

ROBIN WINFIELD

San Francisco Fire Escape, 2011
Fujiflex crystal archival print and acrylic, 28 x 24



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

all the pretty girls alone. “Yes, chica, you may say we are low down on the totem pole,” I replied.

“The totem pole?”

“In America, you are rated as a human being by your teeth as well as your bank account. Look at mine, then look at yours, chica. In America, you would be a queen, if only for a day.”

The four men reappeared with the American woman from breakfast. She was under guard, I realized, and she flashed me a look of terror as they passed behind me. One of the men caught her look and checked me out, but as a second-rate Mexican, I didn’t register.

“Well,” said the girl, “there goes an enemy of the state, I think. They never bother the tourist; the tourist is king.”

“I met a man last night who seemed to be in fear of the police.” I described Kiko.

“It was a maricón you saw.”

“What’s a maricón?”

“A homosexual prostitute. They are forbidden in the hotel.”

“This one works for Nacho.”

“I hate Nacho; he is always trying to recruit me.”

“Can’t you complain?”

“Nacho is a kind of spy.”

“He’s a pimp, honey.”

“He reports to the manager.”

“Who does the manager report to?”

“The ministry of tourism.”

“I see.”

“I would like to go to America, even though it is a corrupt society.”

“Where did you learn English?”

“My father had a collection of American paperback murder books. These are forbidden now, but I learned the language from the books. Do I speak good enough for America?”

She reached across the counter and grabbed my hand and pressed it against her abdomen, turning slightly to hide what she was doing. “Please take me with you,” she whispered. “I’m single and free. I can work hard.” She let go of my hand quickly.

I saw my driver Pupi standing around casually in a corner of the lobby. The American woman and the four plainclothes passed by him on their way out, and one cop

said something to him. You might have missed it, but I saw and the girl saw.

“There is my uncle,” she said.

“In the little hat? That’s my driver.”

“Oh.” She lowered her eyes and got quiet.

“What about him, chica?”

“I will ask you please not to repeat to my uncle what I said.”

“What’s the matter with Uncle?”

“He is a kind of policeman.”

“Say, honey, how do I get a taxi to the airport without Uncle knowing about it?”

“Take the stairs to the swimming pool. There is a path leading to the Malecon. You can find a cab in a few minutes. They must not pick up tourists, but you are Mexican.”

“Thanks.”

“Vaya con Dios.”

“Igualmente.”

It was too early for much traffic. A row of apartment houses along the sea road that would have been nice a hundred years ago faced north like toothless old men dreaming of Miami. The sea kept bubbling up over the crumbling wall, but it was not picturesque. People tended fishing lines, and kids floated in the oily water on inner tubes and pieces of wood. Olvera Street looks pretty good from here, I thought—a nice little business with money coming in and good will going out, enchiladas, rice and beans any time of the day or night, and a cherry Bel Air for church on Sundays? What if I don’t make it back; what if this is the end of the line? A feeling came upon me like I used to get behind the walls—like the world was backing up and pulling out and there was not one damn thing I could do. I thought, if I could just see Louie once more and be a little nicer to him—and my eyes filled with tears. “Step it up and go, you sorry-ass pendejo,” I said out loud.

I asked a fisherman about taxis. “There is one,” he said, pointing to an ugly little sedan limping along slowly. He flagged the car down and spoke to the driver. He called me over. “Chino will take you; he is my friend.” I gave the fisherman a dollar.

“Now he doesn’t have to stay there all day,” Chino said as we pulled out.

“You know him?”