

# True Artists Only Have Impossible Loves

Willy Lizárraga

*Adam's my man and Eve's not to blame.  
He bit in; it made no sense to stop.*

Stephen Dunn, *A Postmortem Guide*

By the time Anaisneris arrived in El Castillo, we had seen Alberto go through enough deaths and resurrections (all of them over sentimental matters) to be keenly aware of a manic self-destructive/self-reinventing pattern that offered very little hope of ending in any other way but tragedy. So there was really nothing new about Alberto and Anaisneris' orgasmic upward trajectory and dysfunctional fall from grace. Yet we did notice something ominously stubborn (in a new way) in how he clung to her when she no longer wanted him, something perhaps too overtly masochistic (suicidal if you wish) about his determination to bring upon himself the maximum amount of pain. We couldn't blame him for that, though. Anaisneris had been crowned by all of us, after all, as "the queen of El Castillo, the Mission District and every alternative universe governed by a syncopated beat," which was, by the way, a small part of Alberto's exalted nightly introduction of her.

"Indeed, bellísimas ladies and uglísimos gents, let me warn you that you're about to experience the transcultural and politically forbidden pleasure of being transported to the

hot, muggy and sultry streets of Havana with just the right Tropicana twist. Sí, adorable, elegant ladies and cheap, panzones gents, we have reached that point of the late night when our most special guest artist is about to take us on an electrifying dance tour. So please put your hands together for Anaisneris de la O, better known among the cognoscenti as El Terremoto de la Habana, who will perform for us her signature transformation from backwoods Cuban rumbera to flamboyant Latin from Manhattan, or better yet, from small-village, hot-hips country mama to cuchi-cuchi, big-city, sofisticada Broadway diva.”

It hardly mattered, interestingly enough, that El Castillo and our band were undergoing their most evident decline and that we, well aware of it, were seriously considering quitting “while we were maybe not ahead but at least not too far behind.” It hardly mattered, of course, because while Anaisneris danced and we played for her, our kings-of-the-underground-Latin-funk badges shone as bright as in the old days. And for that alone we looked up to her with a mixture of gratitude (nobody else could have resurrected our groove and our libido so effortlessly), awe (for her daring) and guilt (because eventually when the time came for us to help her get away from Alberto and El Castillo, we didn’t).

We couldn’t, really, because as Ali would say, trying to comfort us with his chess-infused wisdom: “Getting rid of your queen, man, that’s got to be the hardest thing in life.”

The truth is that from the minute Anaisneris set foot in El Castillo we were all under her spell, actually, even before she stepped into our castle. She hadn’t even left Cuba, as a matter of fact, and she had already grabbed us “by the balls de los cojones.” And if that sounds only possible in a magic-realistic way, here’s how it happened:

It was the early spring of 1980. It was a time when it wasn’t that unusual for us to gather in El Castillo’s kitchen in front of our “wetback TV” to watch the ten o’clock news from Mexico while we prepared dinner before our nightly or almost nightly rumba. It was

there and then when we first saw her --without knowing, of course, who she was. And once we saw her, we couldn't forget her, for the simple reason that you don't forget a face or a body like hers, so naturally expressive and defiantly sexy even in the midst of the worst Cuban political refugee crisis.

And while Ali couldn't help rubbing his eyes in disbelief as he kept repeating, "Sometimes, man, I'm telling you, sometimes the revolution *is* televised," and Rosie, sitting next to him, passed judgment like only an Argentinian queen of guerrilla warfare could -- "Gusanos de mierda, that's what they are, scum" --by almost unanimous decision, meaning with the sole exception of Rosie, we elected Anaisneris "*the* Mariel Crisis poster babe."

"And you know what?" Rosie wasn't going to let this go without protest. "This new type of gusano is gonna hate it once they leave Cuba and make it here. 'Cause the American dream doesn't include living off the government. But then it'll too late to realize how good they had it over there."

Now, as to who ignited this refugee crisis, apparently it had all started when a municipal bus carrying a few dozen passengers intentionally crashed against the Peruvian Embassy's front gate in Havana. The bus driver and the passengers (our dear Anaisneris among them) were desperate (or crazy) enough to conceive of the ploy in the hope of obtaining political asylum. I should also mention that they had no intention of going to Peru. Their desired final destination was the U.S., and they had no idea that in a matter of days thousands would follow suit, cramming the embassy beyond capacity.

It was big news, and for us even bigger. It stirred us in some visceral, intimate way. Our "prosthetic Cuban persona," as Alberto called it, seemed to be under threat, and that

was all we could talk about. Our Cuban obsession, however, never included imagining that a few years from then our Mariel-Crisis-poster-babe would knock on our castle's door. And lucky for her and for us, at that moment, we weren't playing anything Brazilian. We were playing, in fact, Ray Barretto's *Soy dichoso*, and we must have sounded real good (and dichosos) because, the minute she stepped inside our castle, she flung off her coat and jumped onto the dance floor.

All we saw was a tropical hurricane dressed in red parting the sea of dancers like Moses. All we knew was that we were facing a rhythmic fury of overwhelming proportions. So in a matter of seconds it was all about trying to keep up with her while she, fully confident of her prowess, went after each of us in turn for a true *mano a mano*. At this point, though, I better let Alberto, our MC Tropical Pit Bull, tell what actually happened that night. Something tells me I won't have another chance like this to formally introduce the whole band. And nobody does that job better than him.

So let's begin with Ali, since he just happened to be chosen by Anaisneris as her first victim.

"That's right, esbeltísimas ladies and gordísimos gents, let me introduce to you from Lebanon, via Paris, although his heart is really Brazilian, talk about multi-culti, el sultán de las negras y las blancas, the master of offbeat minimalism, the Houdini of the multicultural groove and the Ayatollah of the blue notes. Yes, adorable concurrencia, let's put our hands together for Ali Matta on keyboards and piano. Mstattaaaaaaaaal, habibi."

*Mstattal* means stoned in Arabic, and Alberto liked to scream it when introducing Ali "for special effects." Needless to say, Ali couldn't play if he wasn't under the influence, but

neither could the rest of us. It took Anaisneris, anyway, no more than three minutes to finish Ali off. He just couldn't rise to her ebullient level. Ali's piano solos tended toward the playful in a pensive, bluesy way. Heating up the montuno was his weakest talent, and that was exactly what Anaisneris needed and demanded from him.

“So, now, inteligentísimas ladies and brutísimos gents, I'm afraid it's time to get serious, 'cause from Buenos Aires, Argentina, we're honored to have among us the only lesbian fundamentalist professional illegal alien Marxist-Freudian trombone player in the world. I'm talking about Rosie Horowitz, otherwise known as Simplemente Evita, La Desaparecida, El Trombón del Distrito. And you know what district I'm talking about, right? And as the Mission District's Radio Bemba duly claims, when Rosita blows, ayayay, the murals in the Mission come down from the walls to shake their booty and the palm trees on Dolores Street swing so hard they drop all their leaves. So let's hear un aplauso, amabilísima concurrencia.”

Anaisneris de la O versus Rosie Horowitz: “A duel brought to you by post-feminist gods after a night of absolute fucking debauchery.” That was what Rosie said to me just before she vamped up the montuno with a long, fat blow as she stepped up to Anaisneris' challenge. Yet if Rosie thought she could win by blowing her bone as hard as she could, she soon found out that Anaisneris' swiftness and agility were simply too elusive a target.

“So we got goddamned serious all right, virtuous ladies and ornery gents, well, let's keep it that way for our next pescaíto frito who was born and raised in the Bronx and, after so many years in the Bay Area, still speaks with a Bronx accent. I'm talking about the only one of us who's already forged his artistic immortality next to musicians of the stature of Miles Davis, Stan Getz and Carlos Santana. Yes, respetables unconditionals, let us pay our respects to our most glamorous, blond Mexicano and up-and-coming recording artist,

creator of the Irish Bossa, the Cheeseburger Samba and the Guacamole Swing. So put your hands together, excelentísmas damas y perrísimos caballeros, to salute tenor sax virtuoso Cuautemoc McCoy-Hernandez. Ese mi pinche Cuate, ayayayayayayaayay!”

Finally with Cuautemoc, we had to admit, for the first time we felt Anaisneris had a real chance of losing. As the intensity and bravado of her dancing kept growing, however, it also became clear that “the hurricane in the red dress,” as Alberto had started to call her, wasn’t going to be stopped by anything short of a lethal “combination perfectation,” Alberto’s favorite term to describe any highly infectious mix of “raw musical feeling with intensely polished talent,” which was, of course, what Cuautemoc was all about. Yet being the cool and classy New York gentleman he was (and still is), after a long and sinewy solo that brought Anaisneris literally to her knees, he gracefully backed out.

In light of Cuautemoc’s retreat, bloody Brendan chickened out. He didn’t have a chance, anyway. And although he didn’t step up to the challenge, I’m going to let Alberto introduce him all the same. Otherwise we risk not understanding the metaphysical depth of his shameful retreat.

“Yes, amorosas ladies and sabrosones gents, from Glasgow’s tough, gray working-class barrios, el único bloody Scot who swings like a fucking Cuban on a straight mojito diet, because, hey, señoras y señores, he might not have the Latin looks but let me tell you, this red-haired, hot-blooded, Scottish machísimo man can bloody make you shake your booty in the middle of a bloody nuclear attack. And he’s not only more Cuban than the Cubans and more Brazilian than the Brazilians, he’s also won the bench-press competition in the Mission District for three years in a row. Yes, señoritas y señorones, I’ve seen him knock out a pit bull with a single blow. So with no further ado: It’s a carnival float, no, no, no. It’s an extraterrestrial monster, no, no. It’s Superman, no, no. It’s nothing more or less than

Brendan MacMurry carrying his contrabass on his back while riding his bloody Harley and eating a carne asada burrito with extra cheese and guacamole. So, let's hear that bloody fucking applause, ladies and gentlemen.”

At this stage of the duel, of course, Jesús and Alberto were the only ones left, and they were looking at each other as if to say Go ahead, man, be my guest. Jesús, however, must have perceived in Alberto something close to a non-negotiable determination to be the last one to go against “El Terremoto de la Habana,” so he obliged.

“This time then, respetable concurrencia, we have on mandolin and acoustic and electric guitar, directo de Madrid, the bad-ass boy from Lavapiés, the best hippie-punk-Flamenco pasta chef to have landed in the Wild West, and the only person I know of who learned English listening to Bob Dylan. So don't blame his Spanish accent if you don't understand him. It's all Dylan's fault. Sí, respetable concurrencia, please put your hands together for Jesusito El Principito.”

Now, as for why I didn't even count myself as a legitimate contender, let me just say that, as the singer of the group, I had learned not to consider myself a “real musician,” a belief shared by all pescaítos fritos, by the way, and defended in the most brutal terms by Brendan and Cuautemoc, which is why, as Anaisneris annihilated Jesús in record time, nobody expected me to come to his rescue. I shall let Alberto introduce me, though, for formality's sake.

“Yes, amazing camarás, the time has come to introduce to you the Frank Sinatra of the taco vendors, the Tom Jones of the funkier alleys, the Stevie Wonder of the fresh-off-the-boat señoritas and the Héctor Lavoe from Walnut Creek, who, I should mention, doubles as hack writer. So you better be good to him, 'cause you don't want to find yourself described in not-too-flattering terms in one of his now famous ‘Mission Chronicles,’

appearing, by the way, in the Bay Guardian almost every week. Put your hands together then with gran entusiasmo for Alfonso ‘Foncho’ Tejada on vocals and percusión menor.”

Now, I guess it’s time to introduce Alberto, just like I did it in real life, doing my best to imitate his inimitable MC Tropical style.

“Well, patient and impatient señoronas y señoritos, let’s pay homage to the man responsible for us being here, the one who started this collective musical dream and who is also responsible for making our castle the leading underground musical space in San Francisco. Yes, damas y caballeros, all the way from Chile’s northernmost desierto picante comes our official founder and bandleader, the undisputed poet of the bongos, the clandestino master of the congas and the Pelé do pandeiro, the fastest and hardest hands on the West Coast, sporting, just in case you haven’t noticed, the biggest afro and the thickest mustache in San Francisco. So please put your hands together for Alberto ‘El Negro’ Gonzales.”

I think I should point out that Alberto had a real winning plan too. That is, aware of Anaisneris’ unquestionable rhythmical superiority, he’d figured out that his only chance to win lay in his endurance. Without going crazy, then, for every rumbera-de-la-calle move Anaisneris performed, Alberto had the matching “combination perfectation.” And when he saw the first signs of exhaustion in her moves, he switched from congas to bongos and from playing with his hands to sticks.

Anaisneris answered back by taking off her red tank top –her dark brown skin now glowing against her red bra, her long, red earrings rattling like wild maracas while she syncopated every single muscle in her body, just in case Alberto thought for a split second he had a chance.

Meanwhile, Alberto stuck to his plan and kept plenty of gas in reserve. Then, when she least expected, he began to pull away like a winning horse in the final stride, turning the hard montuno into frenetic batucada. Something had to give. I'm sure that's what they were thinking as they locked their eyes and their faces melted and disappeared behind a solid curtain of sweat.

Love is a burning thing. Johnny Cash got that right, although he knew nothing of rumba or samba. And when the flame is that high and so outrageously combustible --or as Alberto liked to say, "when the groove is so fucking hot and dirty" --I guess it only made sense that they would both concede at the same time. And when they embraced and kissed each other, and just before sunrise locked themselves in Alberto's room until the next evening, and then the following night she moved in with him (and us), we weren't in the least surprised.

A week later, during our first dinner en familia, we got to hear from her own lips how she had lived for three months inside the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, "una eternidad, lo juro," how she had left the embassy in total despair and eventually managed to cross to Miami in a 1957 Ford sedan with twelve people aboard.

"D'you mean you crossed the fucking ocean in a bloody car? Are you fucking joking or what?"

"Sí, coño, en un anfíbeo de esos. How do you say anfíbeo in English?"

"Amphibian."

"Eso."

Not quite believing what she had told us yet knowing that it was only fitting that she cross the ocean on a Ford like Ulysses on a sailboat, we, in return, told her how we had first met her thanks to the ten o'clock Mexican news, and how we had instantly crowned her "Ms. Mariel Crisis Universe."

"Ms. Mariel Crisis Universe?"

"That's right."

"And whose idea was that, coño?"

"Well, everybody's. No, no, sorry. Everybody's except Rosie."

At which point Rosie raised her dissenting voice to ask Anaisneris, "What kind of a political animal are you, preciosa, if you don't mind?" Rosie just wasn't going to allow an anti-revolutionary "gusana" to be our castle's queen, no matter how incredible a dancer she was or how deeply in love or in lust she and Alberto were.

Fortunately, Anaisneris duly intuited that this was probably her only chance to establish some sort of truce with Rosie and begin to carve a niche for herself in El Castillo.

"Muchacha, coño, of course I'm grateful to the Revolution, especially for my education. To begin with, I come from a poor guajiro family. How do you say guajiro in English?"

"Country people."

"Eso, then, country. Anyway, I owe a lot to the Revolution and I'm not ashamed to say it. The problem was that when I finished dance school, tú sabes, I couldn't find work. So I ended up working as a guard in El Museo de la Revolución, which is okay for a while, but not for the rest of my life. So, I'm not a crazy anti-communista, coño. I just got out of there because I think I deserve a chance to do what I love."

We could tell Rosie seemed, if not entirely pleased with Anaisneris' answer, at least partially relieved. She couldn't resist pontificating, however:

“Sure, preciosa, sure, but don't get your hopes too high, okay? 'Cause you might find out that you came from Guatemala to Guatepeor, from a guard at El Museo de la Revolución to one more waitress with artistic pretensions in a city full of them. The land of opportunity has its way of fucking with you, you know. And believe it or not, but here the losers don't get shit, preciosa.”

That was how Anaisneris came aboard.

That was also how living in El Castillo became a little bit like living, if not in Havana, then very close to it. “A question of volume and frequency,” Alberto would say, referring to the fact that the castle now seemed fuller than ever, “buzzing,” yet all in a relaxed, tropically inspired way: the black beans slow-cooking day in and day out, their smell permeating the castle's walls and inducing an inextinguishable state of low-intensity siesta-fiesta for men in wifebeaters and women wearing big rollers.

Even the weather changed, at least inside El Castillo. It was like a “category five hurricane,” according to Cuautemoc, who couldn't get over the fact that whenever Anaisneris and Alberto had sex we were all in on it. “A question of volume and frequency,” once again.

“I mean, this is getting fucking ridiculous, man” Cuautemoc would insist. “We're all waiting for them to start fucking and then it's like a competition to see who can fuck louder. And then it never ends. So I'm sick of showing up late and worn out to all my gigs. And I'm not complaining, really. I just wish I had that Cuban stamina, man.”

Then Brendan's father paid us a visit.

“Right, right, right, Foncho. And he just couldn't take Anaisneris' nightly screaming, remember?”

“Well, I don't blame him, man. The poor man honestly thought we had an extreme case of domestic violence in our household.”

“And then the first or second morning after his arrival, remember? While some of us were trying to explain to Brendan's father that there was no torture going on in the house, Ms. Spandex walks into the kitchen in full regalia and the poor man walks up to her to ask her...”

“Right, right, right, he asks her: ‘Excuse me, young lady, but are you all right?’”

“And Anaís looks at him like who the fuck are you?”

“Right, right, right, man.”

“Fortunately she had to run to her English class or she would've beat the shit out of Brendan's father, man.”

“Yeah, but then Brendan got on his father's case.”

“Y manda cojones, it got ugly.”

“As ugly as it can get. I mean the old man flew back to Scotland the next day.”

“Fucking, bloody Brendan, man. He accused his father of being a racist, remember?”

“I really don't remember, che. I left the kitchen and went to my room. I like my breakfasts with a lot less drama, you know.”

“All I know is that after Brendan's father left, Alberto got into the habit of playing Yma Sumac, full volume, to sort of disguise Anaisneris' screaming, remember?”

“Right, right, right, if only Yma Sumac knew.”

“I wonder how she’s doing now, wherever she is.”

“Who? Yma Sumac?”

“No, man, Anaisneris.”

“I wonder how long her affair with Miguelito lasted?”

“Alberto took it so hard, man.”

“Well, you have to admit, it wasn’t easy for him. I mean, of all men, she had to pick Miguelito, manda cojones, pretty much the worst conguero around and like Alberto used to say: ‘Un huevón más pobre y más feo que yo.’ ”

“She gave him plenty of warning, though. I mean how many guys did she screw when Alberto was looking the other way or pretending to?”

“Alberto was blind, Rosie.”

“And deaf.”

“Yeah, yeah, but don’t forget that Alberto’s crisis was bigger than Anaisneris. As a musician he’d gone as far as he could, and now he was getting old and was stuck with being a janitor. And he knew, we all knew, that El Castillo was coming to an end.”

“I don’t know why, Foncho, but I can’t stand it when you talk like that, che.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re reading from a book or something.”

“Well, I’m fucking writing a book about Alberto’s life, what do you expect, Rosie?”

“Nothing, che. All I’m saying is that you sound...”

“Like an Argentine?”

“I guess.”

“You mean I sound like I know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, but a little too much, you know.”

“Well, you know what, Rosie? Fuck you. And fuck all Argentines too.”

I know, I know, I know I should never let Rosie get under my skin, but she did and still does. In any case, the contrast between Anaisneris’ diva-on-the-rise glamour and our pathetic condition as a middle-aged band that, for all practical purposes, had simply outlived its talent was the defining factor of those last years of hard rumba. It was her luscious youth, exuberant moves, bottomless ambition and energy mixing it up with our graying, thinning hair, bulging potbellies, tapered-down illusions and almost desperate effort to remain in command of our groove.

As Alberto used to say with his usual power to charm even on his way down: “Ladies and gents, as you see, we can still swing hard, actually harder and funkier than ever. And you know why? ’Cause we don’t hide la diferencia. We embrace it and we flaunt it.”

“La diferencia” also had many sides to it. I mean Anaisneris hadn’t arrived by herself, to begin with. I wouldn’t call it “an invasion,” as Alberto liked to say, but there were enough of them to push us to the side. They were real too, not prosthetic, part-time Cubans like we were. They were black and cool, dressed to kill. They could shake their hips and shoulders and swing the local chicks like they’d never been swung before.

It was “the Versace Orishas’ revenge,” according to our female friends. And in a city where the only males who knew how to look good were gay, they hardly went unnoticed. More important, they had had a thorough Marxist education and were ready to pursue the American Dream with all their dialectical, materialistic might. As Amanda (our muralist in residence) liked to say when asked about her insatiable appetite for fresh-off-the-boat

Cubans: “Híjole, mano, un cubanito is just what my doctor prescribed for my capitalistic depression.”

Like any trend, though, the passion for new Cuban immigrants would eventually run its course. We just didn’t have the historical perspective afforded to historians and novelists. All we knew was that we had just experienced a considerable blow to our most Argentinean ego. More to the point (in Brendan’s words): “These motherfuckers are hitting us where it really hurts, man. And we’re in a fucking ridiculous position ’cause we’re way too bloody old to change. It’s not like all of a sudden we can become fucking bloody rappers.”

We had our way of getting back at them, though. All we had to do was grab our *zurdos*, *timbãos*, *pandeiros* and *repiquinhos*, show off our samba steps and make sure that they saw us laughing at how utterly out of sorts they looked confronted by an infectious Afro-Latin beat that had no *clave* to tell them what to do. No matter how often we exercised our Brazilian revenge, though, one thing was clear. As musicians, *rumberos*, *sambistas*, *salseros*, *funkeros*, *descarga-happening-organizers* and kings of our hill, we were on our way out. And whether we wanted to thank or curse them for bringing to our attention our insoluble middle-age dilemma, there was no point in pretending we hadn’t gotten the message.

Meanwhile, salsa, soul and funk, three of the four pillars that had defined our rhythmic foundation, were entering a “deplorable, decaffeinated state.”

“Michael Jackson, Madonna and Ronald Reagan are calling the shots. I think we better pack up and leave,” was Rosie’s way of accentuating the obvious.

“And salsa, shit, salsa is going flabby, man,” Alberto would add.

Maybe we had to do what the surviving punks did, play as if we were dead or deaf. The most disconcerting aspect of the death of salsa as we knew it, however, was its new mainstream appeal. Everybody was taking salsa-dancing classes.

“Salsa is no ballroom shit.”

“Well, it’s changing, man. What you gonna do?”

Fortunately, the budding field of World Music offered us an unexplored horizon in which to expand. Ali had always been pushing us to play more Middle Eastern grooves anyway. And Jesús never stopped believing in his African “mosca loca” style. To no one’s surprise, however, Ali began to play more chess than piano. Jesús set the guitar aside to take cooking classes. Cuautemoc recorded *Dolphin Caliente*, and unlike his three previous albums, it didn’t feature any of us.

Sensing “the change in the bloody wind,” Brendan started to learn computer programming, which was good for his professional future but calamitous for his ever-beleaguered sense of humor. Rosie began to remodel Victorian houses and turned, to our surprise, New Agey.

“I never thought I’d live to see a fucking vegetarian Argentine,” was Alberto’s oft-quoted commentary on Rosie’s latest reincarnation.

I went back to college and registered in two English classes, which, surprisingly, the pescaitos fritos approved of, mainly because I had opted out of Creative Writing classes, which according to them, “just produce more bad writers who write well.”

Who was I to argue with them, anyway? They had read quite a bit more than I had. All I knew was that I was getting tired of being the Frank Sinatra of taco vendors.

I also noticed that some of us had begun to romanticize our past. Our rumba extravaganzas were “the most amazing cabaret marathons ever staged in San Francisco.” Or:

“Santana did nothing compared to us, man, ’cause our artistic contribution included theater, dance, performance art and you fucking name it.”

Rosie began boasting about our intellectual bent during the height of our golden age, which she established around 1978. She would go on about how Hannah Arendt, Gramsci, Sartre, Camus, Carlos Castaneda and the local Che Guevaras (Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver) were the subject of endless wee-hour, post-rumba discussions.

“Let’s not forget that we weren’t only a band,” Rosie would say without the slightest irony. “We were a fucking movement.”

And the fact that nobody else remembered it that way didn’t seem to have any effect on her portrayal of our past. Memory doesn’t work by consensus, I suppose. Or maybe it did for a while, but in our “bloody ominous decline,” as Brendan liked to say, we were no longer thinking collectively.

The Mission had changed too. Less Filipino and black. More cafes and trendy restaurants. Less whores. More “artists.” Less Mexican. More Salvadoran. And we would blame them, “los chaparros salvatruchos,” for the growing popularity of cumbia, merengue and “all that bloody romantic shit with no syncopation.”

Speaking of which, I remember Brendan mourning, tears and everything, “the fucking bloody death of syncopation, man.”

Mourning, yes, that is probably the all-encompassing word for what went on in San Francisco in the mid-eighties. And for better or worse, that period is now indelibly linked to Anaisneris, who had arrived just in time to revamp our middle-aged musical career and erotic

imagination yet offered no antidote or consolation (nobody could, really) for the oppressive sense of doom that AIDS, like a new type of fog, cast over San Francisco.

Rosie had all these theories, of course.

“A new erotic paradigm has been born, che. Well, not really new, but anyway sex and death are back together. And you know what? You better get used to it.”

“Easy for you to talk like that, Rosita de los cojones, ’cause we still ain’t seen a lesbian del coño de su madre dying of AIDS,” was Jesús’ roundly applauded response.

Now, of course, so many years later, (it’s always later, never on time, maybe that’s why I’m a writer, to get even with time) I’m surprised we could keep on playing and having our weekly rumbas with such darkness engulfing us. I guess we didn’t know what else to do. We didn’t have much time left, anyway. So we had to party as hard as we could.

To make things even more desolate at our most despondent hour, Anaisneris, and her friends, leaders of the Yeguas del Apocalipsis (Mares of the Apocalypse), appropriated El Castillo’s grand salon for a couple of days and nights a week and we didn’t even put up a fight. In fact, we gingerly moved aside to make room for their guerrilla theater company, experimental dance troupe, visual arts collective and (in Brendan’s classically inclined English) “bloody fucking feminist-support bullshit.”

We had been demoted from house band to a minor inconvenience, and we didn’t even have the reflexes to hold our own, unless you consider bitching and whining resistance tactics. Naturally, after a few weeks, the Yeguas went on to add a third day and night to their busy calendar of events, which included morning yoga classes, drama and dance rehearsals, massages, group therapy and an end-of-the-night fiesta to which we were always invited. They had wisely figured out that was our sole unspoken and nonnegotiable condition.

That was the pathetic state of affairs when Anaisneris began to seriously look for her way out of the relationship. And maybe it was just her timing, but Alberto refused to accept the obvious. Their fights escalated. Anaisneris opted for staying at a friend's house. In retaliation, Alberto refused to give her her clothes back and locked her out of "their" room.

Two weeks later, just before sunrise, while we got drunk and stoned after a forgettable rumba-jam session, surrounded by Cuautemoc's conceptual take on California's car culture (he used car seats as sofas, traffic lights as lamps and street signs as paintings and sculptures in his room), as Rosie told us about the latest gay protest in front of City Hall ("Most of the people wore nothing but towels around their waists. And they all carried signs that read: First the baths, next our bedrooms. Pretty serious shit, let me tell you..."), we heard a knock on the door.

"Coño, don't look at me like that," Anaisneris said, as she opened the door. "I just came to say goodbye. You can keep my clothes, Alberto."

She didn't say anything else, and before Alberto (or us) could reply, she had run downstairs and disappeared.

"That's how it is, man," Alberto mumbled, "somebody's always gotta leave when the party's just beginning."

I (maybe all of us) sensed a self-lacerating edge in Alberto's words, but I (we) didn't feel like dwelling on it, not at that moment.

The sun had just come out over the hill, and San Francisco's downtown skyline shone through the attic windows like a city built entirely of uninvited fears and broken dreams.