

## *The Red Dress*

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Rafael rides his bike to work even when it's ten degrees and the frozen slush is criss-crossed with deep ruts. His friends make fun of him, asking Raf why he needs to be in such good shape. Doesn't Rita give him a workout at home?

All of Rafael's friends have cars, even if it's only a rust-bucket held together with gray duct tape and novenas to the Holy Mother. His buddies are still single. They have nothing to worry about but their cars, and no one to care for except sometimes each other. None of them knows about saving money and keeping the same woman happy for longer than one summer. They shoot pool and drink beer and buy silky shirts as if they will still be doing these things when they are old men who put their teeth in a glass.

In February, as the streets become icy with melted snow, Rafael lets more air out of the big balloon tires on his old red-and-white Schwinn. He calculates how much he saves on his way to work. The thought keeps him warm. He pictures the cream-colored blouse he is going to buy for Rita's name day and the Golden Book he will get for little Madelina. She will sit in his lap and read it to him, making up her own story for the bright pictures. And the next time she reads the story to

him, it will be different. That is how Rafael knows what Madelina is thinking about. He does not have to ask; he only needs to listen.

Rita knows Raf does not listen to her when she tells him he should get a new bike, a racer with hand brakes and skinny tires. “I like the old one,” he says. “I don’t have to worry someone will steal it. It’s good enough.” His favorite words.

He is a good man, a good husband and father, but his attitude makes Rita crazy. He wears his blue jeans and torn sweatshirts until they are too thin to wash the floor with them. Rita tries not to complain too much. Her friends laugh at her when she tells them she wishes Rafael was more selfish. They tease her, saying they will be happy to trade husbands with her, although Lucie probably means it. They tell her they are ready, whenever she is tired of being treated like a famous actress.

She knows her friends talk about her. They think Raf spoils her. And sometimes, when she and her friends sit around the kitchen table squabbling like hens, one of them teases too far and it comes out.

Rita thinks Rafael is not always honest with her. She watches him when they meet his friends outside *El Gato Negro*. Their chests out like roosters, they lean against Roberto’s lipstick-red Mazda, rubbing their hard thighs against the flawless metal skin.

Rita wonders, *Do they think no one sees them?*

She knows Raf wants a fast and flashy car like Roberto's. He is a man. But Rita cannot persuade him even to look at a new bicycle. She wonders if he does this to hurt her; because he is already tired of her after five years of marriage.

Five summers ago Rafael bought her a sleek red dress of material so shiny it looked almost metallic.

Rita loves the dress. It is cut low and rides up on her thighs, conforming to her like the cool, damp towel she wraps around herself after a shower. She puts on the big chrome earrings he gave her for Christmas, the ones that look like little hubcaps.

After dark she and Rafael go out for a stroll on Fordham Road to enjoy the breeze that bypasses their sweltering apartment. Heads turn like compasses. The men leer at her like she is a red Corvette.

But Rita loves the shiny dress and the chrome earrings Rafael gave her. That is the whole problem. And whenever she thinks of the red dress, she slips into the memory of the first time she wore it.

It is the last sultry Saturday in August. Rafael comes home from his job at the cabinet factory on Webster Avenue soaked with sweat. Rita knows he has raced his bike straight home without stopping to refresh himself at *El Gato Negro*.

Rita pushes him away with her fingertips. He smells vinegary from the oak shavings in his tousled hair and the sawdust stuck to his sweaty skin. He looks tired, but Rita has waited all week to go dancing in her new red dress.

While Rafael showers and shaves, Rita braids her thick black hair in a single plait down her back. She watches Raf put on a clean pair of jeans and a white cotton shirt. He would be embarrassed if he knew how handsome and sexy she finds him.

Rita slips into the red dress. The shimmering fabric is cool and sleek like water, like water that's on fire.

Raf slowly pulls the silver tongue of the zipper up the curve of Rita's back. His fingers linger at the nape of her neck, playing with the damp wisps that have escaped her braid. His rough hands slide over her shoulders and down her arms, the downy hairs prickling where he touches her. Rita shudders. A chill inches up her spine.

They slide to the floor and roll onto the carpet her mother gave them as a wedding present, overtaken by the fever of a summer night. The air grows muggy, liquid, so thick it is audible, the molecules rubbing against one another like lazy beetles.

Rafael pulls off his cotton shirt and unbuttons his jeans. Rita pulls down her soaked underpants and Raf slides the shiny red dress up her thighs. They do not undress any further; they are in a hurry to make their love last all night.

When the fever has burnt through them, they have no inclination to get up from the floor. Rita and Raf lie against each other on their backs, their skin now cool, the carpet prickly. The

curtains, translucent with streetlight, flutter over them on the breeze like the languid ghost of summer's night. They fall asleep among the shadows of the billows and folds.

That night they made little Madelina, there on the carpet, wearing her sleek red dress and earrings like tiny chrome hubcaps. Rita loves that dress so much there are times she'd like to burn it, especially when Raf's friends look at her like they're looking at themselves in her showroom gleam.

*Don't flatter yourselves, Rita thinks. You are only men. All men are in love with their cars. Do you think a shine lasts forever?*

Rita puts Madelina to bed and stands at the window. She melts a hole in the leafy frost with her warm palm, and looks down the street for Rafael on his bike. But it is too early. She sits on the sofa, her feet snuggled under the worn velvet cushion.

She feels something compact and square-edged with her toes. Maybe it is one of Madelina's little books. Rita lifts the cushion.

Nestled in a valley of collapsed springs is a small white box tied with a satiny red ribbon. Rita tugs on the ribbon and the knot falls loose. She lifts the lid.

On a bed of cotton lies a silver heart on a fine silver chain. In the center of the heart Rita's and Rafael's names are engraved in flamboyant script. Rita turns the pendant over.

The front of the small heart is bright red enamel with the word *Siempre* emblazoned in silver letters.

Unhooking the tiny clasp, Rita lifts the heart to her throat when she hears a noise. She puts the heart back in its box, hastily reties the knot and replaces the box beneath the cushion before she realizes the old steam radiator in the hallway is clanging. Her heart pounds.

Again Rita thinks of the red dress and the first time she almost went dancing in it. She wiggles her toes beneath the sofa cushion, keeping them warm until Raf gets home.