

BOOZE

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1054 words

Whenever my parents gave birthday parties for me or my sisters and brothers, my grandmother did the cooking, my mother cleaned the house, and my father, when everything was ready, would plunk down in the center of the white tablecloth a big bottle of Four Roses whiskey.

The men usually drank at one end of the table, while the women, wives, girlfriends, old lady friends of my grandmother, set the table – fried chicken, beef curry, mashed turnips, dirty rice, cucumber salad—sometimes having to push the men’s glasses out of the way to make way for plates. We kids ran around laughing, grabbing candy out of the candy dishes, making general annoyances of ourselves because it was a kid’s birthday, and everyone was in a good mood. After the food, my grandmother, perspiring with pleasure at its reception, brought in the big store-bought cake. Everyone gathered around for photos—grinning faces in shades of black and brown, friends, relatives, two sides of the same family, Dayak and West Indian, worlds apart living in a neighborhood that was a world apart.

The last photo flash and the smell of burnt birthday candles were the signals for my young aunt to call everyone into the living room at the other end of the house. Turning up the volume of the record player, she unleashed the La Playa Sextet or Tito Puente - music, which beat like what your heart would beat like, if you let it. Most everyone would follow, taking their drinks with them as the rhythm of the horns and the conga drums enticed them, and the living room filling with bodies dancing and swaying, not stopping even when my grandmother, who preferred her sexual innuendo in calypso, sneaked in a record: *“Oh, mister, don’t touch me tomato, touch me pumpkin or me potato, but for goodness’ sake don’t touch me tomato.”*

We kids would giggle knowing that the words were somehow naughty, while we spilled soda on the rug, trampled on the potato chips, and accidentally broke most of the birthday presents. But we always kept an ear out for the deep male rumbling at the other end of the house, the dining room, where my father and his friends would be cracking open a second bottle of Roses while

the West Indian men in the living room are moving their hips like a rolling wave, taking into their arms my aunt, her friends, and other men's wives, whom the alcohol has also made brave. The air radiates with a humid mist of heavy perfume, and the men's faces are shiny with sweat as they crack ice cubes in their teeth. They take off their jackets and ties and squeeze the women who keep joking that their garters are pulled so tightly on their nylons, they're forced to dance on their tiptoes.

Me and the other kids would run from the living room moist with the humidity of flirtation, conga drums and whiskey, through the inbetween room of my grandmother's bedroom ripe with the smell of mothballs and oval pictures of the long dead, into the dining room which was now warming with the rising anger of the men. Hiding behind chairs, we watch them downing their shots, the whites of their eyes, including my father's, getting redder, their voices, which had been polite and speaking in Dusun, the tribal language of their Borneo boyhood, now sliding and slurring, cursing in English over past insults, and laughing in the way men laugh just before they hit things.

It was so exciting. Like being allowed into a special universe where we could crave violence, crave sex, crave them so deeply in our bodies without knowing exactly what we were craving. The only thing we knew for sure, and we were breathless for it, was that we didn't want to miss a moment of whatever was going to happen. Because something always happened. A drunken Borneo husband on the way to the bathroom would catch his wife dancing too close to a West Indian guy. Or someone wouldn't like the way he was being looked at. Or someone else would drunkenly grab the tablecloth to stand up, causing everything on it to come crashing to the floor. A joke ... a friendly touch ... the wrong word. And then, without warning ... people pulling people off other people. A woman kicking. Others leaving in disgust then turning back into the house after being taunted by someone at the window. Fights breaking out on the stoop. The music would still be loud. Over it, people shouted, laughed, cheered. Someone would try to be reasonable. A jealous girlfriend slamming a door. My aunt lighting a cigarette with another man's lighter. My father, his eyes red, throwing punches at friends, enemies, my mother. The birthday cake would fly out the window. Dishes broke. Glasses fell. My grandmother would scream and have to be calmed down.

But nobody ever called the cops ... even when a knife flashed in someone's hands. Then a second knife. Not the partygoers, not the neighbors, not anyone. No cop car with sirens. No banging on the door. No hauling off to jail. Our neighborhood was Black and poor. But that wasn't the only reason. No one trusted the cops. They were white and stupid and like animals with their nightsticks. Or else they were like the government. Always asking questions. Where do you come from? Why are you standing there? Who do you think you are? Like the people from welfare when you had to hide the new radio when they came to see if you were still poor enough. Like the priest who had to be lied to. Or the boss you had to bow to. Or anyone and everyone whom you had to be invisible with.

So there was really no need for any stupid cops. Because after a while, the booze would run out. The rage would dry up. And everyone would just go home. My grandmother would sleep with my mother. My father would stumble his way to a cot in the basement. My sisters and brothers would curl up tired and satisfied on the couches. And I, I would sit alone at the dining room table, pouring warm Pepsi into one used shot glass after another, swallowing the tinges of leftover Four Roses, hoping that whatever was trapped inside me would be released.