

The birthday party

L. F. Valero *

Kiki watched the sunlight swim through the leaves of the mulberry tree. Hanging from a limb was the piñata, a bright yellow parrot that sat on its own perch. A bird bigger than life, bigger than five-year-old Kiki.

She knew she was five because her sister told her so. Early that morning a small voice whispered to Kiki. She stirred in the bed she shared with her two sisters. Her eyes opened; the voice continued: —Kiki, what's your favorite food in the world? Without hesitation Kiki replied —Hot dogs. Her sister shook her head sadly and said —You're supposed to say cake because that's what we're having today. It's your birthday.

Kiki's eyes widened and she asked solemnly, —How many am I? —Five— her sister said.

Today would be the day to break the piñata. That made Kiki sad because the parrot piñata had hung in their house for months now since her father brought it from Tijuana, and it had become a friend to Kiki.

Later her friends arrived for the party and everyone had cake, presents were opened, and then the children took turns getting blindfolded and trying to break the piñata that hung in the mulberry tree. When the parrot finally broke open, candy wrapped in brilliantly colored cellophane flew out, mixed with a lot of cockroaches. The combination of candies and cockroaches made the children scream but still they pushed and shoved to grab as much as they could carry.

The main part of the party was over and Kiki's Mama and Tata went into the house. Little brown and white

hands sticky from candy joined together and the kids sang "Ring Around the Rosie" over and over. Terri Lynn had new shoes. She was Kiki's best friend, a tiny little girl like a doll or an imp, with freckles, blond pigtailed and a nose that swooped gently upward. She was dressed in pink and white from head to toe. She asked Kiki did she like the new shoes. They were white patent Mary Janes and seemed like the shoes of a princess. Still Kiki thought to herself that red shoes were the prettiest. But she wanted to make her friend happy so she said —Terri Lynn, you have the prettiest *choos* in the world.

Terri Lynn abruptly turned away and called to her older brother: —Hey Mark, c'mere, listen to Kiki talk! Mark was the boyfriend of Kiki's sister Carmen and he was tall for eight years old, golden-skinned with green eyes and dark blond hair. Mark and Terri Lynn often played with Kiki and Carmen long days until the sun disappeared in the purple summer nights.

Terri Lynn started to giggle and soon all the children gathered around. Kiki wondered what was so funny, then Mark started asking her to say different words. Why was she supposed to repeat the words *shoes* and *choo-choo train*? Why did they all laugh at her when she said those words? She began to feel something dark and heavy in her heart, something that made her wish she could disappear. This thing called shame found a home in the heart of a small girl as she realized she sounded different from other children.

It got worse. One child said —Hey, you sound just like a Messican. Then —Your daddy is a wetback. —Dirty Messican, greaser!

Wetback, Messican, greaser? These words she did not understand, but she knew there was something dirty and disgraceful in them.

Kiki ran away from the children and hid in the almond orchard. She wept hot bitter tears. She rocked herself and wept until, exhausted, she began to think. Why did they laugh and call names? Why did she speak differently? She thought of Tata and Mama, how they talked different too. They even had their own special talk, a language they refused to teach the children. Kiki remembered that her older sisters knew some of it but got in a lot of trouble if they spoke it at school. So now it was Mama and Tata's special grown-up language that they used between themselves and some other grown-ups like Tío and Tía.

That must be it, she reasoned, Messican talk. Yes Messican talk is bad. So bad that even if she couldn't talk it some of her talk sounded like the bad language.

Kiki did not tell Mama what happened, and she would never tell Tata for he was sure to become very angry. Instead she began to listen carefully to the way everyone spoke and practiced every day the words that had brought her shame. Until she sounded like Mark and Terri Lynn.

She dared not tell Mama and Tata that she hated their music and secret language. She only knew it was bad and different, something called Messican, and she began to hate everything that went with it, the food, the music, the strange friends of her parents who could only speak the Messican language, her Abuelita with her strange customs and even Abuela's prayers in that ugly strange language.

This is how Kiki learned to hate

* Chicana writer and former farmworker from Northern California.