A Cup of Water Under My Bed

a memoir

Daisy Hernández

Beacon Press
Boston

Even If I Kiss a Woman

My mother and tías warn me about dating Colombian men: "*Esos no sirven.*" They say the same thing about the 1970s television set in our kitchen. "That TV *no sirve para nada.*" It doesn't work.

As a child, I think being married to a Colombian man will be like fighting with our old television. It only gets three channels, but we make it work because it is the one we have. We switch between channels by turning the knob with a wrench. Then we spin the antennas in circles, and when one points at the sink and the other out the window— past the clothesline with Tía Chuchi's three-dollar pants—we find it does work, and we have the telenovela *Simplemente María.*

Although my five uncles are in Colombia, phone calls between New Jersey and Bogotá bring stories of my charming, whiskey-drinking tíos and all the evidence for why Colombian men don't work. From the kitchen, my mother and aunties dictate warnings that over the years come to sound like twisted nursery rhymes.

> Colombian men get drunk, beat their women,
> cheat on their wives, and never earn enough money.
> They keep mistresses, have bastard children,
> and never come home on time.
> They steal, lie, sneak around, and come home to die,
> cradled in the arms of bitter wives.

The same could perhaps have been said about men in other countries, but it's easier to believe the worst about the people you know best.

At sixteen then, I know to stay away from Colombian men. I know that Julio is Colombian. But he works the grill at the McDonald's where I have my first after-school job and he winks at me. While I know the dangers of Colombian men, I have also been reading Harlequin romance novels since fifth grade, and I have been waiting for a man to wink at me. Men do this with beautiful women, and those women are always happy. They do not work at fast-food places. They get to go to college. They speak English perfectly and French as well.

Julio talks to me in Spanish. *Querida, mi amor, mi cielo.* In Spanish, there are so many words to love a woman—words I have never heard before. When things are slow in the kitchen, Julio stands behind me at the register and helps me with the orders. "*Ya mi amor*, I got that for you. Get the next customer."

I give him my phone number, which is to the say the number at my mother's house.

Most women stick to their own kind. They base love and their marriages on the lines drawn between countries. My high school friends have mothers from Chile, Perú, Ecuador, and Argentina, and these mothers have married men from their homelands. Some wed there and migrated together. Others met their husbands here in Jersey among friends, at a house party, a work place. Coming from the same country was the start of connection, the entry point to love.

The women in my family do not believe in such intimacies.

My mother married my Cuban father, Tía Rosa settled with a Puerto Rican, and Tía Dora a Peruvian. They married men with dark eyes and *papeles*, men whose wallets had Social Security cards. Tía Chuchi never bothered with any man since everyone knows that God is the only man who truly works.

The women in my family then teach me a complicated formula of what works with men. My father's alcoholism is better than womanizing or, worse, a man who can't hold down a job. My Peruvian uncle is snobbish at times, but he drives a Chevrolet and takes us to Great Adventure, Action Park, and Niagara Falls. My Puerto Rican uncle is fat and has kids from a first marriage, but he reads tarot cards and cooks a good *arroz con pollo* for Thanksgiving. Finally, God does nothing to stop the war in Colombia, but he is reason enough for Tía Chuchi to wake up early every morning and have someone to think about other than the *violencia* over there and the unemployment lines here.

My mother and aunties advise me on what to look for in love:

A man with a college degree is best, but choose white over black because no one sees the diploma on the street, in churches, and at the *supermercados*.

Forget Caribbean men. They want sex all the time, speak Spanish with missing syllables, and if they are not black, their grandmothers might be.

Forget Central Americans. They want sex all the time, do not grow any taller, and if they are not *indios*, their grandmothers might be.

Consider Argentineans. They want sex all the time, but most are white, have law degrees, and if they are not Italian, their grandmothers might be.

Remember to ask if he grew up in the *capital* or some no-name *campo*. It is the difference between marrying the Bronx and Fort Lee.

When Julio begins calling, I get under the bedcovers with the telephone receiver. My mother and aunties roll their eyes, sure that it is a passing interest. They are certain I will marry American. Anything made in America works. The cars, the washing machines, the light bulbs, even the men.

Of course, they hear the same accusation, "*Esos no sirven*," hurled at Americans. They even know a woman who left her

husband and children for an Americano. Months later, the gringo dumped her.

"No better than a Colombian," declares Tía Dora, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. "He wanted her for you know what *y nada más*."

But it is the Colombian men that my mother and aunties knew best. In our kitchen, they are the guiltiest.

Julio is a paradox for my family. He has hazel eyes and pale skin and looks more American than the Italians who run my mother's factory. He calls my mother Doña and returns from fishing trips with trout for my father. My mother is suspicious; my father delighted about the free seafood.

Six months later, my tías and mother don't know what to say. The last time a woman in our family dated a Colombian was almost two decades earlier in a country where that was the only choice. My mother gives me an accusatory look that calls to mind the writings of Achy Obejas: "We came all the way from Colombia so you could date this guy?"

I continue dating Julio, however, because I am confident in the love of the women in my family. Despite their dictates about men, my mother and aunties teach me that our primary ties are to each other as women. The four of them rely on each other for the cleaning, the shopping, the respite of a good *chisme*. It's a woman who will fry you a good salty *bistec*, and it's a woman, a sister, who has now pulled out the sofa bed in the living room, because Tía Rosa's husband left and a commuter van hit her on Kennedy Boulevard, leaving my auntie in the middle of the street like a mashed-up bird. She's been released from the hospital and has come to live with us.

In a home run by women, I hold high court. The three aunties have no children of their own, and as the first born to my mother, I am *la consentida* and also their American brat. National identity can carry many meanings; in our home, it is a get-out-of-jail-free

card that extends to dating a Colombian man. Everyone—my mother, my tías, and even me—we blame my transgressions on my American side.

My own concerns, though, have to do with another border. I am a virgin, and Julio has said he will wait until I am ready. I expect to be ready soon.

The women in my family do not talk to me about sex, and women's magazines do not mention poverty or race. My mother and tías tell me that men either work for you or they do not. Romance happens between seven and nine in the evening on Spanish soap operas. Sex comes later.

But at the library, I read the truth about multiple orgasms in *Cosmo*. I rely on a library copy of Judy Blume's novel *Forever* to tell me I can have sex with a boy and not marry him. Something can happen between a broken hymen and baby showers. College and a career, of course, but mostly it will be a lot of sex. My best friend and I spend our teenage summers reading Judith Krantz novels and watching porn videos from her father's collection. We see that women can have sex in swimming pools and hotel rooms and even on a spaceship. They can do it with different men and with each other. I observe this, analyze it, and come to my final conclusion: sex is good.

By the time I watch women have sex with each other on my friend's nineteen-inch TV set, I have already heard about women like them.

I am ten years old and sitting at the kitchen table when a friend of my mother's tells her and the tías the latest *chisme*: a woman they all know from the neighborhood has left her husband and children to be with another woman. Gasps make their way around the kitchen table where *café con leche* is being served.

"Can you believe it?"

"She's that way?"

"I never would have thought it!"

Everyone is shocked that a woman was so moved by love that it flung her into the arms of another woman. I, for one, find it terribly romantic. It's like a Harlequin romance novel but without the stoic, rich guy, or like *Romeo and Juliet* but without the suicides. Two women in love confirms for me that there is a love that can push you beyond what everyone else says is possible.

I am also not sure why the women in my family are so startled about a woman going off with another *mujer*. Besides discussing how Colombian men don't work, all we ever do at home is talk about women.

There are two types of women in this world. The telenovela one is a fair-skin lovely who works as a maid, suffers public humiliations, and marries her well-to-do man in the last episode. Then, there is Iris Chacón.

On Saturdays, my family gathers to watch a variety show on Spanish-language television, where Iris Chacón is all sequined thong and big brown ass, and salsa is a side note. She is a curve of glitter on the screen, an exaggeration turned into art of what it means to be a woman, and we are very much in love with her. Or at least, my father and I are.

My mother and tías talk endlessly about Iris Chacón.

"Look at her *tetas*!"

"*Qué grandes, no*?"

"And her backside!

"*Cómo lo mueve*!"

They discuss other dancers and performers, debating who has silicone implants and fake behinds. I stare at the screen, wondering how real Iris Chacón is.

"She might as well wear nothing!" my mother declares, as if to chastise us for looking.

My father and I nod but keep our eyes on the screen, grateful that the reception is good on the old television set.

After a year of dating, I am very much in love with Julio, his old white Camaro with its black doors, and the tender way he kisses me. He takes me down the shore at night when the world is flooded with stars and the sound of crashing waves, and life feels so much bigger than what I ever imagined. I am seventeen and in love.

I am also beginning to resent my mother and tías for finding any fault in a man who takes me to the movies, the mall, and upscale versions of McDonald's, like Houlihans. The more they raise their dark eyebrows and ask if Julio ever plans to attend college and amount to anything more than a fast-food job, the more I call him and tell him I will love him forever.

Sex is a different matter.

Growing up in a small town where love easily means nine months of *gordura* and no high school graduation, I am determined not to become a teenage mother. I tell Julio that sex between us shall happen after my high school graduation, when I am on my way to college with a four-year scholarship.

I then go about sex like the overachiever from a working-class home I truly am. First, I start taking the pill. Then, I drag Julio to the local clinic to be tested for HIV. There, I carefully read the pamphlets on STDs and abortions. I pepper the counselor with questions. I check the expiration dates on the condoms and examine the rubbers for visible signs of tears. Finally, I am ready.

Sex with a man is like what I have read in books and *Glamour*. There is suspense and need, an aching and much throbbing. There is *el* spot, and when Julio touches it, I understand immediately that this is the reason women cheat on their men, risk their corporate jobs, and abandon their children. And that Judy Blume was right, too. Something else could happen.

By the time I start wearing a fake gold chain that proclaims "Julio [heart] Daisy 2-14-91," my mother and aunties refuse to speak to him. It only makes me want him more. At nineteen, I move in with

him, setting up our home in a basement apartment while commuting to college and working two part-time jobs. I love Julio against all odds, but mostly against the wishes of my mother and tías.

When we break up a year later, Julio says my mother was right. He feared what she desired: that I would leave him for the guy with more money and a better car. Guilt-ridden, I tell him he's wrong. The other guy understands me better. He's also in college and a writer.

But Julio is right. The other guy does have a better car. He didn't emigrate from Colombia and he has the money to attend college. He's not Italian, but his grandmother is.

How did I end up heeding my mother's warnings? Were the romance novels wrong? Does love follow the lines of race and class?

To the degree that I am disturbed, my mother and tías are delighted. Finally, I am listening to them. I am in college, living back home, working part-time at a newspaper, and dating a gringo.

The sign in the student center at William Paterson College reads "Workshop on Sexuality for Women * Hosted by the Feminist Collective."

I would like to say now that the afternoon, which changed my life, was cinematic. But it wasn't. One night, I was in the arms of my new boyfriend; the next afternoon, I was sitting in a carpeted room with other college girls, giggling, fully clothed, drawing portraits of our vulvas.

The facilitator, a woman from Planned Parenthood, is genuinely cheerful and unfazed by our work. "That's it everyone! You're doing great!" she calls out. "Fanny, that's beautiful! I love the colors. Keep going! We've got crayons for everyone! Don't be shy."

I glance up and down the table. All the women are drawing vulvas in startling shapes and colors and spending time on the size and details of their clitorises. So engrossed in staring, I almost don't hear the Latina sitting next to me when she starts talking.

Fanny is the president of the Feminist Collective and she's encouraging me to attend the group's weekly lunch meetings. I nod politely, but I'm too preoccupied with the portrait of another woman's vulva, which looks like strawberries that have been plucked, washed, and pried opened.

Fanny introduces me to the white woman sitting next to her, saying, "This is my girlfriend."

Maybe it's the rich colors of all those vulvas in one room or the slow and purposeful way she says "girlfriend," but I understand her immediately. And as I nod at Girlfriend, I think, "I have never met one." A lesbian.

Lesbians happen on television like Iris Chacón. They belong to another country. The idea of actually kissing a girl has never occurred to me. As Fanny and Girlfriend peck each other ever so lightly on the lips, I feel so embarrassed and enthralled that I frantically look around for a place to put my eyes. Finding nothing, I stare down at the crayon drawings of their vulvas.

What is wrong with me? *Qué me pasa?* Why had it never occurred to me? A girl. I love kissing boys, but a girl. I could kiss a girl. The facilitator passes by, murmuring, "Daisy, why don't you add some colors, open it up."

I look down and it's there for the whole world to see: my vulva. I have drawn a small brown mound, a little hill speckled with black ants for curls.

Not sure of where to meet a girl I can kiss, I head for the weekly meetings of the Feminist Collective. I dress in what I think are my best plaid shirts, but instead of meeting a girl, I find myself immersed in women's rights. We talk about sexual abuse, organize our school's Take Back the Night, and analyze the importance of lube. The women's studies professor gives us impromptu talks about the fluidity of gender identity and desire, and it is all I can do to sit still next to the girl who looks like a boy.

It is the mid-nineties and multicultural everything is in. I have the books, the teachers, and the new friends to teach me that being queer is about as normal as me being a Latina at a predominantly white college. Sure, Latinas and queers are outnumbered, but now the laws are on our side, and we have a small but visible community.

The more I listen to Fanny talk about her life with a woman, the more comfortable I also feel. She knows about Audre Lorde and *arroz con frijoles*, and she throws a Spanish word into the conversation every now and then. She is close enough to remind me of home, the equivalent of my mother and aunties in one woman, with the lesbian and feminist parts added.

The worst part about trying to date women is that I don't have my mother's warnings. There is no indicator if I am doing it right or wrong. And so, my queer friends and the spoken-word artists in New York are my teachers, and they know the formula.

Sleep with your friend, sleep with her friend.

Break up and get back together again.

Write her a poem, show her the piers, pretend you want less than you do.

One-night stands, one-night nothing.

You'll see her at Henrietta's again and again.

My friend is Dominican, and she reminds me of Iris Chacón. When we make love, I can't tell what's more exciting: her large, naked breasts against my own B-cup–sized ones or the inversion afterwards of gender roles. I am now the one buying dinner, picking up the flowers, driving us upstate. Every time she mixes Spanish and English in the same sentence, a part of myself collapses into what I am sure is eternal love.

Within months, however, the relationship sours. So, I try dating another friend. She e-mails that she isn't interested.

I go out with a Puerto Rican butch, who drinks about as many Coronas as my father. My mother and aunties would be horrified. I am too, after two months.

I meet another Dominican femme, but this one drives an SUV, has her hair straightened once a week, and keeps a butch lover in the Bronx. After three times in bed, I get tired of being on top.

Dating a transgender man, I get tired of being on the bottom.

I go back to what I know and try dating a Colombian woman. But she lives across the Hudson River and doesn't have a phone with long distance.

I persevere though—drinking flat Diet Coke at lesbian bars and giving women my phone number—because I do not believe my mother. I have read the romance novels, seen the movies, and heard the songs. Love will work no matter what job I have, what nationality I claim, or what street I want to live on. It will work even if I kiss a woman.

And it does.

For a few months, I fall in love with a dark-haired woman who has a way of tilting her bony hip that gives her ownership of the room. Men hit on Lisette and she snaps, "I don't think my girlfriend would appreciate that." She is the most feminine woman I have dated (hours are spent dabbing eye shadow in multiple directions), but also the most masculine. She carries my bags, buys me overpriced jeans, leans in to kiss me. She talks to me about the films she will make one day and the books I will write. She follows me into the dressing room at Express and whispers that she wants to go down on me right there. "I like it when you scream," she tells me in bed. "I need you to do it like this morning. Scratch my back when I'm fucking you."

I had heard those lines before from men and from women, but it's different this time. I am sure I will never date anyone else ever again.

When she breaks up with me (yes, by e-mail), I don't know if I am crying over her or because I can't talk about it with Mami and Tía Chuchi and Tía Dora and Tía Rosa, the first women I loved. Instead, I tell them it is the rigors of graduate school that now make me sob in my mother's arms in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon.

After another night of crying about lost love, I call my mother into my bedroom. Unsure of where to begin, I choose the logical. "Mami," I begin in Spanish, "it's been a long time since I've had a boyfriend."

She nods and gives me a small smile.

I look at the pink wall of the bedroom I have in my parent's home, the writing awards, the Ani DiFranco CDs, the books. "*Estoy saliendo con mujeres.*" I'm dating women.

Her mouth opens, but no sound comes out. She covers her heart with her right hand in a pose similar to the one of the Virgin Mary that hangs over the bed she shares with my father.

"Mami, are you ok?"

"*Ay, Dios mío.*"

When she doesn't say anything else, I fill the silence between us with a concise history of the LGBT, feminist, and civil right movements, which combined have opened the door to higher education, better laws, and supportive communities of what would be otherwise marginalized people. "It's because of how hard you worked to put me through school that I am fortunate enough to be so happy and make such good decisions for myself."

By this time, my mother is hyperventilating and fanning herself with her other hand. She stammers, "I've never heard of this. This doesn't happen in Colombia."

"You haven't been in Colombia in twenty-seven years."

"But I never saw anything like this there."

In the days that follow, Tía Chuchi accuses me of trying to kill my mother.

We're on the phone. She's at Tía Dora's apartment. As if it's not enough that I am murdering my mother, Tía Chuchi adds with grim self-satisfaction: "It's not going to work, *sabes*? You need a man for the equipment."

For this, I am ready. I am not being sassy. I really do believe she doesn't know and that I can inform her. "Tía, you can buy the equipment."

She breaks out into a Hail Mary and hangs up the phone.

My mother develops a minor depression and a vague but persistent headache. She is not well, the tías snap at me.

"Don't say anything to her!" barks Tía Dora over the phone. "The way this woman has suffered I will never know."

But she wants me to know.

Tía Dora stops talking to me. She throws away a gift from me because she can see that the present (a book on indigenous religions in Mexico) is my way of trying to convert her to loving women. Tía Chuchi begins walking into the other room when I arrive home. Tía Rosa alludes to the vicious rumors the other two aunties have started about me. "It's terrible," she says, and then: "*Siéntate, siéntate.* I made you *buñuelos* just the way you like. Are you hungry?"

Tía Rosa still complains about the back pains from the accident of years before, but she is living in her own apartment again. In her sixties now, she is a short, robust woman with thick eyeglasses and hair the color of black ash. Her husband is long gone, and since the bed is half empty, Tía Rosa has covered the mattress with prayer cards. Every night, she lies down on that blanket made of white faces, gold crosses, and pink-rose lips.

That my romantic choices could upset my mother and tías had been a given since high school. A lot can be said about a woman who dates the wrong man. But dating the same sex or dating both sexes has no explanation.

My mother now is hurt. More than anything, she is bruised, and she wonders what she did wrong. "This isn't what we expected," she says quietly one day as we walk toward Bergenline Avenue to catch the bus.

I keep thinking that if only I could tell my mother how it works with women, she would understand. The problem is I don't know.

The closest I have to an explanation is a Frida Kahlo painting titled *The Two Fridas*, where the artist is sitting next to her twin who holds her heart, an artery, and a pair of scissors. That is how I feel about loving women. They can dig into you and hold the insides of you, all bloodied and smelly, in their hands. They know you like that. But this is nothing I can say to my mother.

I miss the conversations now. More than anything, I long for the days when I came home to report that Julio had given me flowers or promised to take me to Wildwood. We have, my family and me, including my father (who demanded to know if Julio was gay the whole time), settled into a region called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." And it is hard, I imagine, for people who have not experienced this to understand the weight of that silence and how the absence of language can feel like a death.

Often when my mother tells me about those early days in her relationship with my father, she mentions the *postres*.

"He would bring pastries from the bakery," she recalls, smiling and then adding with a warning, "That's how they get you."

Kristina does it with *dulce de leche*.

Our first date is a month after September 11. The city is struggling to be normal. The subways are running and the *New York Times* is publishing its "Portraits of Grief." Kristina and I eat burritos on Christopher Street and walk to the piers. In the summers, brown butches and black divas light up the area, their bodies pretzeled around their loves and friends and strangers, but tonight the piers are empty, muted, *solitos*. With the bone skeleton

of lower Manhattan near us and Jersey's lights across the river, Kristina and I kiss for the first time.

She's mixed: white, Chicana, Californian, New Mexican. She reminds me of the women in my family, the shape of their bodies, *ni gorda ni flaca*. It's how quick she lights up when I say, "I've got *chisme*," and the way she talks to her mother on the phone and then laughs and says to me: "I'm on hold. Walter Mercado's on."

This is our routine: I take a bus from Jersey, then switch to the 1 train. She meets me at the stop near her apartment in the Bronx. We make love. Afterwards, Kristina rolls over on her side and asks, "You want some ice cream?"

She dresses and crosses the street to the deli for small cups of *dulce de leche*. I eat the cold caramel on her sofa, my head on her shoulder, crying into the *helado*, because Halle Berry has won the Oscar.

My mother would like Kristina. She would probably like her more than she likes me. Kristina believes in diplomacy. Like my mother, she doesn't see why I need to write about sexuality. She values privacy. My mother would appreciate that.

When Kristina and I break up, almost five years after we first ate *dulce de leche* together, I call Tía Chuchi to deliver the news. "We've ended," I say in Spanish. "For good this time."

I don't know what to expect from my auntie, but I'm figuring she will say something along the lines of good riddance. Instead, she exclaims, "That's why you're taking the martial arts class!"

"What?"

"That's why you're taking martial arts. I knew this woman who rented a room once from a lady and it turned out the lady was, *tu sabes*, gay." The lesbian had terrible fights with her partner. "It was horrible," my auntie recalls, as if she had been in the room when the arguments exploded. "They threw pots and pans at each other and fought with their fists." Tía sighs. "It's good you're taking the martial arts classes to defend yourself."

I start laughing and crying, because my ex-girlfriend couldn't face a kitchen mouse let alone strike another woman, because I loved her so much and walked away, because I glimpse in my tía's words some deeper emotion, some love that struggles to be steady even when it hurts.

Queer Narratives

The teenagers file into the classroom, an army of baggy jeans and stiff hair, acrylic nails and cell phones. They number at least thirty, maybe forty. Their teacher is forcing them to be here, because a community organization has sent me to talk to them about what it means to be a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. The idea is that the more contact young people have with queers, the less likely they will be to hate us or worse.

"I'm bisexual," I start. "It's like you like vanilla and chocolate ice cream, but not at the same time." I score a few smiles and half of a laugh, the kind you get when the joke was that bad. The boys in the front pause from scanning their cell phones.

As I talk, photographs of my life migrate around the classroom: aunties gathered around me at a birthday cake, my mother beaming next to me at college graduation. The boys hand the photos off like baseball cards they already own; the girls cradle them with the tips of their nails, careful to not leave any kind of *mancha*.

A girl raises her hand. She's at the back of the room and reminds me of myself when I was in high school (the big earrings, the acrylic *uñas*, the long hair tucked behind her ear). She asks, "Do you want to marry a guy or a girl?"

I want to tell her: "Girlfriend, I'd be happy to meet someone I like as much as my cat." But I can't say that, because these are teenagers. They are impressionable. They're young. If I give them the wrong response, they might beat up a queer kid one day or not come out of the closet themselves. "For me, gender