

On How the Juan Ponce de Leon Carnival Came To An End

by Lourdes Vázquez
translated by Consuelo Corretjer

In a frenzy, I sewed that evening, fastening countless sequins to the cape's train. I loved helping my grandma. There were only a few more days left to deliver the job and Grandma would say over and over that thanks to it, we would no longer be poor. She had asked her client to buy all of the sequins, pearl, and beads left in all of the stores in San Juan, "so there would not possibly be any competition," she said. We devoted our time to sewing the applications by hand until the pain in our fingertips was unbearable, and tiny drops of blood fell from them. Each of our swollen fingers had to be bandaged with adhesive tape. We were exhausted.

My mother said, "All right, go for a walk," and that is what we did. We walked around the streets with our tiny fingers bandaged with adhesive tape. People were having fun and you could hear music everywhere. I had a few cents left from my snack money so we went to buy confetti. I love confetti. You throw it up in the air once and then you throw it again, and everything it touches becomes beautiful. We held on tight to our confetti until we got home, in case any of the street urchins wanted to play a trick on us. The cloak was on the living room floor and its train was spectacular. It was some fifteen feet long, and Grandma figured that it had at least ten thousand sequins, plus the pearls and beads. But most striking of all were the ovals that Grandma had designed with the feathers that Giusti—the store—had imported from Europe. They were peacock eyes that would open and close with each of the cloak's movements. Grandma always watched for the newspaper ads until one like this appeared:



And she'd get there before any other seamstress, to purchase Giusti's best merchandise. The saleswomen knew her well.

We had to make special hooks for the cape. They are covered with sheepskin before being fastened on the shoulders so that the person could wear the cape without bruising the skin. My grandmother never told anyone where she finds sheepskin in this island. I think that her friend who lives in Venezuela gets it from sheep farmers in St. Croix and sends it to Grandma in San Juan. I believe that is so, because each time she receives the package it is stamped in Venezuela and the US Virgin Islands.

That night went fast, as we immediately set to sewing again. Later, Mom and my sister Concha joined us. When we finished, the glitter from the sequins had gotten into our eyes. We went to sleep amazed by that marvel. The night passed quickly. The following day we got up very fast and ran for the living room. The cloak was there, the sunlight directly on it, and its gleam was spectacular. That's when Concha fancied putting on the mantle, dragging it all over the house as we ran after her. She dragged, tugged and tore it each time it got stuck on the furniture. We chased her and screamed at her so much that we got tired. That's how the trouble started. The moment Concha tossed the cloak away she started to swell. All at once she began to grow and all of her bulged. Her lashes and earlobes grew, and her buttocks became very protuberant, to say nothing of her tits. Concha looked gorgeous. She became a woman. I went from surprise to envy, and in a couple of seconds, I was under the cape. My grandmother started to shriek, "One girl growing per day is enough!," she said. But I stubbornly remained there and would not budge until I began to burst like Concha. The first thing to pop were my fingers which shot out like strings, my eyelids uncapped like milk bottle caps and my tits hurt terribly as they stretched. My rounded buttocks, like a donkey's rump, swelled until they became smooth and sensuous. I no longer envied Concha; I looked like her, although I think I looked prettier.

My grandmother said, "this is the end." And she left for the kitchen to make linden tea. While she picked the tiny dry leaves from the plant, she spoke like a madwoman from the kitchen. That she had seen much in her lifetime, that she had even thought there was nothing left for her to see; but what she had just witnessed was unique in the family's history. That it had never happened to any other family in the island! That we had better not tell anyone because nobody was going to believe us. Instead, we are to say that Concha and I had gone to take care of our great aunt in Caguas who suffered from senile dementia and that these two women, these handsome young girls before her, are distant relatives just arrived from New York to see the carnival. The water began

to boil and she turned the fire off and filled a little cloth bag with the leaves. She placed the bag in the pot and went on ranting. "What would we do now with these two naked nubile women? We are going to have to chase away the neighborhood guys and get some clothes for these days."

And so, Grandmother rushed out without even having a mouthful of the tea she had prepared. "Careful, be very careful with the cloak; do not touch it lest you turn into decrepit bags," she warned as she left. My mother and I looked at the cloak, enraptured. "Maybe it was a spell cast on the beads, some witchcraft from an envious seamstress, who knows?" my Mom mused while Concha looked at herself in all the mirrors. The stretching had torn her nightgown and half of her body was naked. She contorted it like a cheap bargirl would do, not understanding where all the flesh had come from. My Mom and I remained quietly sitting on the sofa, holding hands while we waited for Grandma. When she got back, she had some sleeveless cotton shifts with flower prints, the only things she can find in the store. "Take off those rags," she said. "Put on some decent clothes. There's no point in going around the house showing off your hairy private parts."

We had to get dressed quickly, clear the living room and make sure that everything would be tidy by eleven in the morning when the client would come to pick up the cloak. I could not help laughing and thinking about what would happen when the queen put on that gigantic piece of cloth and she would start growing like crazy, but I also felt sorry for my grandma. Now, what happened would be known all over and she would lose all her clients. She, the best seamstress in the whole island.

Using a broomstick very carefully, Grandma started to fold the mantle. Then, she requested a blue sheet and with great difficulty we wrapped the cloak in the sheet. "Careful," she repeated over and over. "Do not touch it again, we could get into a lot of trouble."

As soon as the lady arrived, Grandma gave it to her. Such a fine, educated lady. She was dying to get home and show the cloak off so her friends would feel envy. Meanwhile, we sat on the sofa not saying a word. After the lady left in her big chauffeur-driven car, Grandma said, "Now we have to watch out and not make a single mistake. Remember, you are from New York."

Grown up and speaking English; I don't know how we can manage both difficulties at one time. I was thinking all this by myself while Concha contorted her body. She was already walking around the house in my Mom's high heels, swaying from side to side, her legs twisted. Again, we chased after her. Grandma said that Concha should take those heels

off, and that she—Grandma—would teach us how to behave like proper young ladies as soon as possible. “There are two main lessons in life all women must learn,” she said. “First lesson: Everyone is treated respectfully. Second Lesson: Do not go around showing off your private parts.” Grandma said this was enough to go through life. I personally think that Concha could use a few more lessons, but Grandma says we are in a hurry and so she produced some chiffon scraps and started sewing our outfits for the evening. I never saw Grandma sew so fast. My mom could hardly cope with so many instructions all at once. “Hold here, put a pin here, measure here,” she instructed. “How is it going?” asked Concha. “Shut up, it was you who got us into this mess,” Grandma said.

Concha opened a box of Chiclets gum, took a tablet and put it in her mouth. Meanwhile, Grandma prayed that we would not get any visitors that day. Grandma and Mom

All at once she began to grow and all of her bulged. Her lashes and earlobes grew, and her buttocks became very protuberant, to say nothing of her tits. Concha looked gorgeous.

sewed without stopping. It is hard getting used to such a large body; the tits weighed down on me. By seven, Grandma had two beautiful dresses ready. They were so pretty that they would surely make the whole neighborhood envious. “Shower now and get dressed,” grandma and mom both said. And we rushed toward the bathroom. Concha looked like a cheap nightclub-girl; each time she moved, her buttocks shook. Since there was little room for the two of us, I told her, “Concha, don’t move so much,” but she would only laugh.

We wore Mom’s shoes. Concha looked like an old woman because the pair she was wearing was too big for her; while I... well... they could not have fit me better. We walked fast with great difficulty... because Grandma did not want to miss the parade. The boys started saying nice things to Concha and me, and Grandma responded by hurling the first epithet that came to her mind. We walked until we found the perfect spot. “We can see the queen from this corner,” said my mom.

Nobody mentioned the cloak, but I knew how worried we all were. Well, not all of us. Concha was walking happily, flaunting her hips like the poet wrote: “*Por la encendida calle antillana va tembandumba de la quimbamba.*” We stopped at a corner and stood quietly watching the parade: King Momo, the Casino’s group in their costumes, the Child Queen and the group costumed as the different world nations and finally, the Queen in her brocade dress wearing the bewitched cape! The Queen, who had not grown at all, was walking

majestically, pulling along the most beautiful mantle in the world. Neither Grandma nor my mom said a word. Concha was happy watching the costumed neighborhood guys as they marched dancing the *plena* and I looked in awe at the peacock’s eyes on the cape. They opened and shut each time the Queen moved and, I swear, one of them winked at me. The truth is that, at the beginning, I was rather disappointed. I had imagined that the Queen would be the same size as King Momo. But I thought it was better that way, because, after all, we would stop being poor. Word will get around that it was Grandma who designed the cloak. She did not seem too concerned with this, instead, she spoke constantly about our future. What we would do, whom she would marry us to, and how many children we would have. Concha asked, “Who will we marry?” and Grandma replied, “I shall take care of that.” And I was reminded of Martina, the cockroach in the fairy tale, choosing a husband while sitting at her front porch.

We were chatting when we heard a loud explosion. A terrible confusion overcame the people. We were caught against a fence, while the crowd started to run in all directions. Concha stepped up on a box of Coca-Cola and managed to see what was going on so she started to describe the situation. To everyone’s surprise the Queen’s body was stretching like chewing gum. Her limbs grew, her head and ears expanded, her eyes protruded like the eyes of the witch in the *Little Lulu* comic strip. Grandma was dumbfounded. A lady started to scream hysterically, preventing me from hearing what Concha was saying. Too bad, I was missing the best of the spectacle. But suddenly the Queen grew so much that I was able to see her. She was as tall as a twenty-storey tower. Her legs couldn’t hold her up and they swayed back and forth like bamboo reeds. They came close to each other and then moved away. Pity, she did not turn-out as pretty as I did. Gradually, people left the square, leaving behind only Queen Moma swaying her body with her mother alongside her, screaming desperately.

We held hands and slowly drew close to the Queen on her stilt-like legs. The skinny Queen who was frantically searching for an answer in our eyes; the Queen and her stretched limbs who became a wrinkled and dry old thing right before our eyes. Grandma silently hovered around the square. The Insular Police, the firemen, the governor’s security forces arrived, all to no avail. They could not find a way to remove the ugly sight. Nobody associated the cape with the great disaster that shook the island. The lovely firefly dress—Grandma’s creation—became fluff flying off in the

air. The cadets from the visiting ships laughed their heads off, so the police began to take them away. "Such strange things can be seen in the tropics," they said. The cape was on a treetop, its eyes blinking, bored with so much shouting.

The stick-like Queen's hysterical mother pulled her hair out, started to foam at the mouth and hurled insults until the ambulance came, this time accompanied by the governor himself. "How terrible to have this disgrace happen when so many special guests are present. I can predict this tourist season is going to be failure," he said. "By now, tourists are probably packing their suitcases to leave this impoverished island, full of lice, hunger and now even black magic. We are worse off than Haiti and that is a lot," said the fat old man who scratched an ear as he spoke.

My Mom asked about Concha, "Have you seen her?" "She was here a while ago," I said. "Concha!" we called her several times. "Concha!" "Where could she be?" Concha was nowhere to be found and then, I had a brilliant idea. Slowly I approached the dock and there she was, among the cadets who were admiring her and lusting for her as if she were an animal in heat. "Concha!" I yelled. But she did not even acknowledge me. I got closer and said, "Concha, let's go," while a cadet whispered something in her ear. "Let's go, Concha." I took her by the hand and dragged her to the square. She was so pleased with herself. "There is no hope for her," I thought. "Men are going to be her downfall." Grandma remained silent, alone in the distance.

The next day, the news was in all the papers. They had still not been able to remove the long-limbed Queen. "Shame has visited one of the most distinguished families in the island," the news stressed. "High society is mourning." The governor declared a day of mourning and loads of policemen were posted around the ruined Queen in order to protect her from the neighborhood's street urchins. They tried to feed her but she refused to eat. The doctors insisted that she should eat. The mayor, swift and nimble, sent carts full of dried beef and boiled plantains; they are trying to feed her with seven shovels all at once. All efforts were in vain as the unfortunate woman refused to open her mouth. The journalists saw a young gentleman approach her in bafflement. They discovered he was her fiancé. I say "was" because right there he declared that this woman was definitely not his fiancée. The Queen's mother was hospitalized. Her father got very distressed, as the stick-like Queen is his only daughter. "This is the work of my enemies," he said. The photos in the newspapers showed the cape resting on the treetop. Seventy sheets were brought from the municipal hospital and ten seamstresses worked quickly at their sewing machines to make her an overall to prevent any scoundrel from poking her private parts, which are "pretty big" the press reported. That's when I realized we would never get out of poverty.

That night, Concha fell asleep immediately. Mom and Grandma went to bed without speaking. I stayed awake, and waited for the house to be in complete silence. Then, very carefully, I picked up the broomstick and tiptoed out and headed for the square. I approached the site where the lean Queen was. Two big tears were running down her cheeks. The guards, bored by the spectacle, had retired to the pier and were smoking and whispering among themselves. The cadets from the training ship strolled sleepily on deck. I walked toward the cape and looked at it closely. Its peacock eyes were closed, so I stretched the broomstick until it reached one tip of the cape. Little by little, I pulled the cape until it fell to the ground. I dragged it to the pier; the peacock eyes were now blinking, and the guards continued to whisper. I looked at the night sea and flung the cape into the water. I thought I heard a moan. I turned my head around and there she was. Since her limbs were so long, she could come close or move away without difficulty. The noise of the cape in the water had broken her lethargy. The guards looked at us with curiosity from afar. Steps were heard in the night's hollow and in the distance I saw the unmistakable shapes of three women. I could almost feel the swollen Queen's breath; she heaved intensely. I touched one of her cheeks—a thousand times bigger than mine. I kissed her tenderly and stretched my hand for her to take. I walked slowly while she followed my lead like a wounded serpent. The police did not interfere. She moaned with the slightest movement while she dragged herself beside me toward the end of the pier. The black sea canvas was shining. The stars multiplied ceaselessly. My look told her that the sea is wide, mute and, above all, discreet so she should decide to step on that transparent carpet. I retreated some thirty paces toward the square. I have heard that the bottom of the sea is silky. Then, I heard a thud in the water and we all stared at the circular motion on its surface. Grandma stopped before me and took me by the arm. Mom squeezed Concha's arm. Concha is a lost cause. She was exposing her breasts. We walked two or three times around the square like sleepwalkers until we began to see the dim morning light. "You owe me the sewing workshop," I told Grandma. "And you owe me your courage to do what you did," she answered. The police could not understand what happened, but the governor was certainly happy with the news. ☺

Poet, short story writer, and essayist, Lourdes Vasquez has been widely published in journals, anthologies, and newspapers in the Caribbean, Mexico and the United States. Her published works include Las Hembras (Chile, 1986), Poemas (Colombia: Museo Omar Rayo, 1987), La Rosa Mecanica (Puerto Rico: Huracan, 1991); a biography of Puerto Rican poet Marina Arzola (Puerto Rico: El Gallo, San Juan, 1990), El Amor Urgente (New York: La Candelaria, 1995) and The Broken Heart, (New York: La Candelaria, 1996).