

SWEET SIXTEEN

Judith Santos

The plaza, 5 p.m. The plaza opens its arms welcoming me, waiting for me to come. I sit in the plaza, receiving the caress and warmth of doves, the dreams of homeless old people, the melancholy of the drunks, and the smile of other girls, others like me.

I sit in the plaza, seeing the bay of Valparaiso. Valparaiso, beauty of uneasy sea, hills, poverty, and crying sea-gulls. A city with a strange architecture, a mixture of old English buildings and home-made houses built of worn-out pieces of wood (which the sea has returned to the land from its heart) where they slept in long silences.

The houses are made from all elements: partly straw, metals from shipwrecks, laughter from the wind and sorrow. Colourful houses for a grey city.

I am sitting a long way from the beach and looking at the sea. I know the sea cannot reach me. Sometimes I am afraid of the sea. I remember the legends about its love and hate, its furor. I imagine that I have seen "The Caleuche," the mad ship that appears to you and calls to you, leading you to death. Who knows? Nobody who has seen it has ever returned from the eternal solitude of the depths of the sea. I remember listening to the story in my village. Twilight was the time for sharing the sweetness or sourness of the day, sitting around the brazier. The older people, a different story in each one of their wrinkles, were the first to start remembering. But today, I am alone looking at the sea. I feel calm and ready to work. Perhaps today I will have a good day.

Lately the money is not enough. Before, the money could have bought fruits, milk, ribbons, even some second-hand clothes. Year after year everything seems to cost more.

I am hungry and, from the bars surrounding the plaza, the smell of sea-urchins, clams, meat-pastries, and corn puddings drifts out to me, laughing at me: the devil-smell of beautiful food.

Today I want to dream of handsome blue-sea-eyed sailors coming with pockets full of dollars. I dream the tasty green of the dollars, the vegetable smell of the dollars, dollars for sex, dollars for food, dollars for my happiness, dollars. I want to dream. Dreams easily come true.

This city is an important port in the South Pacific sea. This makes me feel proud; the pearl of the Pacific we call it. The ships come here from secret lands. They bring sailors, money, and peanut-butter cookies. Holy city! Holy sailors!

I am a lucky person because I have the best seat in the plaza. Some of the other girls prefer to stand in groups of two or three and wait for the men, talking and laughing. I would rather be here, quiet, until the moment when a possible client arrives.

In the beginning, I used to call the sailors and workers in a loud voice to make them look at me. That was before. Now I am sixteen. They can find in my body what they are looking for.

When I came to the city, things were wrong. I could not find a job. I did not have references. I tried to work in a restaurant but nobody accepted me. I was thirteen. The law does not accept the hiring of girls under eighteen as they cannot work serving alcohol. How could I return to the countryside? People told me not to leave. The big city, my mother said, is always hungry and eats people. I thought, this never could happen to me; I was smart and strong. But things were different here. I did not have a place to live. I slept on the floors

Your tears are the words
I will cry in this story.
I will speak for you
girl of the plaza.
Sit there, hope.
Perhaps tomorrow
the wind
will wipe off the misery
perhaps, tomorrow
we will have a good day.

protected by the big arches of the doors of the market.

Winter in the city brought a storm — rain, wind, and cold for ten days. At night, the newspaper-blankets of the poor, which covered me, could not protect me from the rain. I do not remember the following days after the storm. I became sick. This happened three years ago. I only remember the shivers, the nightmare, the monster of the fever trying to burn me, promising to take me to the place where dolls, birds, sea shells, chocolate cakes, and rainbows were waiting for me.

A girl found me lying sick on a pile of rotten fruit and garbage and took me to her room. After, when I recovered from the fever, she brought me to the plaza. She introduced me to the others and showed me the tricks of the profession.

At first no man would look at me. After the sickness, my bones were dancing on the surface of my skin; my face was white foam of the sea in the morning. I had to shout at men, calling their attention so loudly that everybody in the plaza laughed, seeing the efforts I put on my starting job. But I had to do the best I could; everybody has to work. I was not the exception.

Now it is different. Men look at my body, fruit of a reachable tree. They ask my price. Sometimes they agree on the amount. Other times they argue for a peso or two.

Sailors from other countries would not argue or bargain about prices. The long days, the many nights listening to songs evoke in them music and cadences of bodies. When they land, price is not important. Any price would be paid for the juices, fruits, and bodies in the market.

Most of the time, after I find a sailor who is willing to pay me for love, I invite him first for a drink. I take him to a bar that I know. Drinks, songs, and jokes with the smell of the night and the vibrating music of the guitars. I always order "pisco," the drink of the Indian Gods, made from the grapes of the sleepy mountains, where the sun is the King father and grapes are the daughters of love. Pisco: sorrowful music of flutes, kissing you with each sip of the alcohol.

Because I do not like to drink when I work, and in part because of the profession, I only drink water and my client pisco. But he does not know it. The drinks are served in clay glasses which hide the liquid. The man is the only one who gets drunk.

Later, after making love, when the man is dreaming about guitar-shaped women and dancing hips, I empty his pockets. I take all the money and leave.

Next day, if he goes to the police, I do not have to worry. For men, all the women of the night have the same features, all bodies the same melody, all the trees the same leaves. How could he find me among the many black eyes winking at the sailors when the sun dies on the sea?

Sometimes I would like to go back to my house. They told me not to leave. But I wanted a future. A husband, a small house with a red roof. A ticket for a Sunday show. A garden. A silk dress.

I think I have the best seat on the plaza. From here I can see all the sailors and the workers when they come. I can see the sea and smell the food from the restaurants which makes me hungry. And dream. Perhaps I will have a good day. Perhaps I will eat today.