

# Quarter Moon

**By Paul Wilborn**

Maybe it was the way the moon lit her like a comedy club spotlight as she turned the corner onto Seventh Avenue after work – “Hey, you’ve been a great audience - I’ll be here all week...”

Or how it winked at her over Carl’s shoulder – her back pressed against the red-brick wall behind the bar; her eyes wide as his tongue pushed deep into her mouth.

On full moon nights, Cilla would climb through a window onto the narrow rooftop between her apartment and the ledge over Seventh. She loved the metallic purr of the neon movie marquee that hung just below the wide ledge and the glow from it that bathed her in kaleidoscope colors - ruby, emerald and coral.

From there she could watch the moon emerge from a curtain of cloud to whitewash the wrought-iron balconies and brick battlements of Ybor City.

Under her huaraches, the roof was a crunchy cereal of coarse gravel and sun-bleached plastic beads, tossed by night-parade pirates as Cilla and her friends screamed and waved their arms. This ad-libbed terrace was why she loved her apartment – a place thousands of miles from the scrubbed, middle-class house where she had spent her childhood.

Her second floor apartment was accessible by a red door that opened onto Seventh, a few steps from the art-deco ticket booth of the Ritz – a 1930s movie palace, now peddling porn to suburban husbands, college students, and sailors arriving by taxi from the port nearby. Some nights Cilla was lulled into sleep by the moans of celluloid lovers.

There was no bell on the red door, so Cilla’s visitors stood on Seventh, under the Ritz marquee, and tossed pennies that clattered against her windows.

Behind the red door were two flights of narrow stairs, carpeted long ago in red pile – now flat and faded to pink and stubbornly holding a faint aroma of rotting fruit.

In occasional calls to her family, the apartment morphed into a modern triplex near the university – not a smelly walk-up in an historic quarter that time had left behind.

She couldn’t tell her mother about the rusty refrigerator or the hot plate and toaster oven on a splintered wood counter that passed for a kitchen. Or her closet of a bathroom - lit by two Virgin Mary candles from the Cuban bodega across the street.

Cilla hung lacy pink curtains and thick white towels to distract attention from the rust stains scarring the tub and climbing up the galvanized pipe inside her toilet.

But her bedroom was wide and filled with light and her metal bed, found tossed in an alley, was buried beneath pastel pillows and a fuzzy white bedspread she had brought from Ohio. The tall west windows looked out over the jutting spires of downtown Tampa – a working class city always on the verge of metamorphosis, but somehow unable to shed its own skin. The north windows of her living room revealed the rooftops and the sky above Ybor, once Tampa’s immigrant quarter, now abandoned except for Cilla and a battalion of artists seeking urban authenticity and cheap rent.

She painted the walls pale blue, and Carl, a late-blooming abstract expressionist, and occasional guest in her bed, had added swaths of Florida clouds. Some mornings when Cilla awoke, the sky on the walls blended with the real thing outside the windows.

In another alley, Cilla had discovered a polished metal desk chair that fit through her window. Now the chair was her midnight perch - a glass of red wine on the ledge; a cigarette burning in one of the Buzz Man’s ceramic Ybor ashtrays.

She took a long drag on a Benson and Hedges 100, and blew the smoke up toward the swollen moon. She flicked on a flashlight, the beam falling on two crisp pages of formal cursive.

She wasn’t sure what was holding her here as 1981 gave way to 1982 – now a full year after picking up her art history diploma from the University of South Florida. Maybe it was the gravel rooftop, the glow of the Ritz marquee or these handwritten words meant just for her – reasons as good as any to spend your 25<sup>th</sup> year living in a forgotten quarter of a port town like a refugee from a distant land.

Or maybe it was the moon.

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General Avenal arrived for dinner every afternoon at exactly the same time. Cilla’s shift started at three. The General marched in at four, as she was polishing glasses and wrapping stainless forks and knives in large paper napkins.

Rough Riders was a dark-wood pub inside an Ybor City cigar factory that now housed stalls for weekend antique vendors. A plank floor was set with bulky tables and heavy chairs that matched the food – thick burgers, finger-sized fried potatoes, Cuban sandwiches (ham, pork, cheese and pickles on crusty bread), and black beans and rice, sprinkled with raw onion. Tampa had been a staging ground for Teddy Roosevelt and his soldiers before they charged the Spaniards in Cuba. The name

seemed to fit in this historic district – even though the actual Rough Riders had camped across town.

The artists, postal workers and agents from the Customs office near the port started circling the bar at five - happy hour got them two beers for the price of one and deviled crabs for a dollar. So for one hour, she and the General were usually alone.

She had his *café con leche* ready when he arrived. She set it down, with some formality, in front of him.

“Priscilla, you look fresh and fetching today,” the General said, in English that was accented with the formality of his early life in the Asturias region of Spain. (“We were never conquered, Priscilla. Never!”)

Cilla had slipped and told him her real name one afternoon. She had trimmed the first four letters when she moved to Ybor – along with most of her almond-colored hair.

At the time, both decisions felt liberating and mature.

Fetching was never how Cilla had described herself – especially in a waitress uniform – with her chunky Midwestern curves pushing against the narrow black skirt and tight white blouse, her wide, peasant feet tucked inside black Converse high tops.

The General however, *was* fetching. A fine-boned, meticulous man, wrinkled but regal, barely cresting five feet, he always brought his own starched white napkin, unfurling it with a wave, then smoothing it out on his lap.

Today, as every day, his white pleated trousers were pressed, his rep tie knotted at the neck of a blue dress shirt, and his navy blazer adorned with military epaulets. His breast pocket was home to a cluster of ribbons and medals. Snowfalls of dandruff, escapees from his lacquered white hair, were the only aspects that wouldn't have passed a military inspection.

Roddy, Cilla's neighbor and one of the art colony pioneers, swore the General was an old fraud – from the medals to his military title. The General had made a sketchy living selling military commissions and official government recognitions – suitable for framing - from various Central American fiefdoms.

But he had inherited the most beautiful building in Ybor – *El Pasaje* – a red-brick, two-story fortress wrapped in an ornate passageway – a wide sidewalk enclosed by interlocking brick arches. He lived alone upstairs, save for an aging fireplug of a housekeeper - a grim-faced woman who trudged bow-legged about Ybor – swathed in scarves, loose fitting black lace dresses and thick white cotton hose that wrapped her arched legs like bandages. The small oval of her face that emerged from the dark

scarves was pale except for two scarlet circles of rouge on her cheeks. When she was out, she spoke - in Spanish - only to shopkeepers and returned to *El Pasaje* with grocery bags and the General's pressed uniforms from the laundry on 15<sup>th</sup>. In Ybor, they called her "The Widow."

To Cilla, this little man and his housekeeper carried inside them a large scoop of the magic dust that was Ybor City. They were a living link between the immigrant past - Italians, Spaniards, Cubans and Jews - eating, fighting, working, marrying and dying here - and the painters, sculptors, and scene-makers who had inherited the place from them.

The fact that he was likely a con man made him that much more intriguing.

"You look especially Maya-like today," he said. "Did you know that?"

He liked to flirt with her this way - claiming she could have been the model for Goya's radical nude, *La Maya Desnuda*. The painting, confiscated during the Inquisition as obscene, captured not a traditional beauty, but a small-faced, full-bodied woman much like Cilla.

"I'm not feeling it today," she said. "But thank you."

"Did you read my paper?" he asked, carefully wiping his knife, fork and spoon with a pressed handkerchief pulled from his jacket pocket.

"I did," Cilla said, pulling a chair opposite him and sitting down.

"Then we are in agreement? No?"

"I will concede that Goya could go darker and deeper, but Velazquez is still the better painter. I'm sorry. He just is."

This was the standard argument between them. The General - a staunch Goya man - held the deaf Spanish painter above all the others - Picasso, Velazquez and most certainly Dali, whom the General referred to as "that damn moustache man."

Cilla loved Spanish artists - including Goya - and had written papers on most of them. But what she really loved was sparring with the General about art. He held his ground against her, not like the young Ybor artists who knew little about art history and always deferred to Cilla's opinions, calling her "*La Profesora*."

The General's paper - a two-page, hand-written screed she'd read on her balcony the night before - hadn't changed her mind. It was more rant than research. On matters of art - and most other subjects - the General's mind was made up and no amount of footnotes would change that.

But Cilla loved the arguments and his dinner table rituals: The polished silver placed carefully around the white China plate he brought from home. It reminded Cilla of the numbers on a clock. The coffee at 2. His round black glasses at 10. Then, between them, circling the top of the plate like a tiara - the vials, pill bottles, satin pouches and eye-droppers containing his potions - milk thistle, cumin seed oil, bulky vitamin C tablets, pomegranate and blueberry extract, and his secret weapon - saw palmetto and stinging nettles gathered from the woods near Gibsonton and crushed with a mortar and pestle.

Life extension was the General's current passion and profession. He peddled his herbal wares via mail order and was his own best customer, though the frail little man didn't seem like an advertisement for his products. Cilla feared a strong wind could knock him over. His voice, however, was crisp and round.

He challenged her: "But have you seen a Goya with your own eyes? Not in a book or a slide? Have you?"

Cilla admitted she hadn't. The General looked around to make sure they were alone, then leaned across the table, his eyes locking on hers.

"I have one. No one knows this except me - and now you. And in this town of rogues and thieves, I beg you to keep my secret."

Cilla didn't blink.

"You have a Goya? Here in Ybor?"

The General nodded, then leaned back in his chair.

"Would you like to see it sometime?"

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