

Nani Power

214

Call him Alfuerza De Roman Gomez-Alba. In choked whispers in La Laja, they call him: a dead man.

The blackest dawn, an hour before the sun hits Acapulco bay like a broken egg, Señora Malagueña fries him tortillas in her pink robe that said Kitty on the back and her red hair the color of a malafueza cocktail. He sits and waits for Gonzalez and the others. Word was he made a baby over in Ensueño, born yesterday in the early night and Gonzalez's sister who bore her had died lying in a pool of blood.

And just yesterday, he kissed a German girl in the fancy hotel by the sea, her name he couldn't even say. She made his stomach turn like frogs, in her new clothes, smelling like stores. She ate cookies wrapped in silver from her pocket, kissing him by the lobby fountain and saying she wanted him to come up to room 214, in her knife-chopped Spanish, num-airo dos uno cua-dro. They drank those putagringa drinks. He could see the pink edge of her underwear and she had an ass as narrow as his little brother's. Her name was a bag of broken sounds. But it was written down on the bar's napkin. In his pocket.

Alfuerza washed his jeans with a bar of soap and hung them in the window, and then Malagueña ironed them wet. They were the only things he had that looked foreign. He had a woman like a wife and she now hands him food, shaking. He had never been with that girl, Gonzalez' sister, but Casy told him she died and had the baby and said it was him, Alfuerza who did it, and now they were coming. He would need to pay. The whole town was in tears, Casy said. You

She made his stomach turn like frogs, in her new clothes, smelling like stores.

should go, man, get the fuck out. Never mind he didn't do nothing with her. That German, he had been walking the beach with Casy and she and her girls lay there on blankets, almost naked. He gave them his rum. In the Lobby, she said, ahora chico, like she wanted him right there and everything, in a gold lobby, her new smell, making him feel like he had seen a lot of stuff.

That sister of Gonzalez said she was seventeen at the dance last year, with her lips red as Toledo candy, when he and her were in that place. She said she could do it and liked it and all, but when he went and lifted her skirt, she looked like a baby and she cried. He didn't want to hurt no one. He kissed her and say, go home, bebe, but she spat in his face. This is what he told everyone, when he came back to Casy, his sweat drying under his clothes: I don't do nothing with her. Naw. Man. Nothing.

Later, a few months after that night, he remembers they were in the fat man's bar by the sea and Gonzalez had to leave for a party,

Gonzalez say, my sister, she thirteen today. Casy don't say nothing, Alfuerza just cough and look at the water.

Yeah, he remembers that night. Casy was sleeping in the car because Acapulco was too far to drive and they were wasted anyhow and Alfuerza run in, let's leave, cabrón, he said. He could hear Gonzalez' mother call through the walls. He and Casy left fast through the field, caught that road that goes to the city fast. And now they coming. For him. They probably kill him in the dawn, out in the back field, they say they do and they will do, like the bloodless would.

The Germana told him, you know, you too cute. Here's my number, you should come to München. How I gonna do that, he asked. You find a way. He could see that ocean now, green and calm, and it had the fog. All the boats going by. He could get out of here. Every day, five bodies wash up in the Acapulco sea. Headless. The tortillas getting too cold. The front door, somebody knocking hard.

Call her Doris Jean Plummer.

Well, I just know I had the best time ever. Just like before. We came on our honeymoon back in 1954 when this was Hollywood's playground, when Frank Sinatra and Rita Hayworth played down here. I remember I was so excited. I bought two halter dresses that were all the rage.

We did all the things honeymooners did down here. We walked on the beach, though I must admit it's a bit dirty now. The new president is cleaning everything up, they say. The water is brown, anyway, we don't swim. Back then, I did. I went in the water and Frank whistled when I came out, but that was OK, because we were on our honeymoon. Oh, Lord.

It was the first time I drank champagne. And Frank, Frank was kind to me and gentle. I don't need to tell any more here. We went to the cave and saw the divers. I tried to speak Spanish, but that was useless. I had never been around a man. I felt shy. Frank also. We couldn't be naked in front of each other, we actually never have. We shared a bed. I felt scared. He held my hand. It's been fifty-four

years. I don't look like I did in 1954, that is for sure. I planned this trip. Frank always said it was the trip of a lifetime. He always said nothing could compare with our honeymoon in 1954!

I mean, we ate steaks every night! We slept in and then ate our breakfast on the patio. And at night, we watched the sunset. One day, we didn't leave the bed. It took four days for me to feel comfortable. I was very shy. And Frank made me laugh. The guys down at his work chipped in, for this one. Said Frank would like it. And maybe it would help. It was awfully sweet of them. Frank is sitting on the bed now, and did you know they were able to give us the same room from back in 1954? Room 214. Though I asked for two doubles, because sometimes Frank. Well. Things have changed.

No, Frank, Ellton's not here now.

Ellton's our son, see. He keeps asking if he's coming.

No, he's not, Frank.

It's awfully hot in here. I called in for some lemonade. I was hoping we could walk on the beach at some point, but he won't leave the room, just like before, but for different reasons.

No, Ellton is not here.

He's asked me six times in the last hour. I know it is silly, but I'm wearing the same travel suit I wore in 54, and yes, I fit into it still. I have pictures from that trip. I brought them with me. It was the trip of a lifetime.

I want him to have the best time ever. That's what the boys had said, let Frankie boy have the best time ever. And I will. I don't need to spell everything out, do I? I can let him have his peace, right.

I don't have to say anything. Not a thing.

I learned a lot since our trip but I don't know how to put in words. It's just a feeling I have. It sits over me softly like an invisible blanket and I can't even think of a word.

Oh, I wish you could see the sunset. It's lavender. I love lavender. I think the fellow is here with the lemonade.

No, Frank, it's not Ellton. Honey.

Alfuerza runs like his life. He runs so hard he can spit out his heart. Runs through the shit street like a cat. You see a cat tear ass through some place; he's like this one. They want to cut him and bleed him and he got going fast. That Casy can talk some shit. That Malagueña. Not him.

He didn't do anything to that girl, but they won't talk, they'll just take him over there and then no one will ever talk again of this person.

He's running to the Beach strip, where the shiny ones go. Those German girls. He's going fast through the gold lobby like a river, they yell at him but he take the stairs, he remember what she saying in that weird voice, 214. 214.

That German, he can live with them, he can go where they go and God can have his own plans with him.

Death don't scare him.

He too young to die.

But coming to the door, an old lady there, not a German girl and everything all fucked and things have to be fast, he asking, where German girl, and she don't know and he come in and she starts to get and yell and he has to grab the lady and where German girl and hold his knife up, up, where German girl, and say, just shut up, shut up, it happen fast like a speedboat in Manzanillo, fast, fast, not thinking, just doing, grabbing her, holding her mouth, knocking over the table.

Shut up hell, he says, words he learned in movies. Fuck.

She cry but then say, please, help, no.

Old man coming out of bathroom and do nothing, turn, and say, Ellton? Ellton, you here?

Please, she start to cry. Alfuerza push her down on a chair.

No hurtin you. Just where German girl?

There are no German girls here, son, just me and Frank.

Just her and the old guy.

Alfureza thinking: The girl's gone across the sea. My life over anyway. You get one chance in this world.

His little knife never hurt anybody, only cut some chickens and open a coconut for Malagueña once, but this old lady she don't know. He just say, say anything, do anything, and I cut you bad. So she shut up. Man asking about Ellton, he say shut up hell. Just shut up. Somebody come to door with lemonade and he watch her and she take it cool and they drink it, her and him, on the patio and it looks real pretty up there and Alfuerza watch the ocean and thinking those German girls all sweet out away faraway. At some point, the man falls asleep.

He then say to lady: I don want hurt nobody. OK?

Ok, she says. She looks at him then. OK, she says softly.

It becomes dinner time and she say, we need to eat, and Alfuerza say, Ok, eat and she order very tranquila some steak, and she say, you know the steak here is just marvelous and he say yeah, and she order one for him too and when it comes, an old lady bring it in and Alfuerza just sit there and act like nothing, like he know these people and everything cool, and he real surprised because he's waiting and that old lady, she act all cool, too, and then old man wakes up, he say where is Ellton, and she say, he not here, and they eat that meat all done.

And he wonder if Gonzalez and his guys go, if they hurt Malaguena. When he can go back to his house and get a few things. How he can go to Germany. And then the old man, he tired so she get him up and take out his teeth right in front of Alfuerza, and pull down his pants and the man wears diapers like a baby and his legs look like old ropes. And she pulls down that diaper all full of orange pee. And old man puts another one on, his fingers all shaking.

We came here on our honeymoon back in 1954, she says.

He blinks at Alfuerza.

Who is this Spanish gentleman? he asks, suddenly his eyes clear like windows.

That is Ellton, honey.

Ellton! He looks at him hard.

Son of a gun.

Then they sit on the patio. The sun coming down pretty like a painting, all kind of colors. She talking now. Like she relaxing. We

saw Marilyn Monroe once on the honeymoon, didn't we, Frank. Oh, yes. She was smaller than you think. Really quite petite. Lovely figure of course. Wearing a white dress and a straw hat with a dark, well, a man of your complexion, we say 'swarthy'. A classic Latin handsome type, like Rudolph Valentino. Oh, we were thrilled. Just thrilled. Oh, we ate strawberries and Fried tacos.

Margaritas! says the old man suddenly.

Yes, Frank! We had a margarita, tell Ellton about that.

Salty. On the, on the.

On the edge, dear.

On the edge.

Then they don't say nothing. Hear mariachis coming down Avenida Pulpera.

This music, Alfuerza say.

Oh yes, listen, Frank!

Peoples marry, he say.

And she look to the sea, her eyes all happy.

Then it get dark and she put on the man's pajamas. She don't say nothing to Alfuerza. She put on a nightgown and lie down on one bed, and the old man on the other and he sits in the chair.

He say, Is Ellton coming?

And she say, yes, dear.

And the man sleep. And Alfuerza sit there. And after an hour, she say softly, what do you need with these German girls, son? And he say, you speakin' Spanish and she say no. And so he tells her everything in English, best he can. And she say, are you sure you want to go with these German girls, and he say, what I do else in world, kind of dirty world. She don't say nothing.

And the young man who holds us here is quiet. And it's funny, I feel very calm. I am certain he will not hurt us. I just stay calm and I love this room anyway. This is the room where Ellton was conceived, yes it is. So I listen to his story. And it seems some men wish to do him harm, for something he did not do. I suggest he goes to the police but he laughs, no Police caring, he says. And he says he wants to go to Germany.

At that point, Frank got frantic which happens. I have pills for him but I can't find them. I left them back home, maybe.

He woke up. Where's Ellton?

Ellton is here, Frank.

No. No. Ellton.

He's here, Ellton, right here, in the chair.

And Frank sits up in his pajamas and looks at the boy, the dark boy in the chair with his eyes like coal.

Ellton. Ellton, where did you go.

Now, Frank—

No. He left us. Left us.

I'm about to say something, but the boy talks to Frank.

I comin back, he says, I comin back to see you.

I buried you, Ellton, Frank says in the dark.

You can see the silhouettes of boats even through the sheer curtains in the sea.

I buried you next to my father.

I don't know how Frank remembered this one. And of all things to remember, when he can't remember my name or when we married, or even where we live, he has to remember this.

Yes, I did. Worst day.

And the boy says nothing.

And Frank makes a sound, like the whine of a young baby.

I go over and hold Frank. And the thing is, Frank never cried before when Ellton went. Even in the hospital, when the doctor came, Frank just shook the doctor's hand. I never understood that, but I said nothing. No one speaks for a while and we just listen to the ocean. Around late in the early morning, a big foghorn sounds. The boy is sleeping.

Alfuerza goes to the old lady.

Listen, lady. I want to go.

She wakes up, blinks.

Please don't go, Ellton.

I not Ellton.

I know, but. I don't know. I've enjoyed your company. Oh, oh.

Listen. I got a go, go my home, get my thing. I got a go.
Please go to the police.

No. Lady.

He was breathing hard.

Listen. Listen me.

She sat up. Shall I call some coffee?

No.

Listen me.

Ok, Ellton.

Gonzalez sister, Ok. Yeah. I do that. I do. That baby mine. I know. I don't tell nobody this but. I don't know she so young. That baby.

It's Ok.

I, I. No, you don't understand. She say she seventeen, she like woman, she. O Dios.

It's Ok.

I go back. Tell me what I do. I gon die.

Well, just do the right thing. Always do the right thing.

Alfuerza he gets up, looks at the old man. Don't want to go but. I know. Tell him. I don know. OK.

The boats are out again and she lies back on the bed as the door slows clicks shut and Alfuerza leaves. And then in the blue darkness, the air conditioner cranks up again and Frank turns over. Ellton. That you?

No, Frank, she says, Ellton's not coming.

And she hears him snore. And it's light, must be six. She opened the patio and it looks so dark out to sea, and she can see a man on his patio next door, smoking, talking and she can hear every word he says: That's what I'm saying, Bill. Unh-huh. Bring those guys up there and I'll show them a thing or two. You know. A thing or twooo, muchacho. Yeah, Spanish, ha ha. Yeah, looking at the water now. Uh, well, I guess the event is, in two hours. What...yeah, I'm ready. I have the, the thing sealed, finessed--What the hell.

What do you mean? Hey, I'm down here and you want to say Jackie and them are out on that thing. OK, I mean. I'm down here now. In front of the fuckin ocean. fuckin beauuutiful. Naa. Shitty beach though.

Listen.

This is their last day. Mariachis are coming up the street again, after the whole night. As she lies in the bed, the air conditioner cranks in again and her breathing sounds like the ocean waves. The doorbell rings. She goes to the door. It's the old waitress in a polyester pantsuit of orange and brown, with a cart. She says buenos dias, brings in the food. Frank moves in his bed and says Ellton, and she says nothing, she watches her open up the stainless steel covers and the steam rise, and the mariachis are louder, louder, louder, and the waitress laughs, Una boda, she says and she understands this as marriage and she smiles, and they all are there together for a few minutes, these old ones, listening.

*Nani Power is the author of **Crawling at Night** (Grove/Atlantic Monthly, 2001), a New York Times Notable Book of The Year and a finalist for The Los Angeles Times Book Award as well as the British Orange Award. It has been translated into seven languages. Her second novel, **The Good Remains** (Grove/Atlantic Monthly, 2002), was also a New York Times Notable Book of The Year, and a finalist for The Virginia Library Award. **The Sea of Tears**, her third novel, was published in January 2005 by Counterpoint Press. Her newest book, a food memoir, **Feed The Hungry**, was published by Simon and Schuster in April 2008. Her stories have been published in numerous literary magazines including The Paris Review, Salon, Gargoyle and Nerve.com.*

*Her new book **Ginger and Ganesh** is scheduled for release in April by Counterpoint Press. Visit her online at www.nanipower.com*