

My Tocaya

Have you seen this girl? You must've seen her in the papers. Or then again at Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2 on Nogalitos. Patricia Bernadette Benavidez, my *tocaya*, five feet, 115 pounds, thirteen years old.

Not that we were friends or anything like that. Sure we talked. But that was before she died and came back from the dead. Maybe you read about it or saw her on TV. She was on all the news channels. They interviewed anyone who knew her. Even the p.e. teacher who *had* to say nice things—*She was full of energy, a good kid, sweet*. Sweet as could be, considering she was a freak. Now why didn't anyone ask me?

Patricia Benavidez. The "son" half of Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2 even before the son quit. That's how this Trish inherited the paper hat and white apron after school and every weekend, bored, a little sad, behind the high counters where customers ate standing up like horses.

That wasn't enough to make me feel sorry for her, though, even if her father *was* mean. But who could blame him? A girl who wore rhinestone earrings and glitter high heels to school was destined

for trouble that nobody—not God or correctional institutions—could mend.

I think she got double promoted somewhere and that's how come she wound up in high school before she had any business being here. Yeah, kids like that always try too hard to fit in. Take this *tocaya*—same name as me, right? But does she call herself *la Patee*, or *Patty*, or something normal? No, she's gotta be different. Says her name's "Tri-ish." Invented herself a phony English accent too, all breathless and sexy like a British Marilyn Monroe. Real goofy. I mean, whoever heard of a Mexican with a British accent? Know what I mean? The girl had problems.

But if you caught her alone, and said, *Pa-trrri-see-ah*—I always made sure I said it in Spanish—*Pa-trrri-see-ah, cut the bull crap and be for real*. If you caught her without an audience, I guess she was all right.

That's how I managed to put up with her when I knew her, just before she ran away. Disappeared from a life sentence at that taco house. Got tired of coming home stinking of crispy tacos. Well, no wonder she left. I wouldn't want to stink of crispy tacos neither.

Who knows what she had to put up with. Maybe her father beat her. He beat the brother, I know that. Or at least they beat each other. It was one of those fist fights that finally did it—drove the boy off forever, though probably he was sick of stinking of tacos too. That's what I'm thinking.

Then a few weeks after the brother was gone, this *tocaya* of mine had her picture in all the papers, just like the kids on milk cartons:

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

Patricia Bernadette Benavidez, 13, has been missing since Tuesday, Nov. 11, and her family is extremely worried. The

girl, who is a student at Our Lady of Sorrows High School, is believed to be a runaway and was last seen on her way to school in the vicinity of Dolorosa and Soledad. Patricia is 5', 115 lbs., and was wearing a jean jacket, blue plaid uniform skirt, white blouse, and high heels [*glitter probably*] when she disappeared. Her mother, Delfina Benavidez, has this message: "Honey, call Mommy y te quiero mucho."

Some people.

What did I care Benavidez disappeared? Wouldn't've. If it wasn't for Max Lucas Luna Luna, senior, Holy Cross, our brother school. They sometimes did exchanges with us. Teasers is what they were. Sex Rap Crap is what we called it, only the sisters called them different—Youth Exchanges. Like where they'd invite some of the guys from Holy Cross over here for Theology, and some of us girls from Sorrows would go over there. And we'd pretend like we were real interested in the issue "The Blessed Virgin: Role Model for Today's Young Woman," "Petting: Too Far, Too Fast, Too Late," "Heavy Metal and the Devil." Shit like that.

Not every day. Just once in a while as kind of an experiment. Catholic school was afraid of putting us all together too much, on account of hormones. That's what Sister Virginella said. If you can't conduct yourselves like proper young ladies when our guests arrive, we'll have to suspend our Youth Exchanges indefinitely. No whistling, grabbing, or stomping in the future, *is that clear?!!!*

Alls I know is he's got these little hips like the same size since he was twelve probably. Little waist and little ass wrapped up neat and sweet like a Hershey bar. Damn! That's what I remember.

Turns out Max Lucas Luna Luna lives next door to the freak. I mean, I never even bothered talking to Patricia Benavidez before, even though we were in the same section of General Business. But she comes up to me one day in the cafeteria when I'm waiting for my french fries and goes:

"Hey, *tocaya*, I know someone who's got the hots for you."

"Yeah, right," I says, trying to blow her off. I don't want to be seen talking to no flake.

"You know a guy named Luna from Holy Cross, the one who came over for that Theology exchange, the cute one with the ponytail?"

"So's?"

"Well, he and my brother Ralphie are tight, and he told Ralphie not to tell nobody but he thinks Patricia Chávez is real fine."

"You lie, girl."

"Swear to God. If you don't believe me, call my brother Ralphie."

Shit! That was enough to make me Trish Benavidez's best girlfriend for life, I swear. After that, I *always* made sure I got to General Business class early. Usually she'd have something to tell me, and if she didn't, I made sure to give her something to pass on to Max Lucas Luna Luna. But it was painful slow on account of this girl worked so much and didn't have no social life to speak of.

That's how this Patricia Bernadette got to be our messenger of luh-uv for a while, even though me and Max Lucas Luna Luna hadn't gotten beyond the I-like-you/Do-you-like-me stage. Hadn't so much as seen each other since the rap crap, but I was working on it.

I knew they lived somewhere in the Monte Vista area. So I'd ride my bike up and down streets—Magnolia, Mulberry, Huisache, Mistletoe—wondering if I was hot or cold. Just knowing Max Lucas Luna Luna might appear was enough to make my blood laugh.

The week I start dropping in at Father & Son's Taco Palace No. 2, is when she decides to skip. First we get an announcement over the intercom from Sister Virginella. *I am sorry to have to announce one of our youngest and dearest students has strayed from home. Let us keep her in our hearts and in our prayers until her safe return.* That's when she first got her picture in the paper with her ma's weepy message.

Personally it was no grief or relief to me she escaped so clean.

That's for sure. But as it happened, she owed me. Bad enough she skips and has the whole school talking. At least *then* I had hope she'd make good on her promise to hook me up with Max Lucas Luna Luna. But just when I could say her name again without spitting, she goes and dies. Some kids playing in a drain ditch find a body, and yeah, it's her. When the TV cameras arrive at our school, there go all them drama hot shits howling real tears, even the ones that didn't know her. Sick.

Well, I couldn't help but feel bad for the dip once she's dead, right? I mean, after I got over being mad. Until she rose from the dead three days later.

After they've featured her ma crying into a wrinkled handkerchief and her dad saying, "She was my little princess," and the student body using money from our Padre Island field-trip fund to buy a bouquet of white gladiolus with a banner that reads VIRGENCITA, CÚDALA, and the whole damn school having to go to a high mass in her honor, my *tocaya* outdoes herself. Shows up at the downtown police station and says, I ain't dead.

Can you believe it? Her parents had identified the body in the morgue and everything. "I guess we were too upset to examine the body properly." Ha!

I never did get to meet Max Lucas Luna Luna, and who cares, right? All I'm saying is she couldn't even die right. But whose famous face is on the front page of the *San Antonio Light*, the *San Antonio Express News*, and the *Southside Reporter*? Girl, I'm telling you.

There