Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock.

And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how very un-Dominican of him).

He was seven then.

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. Because in those days he was (still) a "normal" Dominican boy raised in a "typical" Dominican family, his nascent pimp-liness was encouraged by blood and friends alike. During parties—and there were many many parties in those long-ago seventies days, before Washington Heights was Washington Heights,
before the Bergenline became a straight shot of Spanish for almost a hundred blocks—some drunk relative inevitably pushed Oscar onto some little girl and then everyone would howl as boy and girl approximated the hip-motism of the adults.

You should have seen him, his mother sighed in her Last Days. He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa.1

All the other boys his age avoided the girls like they were a bad case of Captain Trips. Not Oscar. The little guy loved himself the females, had “girlfriends” galore. (He was a stout kid, heading straight to fat, but his mother kept him nice in haircuts and clothes, and before the proportions of his head changed he’d had these lovely flashing eyes and these cute-ass cheeks, visible in all his pictures.) The girls—his sister Lola’s friends, his mother’s friends, even their neighbor, Mari Colón, a thirty-something postal employee who wore red on her lips and

4. In the forties and fifties, Porfirio Rubirosa—or Rubi, as he was known in the papers—was the third most-famous Dominican in the world (first came the Failed Castle Thief, and then the Cobra Woman herself, Maria Montez). A tall, debonair prettyboy whose “enormous phallus created havoc in Europe and North America,” Rubirosa was the quintessential jet-setting car-racing polo-obsessed playboy, the Trujillo’s “happy side” (for he was indeed one of Trujillo’s best-known minions). A part-time former model and dashing man-about-town, Rubirosa famously married Trujillo’s daughter Flor de Oro in 1932, and even though they were divorced five years later, in the Year of the Haitian Genocide, homeboy managed to remain in El Jefe’s good graces throughout the regime’s long run. Unlike his ex-brother-in-law Ramírez (to whom he was frequently connected), Rubirosa seemed incapable of carrying out many murders; in 1935 he traveled to New York to deliver El Jefe’s death sentence against the exile leader Angel Mordales but fled before the botched assassination could take place. Rubi was the original Dominican Payer, suckled all sorts of women—Barbara Hutton, Doris Duke (who happened to be the richest woman in the world), the French actress Danielle Darrieux, and Zsa Zsa Gabor—to name but a few. Like his pal Ramírez, Porfirio died in a car crash, in 1965, his twelve-cylinder Ferrari skidding off a road in the Bois de Boulogne. (Hard to overstate the role each play in our narrative.)

walked like she had a bell for an ass—all purportedly fell for him. Ese muchacho está bueno! (Did it hurt that he was earnest and clearly attention-deprived? Not at all!) In the DR during summer visits to his family digs in Bani he was the worst, would stand in front of Nena Inca’s house and call out to passing women—Tú eres guapa! Tú eres guapa!—until a Seventh-day Adventist complained to his grandmother and she shut down the hit parade lickety-split. Muchacho del diablo! This is not a cabaret!

It truly was a Golden Age for Oscar, one that reached its apotheosis in the fall of his seventh year, when he had two little girlfriends at the same time, his first and only menage à trois. With Maritza Chacón and Olga Polanco.

Maritza was Lola’s friend. Long-haired and prissy and so pretty she could have played young Dejah Thoris. Olga, on the other hand, was no friend of the family. She lived in the house at the end of the block that his mother complained about because it was filled with puertoricanos who were always hanging out on their porch drinking beer. (What, they couldn’t have done that in Cuamo? Oscar’s mom asked crossly.) Olga had like ninety cousins, all who seemed to be named Hector or Luis or Wanda. And since her mother was una maldita borracha (to quote Oscar’s mom), Olga smelled on some days of ass, which is why the kids took to calling her Mrs. Peabody.

Mrs. Peabody or not, Oscar liked how quiet she was, how she let him throw her to the ground and wrestle with her, the interest she showed in his Star Trek dolls. Maritza was just plain beautiful, no need for motivation there, always around too, and it was just a stroke of pure genius that convinced him to kick it to
them both at once. At first he pretended that it was his number-one hero, Shazam, who wanted to date them. But after they agreed he dropped all pretense. It wasn’t Shazam—it was Oscar.

Those were more innocent days, so their relationship amounted to standing close to each other at the bus stop, some undercover hand-holding, and twice kissing on the cheeks very seriously, first Maritza, then Olga, while they were hidden from the street by some bushes. (Look at that little macho, his mother’s friends said. Que hombre.)

The threesome only lasted a single beautiful week. One day after school Maritza cornered Oscar behind the swing set and laid down the law. It’s either her or me! Oscar held Maritza’s hand and talked seriously and at great length about his love for her and reminded her that they had agreed to share, but Maritza wasn’t having any of it. She had three older sisters, knew everything she needed to know about the possibilities of sharing. Don’t talk to me no more unless you get rid of her! Maritza, with her chocolate skin and narrow eyes, already expressing the Ogún energy that she would chop at everybody with for the rest of her life. Oscar went home morose to his pre-Korean-swatshop-era cartoons—to the Herculoids and Space Ghost. What’s wrong with you? his mother asked. She was getting ready to go to her second job, the eczema on her hands looking like a messy meal that had set. When Oscar whimpered, Girls, Moní de León nearly exploded. Tú te llorando por una machacha? She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear.

Mami, stop it, his sister cried, stop it!

She threw him to the floor. Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you.

If he’d been a different nigger he might have considered the galletazo. It wasn’t just that he didn’t have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies. (Unlike his sister, who fought boys and packs of morena girls who hated her thin nose and straightish hair.) Oscar had like a zero combat rating; even Olga and her toothpick arms could have stomped him silly. Aggression and intimidation out of the question. So he thought it over. Didn’t take him long to decide. After all, Maritza was beautiful and Olga was not; Olga sometimes smelled like pee and Maritza did not. Maritza was allowed over their house and Olga was not. (A puertorican over here? his mother scoffed. Jamás!) His logic as close to the yes/no math of insects as a nigger could get. He broke up with Olga the following day on the playground, Maritza at his side, and how Olga had cried! Shaking like a rag in her hand-me-downs and in the shoes that were four sizes too big! Snorts pouring out her nose and everything!

In later years, after he and Olga had both turned into overweight freaks, Oscar could not resist feeling the occasional flash of guilt when he saw Olga loping across a street or staring blankly out near the New York bus stop, couldn’t stop himself from wondering how much his cold-as-hells breakup had contributed to her present fucking-upness. (Breaking up with her, he would remember, hadn’t felt like anything even when she started crying, he hadn’t been moved. He’d said, No be a baby.)

What had hurt, however, was when Maritza dumped him. Monday after he’d fed Olga to the dogs he arrived at the bus stop with his beloved Planet of the Apes lunch box only to
discover beautiful Maritza holding hands with butt-ugly Nelson Pardo. Nelson Pardo who looked like Chaka from *Land of the Lost*! Nelson Pardo who was so stupid he thought the moon was a stain that God had forgotten to clean. (He'll get to it soon, he assured his whole class.) Nelson Pardo who would become the neighborhood B&amp;E expert before joining the Marines and losing eight toes in the First Gulf War. At first Oscar thought it a mistake; the sun was in his eyes, he'd not slept enough the night before. He stood next to them and admired his lunch box, how realistic and diabolical Dr. Zaius looked. But Maritza wouldn't even smile at him! Pretended he wasn't there. We should get married, she said to Nelson, and Nelson grinned moronically, turning up the street to look for the bus. Oscar had been too hurt to speak; he sat down on the curb and felt something overwhelming surge up from his chest, scared the shit out of him, and before he knew it he was crying; when his sister, Lola, walked over and asked him what was the matter he'd shaken his head. Look at the mariconito, somebody snickered. Somebody else kicked his beloved lunch box and scratched it right across General Urko's face. When he got on the bus, still crying, the driver, a famously reformed PCP addict, had said, Christ, don't be a fucking baby.

*How bad the breakup affected Olga? What he really was asking was: How bad the breakup affected Oscar?*

It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him—Shazzam!—his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple of years he grew fatter and fatter. Early adolescence hit him especially hard, scarring his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious; and his interest—in Genres!—which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L. Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and (if the kids from his neighborhood were to be believed) too weird (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before). He no longer went anywhere near the girls because at best they ignored him, at worst they shrieked and called him gordo asqueroso! He forgot the perito, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him hombre. Did not kiss another girl for a long long time. As though almost everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week.

Not that his "girlfriends" fared much better. It seemed that whatever bad no-love karma hit Oscar hit them too. By seventh grade Olga had grown huge and scary, a troll gene in her somewhere, started drinking straight out the bottle and was finally taken out of school because she had a habit of screaming *NATAS!* in the middle of homeroom. Even her breasts, when they finally emerged, were floppy and terrifying. Once on the bus Olga had called Oscar a *cake eater,* and he'd almost said, Look who's talking, puerca, but he was afraid that she would rear back and trample him; his cool-index, already low, couldn't have survived that kind of a paliza, would have put him on par with the handicapped kids and with Joe Locorotundo, who was famous for masturbating in public.

And the lovely Maritza Chacón? The hypotenuse of our triangle, how had she fared? Well, before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis,* Maritza blew up into the flyest *guapa* in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. Since they stayed neighbors, Oscar saw
her plenty, a ghetto Mary Jane, hair as black and lash as a thunderhead, probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than his sister's (he hadn't heard of Afro-Peruvians yet, or of a town called Chinchia), body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities, and from the sixth grade on dating men two, three times her age. (Maritza might not have been good at much—not sports, not school, not work—but she was good at men.) Did that mean she had avoided the curse—that she was happier than Oscar or Olga? That was doubtful. From what Oscar could see, Maritza was a girl who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends. Since it happened to her all the time. If a boy hit me, Lola said cockily, I would bite his face.

See Maritza: French-kissing on the front stoop of her house, getting in or out of some roughneck's ride, being pushed down onto the sidewalk. Oscar would watch the French-kissing, the getting in and out, the pushing, all through his cheerless, endless adolescence. What else could he do? His bedroom window looked out over the front of her house, and so he always peeped her while he was painting his D&D miniatures or reading the latest Stephen King. The only things that changed in those years were the models of the cars, the size of Maritza's ass, and the kind of music volting out the cars' speakers. First freestyle, then Ill Will-era hiphop, and, right at the very end, for just a little while, Héctor Lavoe and the boys.

He said hi to her almost every day, all upbeat and faux-happy, and she said hi back, indifferently, but that was it. He didn't imagine that she remembered their kissing—but of course he could not forget.

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High school was Don Bosco Tech, and since Don Bosco Tech was an urban all-boys Catholic school packed to the strakes with a couple hundred insecure hyperactive adolescents, it was, for a fat sci-fi-reading nerd like Oscar, a source of endless anguish. For Oscar, high school was the equivalent of a medieval spectacle, like being put in the stocks and forced to endure the peltings and outrages of a mob of deranged half-wits, an experience from which he supposed he should have emerged a better person, but that's not really what happened—and if there were any lessons to be gleaned from the ordeal of those years he never quite figured out what they were. He walked into school every day like the fat lonely needy kid he was, and all he could think about was the day of his manumission, when he would at last be set free from its unending horror. Hey, Oscar, are there faggots on Mars?—Hey, Kuzoo, catch this. The first time he heard the term moronic inferno he knew exactly where it was located and who were its inhabitants.

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often) and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he'd become the neighborhood pariguayo. Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have

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5. The pejorative pariguayo, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism "party watch". The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the US occupied Iraq either. During the First Occupation it was reported that members of the American Occupying Forces would often attend Dominican parties.