

## Pancha Loca

*R. A. Christmas*

PANCHA ROBINSON WAS DOING DISHES at her mother's sink and watching her husband Rick, who was out in the backyard with the children. Gloria, Pancha's sister, was sitting at the kitchen table fiddling with a salt shaker and complaining about Larry—her husband—and the rough life she led in the wilds of southern Utah.

"He slapped Vickie so hard the other day," Gloria was saying, "I thought her head'd come off. I almost took her to the doctor. I thought she had a concussion, I really did. Larry just goes, 'She'll get over it.' I could've killed him."

Gloria and her three children were in California on one of their infrequent visits, minus her husband, who usually had something more important to do, like fishing. So she felt perfectly free to run him down.

"All she wanted was a tortilla," Gloria went on. "But when he sees the refrigerator open for more than five seconds he just goes crazy. You'd think it was the end of the world."

"It sounds like it," Pancha said, trying for something neutral.

Pancha hadn't been alone with her sister for several months, so there were lots of complaints to catch up on. What made it bearable, this time, was that while Gloria brought her up to date, she could glance out the window at Rick, who was doing his fatherly duty at the old swingset, making sure each child got a turn and that the smaller ones didn't fall off. She couldn't help but admire the loving, patient way Rick had with children, even though she was painfully aware that he was not the same with adults—face it, with her. But she almost—almost—felt fortunate, compared to what she was hearing.

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Gloria's husband was a tall, muscular redhead—a cowboy type, although for a living he taught elementary school. On those rare occasions when he was around, Pancha always felt a combination of excitement and fear. Larry flirted shamelessly, right in Gloria's face, and he was always inviting Pancha to run errands with him, alone. He would reach out with those big paws and give her a hug or a squeeze on the arm; once he even picked her up and sat her on his lap, which she could see upset Rick—although he never said anything. Although Pancha loved the attention and exulted at how effortlessly she could steal Larry from her older sister, at bottom he was just too big and hairy and macho to be her kind of man. He always looked as if he might suddenly detonate, so it was hardly surprising to hear Gloria confirm (again) that he often did.

When Rick got angry, Pancha reflected, he just got quieter and quieter, until he was mute with rage. The only other sign, she had discovered, was in his eyes, which would change from light blue to icy gray. And when he did explode—on those rare occasions—it was terrible; it destroyed her. But in nine years of marriage only once had there been any violence between them; and this ghastly episode was still, even after a year, too recent for Pancha to be untroubled by the memory. She didn't want to dwell on it, much less share it with her sister.

"If he hasn't calmed down by the time I get back," Gloria announced, "I won't let him touch me for a month."

"I don't blame you," Pancha said, with as much conviction as she could muster. In matters of this kind, she had very little experience. In fact, it puzzled her to realize, again, that in her own marriage (in her life, for that matter), she was almost always the sexual aggressor. If she got angry—supposing—and told Rick she wasn't going to let him "attack" her for a month, he would probably be relieved. Of course, Gloria knew nothing about that. Pancha could only imagine what she might say. There were lots of things that Gloria knew nothing about, thank heaven. With her sister especially, Pancha was quite content with appearances.

Outside, Rick and the children were singing. He always pushed them on the swings when they came to Grandma's, and he always sang, except that this time he was singing something she had never heard before, a song he was probably making up.

Swinging, swinging—  
first you go up,  
then you go down.

That's all she could make out, over and over, to the rhythm of the swings.

Pancha turned to the table and cleared the last of the dishes. Gloria was going on about the Church now—the lousy southern Utah ward she and Larry lived in—nothing but snobs and old people—you had to live there fifty years before anyone would even say hello. Their home teachers were self-righteous bores who came by once every three months, and their bishop (the local banker) even turned Larry down for a loan—gave him a lecture about staying out of debt, right there in the bank in front of half the town. They talked Larry into playing on the ward basketball team, but most of the time he sat on the bench—a first-string high-school player, how about that? Her Relief Society visiting teachers were gossipy prudes, and so on. Pancha knew she didn't have nearly enough dirty dishes to wear it out.

"I'd give anything to be able to go to church down here," Gloria said.

"We love it," Pancha said, tasting the untruth in her words. She and Rick lived less than an hour away, in a snug townhome complex complete with pool and playground, shaded by massive oaks. Their ward was full of friendly blue- and white-collar folks and was headed by an understanding bishop, a saintly soul who drove a UPS truck for a living. What, then, might Gloria say if she knew that her sister hadn't been to sacrament meeting in over a year? That sitting in any church meeting made Pancha feel suicidal, made her legs and her head ache? That she had no calling and neither did Rick. That they paid hardly any tithing, no fast offerings or budget, and last—but never least—both of them smoked. Here was some grist that Gloria would know how to grind.

Pancha had no complaints about *her* ward, but *her* ward undoubtedly had some complaints about *her*. She was the mother who was always sick, always in the hospital, always forcing Rick to call the Relief Society so the ladies could bring dinner over or clean the house—and then, when she was well, she was the one who didn't attend her meetings and didn't get her visiting teaching done. She was the mother who was always "depressed" and who finally swallowed all of her tranquilizers and ended up in intensive care and then in a psychiatric hospital, leaving Rick to take care of four kids and three jobs until he also collapsed and followed her into the same hospital while the children were rotated from family to family—six months of her life in the toilet, and those seven weeks with Rick down the hall a total hell, while the kids frolicked from pool to pool and from Disneyland to Magic Mountain, turning into spoiled little strangers.

But that was only one way to look at it. The other was to say that Rick *and* the Church *and* her parents and even the kids had sold *her* down the river—as a woman. That the promises they all made, the things that were supposed to come true if you worked your ass off and kept *all* the commandments—which she had done, by the way, for years—that all these promises were in fact lies designed to cheat her out of her happiness and potential. And the only solution, as dear Dr. Levin had said, over and over, was to cut all of it—Rick, the Church, her family, yes, even the kids—cut it all out of her life and save herself.

Save yourself, Dr. Levin told her. Now, while you're still young enough to start over. Don't end up like the rest of them, us. Save yourself.

But she hadn't taken the drastic step. She had left the horror of the hospital a year ago, and she was still trying to do it the old way, the way that hadn't worked but the way she was told would work by everybody but Dr. Levin. She was still trying to adjust, readjust, herself to the "real" world; and since she could not face Dr. Levin anymore, she had found another doctor outside and was keeping (barely keeping) her depression under control with medication and by trying not to think too much about her unhappiness.

And so far so good. But that it wasn't really working was obvious enough. Rick still refused to acknowledge that she even had a problem, that there was anything wrong with their marriage. He just plodded on—earning, nurturing the kids, ignoring his crazy wife. Oh, they went out every weekend (she insisted upon it), and they made love regularly and sometimes even spectacularly (she made sure)—but there was still something wrong, because it didn't fulfill her. Because he didn't love her, that must be it. Oh, he'd say so, if she pressed him, but that didn't mean he really did. He probably didn't even know he didn't love her, he was so out of touch with his feelings, like the doctors in the hospital said. And because he did not love her, the kids picked it up and they did not love her. They only feared her because she was demanding and sick and crazy and they never knew what she would do next.

All I want, Pancha thought, as she rinsed the familiar plates, is for someone to hold me for as long as I want. Just hold me, with no time limit. I promise I'll let him go after a while, but at first there must be no time limit. He's got to be willing to hold me forever. If I can be sure he's absolutely willing to do that, then eventually I'll let him go and I'll be good. But I don't know how long it's going to take.

Rick could never understand this. When she got him to sit down on the couch, or when she sat on his lap, he was soon struggling to get

away. He didn't trust her need, that was it. He thought it would never end, but it would. He always had things to do, but all she felt she ever had to do now (no matter what she *had* to do) was to be happy.

She didn't miss the hospital, but she missed the people she had met in the hospital. They would understand right away what she was talking about. She could find someone to hold her there. She *had* found someone to hold her there, but there had just been no way to bring him into her life. No way, dammit. Still, she felt closer to those people, even now, in memory, than she did to her own family. Phil, the old, overweight, suicidal transvestite that nobody wanted anymore; what fun he was to talk to; he knew what it was like to suffer like she did, and he really cared. He would have done anything for her, and he didn't have to sleep with her either. There were so many like that, and they would have great rap sessions sitting in the lounge and smoking half the night, until the supervisor broke it up and made them take their meds. There was Grace, the girl who cut her legs with razors; Lance, the Mormon dooper; Freddy, the alcoholic teenager; Ralph, the smiling half-wit who shot himself in the head and partly missed; and all those weirdos in the born-again Christian unit. At times like this, listening to her sister drone and groan, Pancha missed her hospital friends terribly—the wonderful, unpredictable zaniness of it all, with everyone having time to be concerned with everyone else's problems, joys, and sorrows. The only really bad time had been when Rick was in there, keeping to himself, not relating to her friends, spending most of his time in his room, reading, practicing, writing, and smoking, casting a shadow over the whole hospital, only coming out for group and anger sessions, and late at night to serenade the nurses with his guitar.

Gloria, thank God, knew next to nothing about all this—thanks to their mother's refusal to pass along anything that even hinted at a family tragedy. "Nervous breakdown" and "depression" were not part of Mama's vocabulary—the relatives, near and far, had been told from time to time that Pancha was "sick" or "in the hospital for a few days." And as far as Papa was concerned, it hadn't even happened: during the whole time he had only visited her once, for a "confrontation" with his pathetic daughter at Dr. Levin's insistence; and he hadn't said a word about it since. Six months of her life had vanished, and it was horrible to imagine her sister feasting on the details. But whatever Gloria knew (and she couldn't know the worst, nobody did), it could only be in the most general way, and so far she hadn't mentioned it at all. That was one of the good things about being certified crazy, Pancha reflected. People who knew—even people like Gloria—were afraid to bring it up.

Pancha turned to the stove and checked the beans and rice and made sure there were enough tortillas warming in the oven. Mama was due home from work in minutes, and Pancha didn't want her dinner to get cold. Like always, they would stay until Mama saw the children, and then Rick would be anxious to leave, and that would be fine with Pancha. Being around Gloria for more than an hour depressed her, and she couldn't afford to be depressed, not anymore.

Besides, she was dying for a cigarette, and probably Rick was too. While she stirred her mother's beans, Pancha felt a playful urge to go to her purse and light up a Virginia Slim, just to see the look on her sister's face.

Gloria was going on about the ladies she taught with in the Primary, categorizing their flaws without mercy, threatening to resign her calling as soon as she got back. And Larry was a maverick Mormon who could never get in step with Church programs. Half the time he found some excuse not to go to meetings with her, and she had to sit there with three fidgeting children. She bemoaned the fact that she spent most of her Sundays in the foyer, talking shop with the other young mothers or chasing Brian up and down the halls.

"He was driving me absolutely nuts before we got him on medication," Gloria said. "I'd turn my back for one second and he'd have pots and pans all over the floor, and then he'd pull the drawers straight out on top of them. I'd put everything back, and he'd just stand there waiting for me to finish so he could start all over again. I spent half the day picking up after him, and if I tried to stop him he'd start screaming or throw himself against the wall. He'd get up at night and eat a whole tube of toothpaste or drink my Nyquil or anything else I happened to leave out. Larry put those little plastic childproof thingamajigs on all the cupboards—you know how long it took him to figure those out? Two days. I can't even open half of them because Larry put them on so tight I can't get my fingers in. But Brian can. We had to go clear to Cedar to find someone who would prescribe Ritalin for him. One doctor in town hadn't even heard of it, can you believe that? They just look at you like you can't control your child, even after Larry and I beat him practically black and blue. To them it's just a discipline problem. He's so much better now he's like a new kid."

"He is," Pancha said, only because that was what her sister wanted to hear. There was such a contrast in the behavior of their children that it was always a little embarrassing to talk about it. Brian might be "a new kid" to his mom, but he still hit and screamed and was incredibly selfish as far as Pancha was concerned. Through the window she could see that Brian had been on the swing now for twice as long as

any of her children, and Rick, as usual, was letting him have his way. Her kids were so unused to scuffling that when Brian pushed them they just stood there and took it—even the older ones—or came sobbing to her in front of Gloria, which was even more embarrassing, because when Pancha would tell them to go back outside and stop complaining, they would look up at her as if they had been betrayed. “Hitting is wrong, teasing is wrong,” their eyes would say, when they didn’t say it out loud. “Isn’t that what you always say, Mommy?” But she wouldn’t say it, and Gloria would be talking about something else all through it and wouldn’t even notice, so they would go back out and get punched again. That was why it was nice right now to have Rick out there on duty. Gloria’s kids might be favored a little, but at least it prevented someone from losing an eye.

Pancha rechecked her mother’s beans on the stove, to make sure they were just right. Mama had beans with every meal. Beans and coffee, no matter what else. She was a true Mexican, whereas all of her children so far had married gringos, and only the two oldest, Pancha and Gloria, could speak Spanish. Jesse and Patty understood only the simplest expressions—it would be ironic if they married Mexicans, but it was difficult for Pancha to imagine them married at all, these babies she had practically raised herself while her parents worked and Gloria was away at college. Patty was twenty, but she looked fifteen, was overweight, worked at McDonald’s, and was still living at home. She still rode a bicycle, for goodness sake. Jesse was twenty-two and very bright, but he seemed content with a dead-end job operating a punch press in some nameless factory. He spent most of his free time stoned, up in his treehouse with his girlfriend, a gringa who never spoke more than two words at a time to anyone else in the family. Only Pancha and Gloria had been able to break free of the inertia of family and neighborhood to the point where they could see that there was something else out there, a better way to live. Only by braving their father’s wrath, by breaking with Catholicism and joining the Mormons and enduring his total, albeit temporary, rejection, had they been able to create these marriages, these children, and the very different lives they now led, full of promise and horror.

First Gloria, who set all the relatives’ tongues wagging by going away to college in Utah, and then Pancha, who followed her, vowing never to give up her childhood faith, only to see it slip away during a nonstop reading of the Book of Mormon one winter night while a snowstorm raged outside. And if she stumbled later and slept around a little, that was mainly because it all happened too fast, the old East L.A. habits took time to wear out. But as soon as she found what she

wanted—Rick, her young, hippie professor (he was fair game, his divorce was final)—she had settled down and tried to become a good wife and mother, her testimony intact. She had taken some big chances and had some terrible times afterward; but she took pride in the fact that she had a respectable husband and four gorgeous children to show for it. So it had been worth it, and with a little luck she could complete the circle, overcome this recent setback, and recapture that calm assurance she had felt on that winter night ten years before.

It was strange. Gloria ranted on and on about the Church, yet Pancha knew she had a strong testimony and was a faithful Primary teacher. Gloria never missed church, had never tasted beer or smoked even one cigarette; and yet her life, by her own admission and from all Pancha could tell, was misery. She was yoked to a renegade husband, and all three children bore scars from this preposterous union. Vickie was a little liar who had once asked Pancha's astonished boys to take down their pants—she was already in therapy because she had a speech impediment and threw terrible tantrums. Craig had been born with one leg shorter than the other and was still wearing diapers at age four ("My diaper is my toilet!" he would scream when Gloria tried to coax him to the bathroom); and Brian was a hyperactive hitter who had to be watched all the time. It was easy to imagine the emotional turmoil that had spawned these lost little souls—Gloria and Larry slugging it out night and day; whereas she and Rick seldom even raised their voices. If something did boil over, it was almost always after the children were asleep. It was worth holding back, to be able to look out the window and see her children growing up beautiful and innocent, virtually untouched.

Pancha stole a final glance at Rick as she put the last of the silver in the drainer and let the water out of the sink. He was still at it, swinging himself now, with Mark on his lap. She should feel so blessed—to have such a dutiful husband, who did more than 50 percent of the housework on top of everything else. Which only made it twice as hard to figure out why she kept screwing up, why she felt so unfulfilled. It didn't make sense. She had a better husband than Gloria, and nicer children. She had made it to the temple and Gloria hadn't. She wore garments and Gloria didn't. Rick was an elder, and Larry was an inactive priest. For two years, she and Rick had done everything right and had had their marriage and their children sealed to them in the L.A. Temple for time and all eternity. She knew what it was like to pay a full tithe, keep the Word of Wisdom, attend all of her meetings, and hold two callings besides. And even though he smoked, Rick was still a home teacher, and he just about always got 100 percent, even now.



Gloria had joined the Church first, but Pancha had gone further in it. Gloria had three children, but she had four. Gloria couldn't get her husband to do anything, and Pancha could. She had known what she wanted, and she had gone out and got it—so what if she was still trying to figure out what to do with it now that she had it. Gloria didn't know how to get anything, so all she could do was whine and complain, which drove Larry even further away. In six months everything in Pancha's life might be back to normal; she and Rick would have their recommends, and it would be as if nothing had ever happened—and Gloria would still be chasing Brian down the halls of some hayseed ward, none the wiser.

Pancha sat down at the table and tried to think of something to say—something that might carry them until her mother came home and she could make a graceful exit. Gloria was suddenly quiet, looking bemused, as if puzzled that after all her complaining, nothing had changed.

"Patty's been reading the Book of Mormon," Pancha said, almost without thinking.

"She's *what*?" An incredulous grin broke out on Gloria's face.

"She was over at the house one night," Pancha backpedaled, "when the missionaries dropped by. And they taught her the first discussion."

"Well," Gloria sighed, "that's the end of my daddy."

*My daddy.* There was a pause, during which Pancha knew she was supposed to imagine their Papa having a heart attack. Of course, he had never actually had one; it was just that from time to time, when he was under stress, he would collapse; and Pancha had been with him on several occasions when he had fainted and lay gasping on the floor. It had always terrified her to think that if the "big one" ever came, she might be responsible.

"He got over it when we were baptized," Pancha ventured.

"What makes you think he could take another one?" Gloria said.

"He's older now, you know."

"Isn't that a chance we have to take?"

"Don't drag me into this!" Gloria exclaimed. "Patty'll believe anything anybody tells her for five minutes. You're wasting your time."

"I don't see how it can hurt," Pancha said. "She needs something. She's just stagnating here."

"He'll disown her. He'll kick her out, just like he did us. But we knew how to survive, and she doesn't."

"He took us back, didn't he?" Pancha said. "It wouldn't last forever."

"Don't count on it," Gloria said. "He might just get fed up. You know how hard he is on her."

Patty was adopted, the baby. Whenever she got in trouble this fact was always stressed, however indirectly. What went for the other children somehow did not go for her. That was why her parents had always been hard on Patty. She wasn't part of the "real" family, so it would be easy to get rid of her. All it would take is an excuse, like joining the Mormon Church. That was Gloria's drift, and just the thought of it made Pancha wince.

"She can always stay with me," Pancha said, trying to salvage something.

"Good luck," Gloria said, with a mixture of resignation and sarcasm that set Pancha's teeth on edge. The truth seemed to be that Patty was just too immature, too ugly, too fat and too stupid to be a Mormon. The truth of Joseph Smith's First Vision was somehow contradicted by the truth about Patty. But Patty wasn't that dumb, Pancha insisted to herself; and Gloria wouldn't miss ten pounds off her tummy either.

"Isn't every member supposed to be a missionary?"

"We aren't supposed to wreck families and give people heart attacks," Gloria said. "We aren't supposed to make people worse off than they were before."

After a pause, Pancha looked at her sister and said, "Aren't *we* worse off than *we* were before?"

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No."

"That's crazy!" Gloria exclaimed, but then looked down at her salt shaker and for some reason was instantly silent. Her sister let it drop.

Maybe she knows more than I figured, Pancha thought. Oh well, what the hell.

She got up, went to the sink, and scoured it one more time. Rick was playing "monster" with the kids now, staggering around the yard like Frankenstein with his arms straight out while the kids ran screaming and hid in the bushes. The problem would be getting them all calmed down before they started home.

It was a relief to finally see her mother at the front door.

"Mihás," Mama said, as soon as she saw them. Their mother was a small woman, thin and wiry. She wore gold-rimmed glasses, and her graying black hair, full of natural curl, seemed to resist being tied in a bun. She had worked as a nurses' aid at County USC for as long as Pancha could remember. In the heart patient wing. She spent most of her days helping sick men in and out of bed—so her husband would never have to end up like that, so he could work when he felt like it, as a substitute teacher. When she came into the kitchen she looked worn, but her face brightened at the sight of her two oldest, her daughters,

together. She gave them a wide, toothy grin that animated all the lines in her face.

"Where are my babies?" she said as she sat down. Gloria was quickly up, filling her mother's plate with food. Pancha got her a cup of coffee.

"They're out back with Rick," Pancha said.

"You ate?"

"The kids were hungry," Pancha said.

"Where's your father?"

"Where do you think?" Gloria said.

Their father was always in his bedroom on Sunday afternoons, watching old musicals on TV. Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly were his favorites. He had been a great dancer in his day, before his heart started acting up. Not a hooper, but an expert folk dancer. He had led groups, taught, everything short of turning professional; and when he took the family to the Folklorico Ballet he could still spot every mistake, which gave him great pleasure. He had taught both of his girls to dance, had high hopes for them; but they had both disappointed him in this, as in most things, although Gloria had always been his favorite. He always said she was the better dancer, spoke better Spanish—it was true that she had more education than Pancha, had graduated from college, in fact. But then Gloria had let him down by joining the Mormon Church and marrying a clod. This had temporarily left the door open for Pancha, but she had blown her opportunity by joining the Church too. But at least she had married Rick, who had more degrees than Papa, and now she had given him more grandchildren than Gloria had, and next year she was going back to school; so it would be only a matter of time before she had more education. Pancha felt that her Spanish was every bit as good as Gloria's, and she would take more classes just to make sure. And she still kept her dancing up, a little, whereas Gloria didn't at all—her excuse was she had a bad knee, but Pancha suspected that it was really because she had only danced to please her father, to win the praise he was inclined to give her anyway. Pancha loved to dance, and she felt that in this respect she was his true heir, although he would never admit it. Even at sixty, her father's legs were trim and fit—actually shapely—the legs of a born dancer.

It was painful for Pancha to realize that she would never, could never, stop trying to win her father's approval; even after all these years, even after it helped put her in the hospital and Dr. Levin advised her never to see her father—her whole family—again. Period. Oh, and divorce Rick too, and quick—before his passivity drives you permanently crazy. Not to forget that.

"The menudo is good," their mother said.

"Rick had two helpings himself," Pancha said proudly. She was grateful that Rick loved menudo. It was one of the reasons her parents were so fond of him—in addition to their being grateful to him for taking a troublesome daughter off their hands.

"Larry can't stand the stuff," Gloria piped up, as always. Whenever the subject of menudo came up, this cultural impasse had to be mentioned. Rick was at least trying to be Mexican, but half the time their father couldn't even remember Larry's name.

"How does Carmen like her school?" Grandma said.

"She loves it," Pancha said. Carmen, her four-year-old, had just started preschool. She was "gifted," and the school was private—and expensive. Everything about her children was upbeat, positive, whereas all Gloria had to talk about was runny noses and remedial groups, so Pancha didn't elaborate.

There was a crash at the front door. Patty was coming in, and she had dropped the grocery sack she was carrying; a couple of cans of Coke and some boxes of candy spilled out on the floor. She gathered them up, self-consciously, while they watched in disapproving silence. She was wearing her McDonald's uniform, and her chubby brown face was wet with perspiration.

"Hi guys," she said, as brightly as she could.

"You dropped something," Gloria said.

"I bought some candy for the little kids," Patty panted. "It's a job trying to carry all this stuff on a bicycle."

"You might try learning how to drive," Gloria said.

"Hear that, Mom?"

Her mother made a face, as if to say what everybody already knew—that this was Papa's decision and that he did not approve of young girls doing much of anything outside of dancing and having babies. And has anyone checked the cost of insurance lately?

"Just for the kids?" Gloria laughed, as Patty came in and started piling her little boxes and packages on the kitchen table. Pancha couldn't help but smile.

"I'm a little kid, too," Patty said, but she blushed anyway. There were Good and Plentys, Jujubees, Juicy Fruits, M&Ms—more than one per child. "Where is everybody?"

"Out back with Rick," Pancha said.

Patty put the Cokes in the refrigerator and gathered up most of the candy.

"Dinner's on the stove," her mother said.

"I ate already," Patty said, going out the back door.

"How many times?" Gloria called after her.

"Too much McDonald's," Mama said, with a mother's finality.

Pancha got up and looked out the window. The kids were already crowded around Patty, as if she were the good fairy. Rick was holding hers back, so that Gloria's could get theirs first. Because there was no holding them back.

"I'm going to look after su papa," their mother said. She put her dish and cup in the sink and left the kitchen.

"Well," Gloria said. "Let's see what's left in the bag." She tipped it over and fished out some Sugar Babies. "Want some?" she said, tearing open the package with her teeth.

Pancha nodded. She had to put something in her mouth, and quick. A cigarette always tasted so good after she had been at her folks', but the wait was agony. Rick was probably dying out there, but at least he didn't have much supervising to do. The kids were scattered on the lawn, chewing candy cuds, and he was talking to Patty. Pancha sat down at the table and helped herself to a few morsels.

"Larry wants me to have another baby," Gloria said. Pancha felt her stomach drop. Did that sound like a challenge, or was it just her imagination?

"What does the doctor say?" she got out, as nonchalantly as possible.

"Guess," Gloria said. "But Larry doesn't give a hoot what he says. Once he gets something in his head, he just won't leave me alone until I give in. He's been driving me crazy."

"Have you been trying?" Pancha said, weighing her words carefully.

Gloria laughed. "Whenever I let him. All he does is pester me night and day. If I put the kids down for a nap when he's home I practically have to fight him off. I'm not kidding. If I hadn't married him, I swear he'd've turned into a sex maniac. But so far nothing's happened."

A good thing, Pancha thought, in more ways than one. Gloria had had two miscarriages already, and in her last attempt at pregnancy the placenta had grown right over her cervix and had to be surgically removed. And there wasn't any baby to go with it. Add to that the chance of having another child with a birth defect like Craig's, and the fact that she was over thirty, and it was clearly insane to try again. But she probably would—like she said, she always gave in to Larry eventually; and the people in her snooty ward were probably wondering why she only had three.

"Is Rick like that?" Pancha's reverie was cut short. She felt her skin turn cold.

"Sometimes," she came up with, from somewhere.

Gloria chuckled at this, oblivious to her sister's discomfort.

"What do you do about it?" she said.

Pancha was floored. The request for a little sisterly advice seemed innocent and sincere.

"He gets over it," Pancha said, with a silent prayer that the subject be dropped immediately.

"Of course, he's older," Gloria said, with playful irony.

"Maybe that's it," Pancha managed. It was pretty obvious why Larry pestered Gloria to get pregnant all the time. If he didn't pester, the poor guy wouldn't get anything. As for Rick, he was always so reserved, so—well, reluctant; but good in bed to a fault—once you got him there. Mr. Control. That was the problem. Endless apologies on those rare occasions when he happened to climax before she did. A national catastrophe. As if she cared, as long as she knew she was loved. That was always the question in the background. Well, yes and no. Yes, if she asked him.

Divorce him, Dr. Levin said. Divorce him and save your life. Divorce your parents too, and your brother and your sisters. Cut yourself loose from these people who have ruined your past and will surely ruin your future. Do it—today, now, before you leave the hospital. Please do it.

But what then? Would Dr. Levin love her? Marry her? Would even that be enough? What she had suspected while she was in the hospital seemed perfectly true now. Dr. Levin *had* been in love with her—maybe he still was. She could remember in detail his funny little ways: how he always said, "I'm sorry," over and over, no matter what she told him; how he hated Rick; how tenderly he had held her that day when she was so depressed that she felt like the ceiling was coming down. Yes, it was so clear, he *had* loved her. That was real love, real caring, that was what she wanted in her life. If she had been feeling better, she probably could have seduced him in his office that day. But even if she had, she doubted that he would ever have married her. He had been married three times already; he was still married; and besides, she was crazy. So was he. He admitted it.

Patty came back in, flushed and happy. She doted on the kids and was always buying things for them. She didn't make much at McDonald's and saved nothing.

"Scarfig up on my candy, 'eh," she said. Gloria had finished the Sugar Babies, with some help from Pancha.

"You won't miss it," Gloria quipped.

"Anybody want to split a Coke?" Patty opened the refrigerator.

"No thanks," Gloria said, disapprovingly. Pancha loved Coke, but she shook her head. Gloria was a fanatic about the Word of Wisdom. She wouldn't even take an Excedrin.

Patty opened a can and sat down at the table.

"Mormons aren't supposed to drink Cokes, are they?" she said, as if she were waiting for Gloria's permission to take a swallow.

"Good Mormons don't," Gloria said. Patty glanced at Pancha. They had split Cokes on many a Sunday afternoon, at this very table, sans Gloria.

"It's up to the individual," Pancha countered. With that, Patty took a sip and then set the can gingerly on the table.

"Did you tell Gloria I've been reading the Book of Mormon?" Patty said sheepishly to Pancha.

Pancha nodded. "She thinks it might be a little over your head."

"Don't drag me into this!" Gloria almost shouted.

"It's pretty interesting," Patty said. "It's sort of weird at times, but I kind of like it. I really dig some of the things it says about religion and stuff."

Gloria rolled her eyes, for Pancha's benefit.

"I like the part about cutting off that dude's head. That was cool."

"Does my daddy know?" Gloria said, ominously.

"Know what?"

"That you're reading it, silly."

"I don't know. Sort of, I guess. I don't think he cares what I read."

"Lucky you."

"It's no big deal," Patty said.

"Just try joining the Church and see what happens. He'll kick you out of here so fast it'll make your head spin."

Patty looked at Pancha for reassurance.

"I think they're mellowing out a little," Pancha said.

"Don't bet on it. Either that or my daddy'll have a heart attack."

Patty giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know," she said. "What you said just struck me as funny, that's all."

"Listen to her," Gloria said to Pancha. Patty stopped giggling and took a big swallow of Coke.

"Did you tell her about that cute missionary?" Patty said to Pancha.

"I told her about the missionaries," Pancha said. Now *she* was embarrassed.

"I loved the sound of his voice," Patty gushed. "I could have listened to him for hours."

Pancha explained that Elder Harrison was from the South and had a very pronounced accent.

"He was so cute," Patty said. "I'd become a Mormon for him any old day."

"He's probably younger than you are," Gloria yawned.

"No way."

"I'll bet he is. They go on missions when they're nineteen. How old are you?"

"Almost twenty-one," Patty said, looking crestfallen, as if she knew she should act her age if she could, but she couldn't.

"I'll bet he's younger than you are," Gloria persisted.

"He didn't look it."

"Neither do you."

"It doesn't really matter," Pancha said, getting up. If she didn't get out of there in five minutes the ceiling was going to start coming down again, and voices would be coming from behind the curtains, if not low out of the dust. She left the kitchen, crossed the living room to the door of her parents' bedroom, and knocked. There was a familiar, muffled "Come in" from the other side.

Her mother was sitting stiffly on the edge of the bed, still in her uniform, and her father was stretched out, in slacks and a Hawaiian shirt, watching television. Her father kept his eyes on the TV, but her mother looked up at her with a kind of pained concern.

"We've got to be going," Pancha said. She felt panicky. There was a metallic taste in her mouth.

"But you just got here," her father sighed. That was about what she expected.

"Rick's tired," she said, hating herself for using the same old lie. "And the kids need to get to bed early. They were up half the night last night."

Her father merely sighed again, took off his glasses, folded them, and swung his legs off the bed. Her mother followed her out of the bedroom, and Pancha sent Patty out to round up Rick and the children. In a matter of seconds the house was filled with chattering, tears, laughter, teasing, empty candy boxes, and lots of dirty hands and faces to be washed and bladders to be emptied before the trip home. Rick supervised the cleanup while Pancha took care of the left-over candy and gathered up jackets, toys, blankets, and whatever else she could recall bringing. Grandpa emerged from the bedroom, and they all assembled in the living room for the ritual of goodbye, which was always the same. Each child and adult gave Grandpa and Grandma a big kiss and hug. Even Great-grandma came out of the back bedroom and gave and got her kisses and hugs and cooed to each little one in Spanish.

"My goodness, you're thin!" her father exclaimed to Rick after they embraced. "Are you sure she's feeding you enough?"



Rick laughed while Pancha edged everyone to the door, from the door to the porch, from the porch to the driveway, and finally to the van, where each child was buckled up for the drive home.

Grandpa went back to his TV, but Gloria and Patty and their mother followed Pancha all the way, making small talk, asking questions. Why did people wait until you were leaving to ask you all these questions, Pancha wondered. Was it because they feared the answers, so they asked them as you were about to drive off, just in case? Have those headaches gone away? No, I have a brain tumor—bye. It was easier to handle things that way. Her mother suddenly wanted to know how her job was going, and of course it was going fine. And how her leg was. Fine. And whether Craig needed new glasses. Not yet. (But as any idiot can see they are so heavy they keep falling off his nose). Nevertheless, everything was fine, fine, fine. And in between, in Spanish, her mother bombarded her with news of the extended family—with about seventy-five cousins, there was always somebody getting married, or unmarried, or having a new baby; and even though Pancha had married a gringo and had gone away to college and hardly saw any of her cousins anymore, it seemed essential for her to know these things.

Patty, meanwhile, played peek-a-boo with the little ones at the van windows, and Gloria stood beside her mother like a sentry, arms folded, studying her sister's family with an enigmatic smile.

"When are you going to come up and see us?" she asked Rick.

Please don't make any commitments, Pancha prayed.

"Sounds like a good idea," Rick said.

She held her breath. It would be just like Rick to throw away next year's vacation, then and there.

"Say hello to Larry," Pancha said.

"If I'm still speaking to him." Gloria broke into a colossal grin and cackled as if it were the greatest joke in the world. She'd be pregnant within three months, of that Pancha was sure. What would *she* do then?

"Take care of yourselves," Gloria said, suddenly a bit wistful. She reached out and gave Pancha's forearm a little squeeze—as if that made up for twenty years of teasing and rejection.

"We'll try," Pancha said.

Finally, politely, Rick eased the van away from the curb, and Pancha rolled her window partway up, feeling relieved and guilty at the same time. No matter how successful the visit, she always felt depressed when she left her parents' home. Her father always found a way to stick in the needle, even if it was only to sigh and to say, "But you just got here," which was still ringing in her ears. Daddy always

found a way to bust her bubble—she knew that now, thanks to Dr. Levin and a \$50,000 hospital tab. She remembered again that day in high school when she came home with her arms so full of debate trophies she couldn't even open the front door. She had managed to knock, and her father opened the door and just stood there, looking at her with an annoyed and puzzled expression that made her feel awkward, absurd, and unrecognized, instead of triumphant.

"The door's open," was all he said, and then he turned and walked away without another word.

She still had the trophies, but from that moment they seemed absolutely worthless, nothing more than a load of garbage to be staggered in with and dropped with no ceremony on her bed.

That was Daddy, and there was no changing him. *My* Daddy, she laughed to herself. And yes, the door *was* open, with nothing inside.

They turned the corner and started for the freeway, the familiar path. She and Rick reached for the glove compartment almost at the same instant and sorted out their cigarettes—Rick's Marlboros and her Virginia Slims. Pancha lit up and took a deep drag, passed the lighter to Rick.

"Quiet down back there," she said, almost automatically, over her shoulder. Somebody was teasing, but on the whole the kids were settling pretty well. Pancha was looking forward to just sitting at her own kitchen table, smoking and reading the paper while Rick played his guitar.

"Remind me not to come down here again," Pancha said.

"Okay," her husband said. He was entering the freeway, intent on his mirrors. She knew he didn't take her seriously when she said this, because she had said it so many times. Besides, there were the children to consider. They deserved grandparents, even if one of them was a jerk.

They drove for another mile or two in silence. Pancha glanced back—Mark was already half-asleep, hanging against his safety strap, thumb in mouth and blanket pressed against his nose.

Rick put his cigarette out, very carefully, without taking his eyes off the road. The Sunday evening traffic was heavy.

"I'm feeling bad," she said. She wanted to talk, even if it was about being depressed.

"Any particular reason?" He sounded as if he were bored with the question.

"Just Daddy's little habit of pulling my chain. Like saying I'm starving you to death."

Her husband smiled, but she knew he knew better than to laugh.

"He was only kidding," he ventured.

"He never kids. You ought to know that by now."

"I suppose. I just wonder why you have to make so much out of a casual remark. Maybe you're reading something into it that just isn't there."

"It's there. I had to live with him for eighteen years. I ought to know."

"I guess."

"What doesn't help," she went on, "is that my own husband doesn't believe me. It's like you're on his side."

"All I'm saying is, don't assume that everything the man says is directed in some evil way at you. He was talking to me."

"About me."

"Okay."

"So I'm paranoid."

"I didn't say that."

They drove on. What was there to say that they hadn't said a thousand times? Don't let him get to you. Yes, *do* stop going down there. He will never love you, so stop expecting him to. Rick and Dr. Levin both. She knew it was true, but it wasn't enough to stop her from hoping that it wasn't. When she was born, her father had been in graduate school. She was the reason all he had was a master's, and that was why, when she stood at the door with her arms full of trophies, he had stared at her in surprise, almost as if she had been a stranger. She could still see him there. He had arched his lovely eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, and sighed—virtually in one motion—and had walked away on his dancer's legs.

"The door's open," he had said, which was a lie. The door had never been open. Never.

And Rick had a doctorate, which made matters worse. She was starving him and had given him so many children and so much trouble that he had quit teaching and gone to work for his father. Resigned his professorship on account of the scandal their marriage had caused at the college, and partly from sheer burnout, and they had left Utah, her beloved state, probably never to return and never to teach again because the teaching market had vanished and there were five hundred applicants for every job.

So now the great professor Rick was a lowly salesman who taught part-time at night at community colleges and delivered papers early in the morning when things got bad or worked at a friend's fast-food joint when things got terrible. And now she was starving him to death, because, as Dr. Levin so acutely pointed out, Rick was a sort of substitute for her father, had the same credentials, and more, and a lot of the same traits, and by marrying him and then subtly destroying him,

she could get back at the father she could never reach and punish. Which was a lot of psychological bull, but with just enough truth in it to hurt when you knew that if it were true you still couldn't stop yourself and would ruin him anyway.

And true to form, over the years Rick had changed from a self-confident, kinky, unpredictable, hell-bent brilliant writer into a responsible, unambitious Super-Dad, keeping to himself, reticent, even timid, in her always-depressed presence. Working as a salesman for his father, assuming more and more of the household duties with each child and each of her breakdowns, writing less and less, forgotten by all but a few of his old professional pals. He hadn't published anything in years, but he didn't complain; and now, if she asked him if he loved her, he would always say yes, but he would never say it spontaneously; in fact, he never had. He was just like her father, defeated by life but getting back at you in all sorts of petty ways. The same outrageous guy who had once tossed her pregnant into his car and drove her to San Francisco and dumped her on some strangers, because he had a career to pursue, was now reduced to a mouse who changed diarrhea diapers without a murmur and massaged her back night after night so she could sleep. And all she could do to keep from doing what she was doing was to kill herself, because nobody could make her behave anymore, not even herself.

Ugly thoughts, Pancha thought to herself as Rick made a smooth transition onto the other freeway. Ugly thoughts were a bad sign. Maybe she would get him to make love to her tonight, and for a few minutes she could forget—in the atmosphere of his total attention—what was happening to them.

"Why did you marry me?" she said, when the silence became too painful.

Rick glanced at her but said nothing. He looked like he might be about to change lanes, so he had an excuse for not answering right away. He had started the left flasher, but then thought better of it and flipped it off. For a moment, Pancha felt almost gleeful, watching him conceal his pondering so artfully. Under her watchful eye, he had become a genius at evasion.

"What do you want me to say?"

Perfect. Whatever she wanted. Not, "I married you because I was madly in love with you," or "Because I was hot for your body," or "Because you made me jealous." Nope. You name it, you got it. You have a kid, I'll raise it. You go crazy and go to the nut house, I'll pay for it. You're the boss. Just don't kill yourself and embarrass me.

"I was just wondering," she said. "There were lots of girls who were dying to go out with you."

"Tell me about it."

"There were."

"I guess." He was down to two words now and seemed inclined, as always, to reduce his response to zero.

"I don't see how you can love me after all I've put you through," she went on. "Saddling you with all these kids and bills, and then going crazy. Why don't you just get rid of me? You could probably find somebody who wouldn't give you half as much trouble."

"I doubt it."

Right. Not that he wouldn't like to. Oh no. Just that he had no confidence in himself. Not anymore.

"Do you love me?"

"Sure."

"Why don't you ever tell me?"

There was a pause, of course. There always was when she asked him *the* question, point blank. They were on the big freeway now, almost home; and Rick, ever the cautious driver, hugged the right-hand side. Pancha lit another cigarette.

"I guess I just forget to," he said. "I'm sorry."

Very good. But that still was not saying it, was it? He would say it if she forced him to, but tonight she didn't feel like it. She knew it would be a lie. Maybe he had loved her once, but not now. If you had to ask, if you didn't know, then you might as well not ask. And if you asked too often, you forced people to lie to you. And the more you asked the less they loved, because you wore them out with the asking.

It was impossible that he still loved her. He stayed with her because of the children, because he was too broke to do anything else, because he was just too passive to ever do anything about it. He will never change, Dr. Levin said. Never. Divorce him and save your life.

If I died or committed suicide, she thought, he would only be relieved. He already knew how to cook, clean, and take care of the children. He wouldn't even break stride.

Too bad, then. Stay alive and stay married and make him suffer. Get even. Wait for someone else to come along, and if that doesn't happen, too bad.

"Why did you hit me in the hospital?" she said. She could almost hear him stiffen as the words came out.

"Do we have to go into that again?" He was making his voice sound tired. His "poor Rick" routine.

"I still can't understand why you did it. Dr. Brown thinks you subconsciously wanted to kill me."

"It was an accident." He fished out a cigarette and lit it without taking his eyes off the road.

"It was pretty hard for an accident. Why didn't you just hold me until the nurses got there?"

"I *was* holding you. And the nurses *were* there. But you wouldn't stop attacking me. You were trying to get your hands on my throat."

"I don't see why the nurses couldn't keep me off you."

"They were trying. When we got you to the nurses' station they thought they had you, so they told me to leave. So I let go. But you broke away and attacked me again."

"So you slugged me."

"If you want to call it that. I caught you with my elbow. That's all there was to it."

She took a deep drag and let it drop. She had heard it all before, but that wasn't all there was to it. There was always more to everything. He was just afraid to dive down into the dirty water and look for the bodies on the bottom. The truth was that he hit her so hard the whole side of her face was black for a month. The truth was she remembered everything, every detail of the struggling and the screaming, the clawing and the warding off—as if she were holding movie film up to the light and examining it frame by frame. But because the blow when it came was so cold and deliberate, so lacking in passion—love or hate or anything—she knew at that instant of shock and pain that he did not love her, that he had no feeling for her whatsoever (which was scarier even than hate). And every time she brought it up, she was hoping he would admit it, express it, face it—something—for his sake as well as hers. She knew she had deserved the blow. She had even expected it. But to have it delivered so coldly was worse than punishment. It was like an ejaculation without an erection.

"Are you happy with me?" she said, after another mile.

"Sure."

"I still don't see why you don't just get rid of me," she said.

"Why should I do that?"

"So you can be happy."

"I'm happy enough."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"What if I go crazy again?"

"You won't."

"But what if I do?"

"If you do, you do. You're a lot better now than you were a year ago."

Better than what? she wondered, lighting another cigarette. What was the use? He made a game out of being evasive and noncommittal. Like Dr. Levin said, the real sickies were on the outside, not in the

hospital. There wouldn't even be hospitals if it weren't for all these cold-hearted so-called sane bastards who get their kicks by withholding love from people. That's why I was never really crazy, Pancha thought. I was just asking the wrong people for something they couldn't give; and because I loved them so easily, because love seemed like such a simple thing to ask for, I went nuts watching them fail at this elementary task—when really I shouldn't have bothered to ask in the first place, like Dr. Levin said. Why bother? Rick, Papa, even Gloria—they obviously don't need or want my love. All they want is my obedience or my body or my attention; and when I can't give any more, they make me feel guilty until I go crazy, and then they put me in the hospital so they won't have to deal with what they've done.

But they've underestimated me, Pancha concluded. All of them. Even sweet Dr. Levin, who really didn't believe I'd act on his advice. They've underestimated how far I'll go to find true happiness. They don't realize that I'm willing, deep down, to leave all of them, *and* the Church, and even—if it comes to that—the kids—to achieve it. That's my secret, my ace in the hole. The only question is when I'll find the strength to play it.

Besides, I'm the only one crazy enough to do it, end it, screw it, Pancha thought, as she stared at the frantic freeway, sucking on her Virginia Slim. The rest of them are just muddling through, making the best of a bad situation, maintaining, adjusting, coping—all those terrible words. Carrying on the madness indefinitely and passing it to the kids. Glorious martyrs, not even aware of how depressed they are.

You've come a long way, baby, she chuckled to herself. But you've still got a long, long way to go.

Now, if I could just quit smoking, Pancha thought. That would really be something.