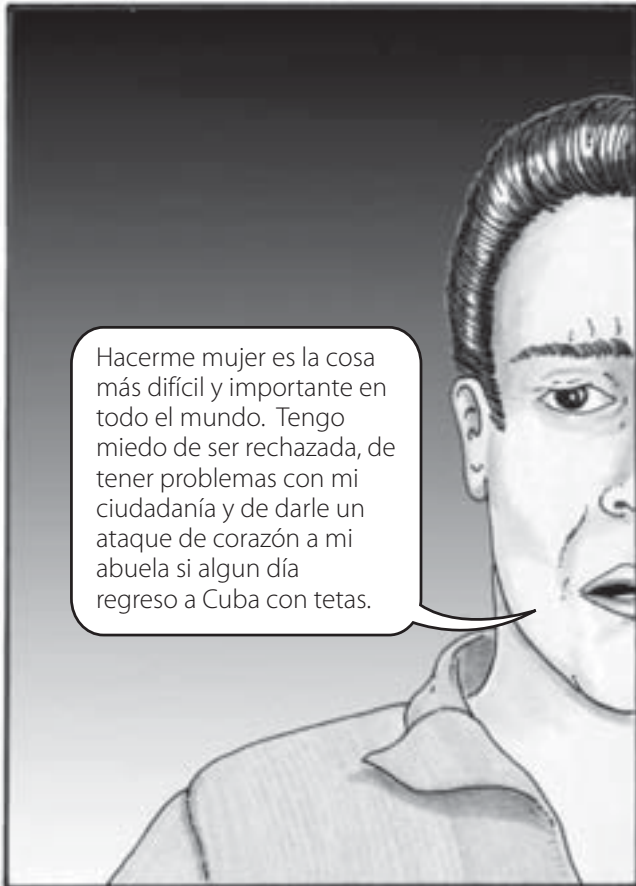
What's it like to be like
them, a beautiful girl?





I had hella gay friends. I always thought those queens were wild and open to all kinds of sexuality and gender, but that wasn't true. I got schooled about transphobia when I tried to tell them I was thinking about changing my gender and living as a woman.



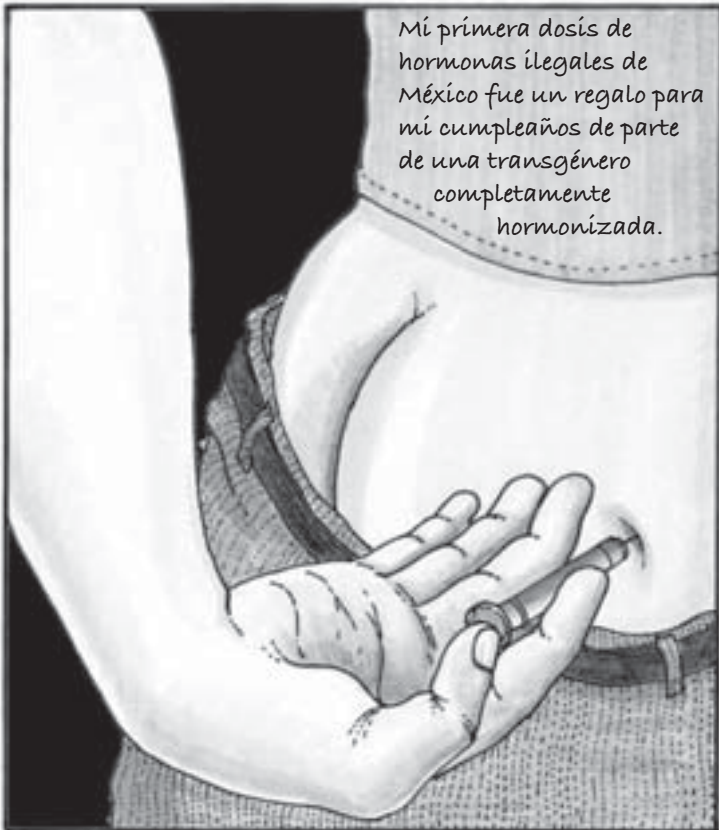


Hacerme mujer es la cosa más difícil y importante en todo el mundo. Tengo miedo de ser rechazada, de tener problemas con mi ciudadanía y de darle un ataque de corazón a mi abuela si algún día regreso a Cuba con tetas.



Así que, puta, me gustaría un poquito de comprensión con esto. Tú no tienes que apoyarme cuando me estoy haciendo mujer, pero si no puedes estar junto a mí, necesitas salir de mi vida.

Tú decides.



Mi primera dosis de hormonas ilegales de México fue un regalo para mi cumpleaños de parte de una transgénero completamente hormonizada.



WOMANIZING

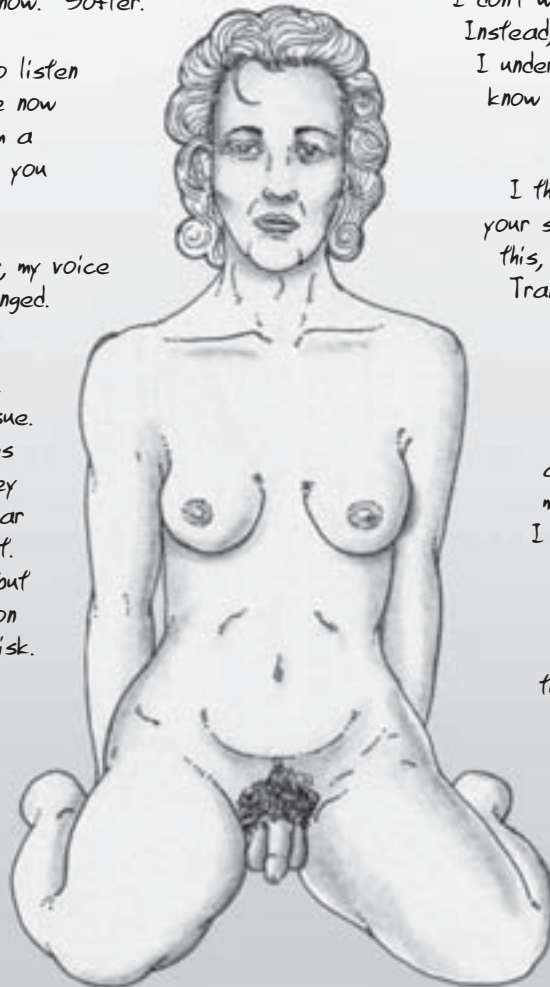
My whole body smells different now. Softer.

It's easier for me to listen as a woman because now I'm not trying to form a smart response while you are still talking.

No mother, my voice never changed.

My girls grew up in 3 months. You grow actual breast tissue. I could feel these hard lumps growing, my skin tearing. They were so tender I had to wear gordita tops from Lane Giant. I could get breast cancer, but I haven't seen no research on transgender breast cancer risk.

My balls just hang around. They don't produce much testosterone unless I go too long without a female hormone shot. I'm less aggressive in my ideas and actions. I don't turn people into sex objects the way I used to.



In violent or aggressive situations, I don't want to attack right away. Instead, I feel this clarity in my mind, I understand the situation, and I know how to handle it. Amazing.

I think that hormones preserve your skin. Don't tell them I said this, but some of those ancient Trannysaurus Wrecks from the seventies still look good.

It doesn't hurt to cry anymore. My heart is more tender, almost maternal. I feel your pain, child.

My body fat moved to all these interesting places. Curves, baby!

My feet began insisting on more and more cute strappy shoes. This is one of the most major mysteries of gender.

At first, the cock pain was horrible. I felt like my cock, the root of manhood, was resisting the hormones. Now my cock has become one emotional bitch. It only gets hard for guys I really like.

Makeup, drugs, clothes, hormones, food and a million other expenses. It was hard to keep up with the salary from my sewing work. I wasn't living rent free anymore, so mama needed to capitalize big time. I watched veteran transgenders and especially the Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles. They were geniuses at working shit out in underground economies. Labor for cash under the table, live where you can and get over even if you don't have no green card.

So I said "fuck it" and went and took hoochie pictures and then I put in an ad in the ho rag "Hollywood Connections" to see if I'd get some business.



The response was off the hook.



The John's wanted company, a partner for their fantasies.



The number one request was for the "surprise down south."

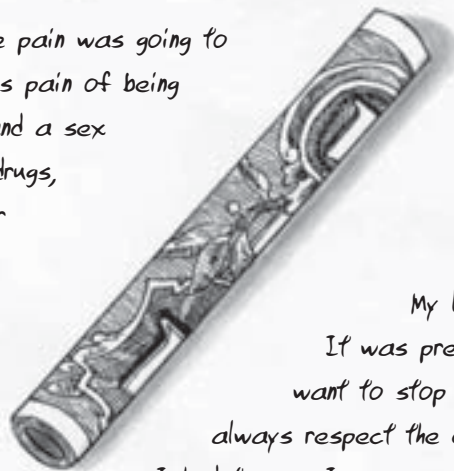


Whoring has some pretty good benefits.
First of all, ho hours are flexible.
You can schedule your tricks around your
Ricky Lake show, pilates, laundry,
teeth cleaning or whatever your thing is.
Some Johns were nice, a few hella sexy.
The main thing was the money. Mama figured out
a whole menu and prices for everything.
I suck you. Ching!
You suck me. Cha Ching!
You fuck me. Cha Cha Ching!
I fuck you. Cha Ching Bling Bling!!!
Some of my tricks wanted to pay extra for
fucking with no condoms. HELL NO.

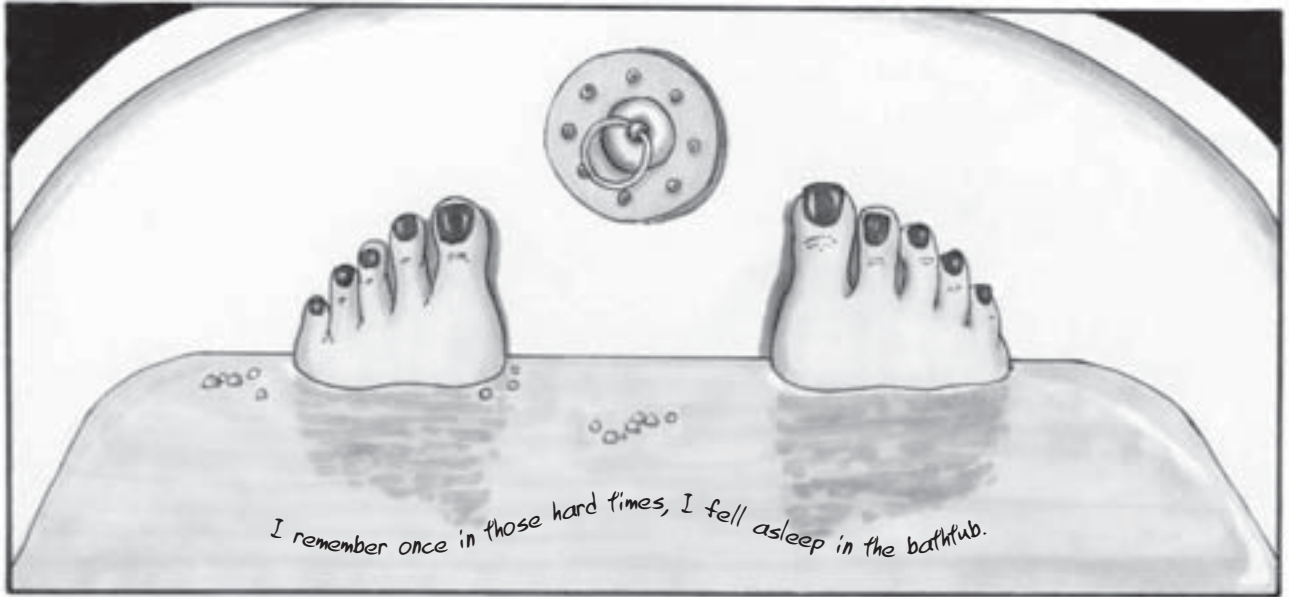


I was a great fuck but a lousy ho.
I hated it when they wanted to have
dinner first. I'm not trying to date
your azz, sonso! So awkward.
As a prostitute, I had no sexual freedom.
I was a product, a service, an idea, but
never a real human being.
You know what? It hurt. Some people
can deal with hoin' just fine, but it was
so painful for me to live like that.
Sometimes I'd think, "My god, I used to
be a math teacher."

Some days I felt like the pain was going to
swallow me up. I had this pain of being
an exile, a transgender and a sex
worker. If I didn't take drugs,
I would have been lost or
maybe dead. Not pretty,
but that was the
real deal.



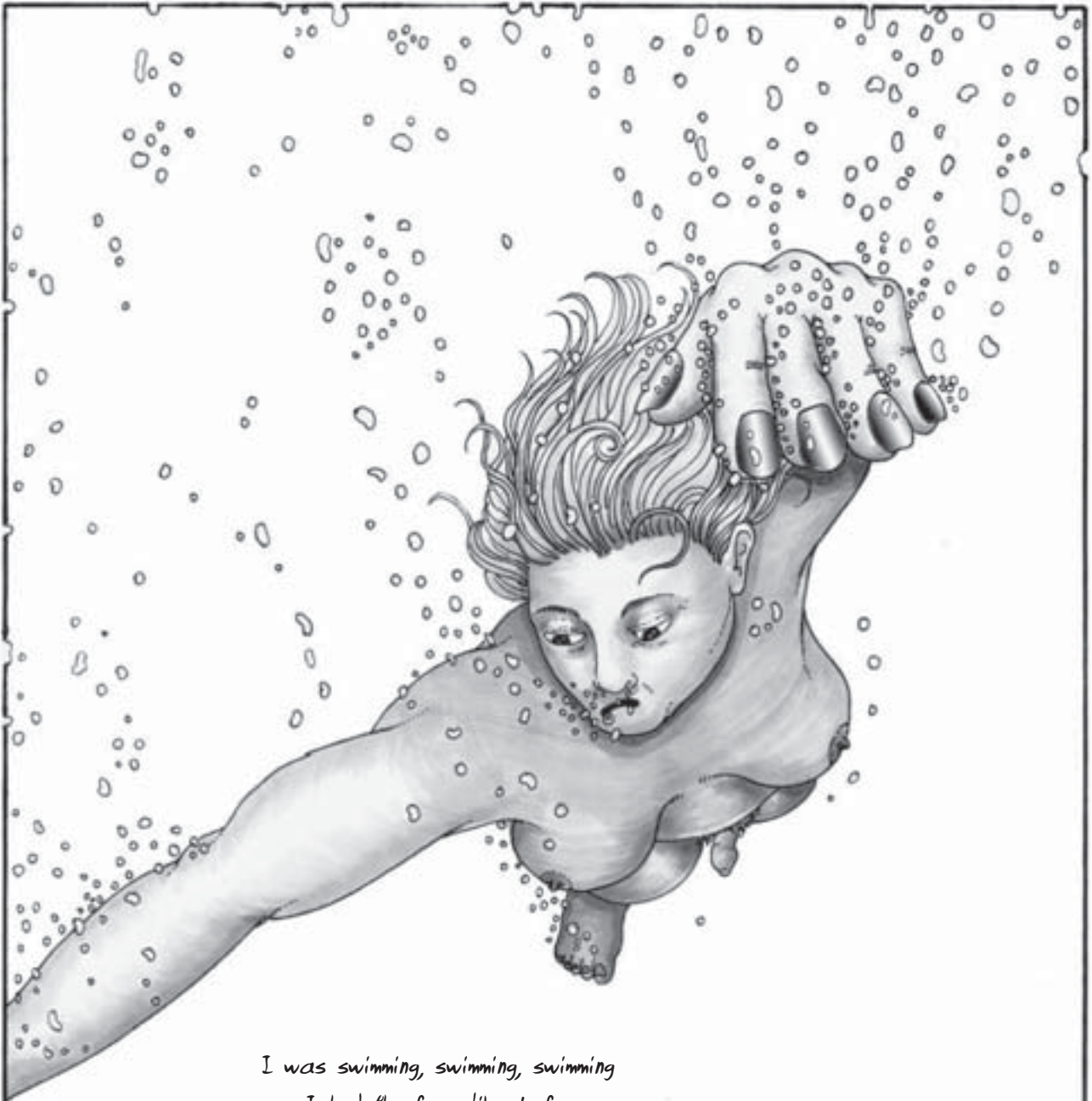
One day I finally said "No more."
My life had got too hard and messed up.
It was pretty easy to stop drinking, but I didn't
want to stop using drugs, so instead I decided to
always respect the damage they can do and limit my use.
I had to cuz I am my own safety net. I fall - I'm fucked.



I remember once in those hard times, I fell asleep in the bathtub.



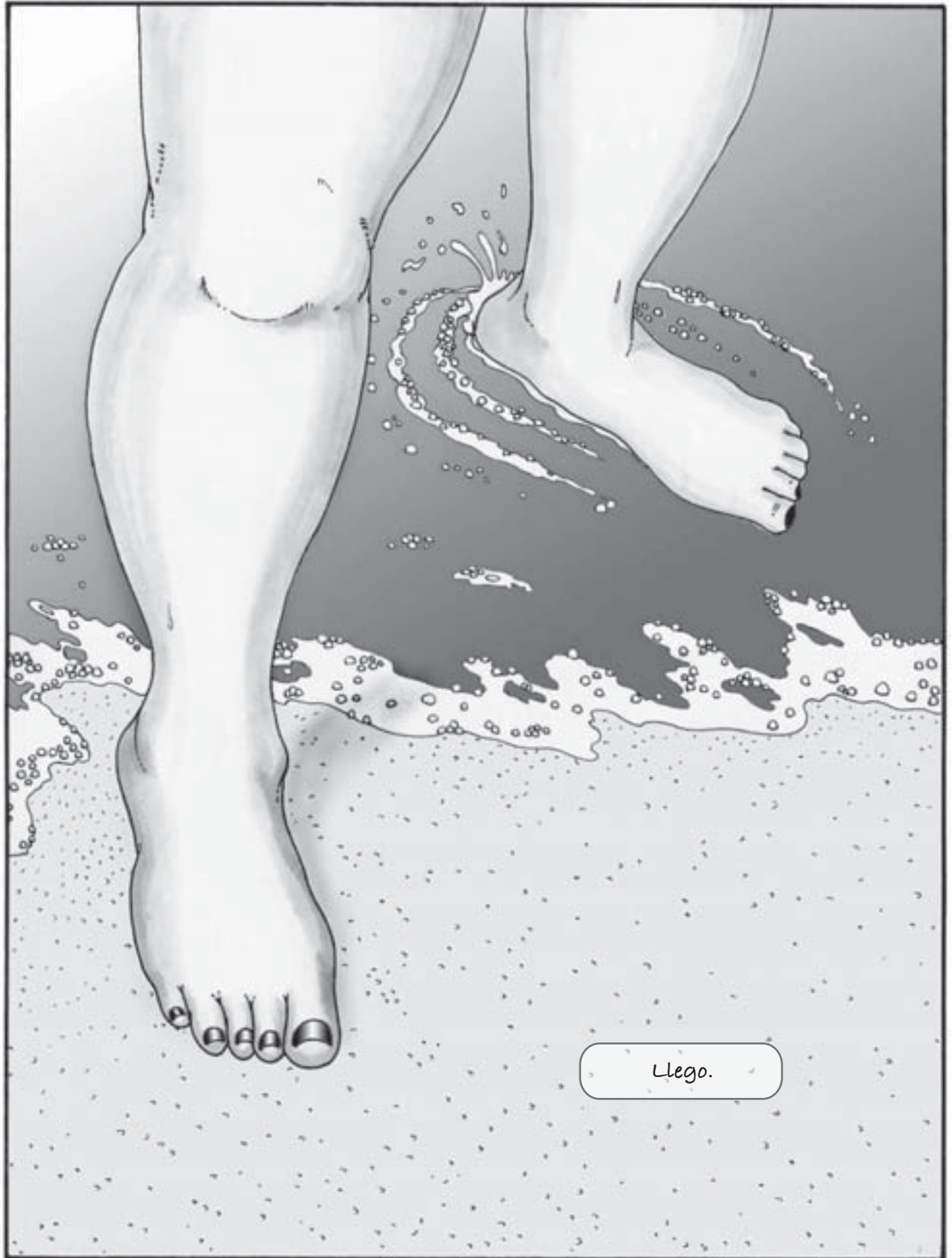
The water gave me the old dream of swimming.



*I was swimming, swimming, swimming
I had the fear like before
Can't find the shore*

And then I knew

*All the in-between places are my home.
This beautiful freak body is home.
And every day I love it . . .*



Llego.

Photo: Patrick "Pato" Hebert



Jaime Cortez is an artist, writer and cultural worker based in California. He was raised between Mexicali, Baja California and Watsonville, Alta California. His writing has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Best Gay Erotica 2001*, *2sexE* and *Besame Mucho*. He was the editor of the groundbreaking anthology *Virgins, Guerrillas & Locas*

and the journal *Corpus*. Jaime's visual art has been exhibited at numerous venues including the Oakland Museum of California, Huntington Beach Center for the Arts and in San Francisco art spaces including Southern Exposure, The Lab and Intersection for the Arts. Jaime attended the University of Pennsylvania and will pursue his MFA in visual arts at the UC Berkeley. He can be reached at beardevil@hotmail.com.

Adela Vazquez is an artist, performer and activist living in San Francisco. She has led transgender HIV prevention programs for Proyecto ContraSIDA Por Vida and the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center. She has performed at Pan Dulce, Esta Noche and the San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride Parade. She says, "Soy Adela, an OffTheHook/Tranny/T-Girl/Transforme/mujer y demas. Got that? Living in San Francisco, great dancer, cook, lover, friend. I'm not a toy, but you can play with me because I'd laugh. I would rather love than hate."



Photo: Jaime Cortez

TECHNICAL NOTES:

Pencil illustrations were done in #2 pencil on 100 lb. heavyweight bristol board. Inking was done with Copic Multiliner set A. The fill was done with the one-and-only Copic Cool Grey pens C0 through C10. The pages were scanned, white balanced and cleaned on an eMac in Photoshop. The word balloons were created in Illustrator using the techniques described in *Comic Book Lettering the Comcraft Way*. Final layout was created in QuarkXpress. The publication is set primarily in Orinda and Myriad, with Papyrus and a few other fonts thrown in for fun. It was printed in Los Angeles on 80# Jefferson Gloss Book White.