



Macaroons

Author(s): Olga Nolla and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Puerto Rican Women Writers (Summer, 1994), pp. 944-950

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931882>

Accessed: 22/09/2013 21:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Callaloo*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

MACAROONS

By Olga Nolla

It was summer and boredom stiffened around us like cardboard. So much so, that well-to-do children made war planes with the words spoken by their bejewelled mothers, busy fanning themselves on the patios while sucking on mangoes. In the house they had inherited from their parents, the two old maids puffed and huffed under a humid heat which respected neither the inner patios nor the galleries protected by blinds; no hint of a sea breeze stirred the palm trees or the clinging vines, one breathed an air heavy as lead and it was a nuisance to make coffee or wash the sheets of Irish linen they had painstakingly embroidered with their own hands. They refused the orders for cakes and candied yolks, Aunt Dora and Aunt Pilar, they who draped Sevillian shawls around them on December afternoons, but this August they couldn't bring themselves to do a thing, they sat on the front porch, rocking their drowsiness, watching people go by and gossiping gossiping gossiping: Arcilla's daughter was seen alone in the movies with a boy, everyone saw them, what are people going to say, someone should speak to her mother about it, why doesn't she lock her up at home to prevent a scandal. Don Goyo's niece should get a good spanking, I hear she was dancing very tightly with Juanito, the pharmacist's son, at the Casino dance, yes, I've always said so, Dora, that girl will end badly like Clarita who people say was sent away supposedly to school so she could get rid of her baby without anyone knowing about it because her family are very well-to-do people, those women are always showing off around town, the Garcías de la Torre are the Garcías de la Torre, all the sisters paragons of virtue, exemplary wives, but between you and me, there are tales to be told about the youngest, the one who married the American, who do they think they are, do they think that because their father is so rich and powerful they can do anything they want? And they are such misers to boot, Benedicta, the girl who used to work in Esmeralda's house said that her mistress kept everything under lock and key and the help hardly had anything to eat, she even measured the rice, not to mention the pork chops, only one per person, and the servants had to eat saltfish. Benedicta told me she had to sleep in a decrepit hovel over the garage, and when the master and mistress went out in the evening she couldn't go to bed until they returned, and many times she fell asleep on the floor at the foot of the children's bed, little angels she said they were. Little Carlos was very naughty but a good boy deep down; Benedicta says they've sent him to school in Switzerland, and when he returns he will no longer remember us because they say he has become a true European and won't like it here any longer, he is going to stay in Madrid or Paris for sure. The Garcías de la Torre are like that, they think that the best thing for their

Callaloo 17.3 (1994) 944-950

children is to marry them off to European aristocrats, such airs, and yet, would you believe it, the grandfather doesn't even like to travel. They say that when he went to Europe for the first time, he took all his twelve children with him and could hardly wait to return to his cane fields. But the man is truly a gentleman, so affectionate to his workers, even though

Dora, do you remember the day he came over, all dressed in white like a starched dove, holding a loaf of bread under his arm?

The aunts sighed and moistened their embroidered handkerchiefs in bay rum to freshen their foreheads. They kept their small handkerchiefs cocooned between their big virgin breasts and often took them out to dry the sweat which moistened their down. As adolescents they had loved Don Abelardo García de la Torre from afar, when he used to ride up and down the street on a chestnut-colored *paso fino* horse. From the same porch where they now comforted themselves sharing tales of other people's lives, they would watch him display his skill and mastery as a rider with his two pistols framing his sweet and gentle gaze, since when he looked at women his haughtiness dissolved like a cotton ball slowly being stretched between one's fingers. He liked well-built women with shapely legs and delicate dark skin. Very light-skinned blonde women are like rabbits, he used to say, and he had never liked red-eyed rabbits wrinkling their noses, such ugly ugly things, as a child he only liked big dogs and horses. And then, he would insist, as a connoisseur in such matters, that solid legs were indispensable to the balance of a well-built structure. His friends laughed when he discussed these matters so seriously, as it was difficult to ascertain whether legs were strong or skinny under women's long and broad feminine skirts. But the fact is that Don Abelardo García de la Torre had a good eye for women and ended up marrying an extremely beautiful creole with splendid legs and solid character. Don Abelardo adored her, and together they enriched the family lineage with perfectly healthy and extremely beautiful children.

Aunt Dora and Aunt Pilar were never favorites of his. They were short and big-breasted with undernourished-chicken legs. And yet, since his manhood never allowed him to completely dismiss any woman, he always had an amiable word for them. On special days, *Oh, happiness*, when the humid breeze conferred on skins a velvet-like pearly brilliance, Don Abelardo gave them approving looks and made flirtatious remarks. The few beaux they had had met with glacial resistance. The sisters thought little of the pale and skinny bank employee who courted Pilar, neither did they like the Spanish restaurant owner who talked incessantly and worked like a mule. The Galician was looking for an industrious and honest woman from a good family, he wasn't interested in fragile-porcelain beauties, and Pilar and Dora were paragons in that respect. They made exquisite desserts and were known for being the best cooks in town. As they had grown older the few single men available had stopped visiting them, and they had dedicated themselves to perfecting their domestic arts with a vengeance . . .

Pilar, poor Pilar
 He never asked you to dance
 You never even knew the touch of his fine hand
 Dora, Oh Dora, you should have married the Galician, girl, you
 would now be rich and have many children, but the Spaniard
 married a little peasant girl from Maricao who used to work in the
 kitchen and tied her hair back with a blue-striped scarf, she
 cooked all day even though she was the owner's wife, which
 didn't keep her from having eight children, how amazing, Pilar
 used to say

Dora unconsciously caressed her belly with the back of her withered hand, feeling a
 centuries-old emptiness at the tip of her fingers while sands of crushed glass scraped
 her bedroom door; then, just then

Pilar, Pilar, the birthday cake for little Graciela,
 Rosaura García de la Torre's daughter, has to be ready
 on Friday, isn't it so, isn't it so, Pilar
 We have that commission for Friday, and the macaroons and
 the tuttifrutti lard cakes
 How delicious

and Dora and Pilar delivered their beautifully-laid trays covered in wax paper so the
 air wouldn't dry their sugar-and-egg-yolk gems. The big chauffeur-driven car would
 come for the trays bearing the fruit of hours of painstaking labor aimed at hungry little
 mouths and the praises of mothers who never ceased hovering over children dressed
 like lace dolls or little sailors. Through the years Dora and Pilar had fed the greedy
 little mouths of the Garcías de la Torre and always took extra pains in preparing these
 birthday parties, Don Abelardo already had thirty-five grandchildren, such beautiful
 creatures, you knew right away that the spark of those brilliant eyes and the turned-
 up noses were clear indications of their grandfather's blood.

It's the family air, Dora, did you notice the good taste with which the eldest
 granddaughter has chosen her trousseau? They say the wedding will be in November,
 we have to start embroidering the monograms, María Cristina absolutely insisted on
 the French design in silver grey and pink, but Luisita wanted a simple pattern of
 drawn work with a few blue flowers on the edges. The mother is headstrong, but the
 daughter doesn't seem to want to give in, don't you think? They have been assembling
 the trousseau for months and they say that sometimes Luisita gets so riled she's
 impossible to manage. María Cristina pinches Luisita and drags her by the arm to the
 waiting car. Luisita says no, she doesn't want that junk, why would she want all those
 things, all she wants is to go to bed with a man even if she has to get married to do it.

Eusebio told you that. Eusebio was driving the car that day and came back the
 following afternoon to pick up the dress we embroidered for Graciela Inés' little one,
 who is a real beauty, truly a doll, she doesn't even complain when they starch her
 organza and never soils her white shoes

Luisita was always bad, remember how on her ninth birthday she fed the macaroons to the dogs? By the time María Cristina realized it there were none left for the guests, they were so delicious!
 They had come out so perfectly that time!
 She had to open a tin of Holland cookies, the poor thing, such an embarrassment!
 Hey, Pilar, speaking of the devil

Suffocated, Dora fanned herself with a cardboard fan and rocked faster in her chair. Pilar gripped the arms of the rickety rocking chair when she saw Luisita in riding breeches and boots standing on the sidewalk across the street as if waiting impatiently for someone, switching her weight from her right foot to the left, counting the huge nails on the old warehouse. In the shadow of the zinc eaves her white blouse absorbed the blushing sparkles of the slanted light. Dora and Pilar fluttered their fans faster and faster and their rocking chairs creaked with renewed intensity. The squeaks mounted over the five-o'clock heat, one on top of the other forming a mountain of small and miserable echoes. Pilar, Luisita seems to have been horseback riding, yes, she seems to have inherited her fondness for riding from her grandfather and her great-great-aunt Graciela. The dried-out eyes of the two old women could not tear themselves away from the slim figure now impatiently caressing and uncombing—uncombed herself—the light-post, black and rough and scarred by the nails of the Electric Company workmen who often climbed its worn-out sides to tie and untie cables. Luisita suddenly stopped and poked the dust on the pavement with the tip of her boot. There were few people around because it was Sunday and on Sunday afternoons the streets assumed the desolate look of those who have accepted disillusionment, she poked the dust with her head bent and the disorder of her black curls fell on her face. From the porch, camouflaged by the small garden of posies and rose bushes, the two old women could not distinguish Luisita's fine features, but they could glimpse a restlessness in disarray, as if the world sleeping in dejected lethargy had stirred, uncomfortably and increasingly vexed, unable to decide whether to awaken, trying to settle into a position that would allow it to unravel time. Something knotted itself clumsily at this stage of its haul and the old women felt uneasy, yet tingling with an exaltation that their skins thought forgotten. Luisita was very much like her grandfather, the way she stood so straight looking ahead, the tenderness warmly held back behind a haughtiness acquired through habit or necessity, who knows, they didn't know about these things, it's just that sometimes they felt a blindfold cover their eyes and then, they who were privy to all that happened in town didn't seem to know anything at all. Luisita now looked rigid, as if making a terrible effort. As they looked towards the beach they saw a somewhat short but very strong young man approach Luisita. He walked straight towards her and looked at her without blinking.

Wringing their faded skirts, the old women understood even less when, now standing very close to each other, Luisita and Manuel, yes, it was Manuel the son of Don Abelardo's best-loved overseer, eyed each other slowly, without moving their

lips, running their eyes through each other's face, hair, torso and legs, hands, their dusty shoes, searching into each other, inch by inch. They kissed. She kissed all the hollows of his body while it hurt him to breathe and goblins flew through his fingers. A wire with rusted barbs encircled their minutes, minutes made up of the rolls of wire that Dora and Pilar used to watch go by in the trucks heading for the farms in the valley (they had thrown their cardboard fans to the floor and sat motionless in their wicker chairs). Then the young people's lips began to move and exchange brief phrases like threats slipped under a pillow

Manuel . . .
Luisita . . .
Manuel . . .
Luisita . . .

Aunt Dora and Aunt Pilar could not hear the words. Was it farewell, a pistol pointed at the chest or a kneeling down on the searing gravel of high noon? Promise or renunciation, Manuel and Luisita, tense like fabric taut on an embroidery frame ready for the needle, turned their backs on each other and walked in opposite directions.

For the first time in their lives, Aunt Dora and Aunt Pilar sat in silence. They didn't run to the telephone to tell everyone what they had seen, they didn't let loose their nimble tongues on the who-would-have-thought, just imagine, you-wouldn't-believe-what-I've-just-seen. They sat watching the empty street until it grew dark, and only then did Dora comment that it was beginning to cool down and got up to close the small gate leading to the sidewalk. The house was shrouded in darkness, but the light of the street lamp was enough to guide her down the steps and across the small garden. On one corner a pumpkin plant stretched itself leisurely. No one had planted it, it had fallen from the sky and settled there, germinating in beautiful offsprings which climbed the wall and embraced the earth. Dora knew they would never uproot it, that it would take over the entire garden and porch, and would cover the roof displaying its yellow pumpkins hanging from the eaves and perfuming the galleries. They dined little, and before they retired to their crisp clean beds (What an obsession, Aunt Pilar!) they spent a few hours lovingly embroidering the bedclothes for Luisita's trousseau. They drew the sky-blue flowers and shaped the edges with special care. The big initials, dark blue and unmistakable, were forever joined to the soft Irish linen. It was close to eleven when they put their needlework aside to turn out the lights. Then, as if awakening from an ancestral reverie, Pilar recited aloud an elusive memory:

Graciela García de la Torre spent long sleepless nights under her mosquito net, watching the moon wane until it disappeared. In those very dark nights

(Pilar, Pilar, you're warbling like a lark in heat)

she slipped her naked feet out of bed and tiptoed past the large bedrooms of the hacienda where her parents and family slept. Eluding even the sharp ears of her slave nanny, she went into the stables pungent with sweat and excrement

(so quietly? Aunt Pilar, how wondrous!)

Her eyes sparkling, she saddled the black colt that was hers, only hers, calling it honeysuckle and caressing its powerful neck. She rode out through secret paths accompanied by the affection of the dogs and the concert of the crickets until she left the house far behind. Then she galloped happily and laughing, her hair loose, riding like a man in the direction of a certain beach where the smugglers would be loading their sailboats under the cover of darkness. For more than an hour, she galloped against the wind and the solitude till she reached it. Under the palm trees the men carried on their usual business, but she saw no one but him waiting for her and lifting her from her mount he embraced her tenderly

(Dora, oh Dora, you are golden and transparent
like caramel in flan)

Graciela García de la Torre escaped from her parent's hacienda many a night to meet the pirate that enraptured her. She would return just before dawn and, as if by enchantment, no one ever realized that she was gone. Only Arsenio, the old slave, noticed the sweat on the horse, but he kept silent. His loyalty never faltered

(why are you lifting the edges of your hem
why Pilar, watch out!)

not even on the night Graciela didn't return; she had sailed away with her lover and was never heard from again. The Spanish authorities could not comfort the desperate parents, who cried for years over the disappearance of the most beautiful and most gentle daughter the neighbors could remember.

oh, oh . . . the most, the most . . .

Dora and Pilar felt like singing softly, only to themselves, the memories circling around them. Not things they truly remembered, but memories which had slipped through the years like sloping streams. They returned to their bedrooms to spend the night with eyes open wide, counting the boards on the ceiling.

And it could be that they cried

Aunt Dora

Aunt Pilar

in the sad dawn of their sterile wombs
their milkless and uncaressed breasts

From that day on they worked with zeal on Luisita's trousseau and when she got married, on the 12th of November to the beat of two orchestras and flowing rivers of champagne, to the son of a rich planter from Guayanilla, she had a bridal chest that was the envy of all her friends and cousins. Even the shrewdest among them could not understand why sometimes Luisita looked towards the sea and a sad and frightened shadow lurked in the fire of her black eyes.

The breeze now blew softly and the fans were put away until the following summer, the air was clean and resplendent, but when darkness descended over life's sleeping body the mirrors did not shatter the reflections as they had done before, back when the wind pushed the silhouettes of Aunt Dora and Aunt Pilar, barefoot little girls gliding through the nights of the old decaying mansion with the ivory-like candles between their soft fingers. Now the light bulbs, covered in grey dust, were

CALLALO

immune to the wind, and the silhouettes did not recognize its irruption into the centuries. Static and firm, the shadows sketched the traces of desolation.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert