

## Coming of Age at Brighton Beach

By Vivian Conejero

It is the summer of 1971. Raquel Contreras Torres has recently turned eighteen years old. She emerges from the subway station, the F train's last stop in Brooklyn. She adjusts her blue denim hat and switches to her prescription sunglasses, carefully putting away her regular glasses into her blue denim bag.

She walks in the direction of the ocean. As she steps on the boardwalk, all the familiar Coney Island smells, sights, and sounds prompt her to smile inwardly. I made it! I traveled all the way here from home, by myself!

She inhales the sea breeze and takes her time to exhale it, while her dark brown eyes roam around. The water is calm, with only small waves rippling its surface. There are not many swimmers on sight nor too many pedestrians on the boardwalk either. The delicious aromas of sugar cotton, popcorn, and *Nathan's* hot dogs pervade the air. How nice and cool it feels at only ten in the morning, Raquel notes to herself.

Earlier, at their Prospect Park West apartment, Apolonia had sent her daughter Raquel off to Brighton Beach, commenting, "You better start going to the beach alone from now on, dear; your father has become a hopeless drunkard."

The young woman's face darkens as she recalls the previous summer at Brighton Beach with her parents. "Keep an eye on your father, Raquel," her mother would plead, explaining, "He may drink too much and fall asleep on the sand.... Someone could steal his wallet, while we are in the water." Raquel knew that her father had a habit of keeping all of their money in his wallet; it gave him a false sense of wealth.

The last time Raquel had been to the beach with her parents, her father had come close to blows with the locker room attendant, on account of some foolish misunderstanding. The incident had made it easier for her mother to encourage her independence. "Yes, dear--go to the beach by yourself; you are now an adult!" Apolonia had said this very morning, adding, "I know I can trust you."

An only child, who had grown up sheltered and over-protected from the outside world, Raquel had received this piece of news with mixed emotions.

"Gee, Mom—that's great! But, who will watch my things while I am in the water?"

"Why don't you try to make friends with some other young people and share watching duties with

them?

“But Mom! You know! It has always been difficult for me to make friends!”

“Well, just lay down your beach towel close to the shoreline and splash near it.”

“It is less than two years since we managed to escape from Communist Cuba and you are breaking all your rules, Mom. You don’t sound like yourself!”

“I just don’t want you to miss out on life, because of your father’s emotional problems; he has already caused us both far too much anguish. Go have fun.”

Raquel surveys the beach. Sky and sea are a stained-glass blue; an occasional white puff of a cloud wafts by. Solitary individuals and small family groups dot the creamy-colored sand. Tranquility reigns.

As she hunts for a place, Raquel becomes aware that her fellow mid-morning beach visitors are looking at her. It is mostly men who fix their eyes on her and smile; women squint at her sideways. She walks away from the small groups of people, searching for a less crowded area.

Raquel locates a relatively secluded spot across from the “Cyclone” rollercoaster, near the boardwalk’s wooden pillars. Stretching out her grass-green beach towel, she feels stares on her and sits down, fully dressed. Her original plan had been to remove her pale-green Oxford long-sleeve shirt and blue denim jeans and sun and swim in the short-sleeved shirt and Bermuda shorts she is wearing underneath.

The minutes tick by. It is warming up and Raquel longs to strip down to her bathing attire and plunge into the beckoning blue ocean. But others’ eyes are on her.

She remains sitting on her towel, hoping that they will forget about her, in due time.

A blond, bespectacled young man in a tan-colored bathing suit rises from his pale-blue towel and walks aimlessly across the beach. He stops ten feet in front of Raquel’s place. He looks this way and that and stands motionless for an instant. With a sudden motion, the man bends over and peers intently into the sand. He does not pick anything up, but peruses the ground. Still bending over, the man looks down, first out of one eye, then out of the other, as chickens do. Letting out a sigh, he retreats to his place.

Raquel twitches. She wonders when she will be able to bathe in the sea. Would her belongings be safe this far away from the shore? She is pondering whether to move her towel there, when three teenage boys appear, obstreperously chasing an orange-and-green beach ball. They fight each other off for possession of the ball, laughing and shouting to one another, in Spanish, “*¡Es mía! ¡Es mía!*” (“It is mine! “It is mine!”). Raquel tenses up: the ball is speeding towards her, with the three boys close on its tracks. She freezes. When the ball is about to hit her, Raquel kicks it back as hard as she can. It races past the boys.

Disconcerted for a moment, they turn around and run after the beach ball in silence. One of them looks briefly over his muscular shoulder at Raquel.

A Puerto-Rican man cups his hands to his mouth and bellows, “*¡Muchacha! ¡No seas tan difícil!*” (“Girl! Don’t play so hard to get!”). His hearty, mocking laughter is echoed by other beach-goers.

Raquel swallows hard. She takes a paperback out of her bag and pretends to read; it is a book on Impressionism. She feels her cheeks growing warm. Why can’t people leave her alone? she muses. All she wants is to enjoy a bit of swimming and splashing in the water.

How different things were when she and all her cousins were kids. On many a summer day, their mothers—her mother’s sisters and one sister-in-law—used to get together at one or another of Havana’s gorgeous beaches. Food, toys, and multi-colored lifesavers as well as other beach-related paraphernalia were packed by each loving Mom, for a day at the beach with the Torres clan, their husbands, and their children. For the most part, the adults chatted and sunbathed, while the kids played in the sand, screeching and splashing close to the shore. How innocent and wholesome those bygone days were! Raquel sighs.

A woman’s voice jolts Raquel out of her reverie. “Oh! She is an intellectual! Look at her—reading a book on art at the beach! Ha, ha, ha!” Her companion quips, “She doesn’t seem to be interested in boys at all,” she says, raising her eyebrows and adds: “Maybe she is one of those ‘Women’s Libbers.’”

Two young men walk by. With a casual glance at Raquel, one of them concurs, “Yeah, that short-haired chick does have that ‘Women’s Libber’ look about her.” The other wisecracks, “She is probably some dyke too!” They explode in laughter and run.

That does it! Raquel says to herself and stands up. She returns the book to her blue denim bag and gathers her possessions. On her way back up to the boardwalk, she overhears peals of laughter and more gratuitous, unpleasant comments.

She clenches her teeth. I will stroll about a bit and then return home soon, she tells herself.

Walking makes her perspire and she rests momentarily on a bench. She notices a mirthful adolescent threesome exiting a beer-and-shrimp establishment. All three boys are holding clear, plastic glasses with beer. Two of the young men are rather boyish and slovenly in appearance. Their T-shirts are dirty and of uncertain colors; their sneakers are well-worn. Their shorts seem to have been cut out from old, blue denim jeans. One of them is noticeably taller and older. The third teenager is a different type entirely. He wears dark grey trousers with a belt, shoes, and a long-sleeved white shirt with thin blue

stripes. His hair is neatly combed. His features are elegant, quasi aristocratic. He holds his head high. His right arm is outstretched, beer glass in hand.

The taller of the untidy boys proposes, "Hey, guys! Let's go drink our beers down at the beach." The shorter boy chimes in, "Oh yeah, man! Let's go watch girls in their bikinis!" While his companions hoot and howl, the sophisticated-looking young man smiles half-amusedly.

Raquel, witnessing this scene from her bench, snorts, Nothing new there...

"I will join you later, guys!" The fellow in the trousers assures his two friends. "I wish to hang out around here a bit longer," he adds, with a nod and a wink in the direction of the beer-and-shrimp place.

"Ooooooh! I get it, man!" the tall boy says. "You want to work on that blonde in there--right, Dave?"

"You could say that, buddy!" Dave winks again. "Isn't she a work of art?" His comrades wolf-whistle their approval.

Inertia has taken possession of Raquel. She is hot and frustrated. Her eyes idly follow the two coarse boys as they make their rowdy way to the sand and search for a spot. They flop down exactly on Raquel's former niche, which is now directly below her bench. She can hear every word of their loud conversation; it is mostly about their friend.

"Hey, pal. Dave is such a lucky dude!" one of them remarks. "Yeah, man. He's got dough--that's what," the other responds.

In the meantime, Dave walks out of the beer-and-shrimp cafe. His Oxford shirt is slightly unbuttoned, revealing a gold chain crossing his hairless chest. He is smiling and chatting with a pretty teenage girl. Her golden, long hair plays with the sun's rays. When she smiles, dimples form on her cheeks. She wears an aquamarine sleeveless top and blue-denim jeans.

"Let me say good-bye to my friends. I will rejoin you in a moment," Dave announces to his conquest. She nods and smiles and stands by, mesmerized by the sea.

Raquel is trying to concentrate on this evolving slice of life. It helps her to combat her natural tendency to indulge in obsessive ruminations. At least, these fellows are not picking on me, she reasons.

"Hey, Dave—did you do the job on that little dame already?" the tall, husky boy snaps when his friend reappears.

"Not so fast, man!" Dave raises one eyebrow. "Chicks have to be worked on slowly; they are sensitive creatures," he adds, with a little laugh.

“Why don’t you stick with us, Dave? We are your pals!” whines the shorter, younger boy. “Yeah, Dave, stay!” pleads the other youth. “Why go after some dumb broad? Be a good buddy!”

Dave throws his head back and laughs aloud. “You two sound jealous!”

“Well, at least bring us a couple of cuties, huh?” suggests the tall boy. The other agrees and interjects: “What’s about you, man, you get all the girls!”

Still laughing, Dave retorts, “I am cool, man,” he pauses and adds, “And I got money. Chicks LOVE money - and money buys drinks for chicks!”

“How about buying your friends some booze?” the tall boy dares.

Dave is silent for an instant. He throws a quick glance over the boardwalk, reaches into his trousers’ pocket, and takes out his wallet. “Okay, pals. Here are some bills,” he hands them over and hurries away.

A blimp crosses the beach sky, leaving in its trail a smoke sign; it spells “WRIGLEY’S.” It is almost noon now. The temperature has markedly intensified. Raquel’s undergarments are causing her mounting discomfort, but her hopes of cooling off in the ocean are dashed. Brighton Beach is quite crowded and noisy by now. How could she risk leaving her stuff unattended, with so many leering and drinking strangers around?

She endeavors not to continue brooding. She overhears the uncouth youths down below, still grumbling about their friend’s fortune with the female gender. Whatever they are imbibing is slurring their speech; Raquel can only identify swear words in their loud, verbal exchanges.

A black derelict makes his way across the beach, scavenging into the sand for money or other valuables people may have dropped.

“Hey, let’s invite that bum to a drink with us! The loutish boy with the hoarse voice suggests. “Oh, yeah, man!” his companion agrees. They both holler at the drifter, “Hey, brother!... Hey, YOU!” The vagrant man looks up, squinting. “Hey, YOOOOOU!” the teenagers shout in dissonant unison, pointing at him. The black fellow stabs at his chest with his right index finger, nodding quizzically. “Yes! YOU!”

“Me?” he asks, with arched eyebrows.

“Yes - you, brother. Would you like some booze?”

The hobo hesitates. The younger boy encourages him, “Yeah, man. Come on and have a drink with us! All men are brothers!” At this, the black man breaks into a broad, toothless smile and walks towards them.

Raquel half-listens to the ensuing drunken dialogue. It is all about male bonding, interspersed by expletives and obscenities.

“I am your brother forever, buddies! If you ever need my help, you know where to find me!” the black man proclaims with joy as he departs.

The adolescents shout back, “We want C\_\_ \_!” Raquel recoils upon hearing the noun for the female genitals spat out in public.

The tramp opens his toothless mouth and yells back, “Me too, pals! That’s what dames are for!”

The boy with the gruff voice hollers in response, “You got it, man! Why can’t they get it?”

“Because dames are dumb, buddy!” the vagrant man shouts, exploding in rough, cackling laughter. The two teenagers and some male beach-goers join in the hilarity.

“Yeah - it’s a man’s world! Those Women’s Libbers better learn that, once and for all!” the older boy adds.

“Right on, pal!” the others agree.

Raquel sighs, but feels no surprise at any of it. She had heard similar opinions about females from the boys she had grown up with in Cuba... Boys she had loved as if they had been the brothers she never had... Something had changed about them around the time they passed their twelfth or thirteenth year of age.

Soon after the above dialogue, silence rules below; the boisterous boys have fallen into an alcohol-induced stupor. Raquel herself is feeling somnolent, although she has neither drunk nor eaten anything since she left home. She begins to nod.

She is awakened by a heavy body sinking down at the other extreme of her bench. She hardly dares to turn her head to look. Throwing a quick glance to her left, Raquel discovers that an old, fat, foul-smelling, ruddy-faced man is now sharing her bench and leering at her. As soon as she has looked at him, he starts to breathe too audibly.

A dirty old pig! This is the last straw! Raquel springs off her seat and hastens towards the Stillwell Avenue subway station.

At home, Apolonia asks her daughter, “How was your trip to the beach, sweetie?”

Raquel answers, “I couldn’t get into the water; I didn’t dare to leave my things alone...”

Apolonia smiles and nods knowingly. “Otherwise, did you have a good time, honey?”

“Not really, Mom.”

Apolonia sighs. "At least you got out for a few hours, dear."

Raquel takes a breath before replying. "It is not much better out there than in here, Mom."

Her mother responds, "I know, dear; I know."

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