

FLORES POR LOS VIVOS

She called herself Potra, but nobody would name a kid that. It's not even a word, just a fake feminization of "potro", a pony. But it fit her leggy grace and baby-fat boyishness well enough that nobody ever challenged it. I personally thought of her as "Ponygirl", as good a translation as any. I met her in the Tijuana bus station, a place I occasionally prowl on the advice of Pablo, the bilingual, bicultural, bisexual violinist who has performed with Ozawa and Perlman but prefers performing with street pick-ups. "There's always some hick kid who needs a meal or a place to stay," he said, "And who's at that stage where he or she will do anything to get it." And he's right.

But Potra wasn't in any sort of desperation. She was standing there relaxed and in charge, looking around the station for her next move, while a blanket-bundled hag that could have been her mother or grandmother sat on a bench fussing with a two year old boy. She was in her early teens, was obviously not a local, and wouldn't been hanging around the station if she hadn't been broke. I ended up buying all three of them a meal and some ice cream for the boy before Potra accepted my offer of a ride into town.

The old woman ate silently, almost invisibly, never looking at me. The boy treated me with the diffidence of a hungry dog that has been frequently kicked around. Potra had understood everything from my first

glance in her direction and chatted with me solidly, making very straightforward eye contact, finding out pretty directly what I was good for. Which turned out to be the promised ride for the whole family (if that's what they were) and their meager luggage, a paid-up week in a crummy hotel room for the woman and kid, food money for the two of them, and a nicer hotel room for Potra. And, of course, myself.

She had specified a place with hot water bathing facilities and would always jump up right afterwards and take a long shower, then come back to bed and cuddle and giggle and fall asleep in awkward embraces.

Though she lived in the gutter she always seemed clean and sleek as a cat, with healthy hair and a glowing pelt. I was crazy about her before the week was up.

Since she seemed to like me, too. I continued to see her from time to time as she drifted into her life as a cholita. The cholos are punkass kids who run wild in the Cuahuila, Tijuana's tenderloin/redlight area. Some cholas become whores, some don't. They are seen as either a symptom of urban blight or a cutting edge of hard-edged border culture. Potra thought it was a fun place to hang out.

She never charged me for her favors outright although she would sometimes ask for gifts of money or favors, usually silly whimsies like a flowers or candy or a baseball hat with a risqué slogan or a tape she heard playing as we walked by a music store. I gave her a fairly nice Walkman-type tape player which she hung onto about a week, then a

twenty dollar one she's had for some time, wearing the bright yellow headphones around her neck as a part of her identity costume, with the lace-trimmed black lycra shorts, fingerless gloves, black boots that cling to her thighs and swash over six inches above her knees, and a black and yellow letter jacket. Muy ala moda, as she says.

I told her she needed a letter for the jacket and explained what it was all about; now she wants one bad. Anybody out there, let me know where to find a high school athletic letter (preferably a scarlet "A", though she wouldn't get it) with as many little brass geegaws as possible. I've also seen her wearing red racers, net hose, a butthugging skirt less than a foot long with sheer black panties underneath, a red beret and black wet-look blouse of unknown man-made materials.

She loved to be admired and would pose for me and hold the poses for lengthy inspection. I was apparently the only man she knew who was mostly interested in the visual aspects of sex and she started picking it up herself. Mainly she liked to give me a hard-on, then pose it for study. Her fascination didn't seem to be adoration or prurience; more like curiosity over something she didn't quite get. She loved to watch me piss and was frustrated she couldn't do it the same way. Her attempts in that direction were fairly disastrous. Quite funny, though.

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Many of the older cholos had been across the border and spoke English, with all the sophisticated cachet it holds in border Mexico. Potra didn't

but would pump me for odd little English lessons restricted to hippping up her street talk. She would concentrate on getting the pronunciation down and got to be fairly convincing at dropping English words and phrases into her patter. She had no interest in actually learning English, which she considered a servile affectation, but was a quick study on anything that would grace her rap. She would occasionally score major coups with rejoinders like "get a life", "make my day" or "gimme a pinche fuckin' break" that were over the heads of all but the most USA-wise of the gang. I was admitted to the physical presence of the cholo gang as any friend of Potra's, and viewed as a harmless sugar daddy--though I had to demonstrate the limits of both the largesse and the harmlessness. Eventually I was just somebody who fell by now and then with some good jokes and stories from the Other Side. Actually, I got most of the jokes from Mexican comics available in stands on every corner, but few of the banda could read. Potra was absolutely illiterate, but would fight anyone that accused her of it.

Once I got a call from a dentist, asking if I would pay for having an abscessed tooth removed from a boy of about five years old. He mentioned Potra's name, said she'd given him my number and said I was good for it. I came over to pay--actually to make arrangements for payments--and to see the boy. It was the boy from the bus station, shy to the point of trembling, so I left him alone while the dentist pulled the tooth and cleaned up his mouth a bit. Potra didn't show up, though. Just

the same old woman, who collected the still-anesthetized kiddo and left without saying a word or looking directly at anyone. I never did figure out exactly who the kid and old woman were, and Potra sidestepped the issue like a matador.

She felt that not asking for money left her freer to mess around--she had a taste for the exotic, for older men, for kids with no previous experience. She would only explain that by means of a proverb her grandfather had told her, that life is an exchange of kindnesses. But she also told me that she felt secure knowing she could always get cash that way if she really needed to. Especially when she hit eighteen or nineteen and the chola street life started to get old. She could step right in on her prime earning years. I once mentioned that she could get more at her current age because there are certain degenerates in the world who wouldn't mind fucking her in her tender years and would pay handsomely for the privilege.

But she spoke of prostitution more as a future safety net, not even a destiny. She called it her Retirement Plan. I asked what her plan for retirement from whoring would be, what she'd do after thirty. She shrugged, thought that marriage to some rich guy might do. I said I'd noticed how eager rich Mexican men are to marry aging whores. She said a rich gringo would do. She considers me a rich gringo, by the way. I made under \$10,000 last year, almost all of it by doing rotten things then selling humiliating public confessions of them to magazines. I told

her the gringo thing might work if she were cleaned, dressed, butchered out, and taught how to talk decent, which got me a hand mirror smacked on by bare ass, culminating in plush buttocks being ground into my face. One evening, on my way back to my hotel room to see Potra, I bought her a red rose from an eight year old Zapotec girl walking up the alley to start her night selling flowers in the bars and street. Potra was lolling nude on the bed when I came in, watching a Spanish ad on an American channel, offering free legal redress from work-related stress or abuse. I spun the stem of the rose between my fingers, dropped it between her breasts. She flexed them together to trap it, sniffed at it gingerly like a dog, then breathed in a deeper draught, her wide Indian nostrils flaring. She kissed the bloom and held it out to me as I leaned over, placing it in my teeth like a flamenco dancer. I played with that, raising my hands in "espanolarias", miming castanets and tapping my heels. That irritated her for some reason so she reached out and snatched the rose through my teeth, two thorns raking my lips as it tore out of them. I licked them and tasted the familiar tang of my own blood welling. She stared at my mouth and I gave her my widest grin, hoping it was showing her bloody vampire teeth. That got her interest and she rose on her elbows, reached a finger almost to my lips, pausing an inch away. I leaned over and planted a bloody kiss on her right breast, then another, blotted and better defined, just above her sparse pubic hair. She stared at the prints, fascinated. She lay back on the pillows, fanning them to dry the blood. I

leaned over her, grinning drops of blood that fell on her thighs, then on to her sex. She grabbed me to her for a deep, hot, very adult kiss. As she sucked at my tongue in a rising fever, I felt my blood running down my throat.

A week later, sitting around a dump in Colonia Libertad while waiting for some shoddy deal or another to go down, I watched a teen-ager sifting the garbage for tin cans then twisting them into flowers with needle-nosed pliers. I borrowed them and, with a few instructions, managed to make a rose out of some oxidized steel strap. Later I epoxied it onto a length of rusty barbed wire and the next time I was alone with Potra I gave it to her. She took it, examined it awhile, then reached over to scratch me behind the ears like a dog, her sign of special favor. I looked at her, a tumble of bare, brown young limbs in the back of my van, and imagined her placing the rusty rose between her thighs, saw myself snatching it out, slashing her puffy lips, pictured her crawling over to press her crotch against me, stamping my body with her bloody seal again and again--unlimited edition Rorschach prints of her most secret smile.