

Say you

That summer was the summer of R&B and slow rock and dancehall. Lionel Richie topped the charts and we spent weekends grinding to *Say you, say me*, cheek to shoulder with the home-grown boys who fingered the buttons on our jeans. We craved bubble skirts and denim jackets and the lipsticks we saw in *Cosmo* magazine. We wanted American style and American food and the lives of girls played by Molly Ringwald in American movies.

It was the best of times, as the saying goes.

And then the Cubanos arrived.

The first girl to snag one was Jewel Remedios, named after her grandmother, from whom she'd inherited penny-coloured hair that spilled over her shoulders like melting butter, dark eyebrows and a full-cheeked face that crisped up in the sun as quickly as the edges of a frying egg. We envied her all of this – that much goes without saying – and Jewel Remedios lived for nothing if not to be envied.

They'd arrived in July, some in sailboats measled with paint, others in swollen shark coloured rafts crawling along the wrinkled shoreline. They were headed for Miami. Nothing really existed in between. Nothing they were interested in. They didn't want to stop, only hollered for water, waving their plastic bottles and pointing at their stomachs. Behind them, the cruise ships drifted indifferently, as clean and white as jawbones.

The story of any island is basically the story of men, arriving. Where are the women in the history of the new world? Waiting for that first glimpse of strangers riddled with chin-fur and sailors' itch, pale as worms, bearing crappy gifts of beads and nails in the hope that it would be enough to *get* them nailed, the first thing they wanted after months at sea. Ha! Those women all tittered and giggled, every last one of them, their bellies full of laughter, but still they fell for it, every time: the promise of something different, something new.

The authorities pulled the Cubans ashore, moved them into camps.

We began to see them around town, the young ones on day passes, no older than nineteen, twenty. Damp with sweat and aftershave. They had a hunger on them, like seamen or jailbirds. Their eyes glinted like knife-blades. We wanted to see how close we could get.

Bienvenido, bienvenido, we said, nodding at them. Among ourselves, we started to talk like horny dockworkers. *Aiii, aii, aii I got a real boner for Mr Pretty Eyes or Mamacita, cool me down, I done see my last chance!*

They noticed us. Of course they did. We'd developed our own little careful swaggers, pulsing our hips in our cut-offs, T-shirts over one shoulder, rattling our bangles. We were Madonna, *circa* Like A Virgin. We strung ourselves like ching-ching birds along the low wall at the harbour. They stopped to ask for directions. We asked what Havana was like, spilling over into disciplined giggles.

Just before sunset, the boys raced back to camp for curfew, and we had no choice but to watch them go – our *Cinderellos* – knowing only that we wanted more from them than we had yet received.

Jewel started going off with Abel, a tall, quiet boy with a hard face whom the other boys called El Jefe.

Jewel's two best friends, Maxine and Sherry – the Stepsisters – reported to the rest of us, gleefully, that the first time Jewel and Abel did it, when she'd seen his *thing* poking out at her like a dowsing rod, she'd slid straight off the deckchair and thrown up all over his sneakers where he'd left them in the sand, but Abel, with the patience of a saint, had used his own T-shirt to clean her off, then whispered Spanish things in her ear that she couldn't understand but which felt like tiny little shocks that went through her all the way to her toes and, we imagined, right into what our grandmas would have called her lockbox.

After that, she started learning Spanish herself, feeding him her new words like tidbits from her own tongue: *Te amo, Abel, Te quiero, Abelito*.

His friends Carlito and Frederico paired up with Maxine and Sherry and, slowly but surely, we all found our own Cuban boys as the summer wore on.

It was mid-August, the height of hurricane season, the mangroves were swollen with rain, the mosquitoes buzzed mercilessly at our ears as we fell asleep, even on the evenings when the control planes droned overhead, or the pesticide truck heehawed past, spraying the bushes and fields. We taught the boys to play American drinking games like quarters and landmines and flip-up-cup, games that we ourselves had only seen on television, knowing that we were preparing them for their lives in Florida and away from us.

They told us about Havana: prostitutes strolling the Malecón; the cigar factories where workers had the newspapers read to them every morning and posters of Fidel and Che brooded from every wall, Fidel looking miserable, like always, because Che was *el guapo*, the panty thief, the martyr, the one who looked like an icon and had been frozen in time while he, Fidel, was just an aging bureaucrat. They told us about helping their *papas* build the boats before they left, in covered courtyards, in garages, in abandoned churches and sometimes in someone's living room – pushing everything aside to make room, knowing they risked prison if caught.

They worried that they wouldn't like Miami, after their parents had risked everyone's lives to get there. Then what?

Jewel took Abel for ice cream, to make out at the lighthouse, to climb along the ironshore and wait for water to splash them through the blowholes; some days she piled the rest of us in and we drove to the cliffs to watch the waves come in, waiting for the perfect one before we pushed ourselves up and away, out to the salt bite of the sea. We dried off lying on the grass, playing top 40 through the car radio. Jewel danced and pointed at Abel, wiggling her hips. *Say you...say me*. He smiled, but in a slightly bemused way.

Jewel began to probe and probe at him like an infected tooth. She wanted promises.

'*Flaquita*, no father want me for his little girl,' he said. 'I have nothing; I am nothing. The sea turned me, my whole family, into ghosts. Puff! We are nothing; we do nothing; we have nothing. We're in *purgatorio*, waiting for lives to start.'

'But this isn't nothing!' she protested waving her hands between them.

'It all feels like limbo,' he said. 'I need to know where life is going first.'

'We'll get to know each other and then, in time... You can have visitors, right? I can come to camp...'

‘It’s only been a couple months, *guapa*,’ he replied, running his hands over his close-cropped hair.

Carlos and Frederico took us aside, told us to tell her to cool it.

‘I can’t *cool* it,’ she said.

One afternoon, after she had stormed off somewhere, we cornered Abel.

‘How to explain to her? We are having a good summer, yes. Some fun. After that journey...but she and I, we are not in the same worlds! Our question is how to find a home, *make* one. On a stinking, leaking boat, in a tent, in *here*.’ He pointed at his head. ‘Your only question is where next to have fun. But this is not an American movie! She is *here*,’ he smacked his hand on the sand, ‘and I am there!’ He swept his arm out in the direction of the ocean.

It was the most we’d ever heard him say at one time.

‘*Cálmate, jefe*,’ his friends said.

Jewel’s cheeks began to look pinched, she lost weight, she couldn’t keep down anything but Supligen and curried goat, and her eyes gleamed as we sat by the ocean mourning the boys each night after they went back to camp.

She decided to go and see him. We couldn’t talk her out of it.

We parked in the dusty lot just outside the fence, which was littered with government trucks and tarpaulin shelters where immigration officers sat counting forms. Row after row of khaki tents; the only colour from the clothes fluttering like bright flags and the listless garbage stacked at the gate. We smelled barbecued beef and the raw tang of several hundred humans being human.

‘Orincon,’ the officer said, a large, black woman with deep grooves down her cheeks and around her eyes. She ran her pen down rows of names. ‘O-R-I-N-C-O-N. Nope. No Abel Orincon. No one processed in here in that name.’

‘No, no, check again,’ said Jewel, smiling as if she was afraid to change her expression. She stood unmoving while her hair flapped around her face.

The officer sniffed and made a show of looking again.

‘No one.’

‘Well, can we just go in, look around for him?’ Maxine asked, putting her arm around Jewel’s shoulders, excited by this turn of events. Jewel was becoming a tragic figure right before our eyes, someone who, finally, finally, was worthy of the way we had worshipped her all along.

‘Against the rules. You have to be met, right here, see, by the person you’re visiting, sign in, and back here within two hours to exit.’

‘Can’t you send someone to call him?’

‘Look,’ the officer closed the file with a snap. ‘I don’t know what business you girls think you have here, but *this*, this little love story you think you have going on, is a tale as old as time. These guys –’

Jewel took off, her sandals flying off behind her, cutting her feet on the gravel. The officer made a *steups* noise and fell back into her plastic chair. She looked around the rest of us. ‘You girls can’t learn. Never. I sorry for you.’

It was a long walk around the fence. The rest of us shaded our eyes with our hands. Jewel squinted defiantly and unwaveringly into the sun. The men from the camp rushed to pull and rattle the chain links as we walked by, their open shirts fluttering around their bare chests: *Tssss, baby! Who you looking for? Abel? Abel? I don’t know no Abel, baby, but you can know me.*

‘I’m going to call her Joya, if she’s a girl,’ Jewel announced, wearily. She looked defiant, and unconvinced. She hooked two fingers through the fence. One of the men, with the weathered face of an octogenarian and the gap-toothed smile of a nine year old, put two of his own fingers over hers and whistled. ‘This is love, baby, true love. Beginning of sexy friendship,’ he said, pursing his lips at her and making a kissing noise.

‘Do you know Abel Orincon?’ she said. “*Conoces Abel?*”

‘Abel...?’ he screwed up his face. ‘I think so, *sí.*’

‘You do?’ she cried. ‘Can you take us to him? Is he here?’

‘You’re looking at him, baby!’ he pointed to himself and cackled.

A heavy truck loaded with plastic water bottles thundered by, showering us with dirt. ‘I’m thirsty,’ one of the Stepsisters grumbled. No one paid her any mind.

It was as if we could feel the melancholy weight of the dying day. Jewel’s steps slowed and her mood wavered as the shadows began to come in. She slipped a scarf from her purse and over her head, stretched both arms out, and held on to the fence with her head bowed. She curled her bleeding toes into the dirt.

‘Wait,’ said Sherry. ‘Wait.’ She tried to yank Jewel away from the fence, but it was too late.

‘Is that...?’

‘Oh my God, oh my God.’

‘*Abel! Abel!*’

There was a slight stiffening of his back, nothing you’d have seen if you weren’t looking for it. He turned away from us, holding up the flap of a tent up with one hand and a baby in the other. He ducked his head.

A short, curvy woman and a little girl, maybe two, three years old, came out of the tent. The little girl bounced up and down, galloping around him, through his legs and under the guy line. She had thin legs, knees like lightbulbs. Finally, she stopped and held up her hands, wanting to be lifted.

‘Papa! Papa!’ she said.

Sherry popped her gum and whistled. ‘Oh shit.’ We all looked over at Jewel, who rattled the fence and then hooked her hands and feet into it, climbing so she could be higher up when she called out his name, so you couldn’t miss her unless you were trying to. But her shouts disappeared into the long tail of dust kicked up by a sudden wind.

Inside the camp, he crouched to kiss his little girl, who danced away into the dust ribbon.

Maxine put her hand on Jewel’s calf. None of us said a word. Jewel looked down at us and we looked up at her. And we knew that, whoever that man was, Abel was someone we’d invented. He was just a boy made from summer, and to summer he had returned.