

33 and a 1/3

by Maggie Sokolik

I've been in Tucson two days, and so far most of my conversations with my father have taken place while I crane my neck and squint into the sun. I scream up, he screams down.

He needs to fix the leaky roof before the rainy season, he says. I didn't know there was a rainy season, I say, and he just laughs.

Down here, there's a birdbath, dry and cracked, and an assortment of cacti, equally uninviting--two saguaros, arms outstretched, offering a spiny hug, and three barrel cacti that look like giant pincushions. The backyard is gravel--not grass--and the only thing that looks like it needs water is the explosion of purple and orange desert lantana, hiding behind an unused doghouse near the tall cedar fence. The doghouse says "Spider" above the door. I suspect there are spiders inside.

Gita must be up, because the wail of a sad country song sneaks through the closed windows--a female voice I don't recognize. It's not Patsy--something more modern. They've been married six months, Dad and Gita, but we've known Gita for years. Their marriage came as a shock. Dad says they crossed paths at K-Mart and it was fate. He doesn't know the half of it.

I came to Tucson to see if he knows even a quarter of it, although it took me six months to build up the nerve. I did send a gift promptly, though. Gita's awake, I yell at Dad, and he says he'll be right down. I've missed another opportunity to talk to him alone.

Breakfast consists of iced tea and pink Mexican pastries. They're sweet but dry, and I gulp down glass after glass of tea. Gita suggests going out for dinner tonight, Mexican, of course. All we've eaten for two days is Mexican, but I like it well enough, so I agree. Dad smiles broadly, and tells me I should speak only Spanish at the restaurant. The waiters flip over blondes who speak Spanish, he says. I smile agreeably, but wonder why he's always trying to pawn me off on dry cleaners, grocery clerks, and waiters. You'd think he'd

have grander ambitions. My Spanish isn't that good, anyway. The subjunctive has always eluded me.

This was Gita's house before Dad moved in. She's kept two of the bedrooms for herself. She needs space to work on her songs and paintings. She's a real songwriter; she won a Grammy when I was a teenager. Her paintings aren't to my taste, though, all desert landscapes and Western motifs--the kind of decor that was once popular but now looks cliché in the Northwest, where I live. I guess it works here. The couches are beige leather, and the walls are concrete block, painted "Sundown Orange," Gita's favorite color. There's a lot of wrought iron--a candelabra, picture frames, and a coffee table, black and in need of dusting. Near the ceiling there are some shelves covered with *muertos*, Mexican skeleton figurines that play a role in a religious ceremony, kind of like Halloween, I guess. At least that's how Gita explained it. Gita isn't Mexican. She changed her name from Greta.

At breakfast there's no talk about marriages, or divorces. My husband, Tim the Accountant, as Dad calls him, left me three months ago to join the Peace Corps. He's in the Ivory Coast, digging latrines. My father hated him. And I still haven't said anything to Dad about Gita and my mother.

I ask Gita if she has a Patsy record. She says she doesn't. She puts on Tish Hinojosa, which will do.

Of course, my parents are crazy. Thirty years after the fact, my father still blames their divorce on Lee Harvey Oswald. He says if Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, Ma would never have gotten it into her head to pack up and go. An interesting theory, I guess, if you are totally nuts. Their own private *Rashomon*. Ma says she had been planning to leave for months, that it was a coincidence that Kennedy was shot that day. Dad was always out of town, always late, and never around when she needed him.

Dad says that Ma was drunk out of her mind, dressed like a clown at a debutantes' ball, nearly burned the house down, and didn't know what she was saying. All I know is Dad won't face the truth even now, and Ma holds onto her bitterness like it was a

precious family heirloom.

Me, I'm sick of being the go-between. But here I am again, going between. Ever since I heard about his marriage to Gita, I have been trying to think of a way to tell him—about my childhood, about the real reason for their divorce. How unfair is it to know more than your parents do about their lives? I wonder: If I had a child, would she know why Tim prefers digging latrines to sharing a bed with me?

The last lines of “Let Me Remember,” sigh from the stereo: “Let me remember, let me remember my own way...”. Dad says he's going to work on the deck. I consider following him--on the deck we'd almost be face to face. I stay back, though, and collect the saucers and glasses. Gita stays at the table. I fill the sink with hot soapy water and ask her if Dad knows. She pauses, and then she shakes her head, rearranging the pink pastry crumbs on the bare tabletop. I ask her why not, and she says there is never a good time. I picture Dad up on the roof day after day, and nod. She asks if I'm doing okay without Tim, and I say I'm not sure.

I don't remember November 22, 1963 the way that many people do. I was only seven. Gita--then Greta--picked me up from school and took me to her house. She said Ma would be over later, and that we were going to live with her from now on. I giggled and hopped up and down, dropping my lunchbox. Gita's house was so much better than ours. Ours was dark and smelled of gin and cigarettes. Gita's had bay windows that faced the river. Our back yard had ants and dead grass and Sigmund's dog shit. Gita's had a tree you could climb and a soft green lawn you could roll in without getting dirty. You could even go out on her roof if you were careful. It had a flat place where you could lie naked in the sun and the neighbors couldn't see you, but you could see them.

Gita showed me my new bedroom, which had once been the pantry. All the shelves were gone, and it was painted my favorite color, lavender. A new white chenille spread covered the narrow bed. My clothes were already put away in the white three-drawer dresser. Christina, my doll, sat on a lacy lavender pillow. I asked Gita

if I could see Ma's bedroom, and she explained that they would be sharing a room, since there was only one. I wondered how Ma, Dad, and Gita were going to fit into one bedroom, but I felt too stupid to ask.

Of course, Dad never moved in. In fact, he never even visited. On days when I saw him, he just pulled up in his blue Ford Falcon and honked the horn. I dashed out, not wanting to make him wait, waving at Ma and Gita, clutching my pink Barbie overnight case that held my pajamas and clean underwear.

I finish washing the glasses and place them to dry on a red dishtowel. Gita asks if I know she has a new song coming out. I tell her I hadn't heard, and she says it's called "33 and a 1/3," would I like to hear it? I nod, and she presses a button on the stereo.

The voice is unfamiliar, but I don't interrupt to ask who it is.

My life in the fast lane
Has grown quite absurd.
I've crowded you out,
I've broken my word.
But I'll slow down my life,
You may not have heard,
I'll make room for you
At thirty-three and a third.

Who's the singer? I finally ask. Gita says I wouldn't know her, a newcomer. I like it, I say, and start humming the melody, which I think is sweet but a little sad.

Dad is on the roof again. I don't feel like staring into the sun, so I won't say anything to him. It can wait until dinner, or tomorrow.

The host at Huapango's knows Gita and Dad. He slaps them both on the back and calls them Señor Sedge and Señora Gita. He asks who I am, and Dad tells him, so he calls me Señorita "Ma-ooh-rah." I say that his *restaurante* is *muy hermoso*, and he claps his

hands and grins.

Gita orders margaritas for all of us. The icy tequila burns my throat. I finish it and another appears. A waiter in a red matador's suit takes our order. I start to ask for the chicken in mole sauce, but Dad jabs me with his elbow and says, in Spanish, in Spanish. So I ask for *el pollo en mole, por favor*, although I don't know if I've said it right. The waiter nods, though he doesn't look as impressed as Dad seemed to think he would be.

How's your mother doing? Gita asks. I say fine, but wonder where she is going with this, or where she is leading me. Dad adjusts his black leather bolo, and looks around and says, where is that waiter? We need more chips.

The chip basket is still two-thirds full. Have you heard from Tim? Dad asks. I say no, and tell him that Ma has found a job as a copy editor for a crossword puzzle magazine. She corrects the clues, I add. Gita says that Ma always did like crossword puzzles, and Dad asks if Tim gets paid for being in the Peace Corps. I know he's really asking about alimony, but I haven't told him I don't want any, even though I lost my job as a meteorologist at the radio station. I say Tim does get paid, but I don't know how much. Gita asks if Ma is living in the same old house, and I say she is, but she's having it remodeled. Dad asks if I'm planning to visit Tim, and I'm about to scream, *why should I*, but dinner arrives and I shove my mouth full of mole. It's spicy and chocolaty, with a hint of garlic and nuts.

After dinner, Mexican coffees appear and I say *muchas gracias* to the waiter, who stares over the top of my head. I trace the letter 'F' in a pile of spilled salt. The mariachis ask Gita to sing--the song she won the Grammy for--"Mi Hermana." Gita tells them that I know the song, too, and she grabs me by the arms. Dad is smiling again. He's sitting up straight with his chest out, the way the army taught him.

The vihuela player strums the opening bars, and the customers break into applause. I'm not nervous, although I normally suffer stage fright. The words come back to me like a childhood rhyme.

Mi hermana, my darling,
El sol y la luna,
Mi hermana, I love you,
Tu eres mi vida.

We finish the song, and Dad has tears in his eyes. He is sentimental, and I love that about him. As we sit down, Gita grabs one of my hands, and Dad the other, and I can see the ideal time and place for me to tell him the truth about Ma and Gita.

It will be tomorrow morning. Dad will be kneeling in the garden, transplanting cacti. He'll be wearing leather gloves, gently tugging at the miniature nopales that he's growing to eat. Nopalitos are good with scrambled eggs, he will say, and I will--right at that moment--tell him the facts as I know them. He'll nod, then say he's sorry he asked me about Tim last night, and I'll shrug and say that's okay.

