



La Cumbre

Cheryl Diane Kidder

Oil on canvas by Kathryn Turner

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by Cheryl Diane Kidder

"Hey, you want to wear the purple ones?" Alma held up two dangly earrings. "I don't care, really." She smiled and nodded at me, then looked up at the ceiling with one hand on her hip. "You know," her eyes twinkling, "I will look good in any color." She poofed her sprayed hair up in the mirror like she was some star of a telenovela. "You go ahead," she insisted. "Take these."

Alma was something more than just Cesar's aunt to me. She was the first one he'd introduced me to, she was the one who helped us so much through the pregnancy, she was the one who threw my baby shower (although, looking back at the videotape, very little English had been spoken that day), and she was the one who insisted I needed to get out and kick up my heels now that he had finally signed the divorce papers.

I tried to pull my stomach in tighter under my black dress. I hadn't been in this dress since before the baby.

"Might be a good idea." Might be best to take any potential suitor's attention away from other imperfections. I clipped the earrings on. Alma pulled my elbow so we were both framed in her dresser mirror. The top of her head came to the tip of my shoulder.

"Now, you gonna have a good time tonight. Plenty of dancing, lots of guys."

I rolled my eyes at her, still not completely comfortable going out with Cesar's aunt. The divorce wasn't even final yet.

"Really, Nancy, you'll see. You need to get out, have some fun."

We looked at each other in the mirror: me unable to hide the doubts, her continually cheery. Even after living in San Francisco for twenty years, her English was still a little broken.

"You look really good. Nobody will know you have a three-month-old baby. No way." She patted my stomach. Felt like it was sticking out a mile. "Look, completely flat." Then she patted hers and laughed. "This is what happens after three kids. Hey, look at me. I still get dressed up. I still go dancing. Every Saturday night. You'll see."

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We went in separate cars because Alma said she sometimes likes to go home early and besides, you never know what may happen. In either case, the baby was in good hands. Minette, Alma's sixteen-year-old, was watching her and I didn't have to pick her up until tomorrow.

I followed the broken taillight of her little Honda through parts of the Mission I'd never seen, thinking: did Cesar know these streets, did Cesar have another girlfriend in this neighborhood? Well, that didn't matter now. Now he was back home in Sonora and I was here, still here in San Francisco with the rest of his family and our daughter.

I'd seen the neon sign before from the freeway, *La Cumbre*, with a martini glass tilting one way then the other when the neon was turned on. I followed her up the hill and around the club. The parking lot was already full so we had to park on the street. The car facing downhill I turned my wheels to the curb, unlatched the door of my new but used Escort and then had trouble closing it again. Alma came over and gave me a hand.

Before we walked in, she made sure we'd redone our lipstick and rearranged our dresses from the ride over. I walked slightly behind her, my dress inching up my thighs with every step.

Just as she was about to reach for the door, it was swept open by an older man in a ruffled, black silk shirt who recognized Alma, greeted her in Spanish taking her hand and kissing her on both cheeks. Then he took my hand lightly, bent his head and kissed the air just above my knuckles. She hooked her arm in mine and we were inside.

"First, we have to find a seat." She steered me to the right side of the room where it appeared all the women sat, lined up against a mirrored wall with small tables in front of them. Alma spoke to one of the women already seated who immediately removed her purse and scooted her chair over to make room. We sat down. Alma ordered two Coronas from a waiter who returned before I could even set my purse under my chair.

"I'll get this one. You do the next one, OK?" The waiter smiled at me and handed me the familiar bottle. I grabbed it, closed my eyes and drank. I was half done with it before I set it back down on the table. I'd met Cesar in a bar. Not this bar, not here, but so much like here. It had been dark. I'd been drinking.

"Come on *senorita*, you wanna dance?" Alma leaned over so I could hear her over the music. Two very young men in jeans and open white shirts held their hands out to us. I shook my head at the second boy, who immediately pouted and returned to his friends, and told Alma, not yet, maybe later.

"OK, then. Don't get too lonely." She laughed, took her boy's hand and jumped up.

I watched him lead her to the dance floor, her red heels on the wood floor. The music started up again and all I could hear was the bass turned up too high. I ordered another two Coronas from the waiter and left him a five-dollar tip.

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The first night I'd met Cesar and we went back to his cousin's house and didn't leave until the next day. I remembered falling asleep under a thin quilt with him inside me on the living room rug and his cousin coming home and finding us there, locked together. He sat right down on the couch and started talking with Cesar and as they talked I felt him getting harder and I hid my head on his chest and tried not to move until finally he said, "Compa.." and I heard the please in his voice and felt every hand gesture that said "A little privacy?" and then I heard the door close again and

we looked at each other and laughed and I thought, this man can see right through me and I thought, I could be with this man a long time and I thought, I could have babies with this man.

And on our second date we bought a Spanish/English dictionary and lay around in bed with two pens and a pad of paper. Three days later I went back to work and stopped taking lunch breaks so I could leave earlier. He stayed with me for a week and then took me to meet his family, well, his father's side of the family who lived here in San Francisco. He introduced me like a fiancée, not just a girlfriend.

After four days he looked up the "L" word, asked me how to say it and then taught me how to say it in Spanish. I knew it was too early to use it, but I let him use it anyway. I tried to talk to him about using it too early, but he didn't care either. I hadn't used or heard that word for many years. It should have startled me.

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"What do you want, eh?" My young man tried asking me in English as we slow danced to something with a salsa beat, not that I let that bother me. We were on the outskirts of the dance floor, it was late, most everybody else had either paired up or was hanging off the bar, trying to bum free drinks. I wouldn't have minded his thigh continually rolling his hip into my hip either except he was a little too short.

"I got what you want, eh?" Then he laughed in my ear which was a stretch given my height and state of inebriation. I clearly did not need this much foreplay.

I leaned down and stuck my tongue in his ear, trying to give him a message. He answered by pulling me closer, his hands firmly planted on my hips. He moaned and rolled his head against mine, the smell of his hair, like coconuts, just like Cesar's. I pulled away from him. The room rolled around me strung with Christmas tree lights. I couldn't focus too well. I tried to remember how many Coronas I'd had and who I'd come with.

Then the music stopped and he was leading me back to my seat. I sat down hard, misjudging the distance. The boy I'd been dancing with bowed from the waist, not letting go of my hand, then kissed it formally, turned and walked back to his table.

Then I remembered. I'd come with Alma and she had gone. She needed to get home early. I was in the Mission at *La Cumbre*. Cesar was in Mexico. I'd been drinking. I'd been dancing with more than one (how many?) men. None of them spoke English too well. I crossed my legs and tried not to look across the room where the men were. The only women left in the bar were sitting where I was, against the wall, purses under their chairs, smoking or drinking, straightening their hair, touching their lips. But they were old, maybe older than me.

The woman next to me was no bigger than Alma. She had poured herself into a green and gold sequined cocktail dress that had huge flounces around her knees. She could have been Alma's grandmother. Her too-black hair swept up in waves off her forehead. Her huge rhinestone earrings waved from her ears whenever she turned her head to laugh. She kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, her green satin shoe kicking me in the shin.

I picked up my purse and walked across the dance floor, the sound of my heels like knocks at the door. I hesitated outside the door marked Damas, but then focused in on the silhouette of a female flamenco dancer, decided I was in the right place, went in and bolted myself into a stall. I was dizzy and tired. I closed the toilet seat and sat down, took out my makeup bag and tried to check my face in the inch long mirror of my lipstick case. I couldn't tell what needed to be redone so I just redid it all: powder, blush, shadow, liner, lipstick. I stood up carefully and bent over, shaking out my hair, running my fingers through it and shaking it like I wanted to pull it all out. I stood back up and had to put a hand on the door in front of me. Slowly, I focused again and sat back down.

It was late. Alma was gone. I had to drive home. Minette had the baby. OK. There were still some guys left. What was their problem? God, they didn't behave like the college guys I was used to at all. Shit, what did I have to do to these guys? Maybe they were just young. I flashed on the women's faces lined up against the wall, the ones still left at this late hour. They were way older than me: wrinkles, false eyelashes, push-up bras and girdles, every one of them. Maybe they just came here to dance. Maybe they depended on guys with mother fixations. Who the hell knew? All I knew was that I was getting lost in the translation. Maybe I was too fast for these guys.

I decided to take another look at the whole scene on the walk back from the bathroom. Completely re-made up, my vision was also somehow improved. On the way back, I watched the mirrored wall behind the women's chairs. I could

see the table of young men I'd been dancing with. They were rowdy, slapping each other on the back or shoulder, starting miniature fights, standing up, sitting down, ordering more beer, laughing, yelling. The women, maybe a dozen left in little clumps, so shiny against the mirror, were waiting for the music to start up again. I measured my chances against them and figured as the only blonde in the whole place it was either going to work for me or against me.

I made it back to my chair and this time allowed my dress to go where it wanted. There was a fresh Corona on my table and the last guy I'd danced with caught my eye, raised his glass and nodded his head. I smiled over at him and the music started. I was still swallowing as he led me back to the dance floor.

This time the floor was packed. The wall was empty. Every woman was on her feet. My young man held me close and this time I didn't care about his height, I just breathed into his hair and closed my eyes. I didn't care the ten-piece band was playing a rumba. I didn't see the other women's skirts go flying as they did the dance the way it should be done. I let my young man lean into me. I pulled him closer. He started talking to me in Spanish. I watched us in the mirror. I had no idea what he was saying, but I was convinced this time he would not leave the dance floor without knowing my intentions.

Whenever the music slowed down he'd pull away from me to see my face, I'd smile and nod and pull him closer. Now he was close enough I could feel him hard against me. He rolled his hips slowly into me and I let my hands drop below his waist. I was worried now that if I closed my eyes I wouldn't want to open them so I rested my head against the top of his head and stared at the other dancers who floated by. A woman passed within a few inches of my head, I could smell her perfume. She wasn't smiling. She was looking off into the distance. She held her young man by the hand and I think she was leading. Each couple I saw in the mirror did the same dance. They knew all the steps. It was so formal, so expected: step, step, turn, shake, turn, step, step, closer together, then apart. Cesar was a wonderful dancer, but I couldn't remember anything he'd taught me.

This time the music stopped and my young man kept a hold of my hand as he walked me back to my chair. Now he was sitting beside me. He looked off into the distance and put his hand on my bare leg. I shifted in my seat to lean closer to him. He moved close and spoke in my ear. I made an apologetic face and shrugged my shoulders. There was no time for dictionaries.

The table of men across the room was quiet. Most of them had either gone or were chatting up women from the wall. Some of the band had come down to the bar for a drink, others were still on stage, smoking and talking. The jukebox was on loud. A couple people at the bar danced on their stools. The dance floor was empty.

My young man leaned over again and kissed my hair, then moved closer and kissed my ear, then left his face somewhere between my hair and my neck. I put my hand on his leg and the lights came up behind the bar. The men at the table made no noise. The band members put out their cigarettes and stood up.

My young man pulled away from me, raised his eyebrows and smiled a little. I was so tired. I wanted someone else to make this decision, someone else to worry about her age, her weight and whether her mascara was still on. I wanted someone else to make a sober decision about this boy in this place at this hour. I suppose I wanted Cesar. I wanted the thing that would always let me down. I wanted the thing that was hardest to get and seemed always out of reach. I wanted that drama back in my life. Even at two a.m. I could tell this boy didn't have it in him. I should have gone right then. I should have gotten up, grabbed my purse, smiled and turned and walked out alone. I should have, and I did.

However, if you don't speak the same language, the nuances of why you're walking out alone are lost. All my young man knew was that I had smiled at him, grabbed my purse and walked out the door. What he remembered was my hand on his leg, his cock against my thigh, his breath in my ear.

He was there at my car door before I could get in. He put his hands on my waist and I pulled away. The street was well lit. The women were slowly making their way to their cars alone. I motioned for him to get in the passenger side. He smiled.

Convinced we were going to his place, he started giving me directions. I drove slowly, not yet decided. We came back through the Mission, some streets I recognized. We pulled onto a street with no lights and no houses and I pulled over to the curb and turned off the car.

He reached over immediately between my legs, his tongue in my mouth. I protested and pointed to the backseat. He sat back in the seat and I opened my door, got out and then into the backseat. It was still dark out. I pulled the hem of my dress slowly up to my waist. He moved over me like a shadow.



Cheryl Diane Kidder's work, nominated seven times for the Pushcart Prize, has appeared in numerous journals, including *Boat Press*, *Front Porch*, *Able Muse*, *Potomac Review*, *CutThroat Journal of the Arts*, *Weber-The Contemporary West*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Brevity*, *Brain, Child*, *Identity Theory*, *In Posse Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Tucson.



