**Shadow Latina**

Kathryn Jankowski

Mama’s had a long day overseeing workers who forge tin cans at a factory in San Francisco. She grabs a cold soda and bottle opener and joins me at the kitchen table. It’s a red Formica set with vinyl chairs that burp when you stand up, a source of never-ending fun, especially if you wet the seats first. I clear my throat and hand her a letter from the principal of my elementary school. She’s not going to like it.

I rush to explain my innocence. “That girl called me a *spic*! I wasn’t going to hit her,

Mama. I just wanted her to take it back.”

I’m not ashamed of my olive complexion. It comes from my father’s people. Bold men with skin like oiled oak and striking blue eyes who fought in the Czar’s cavalry. I’m a proud Slav. I have a *babunia*, not an *abuela.*

Mama reads the message and sighs. “You’re not just Polish. My mother’s family emigrated from Chile.”

I look at her with new eyes. She’s darker like me—my three sisters have much lighter skin. We both have jet black hair, only hers is tightly curled. (Mine will kink and coil at puberty.) Her name is Juanita. How could I have been so stupid?

Except she’s never talked much about her family. I know her mother died young. I’ve never seen her father. Everything in our house revolves around Papa. His culture. The old country. Once Russia, now Poland.

My face burns. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I didn’t want you to feel less important.”

I stare at my hands, the chameleon’s flesh that takes on a green tinge under fluorescent lights. “This is how God made us. Why should we hide who we are?”

“The world can be hard on girls with brown skin. Don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Even when someone’s mean to me?” I cross my arms in defiance as only a seven-year-old can.

She strokes my cheek. “Yes, Katrina. You have to be strong. Ignore them.”

I’m a Gemini. We constantly interact with the world, sometimes to point of exhaustion. Yet I have no choice but to withdraw so others don’t notice me. Like a fly on the wall. Here yet unseen as long as I keep still. Teachers note my reticence on report cards: *Kathy needs to participate more*.

I might have faded completely were it not for a black-caped vigilante: Don Diego de la Vega, otherwise known as Zorro. Defender of the downtrodden, bane of corrupt officials. Was there ever such a mesmerizing man?

Mama shares my infatuation. Each week when the show airs we claim the spots closest to our black-and-white TV. I’m a sponge, soaking up his magnificence. He’s dark and handsome and rich and smart. A kind man with a generous soul.

In my dreams, I’m old enough to be his wife. We gaze at stars from the balconies of haciendas, take long walks in the desert at sunset, spend hours enjoying the simple pleasure of each other’s company. Pure bliss.

The series is long gone when Papa moves us to a bigger house in a new city and sets up a hi-fi in the living room. At first, the record cabinet holds LPs of accordion music and polkas, his favorites. And then Mama, in a quiet act of defiance that surprises and charms me, buys her own albums, ones that feature Latin musicians. When I point out the scantily clad women on a few covers she smiles. “Pretty, aren’t they?”

We have to wait for Papa to go out before we can play them. His house, his rules. They fill the air with hot, sultry sounds. I find my rhythm as we dance to Perez Prado, Xavier Cugat, Tito Puente, masters of Latin jazz and mambo. Mama loves mambo. She laughs as she moves, as free and happy as I’ve ever seen her.

Years later, after she’s passed, Tito and his orchestra are playing at a club in San Francisco. I’m ready. My hair is loose and wild, my dress brightly flowered and snug around my curves. I weave around couples on the dance floor and make my way to the stage.

Tito’s a silver fox, full of energy, leading the bank while keeping an eye on the audience. As I swivel my hips in time to his timbales he grins and winks at me.

Mama would have liked that.