ESSAY

Thirteen Candles, No Wishes

by Lissa Batista



"Native Shadows" by Aja Dandridge

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1. The Owner's Daughter

I grew up in a nightclub with people of the night. In Miami. Starting at thirteen. I was raised between mojitos and bottles of Corona with lime. I was raised with Latin music and Spanish speakers, dancing all night only with those who worked for my father, or his friends, under his supervision. I was raised wearing red lipstick and a scowl because at thirteen my body was all woman; 5'5, 103 pounds, C cups, and thick brown hair to my waist.

My mother told me never to be friendly to the men who talked to me. She said never give excuses like *I have a boyfriend, I'm taken, I'm here with my parents.* They don't care about that stuff. Tell them no, tell them your age, tell them you're the owner's daughter.

I'm on the sidewalk in front of the club making my way onto a highchair where my parents are waiting for me, sharing a Kendall Jackson bottle of Merlot. My mom has a hand over his forearm and my dad's other hand visors his face; he's rubbing his temples using his thumb and pointer. They've been separated for five years, but I remind them from time to time they are soulmates. When my parents bought the nightclub, I remember them sitting outside on the sidewalk. There was a square table with small stools, the seats covered in crushed red velvet. There was also a bottle of wine on the table, Clos du Bois red blend.

He tells me his partner, neighbor for twenty years, friends for over twenty-five, co-workers since the nineties, has embezzled too much of the profits. He can't trace them. No one will talk. It's not worth it. He's selling the nightclub.

We take it inside; it is one of the last times I visit the club. We circle the west side of the guitar bar to the VIP section. We take a small silver leather table. We get a bottle of Milagros Tequila, limes, cherries, skinny straws, and two sparklers that last as long as the merengue playing over the speakers. I'll dance a salsa song with my dad on the dance floor, and people will stop dancing and move over to watch us. They know who we are. The song will end and my dad will throw me into the arms of another coworker, and I'll dance three more songs with the nightclub employees. We all feel it, in the triple spins, the Cuban salsa steps. In the flailing arms and the body vibrating, hands on hands and sometimes on shoulder blades. They know I am still the owner's daughter.

The song comes to an end.

2. When It Comes To My Mother

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My mother’s survival is a mystery. My mother has no birth certificate. She doesn’t have a real birthday. My grandmother may say it’s February 15th, but I know she’s not an Aquarius. She’s a Sagittarius. Her American birthday also agrees with me — December 13th. She is born into an espiritismo tribe, Umbanda. Think of Santeria, but married to Yoruba. I am kept out of the history in the part of my mother’s life, but I was told that when my grandfather gathered in the backyard with the others, they would pray until possessed by a higher spirit and then their corporal bodies would be used to give the spirit offerings. In turn, the spirit would give advice or warnings.

My grandfather walked through hot coal, drank a liter of rum, and ate handfuls of hot peppers. He burped. His voice became hoarse and sounded as if more than two voices were talking in synchronicity. He says my mother is in danger, she needs to be baptized, she is just a baby. Years later, they will always come back to this story and blame my grandfather for not baptizing her at the time like the spirit asked.

She is found at 6 months old. In one story she’s in the woods, in another she’s in a crib. Her bottom lip is slashed down to her chin; someone tried to cut her throat. Blood everywhere. Her lips are ripped. Both of them. I read her diary a long time ago. In the first pages she wrote about being raped by her cousin at thirteen. By fourteen, people find out and want them to get married. My mother will run away to the city, Goiania, and become a model. She escapes her family, finds a new life. Finds my dad at his bar and gets pregnant with me three months later, gets married to him two months after that. By the time I’m a year old, we’re on a plane headed to Miami.

3. Portrait of My Mother Defanging a Snake at 13

Her dirty, blonde hair camouflages her long, lanky body. She's in a t-shirt and underwear, tarantulating through the forest in her backyard on all fours.

She puts her ear to the ground, the buzz of the earth coming alive. She hears what she wants and her body rises like a corn stalk, her hair still perched over her body like haystack, her eyes needles poking through the mound of dead leaves a few feet away.

Her mouth waters as she watches the jararaca’s browning scales breath. My mother breathes in as the snake tastes a lack of fear on its tongue, straightening its back, like my mother's hair down hers. The snake attempts to slither away, but it's too late.

In a swift move, my mother’s limbs web through the cool dirt, pinching the snake between her left thumb and pointer finger, her right hand on its head. My mother meditates; she

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gardens.

The jararaca: its face a root being pulled from the ground towards her and she lets go of its tail, her right hand cradles its head, her left fingers like a mother patiently extract a fang like a child’s milk tooth.

One then the other.

Years later, I asked her about the venom. She straightens, her dirty blonde hair stalks, the curve of her smile, the one I know when she gets ready to lie:

she strikes

she can't die of it if she's venomous too.

4. Daily Horoscope for My Mother

February 15, 1974; Aquarius

Those born on this date display ingenuity as well as imagination, like when you took Junior and me to the backyard and told us ants were our friends. Our hands formed a triangle and trapped little black ants until they crawled on us. The game was who could let the ant get the farthest up their arm. You always won.

There was a beautiful bartender who kept flashing her tits at my father the first year the nightclub opened. You came to work through the back door, slithering into the bathroom where the bartender was putting on her makeup before her shift. You grabbed the girl’s shoulders, slammed her to the wall. You opened your legs to hip width and brought your arm to the girl’s throat. You lifted her up from the floor about 6 inches. She was choking and scratching at your arm and face, but you didn’t budge. It took the security guard, the manager, and my dad to rip you off from the girl. Her body was going limp. You detached and pushed everyone away. My father was yelling, telling you to go home. You, smirking, left the way you came in.

5. I’m Nothing Without My Baby Brother

Recently, we played an intimacy game with our family. The question was: when was the moment you knew you had to get to know the other person more? Junior and I chose the same time frame. Our story goes that we were sharing a bedroom, which we did until we

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were in our mid-teens. I was about thirteen, he was ten or eleven. He's lying on the floor, I'm on the top bunk. He tells me he thinks he's gay. I don't remember what I said, but I know I will protect him at all costs. He tells me it's the same scenario, but I'm not on the top bunk. I'm packing my bags and threatening to run away. He is defending our mom, but we can't remember why. We just know our parents were fighting. I told him to *Stop defending mom, you don't know everything that's going on. There are more sides to the story.* I don't think I was talking about our parents. I think he knows that too. We took a silent vow to each other over unmade beds and balled up shirts into a bookbag with a broken zipper.

6. My Father is a Four-Leaf Clover Dressed in a Suit

My father's mother was a businesswoman who raised ten kids and ran her own hotels. She was said to have had a lover while being with my grandfather, too.

My grandmother and grandfather go to a party with three of their children. My dad is around six months old in my grandmother's arms. A song plays, and my grandfather demands the song be turned off; he knows it was my grandmother's lover who requested it. A friend comes up, tells my grandfather someone upstairs wants to ask him something. It's about business. He goes upstairs, is shot and killed. Six bullets. No one ever finds the killer. My grandmother runs a lifetime from this moment. No one will uncover the truth.

My father started shoeshining at six, selling popsicles in plastic bags at eight, and by thirteen, he was running his own espiritismo congregation in downtown Goiania, Brazil. Espiritismo was the same religion my mother was baptized in. My father rents out a small store and hosts his congregation of thirteen people every Thursday. He swallows down a bottle of rum, but he doesn't get drunk. He eats malagueta peppers by the handful, but his mouth doesn't burn. When the spirit takes over, you become a vessel. Grateful to be the chosen one, your body accepts the offerings.

He's a Virgo, so it makes sense that his drive, his focus and ambitions make him successful. He always got what he wanted. Always. My father knew the power of manifestation and reeled it into his life, pulling everything he desired towards him. Consequences always weighed less than risk. I get my impulsiveness and trigger-happy snap-judgment from him. He ran a pharmacy by eighteen and by twenty, he had crossed the Mexican-American border by foot, hitchhiking rides inside the cushions of an old car driven by an old couple who dropped him off in Boston. There he finds three Brazilian friends to room with and begins to bus at a restaurant with the best French onion soup. My father tells me you can tell the

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quality of the restaurant by their French onion soup. I order it everywhere I go.

My father is also the luckiest person I know. He finds money on the floor; a gun goes off in his apartment and misses him by an inch; his club sells a month before the Coronavirus guts out Hollywood Boulevard in Florida.

But there were moments he wasn't so lucky. At thirteen, he gets raped on the bus by a prostitute with crabs riding home from his congregation. He gets caught with a dime bag of coke that belongs to his brother in the late 80s when he returns to Brazil from America. He loses his mother, he loses his job, he loses his family while trying to fix it, and leaves us in Brazil in 2006 for eleven months. He will get sick, really sick. He will get a lawsuit on his hands, claiming my mother sexually harassed a co-worker. He will get divorced from my mother. He will get migraines and convince himself he has a brain tumor. He will get addicted to pills. He will eventually get his shit together when I get pregnant.

7. Daily Horoscope for My Father

September 10, 1969; Virgo

Those born on September 10th are fortunate if they discover an activity in youth which becomes their passion in adulthood. Business runs in the blood. My father called me yesterday and told me he's ready to come back to Miami. He wants to open up a coffee shop, or a grocery store, or something with cash transactions like a car wash. He can't stay still.

When they are thrust into demanding positions in which they are being scrutinized, they can experience anxiety. My father left the house after the divorce. He had his black plastic bag in one hand, and with the other, waved at me. He was hurt, but when he's hurt, he's really angry. He said things he never apologized for, but I forgave him anyway. He said I will turn out to be like my whore mother. My brother's going to kill himself. I'm a liar.

People in Hollywood knew too much. The cheating, the strip clubs, the threesomes, the lawsuit, the divorce. My father began to suffer from migraines. They got so bad he started leaving work early to rest in complete silent darkness. He laid under three blankets. His face was also wrapped. Ear plugs, socks, eye mask. It got worse before it got better.

They must not allow themselves to stagnate. He just wanted us to be on his side for once, but we stayed at my mother's house, licking her wounds. My dad lepered alone because we never learned to love him.

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8. Portrait of My Father Selling His Club

The rain, like la clave, hits
the window to a familiar beat,
a Tito Puentes salsa,
like the one that plays on
Saturday nights before 10pm,
the one he hated at the moment
and never knew he'd once miss
the older crowds heading
to the dancefloor, blooming
and wilting into each other
in spins and steps. His migraine
storms through his temples
down the vein in the middle
of his wrinkled forehead
it hurts to see him in pain,
but he knows he's getting old.
He squeezes the blankets over
his body and tucks himself in
he imagines he's home in brazil,
his mother on the hammock
humming a lullaby, him cleaning
the red dirt from his yellow-tinted
glasses, the dry air removing
his pain and condensing it
into the tuft of clouds,
an atmospheric change.

9. I Blow Out My Candles

I was thirteen when my father hired a former employee who used to work with him. In the 90s, before my father bought his own club, he worked at a nightclub on South Beach and took German in as a busboy. My father eventually trained him to become the lead server. German was one of the few to quit the South Beach nightclub and come work for my dad.

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My dad took in all the workers who followed and supported him. German being one of the first ones to get hired, went from server to general manager at my father's club in three weeks. He gained access codes to the safe and had an extra pair of the club's keys. He was opening and closing. He was cashing out the servers, counting the bartender's drawers, giving rides to anyone who needed them.

He was young and ambitious, and I think my dad wanted to see him like a son. Someone he could trust, someone who reminded him of himself washing toilet bowls and taking orders on South Beach for all those years. Before my father was drawn under the wing of that nightclub owner in South Beach and flew out to Vegas and Cancun on vacation days together. German didn't go to Cancun with my dad, but he was responsible for picking me and my brother up from school when my parents went to Cancun. German took us to Burger King and shouted into the speaker like that Dane Cook joke when he worked the drive-thrus. German bought us milkshakes. He gave us money for school and offered to take us to the mall. At the club, he got us candy and talked about comedians, movies like *Madagascar*, and once in a while he would talk to us about his bitches that would show up crying at the club, begging for him to take them back.

I was thirteen, and I needed to go to the restroom in the back, but the police officers were busy, and Jose the bouncer was outside watching a drunk who cartoonishly tried to maneuver around him and sneak in. My dad wasn't around, so I asked German to take me, and he knew the protocol. Hold my hand and get me through the crowd. Take me to the restroom and wait for me outside. Then take me back to the front. The DJ booth was next to the ladies room and when I got out of the restroom, he was in the booth. I followed him; I wanted to let him know I was done. He was fiddling with something, playing with headphone strings. He was moving towards me already, to get me, to get down the DJ booth and take me back to the cover charge. His hand slides up my skirt and his fingers slide through my fishnets, his palm grabs my cheek. His mouth is open and groaning.

I should have told my parents then. I should have run through the crowd and gone behind the bar and told my mom. I should have banged on the office door and told my dad. I should have slapped him in the face or threatened to tell the police.

But I didn't do any of those things. What I did was blush furiously. My body responded. I was hot and sweating under my armpits, and my breath hitched. I didn't understand this physical response. I knew I hated it. I knew it was wrong. My body betrayed me, and I thought because of my body, it was my fault. I told myself I wanted it. He told me that, too.

Instead, I kept his secret. Our secret. Instead, I stopped using red lipstick. I stopped using black, bandage dresses. I stopped using push-up bras. I started wearing my father's XL shirts

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to school, listening to “In my White Tee” so I could say I was just following a trend. I started cutting myself. I started wearing bangs to cover my face. I started skipping class. I started kissing more girls. I started hating the way I looked. Hating my breasts that kept growing to a full D. Hating my long, virgin hair, my big eyes and long legs.

But it didn’t matter what I wore. He would come back.

10. The Movie *Thirteen*

When my parents tell me their stories of abuse, we are drinking wine, and it's just the family. Sometimes my mother’s boyfriend is there or my brother-in-law. No one cries. It is all told matter-of-factly. This is something that happens to this family. Abuse is a tradition in our family; it’s our bildungsroman, our bar mitzvah.

Before the club days, we went to Blockbuster and rented the movie *Thirteen*. I’m eleven years old, I have just started my period, I am just discovering my puberty body. I don’t think I’m wearing deodorant yet. I resonate with the blonde in the movie. I relate to her the most. I don’t know that my father smokes every day, but I recognize the smell in his beard. I know the terminology of sex, what blowjobs are, but I am not yet interested in boys. I watched the entire movie with my parents in horror. How can the brunette do this? Coaxes the blonde to forgo her studies, peer pressures her to smoke weed, huff gas, suck her boyfriend’s dick. The blonde almost died, the blonde just wanted to have friends, be accepted. The brunette was miserable. Misery loves company.

I’m thirteen years old. I became the brunette. I have let my curious classmates grab on my breasts, honking them and running down the hall with hands open in case they pass another big-chested girl. I have let them corner me on the stairs and ride up my skirt. I have let them convince me they like me so I please them in ways taught to me by German. Just like the brunette. In many ways, like the blond, I feel guilt and regret. I go to the school counselors who laugh at me and send me to indoor suspension because my skirt was over six inches above the knee. I’ve been told by all of the adults it’s my fault. When we watch *Thirteen* everyone blames the brunette, too.

My mother tells me, whenever abuse comes up in conversation, that girls know what they are doing by the age of thirteen. She says it’s hard to believe them when they put themselves in that situation. I forgive her for saying that, because maybe she too was told by the adults in her life that it was her fault.

My parents are the brunette.

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Later, I have a son and go to therapy to ease the terrifying thought of abuse passing down to him like the common cold. Abuse is brushed under the rug. Abuse is the wine-stained laughs coming out of our mouths each time we bring it up again. Abuse is the brunette victimizing herself by the end of the movie and the blonde takes all the blame. Abuse is believing I became the brunette.

In an alternate universe, my life would have *Thirteen*'s ending; my mother would also believe me, kiss my forehead as if kissing my scars, and lay down on my bed until I fell asleep.

11. Leo ego

Her narcissism is silver victorian mirrors,
two precisely, placed to the left and right
from the golden lacquered clawfoot tub,
so when she wears bubbles like a pompadour
with froth pearls around her frank-and-myrrh
massage oiled neck; she can masturbate
by herself peacefully. Full Eye contact.

12. Closing Time

I am no longer the owner's daughter. The club has sold. I write its name on a bay leaf during a full moon and burn the leaf from a white candle, letting the ashes fall into the moon water inside a silver bowl. I let the bay leaf burn until it burns me. The next day I go to the beach, I drain the silver bowl onto the lapping waves on shore. I give thanks to Yemanja and before I go home I'll jump seven waves for good luck, each wave counts for one year I was under his thumb at the club.

I don't know how to end this. This isn't a happy ending. The club sells, but I'm still here. The club sells, and my parents know about German. The club sells, but we don't report the sexual abuse. The club sells, but I remember the time German held a disposable camera in his right hand, his left hand stroking his pearled dick. He asks me to lift my shirt up, flash the camera — the camera flashes. I'm fourteen. The world cup soccer game is playing on the TVs. We are in the office. My parents are outside, fifty feet away. He tells me that it's blackmail. It's proof I wasn't forced, I wasn't manipulated. I wanted this.

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What I want is to forgive myself. I want to look into the mirror, my hands like holy water washing over my hair that he'd brush with his fingers and hold in a fist.

13. Dance, Dance

A thirteen-year-old girl with a woman's body runs around a nightclub eating fries in the kitchen, making Shirley Temples in the service bar, standing outside with red lipstick on, chin up high, invincible. It's 5 pm, it's midnight, it's 2 in the morning. She's out there, and she believes she is untouchable. No one would dare touch her because she's the owner's daughter, and they are terrified of him. They looked hungry, and they were tempted. She felt it in the way they moved their hand a little lower, onto her hip when they taught her ballroom salsa, 1-2 step, Dominican bachata, lambada. She felt it when they taught her how to eat with chopsticks, holding her hand like scissors, when they fed her gummy worms, *open up*. But she also knew she wasn't worth the risk of going to jail. They would go to jail, right? Pedophilia is a crime, sexual assault is a crime, molestation, indecent exposure is a crime. She held onto that notion like she held onto her Leo ego. She kept on dancing, the song never ends.

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