

ROMEO & MUÑECA

Every night, beginning about eight, they gathered at the corner across from our building, leaning on any available car, hanging out by the phone booth, making occasional forays to the bodega down the block for cigarettes and beer, or to the pizza parlor for Italian ices. Sometimes, coming home late in the evening, I would see two or three of them scuffling. At first, I crossed the street or veered wide to avoid them, but after a while I saw that the fights were mostly good-natured; they were just goofing on each other, clowning and chatting in Spanish and in English. Soon, I was nodding to them or saying "hi" as I walked by.

One night, a tall, fair-skinned redhead caught my eye. Her long hair, under the streetlight, flowed like a shower of sparks. Leaning on the front bumper of a deep blue Pontiac, dragging on a cigarette, she seemed, somehow, the center of the rough activity taking place around her. I wanted to take her photograph.

A couple of evenings later, I decided to chance it. People of indeterminate sex wandered in and out of our area. I approached the redhead. "I'd like to photograph you," I told her. "Just for myself." Immediately, a petite, blond transvestite hopped off the hood of the car she'd been sitting on, set her hands on her hips, and began to strut about between me and the car, tracing a small circle on the sidewalk, grinding her hips and grunting in a grotesque parody of seduction. She stopped about a foot from where I stood and pulled up her blouse, exposing a flat, hairless chest. "You wanna take a picture? Take a picture of this!" she said. Then another queen, more shapely, spat to one side and blurted out, "You suck my dick and have somebody take a picture, and fuck you!" She staggered away,

indignant; they all laughed. "See you later," I said, and walked with what I hoped was a casual step across the street and into my building.

It was two weeks before I approached them again, and this time I was with my roommate Henry. I was reluctant to work with Henry; he was pushy and obsessive, and I was afraid he would tend to dominate, as he tried to in our day-to-day affairs. Still, there were advantages to working with him. For one thing, he was a more experienced photographer. More important, he was brazen enough to pull off things that I could hardly imagine myself attempting.

Besides, there was an odd vulnerability to him, and, though I didn't quite understand how, I knew Henry needed me as much as I needed him. I was fairly confident that even though he might like to have his way at every turn, he would push me only as far as he could without endangering our rather tenuous friendship.

For several minutes we had been speaking with Muñeca, the tall, pale redhead I had approached before. Henry had been doing most of the talking, telling her she looked so interesting, how great she would be to photograph, that the pictures would be very... dignified, of course. I had seen him use this same approach before, with the women he brought back to our apartment, with mixed results; it was hard to see how far he was getting, this time.

The others around us were clearly amused, making comments like, "Oh, come on, Muñeca, you'll be a fashion queen!" but Muñeca herself spoke very little, and when she did, she spoke softly, her words almost drowned out by the din of Broadway. Henry finished his presentation. Muñeca smiled, then shook her head, tucking her chin to her chest like a

sleeping bird. "I don't know," she whispered. "You'll have to ask my husband, when he comes back," she said. "He's the man. You'll have to ask Romeo."

"Will your Romeo be back soon?" I asked. "I don't know for sure when," she said, "but I think soon." We decided to wait. We didn't talk much with Muñeca, but she didn't seem to mind us being there.

I tried to imagine what kind of guy this "Romeo" might be. I soon found out.

A smooth, deep voice from behind us snapped, "Hey, you want somethin'?" We spun around, and I saw a muscular young man in a brown tank top, his broad lips twisted into a snarl. Before either Henry or I could speak, his left hand went to the pocket of his jeans. There was a click and a glint of flashing steel. Henry and I froze.

"It's okay, it's okay, Romeo," said a plump woman standing beside Muñeca, laying her hands on the young man's shoulders. "It's jus' those guys I tol' you about, the ones that wanted to take the pictures."

Romeo shook back and forth like a dog on a choke chain, looking first at the woman who had just spoken, then at us. After a few moments his mouth formed a tight smile. Keeping his knife hand near his pocket, his eyes still hard, he held out his other hand first to Henry, then to me. His grip was strong, and I could feel the calluses on his palm.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Romeo, and this is Muñeca." We nodded and smiled like a couple of ventriloquist's dummies. "Very nice to meet you," Henry said. Romeo's expression softened a little. He pointed toward the woman who had stayed him and to the man standing beside her. "This is Carmen and Joey," he said. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and stood with his feet wide apart.

Henry and I introduced ourselves. I explained that I was a writer and an amateur photographer; Henry described himself as "a professional photographer," which in fact he was, though at the time he was working as a photographer's assistant. We were interested, we said, in doing a book about people on the West Side, people we met on the street.

We explained that we meant him and Muñeca no harm -- just the opposite, in fact -- and that we had only been talking with her about taking her picture and interviewing her. "Of course," Henry added, "we would like to talk to you, as well."

Romeo nodded, taking us in. "Uh-huh," he said.

"You'll find we're very friendly," Henry said. "You didn't have to pull your knife on us."

Romeo nodded again. His clear eyes looked from one to the other of us. He uncrossed his arms and placed them on his hips. "Yeah," he said, his tone softer but still suspicious. "Well, I just didn't want nobody messin' with my woman, that's all."

Romeo pushed himself up onto the hood of a car and leaned back against its windshield, his arms behind his head, surveying his domain. Then he spoke.

"They told me there was these two guys messin' with Muñeca, so I come runnin', but it's no big deal. Carmen told me about you. You want to know about the corner. No big deal, I can tell you.

"Like, Carmen and Joey, they're straight, they're some straight friends that we know. But then Mona, the one that had his arm around my wife, he is butch queen. He feels like a woman, he has a husband who fucks him and so forth, he's a woman in his own way, but he dresses like a man. And that one, her name's Eba. She hustles by car right here on

Broadway. She was hustling the other night and three men -- you know, supposed to be hard men who don't like faggots -- took her in the park and raped her. They're supposed to be so hard rock -- you know, 'I wouldn't fuck a man for nothin' in this world' -- but yet, they took her in the park and raped her.

"Then there's Willie, that fat boy over there sucking on the Italian ice. Willie, that's his butch name, but we call him Wilma. He's basically gay. He has no desire for a woman, he feels like a woman, and he's felt this way all his life; he's never even had a piece of pussy. (I tell you, some people are born that way.) He has sex with men, he has his boyfriend and everything, but he won't be going into drag or starting to take hormones until he moves away from his family. Why? Because a lot of gay people don't have no family, you might say; their family might live right across the street, and yet they have no family. Their family don't wanna accept them no more. Like, my father, he's gay himself, but yet if he walked right by here, right now, he wouldn't even speak to me. He would act like he didn't even know who the hell I was.

"But like, it's not just that. You know, just being gay, it's hard. A lotta people are basically against gay people, for no reason at all. They just don't like 'em, you know?"

"But, gay people are more happier than straight people," he said. "When you go to a gay party, everybody's dancing -- high, high, high, everybody's together. And they're easier to get along with. They take life for what it's worth: 'This is life and that's great and I'm gonna enjoy it.' You see? Because when you're trying to be something or get something and you have to work for it, you appreciate it more. But then of course, it isn't always like that. One minute you can be happy as all outdoors, and the next you can be at each other's throats. People have been killed in gay life.

"In most gay situations, you are their family, you're everything. They usually depend on their friends or their lover to give them everything: the love of their mother, father, brothers and sisters. With a woman, you would try to build a home for her so that she would raise your children there. You would be looking forward to that. With a gay person, makes no difference where you live or how you live, just as long as you're together and it's workin' out. Even as they get old, they still depend on each other.

"You gotta understand that these are people, too. Each and every person has a different way of acting and a way of feeling how they want life to be. Just like you're all straight people, but you have a different way of thinkin' and doin' and livin' and so forth -- it's the same with them."

A mischievous smile crossed his face. "There is crazy gay people, though, I'll tell you that much," he said. "Like, Monic and Victor, this guy and this queen who live together like me and Muñeca. Since they been together -- almost a year -- he has stabbed her three times, and she has stabbed him three times. And both of them are no good. They're junkies and they take downs and methadone pills and they drink all day. But yet, they're happy. You couldn't take Monic and Victor apart for nothin' in this world. They love each other just for that."

He told us of the queens who shouldn't be queens. Of Lengy, whom he had met one night at the Gilded Grape. She was husky, with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He went home with her. She had breasts -- "titties" -- but she had a tattoo of a ship going across them, and a tattoo of "MOM" on her arm; she had been in the service, and then had decided to become a queen. The same thing with Cricket. She used to be a boxer. "You

know how she looks like in a dress?" Romeo asked. "Still like a boxer. There a lot to it," he said.

Then there were the sadist gays, the people who liked to beat people; and the leather bars in the village, where guys came in with leather suits and wigs and what not. Of course, there was money in that, from the hustling point of view. If a guy wanted to beat you, he'd have to pay quite a bit. Romeo had done that for money. He believed in trying everything at least once, because you never understood anything unless you tried it yourself.

"Experience is the best teacher," he said.

"You got high-class gay people, you got low-class gay people, middle-class gay people, and some that just don't care," Romeo concluded. "And then you have these trash gay people." He described a section of Central Park he could take us to, right then if we wanted, where we would see nothing but men walking around. All night long, they had sex with different people, changing from one to the next just for the hell of it. "That's really sick," he said. "That's low, low class. But yet, they could live in some fancy building and everything. But that's their bag, they dig it." He'd been around there. Not to do anything, but he was told about it, so he said, "I'm gonna go see for myself." And he couldn't believe it. There were over a hundred men in one section of that park.

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I don't know how long we had been listening to Romeo speak -- maybe half an hour -- but in that time the sky had turned black, the traffic along Broadway had thinned, and the air had become uncomfortably cool. I was unconscious of the silence that had also grown around us, like the shell of an egg, until Henry cracked it.

"And what about you?" he asked. "You like to have sex just with men?"

Romeo frowned. Henry tried to soften his remark. "Forgive me if I'm too abrupt," he said, "but I don't know much about these things. I've only gone with women." Romeo sat up on the hood of the car and hugged his knees. His frown deepened. He chewed his lower lip and shook his head. I was afraid we would lose him. But I underestimated his patience. Like a school teacher speaking to a child who has failed to understand an assignment, he explained, "I like women and men. But I have no thrill for anything that looks like a man or has hair on his face or anything. I'm still a man; I'm considered a man. Muñeca attracts me because she looks like a woman. You might say it's my eyesight: I project, I see her as a woman, not as a man. Where, if I was to go with a person that looked like a man and he wanted to see me as a woman, he'd just look and see, 'Damn, you're not a woman!'"

"And the sex," Henry pressed on, "is it actually anal sex?" Romeo sighed and rolled his eyes. He gripped his knees again, and the veins stood out on his hands like vines. I cut in. "Maybe that's too personal," I said. "It's fine if you don't want to answer." I tried to signal Henry to ease off.

Romeo took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's okay," he said to me, "it's cool." He turned to Henry. "Look, it would be just like if I was to have sex with a woman. I have nothing to do with the front part of her body and she has nothing to do with the back part of mine. You understand what I'm saying? It's like, I fuck her, you understand? And that's all there is to it, just like you would be with a woman. You fuck the woman."

"Yes," Henry said, "but a woman has a pussy."

"Yeah..."

"And Muñeca doesn't have a pussy, right?"

Again Romeo drew a deep breath, and released it. He swiveled, then slung his legs over the car's fender. "But she has an ass," he whispered.

"Look," he said, "I don't do anything that you might say is in the feminine point of view. I don't suck no man's dick, I don't get fucked in my ass, nothin' of that sort. Let's not put it vulgarly, but, more or less, that's the woman's part. You see what I'm saying? But I'm putting it nicely. I don't want to upset nobody's nerves." Romeo raised his eyes and put on a little boy smile. Neither Henry nor I had noticed Muñeca's return -- she had come up behind us, silent as a cat. She scowled at Romeo, and I felt a chill, like passing through a cold spot in the ocean.

Henry must have felt it, too. "Are you upset?" he asked Muñeca.

"He's all right," she said, her eyes following her feet as they rearranged the dirt along the curb.

"All right?" Romeo asked. He hopped off the car. "All right? I thought you loved me, baby. Now I'm 'all right'?"

Romeo and Muñeca stood only a foot or so apart, he with his hands on his hips, she slouching a little, perhaps to de-emphasize the difference in their heights (it was not until later that I realized "muñeca" is Spanish for "doll"). Romeo laughed, but his uncertainty showed in his eyes. Muñeca's gaze stayed fixed on her shoes. Then she smiled, and raised her eyes to meet Romeo's. He put a hand on her shoulder, lifted himself on his toes, and kissed her on the forehead. They moved together and put their arms around each other.

I felt we should leave them alone, and began to make noises about getting together again later in the week. Henry said he would like them to come to his studio, where he had lights and background paper, and also to take pictures in their home. "It's not a home, it's a

room," Romeo said, frowning again, "but you can come there." Henry wondered if he might also take pictures of Muñeca in the half-nude, "so you could see that what appeared to be a woman is actually a man." Romeo said no way to that, and Henry, to his credit, didn't push it.

We agreed to meet again on the corner in two days, on Thursday at eight o'clock. We were in the process of saying our formal goodbyes, goodnights, and nice-to-have-met-yous when Carmen stormed over in a huff. She had just had a dispute with Willie/Wilma, the chubby seventeen-year-old Romeo had pointed out before. "That fat elephant over there tried to read me," she said, pointing her heavy arm toward the corner. "I said, 'You wish you had my body.' I said, 'You don't have nothin' to offer, so what're you talkin' about, stupid?' I just said to her, 'You got meat on top of meat.' That's true. That's what she's got. He, rather. He. That's all he is, is he."

There was embarrassed silence all around. "Well," I said, "I guess we'd better be going. See you Thursday, okay?"

Romeo looked sour and listless, but he assented.

"Goodbye, Muñeca," Henry said, bowing slightly and smiling. "It was a pleasure to meet you." Muñeca nodded, and smiled back. I envied Henry that kind of charm, despite its insincerity. His silly, formal gesture seemed to restore the mood.

As we headed across the street to our building, I ran over in my mind some things I realized I'd better talk over with Henry about how we ought to conduct the interviews. Before I had a chance to speak, though, the kid who worked in the pizza shop jumped in front of us. He'd seen us talking with Romeo and Muñeca, I suppose.

"Let me tell you," he said, standing with his legs spread, hips pushed forward, hands pulling apart his inner thighs, "a guy's ass is better than a girl's pussy. That shit is tight, bro!"

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Neither Romeo nor Muñeca was on the corner when we got there Thursday night, and after we had waited about three quarters of an hour, Henry and I returned to our apartment to call them. (I'd gotten their number, just in case.)

Henry made the call. Muñeca answered, but she turned the phone over to Romeo as soon as she found out who it was. Something had come up, Romeo told Henry, and they wouldn't be able to make it. "Would you be able to do it some time over the weekend?" Henry asked. Romeo thought they could. Henry arranged to meet them Sunday night.

But Romeo and Muñeca were not on the corner when we got there Sunday night, and Henry and I began to worry that we'd never get together with them. I remember being angry with myself for not somehow finding a way to cement things that first night, but I was also at a loss for what I might have done.

Henry and I told each other this was the kind of thing we would probably just have to get used to.

As it turned out, though, Romeo did show up, and he apologized for being late this time, and for not showing up the time before. He said he and Muñeca had picked up some new grass, and they'd gotten so wiped out that he forgot all about our appointment on Thursday. He guessed we were probably afraid he wouldn't make it this time, either. "Not at all," Henry lied.

Romeo didn't look well, seemed as if the air had been let out of him. "What's up?" I asked him. "Are you feeling all right?"

He sighed. "I got a call from my father today asking me to meet him in the park," he said. "I hadn't seen him for weeks, so I said, 'Damn, I want to see what's happening with him. Maybe he's got something nice he wants to say or maybe he understands me. Maybe I can get to see him more often, get back together with my family.' But I waited all day around the fountain in the park and he didn't even show up. I just came from there now."

He stood before us with his hands in his pockets, his round, smooth face pulled into a sorrowful mask. "It must be tough," I said. "How old are you?" I asked him.

"Nineteen," he said.

I felt, for the moment, as if despite my relative innocence I had the benefit of a few years' experience. "You know," I said, "how I told you before that things were bad between me and my father? Well, they got better, after a couple of years."

"Yeah, well," Romeo said, "it's already been a couple of years."

I could find nothing more to say. Henry asked, cautiously, "If it's still all right, we would still like to photograph you and Muñeca tonight. Is it still all right?"

Romeo's nerves were frayed, but he managed to pull the loose ends together. "Sure, man," he said, forcing a smile. "That's cool. That's what I'm here for."

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We walked the block and a half to their hotel slowly, not saying much. By the time we arrived, Romeo's mood had begun to brighten, and the swagger came back into his step.

Somehow, just our presence seemed to cheer him up. I was glad of that, for his sake and ours. I was still somewhat uneasy about prying into their lives.

Judging from its recessed, canopied entrance and the red and blue stained-glass windows in its lobby, their hotel must have been something thirty or forty years before. By the time we saw it, though, it was just a cut above the welfare hotels in the neighborhood. It was reputed to be a transvestite hotel, and I had seen many of what I assumed were its occupants in the shops and stores on the Upper West Side. The more obvious ones I recognized; others, like Muñeca, I must have mistaken for women.

Romeo led us into a rickety elevator that smelled of urine, then down a litter-strewn corridor and through the brown doorway to their room. The place had a worn-out, claustrophobic feel to it, and their room, though tidy, was oppressive to me for the first few minutes we were there. Muñeca, her long hair tied back in a pony tail, a floral print dress under her paisley apron, was frying pork chops, and this made the atmosphere hot and smoky.

The room was a dull, uneven green, and scarcely large enough to hold their single mattress, an old-fashioned dresser, a wooden arm chair, and an apartment-sized refrigerator, on top of which rested the two-burner hot plate before which Muñeca stood. There was a blurry snapshot of the two of them stuck in the frame of the mirror above the dresser; besides the photograph, there was nothing for decoration on the grease-stained walls but a few discolored prints and a portrait of Jesus, on which was superimposed in white, block letters the words "DIOS BENDIGA NUESTRO HOGAR." The prints looked as if they belonged to the place; the portrait was Muñeca's. The only light came from a

bare bulb on the ceiling. The bathroom, which they shared with several other families, was in the hall.

Henry started to set up his equipment. I sat on the bed, Romeo pulled the arm chair up beside me, and we began to talk. Romeo said that although only Muñeca was working right then and they were having a hard time scraping together thirty dollars each week for the rent, they had been trying to get a bigger room. The landlord would tell them, "it'll be ready next Wednesday," but when Wednesday came, "it'll be ready next Tuesday" would be his story. When Tuesday came, he promised it would be ready in a week. This had been going on for four or five weeks. "Monday, we're gonna get it," Muñeca said, slapping a pork chop on a plate and handing it to Romeo. I moved over on the bed, and she sat with us.

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She was born in Puerto Rico but moved, with her family, to Syracuse, New York, when she was twelve. She was twenty-seven when Henry and I met her. She told us she had wanted to be a woman all her life, as long as she could remember, but she didn't start dressing in drag, growing her hair long, or taking hormones or anything until after she moved to New York. That was five years before. Her parents, she said, didn't mind when she was "just a little butch," but they hated the way she was now that she was a queen. She had recently told her mother, "If you don't accept me the way I am, then it will have to be like you don't have a son. You will have to forget about me."

She worked in a factory in Queens, assembling cables. She'd worked there since she'd moved to the city; she had been hired as a man. "Gay life," she said, "is more free here than upstate. It's more quiet there, more conservative. That's why I like to live here."

At sixteen she'd quit school to go to work, and she had been working ever since. She'd never hustled. Once, Muñeca wasn't working for three months, and she was collecting unemployment insurance, and it was thirty dollars for the room and twenty dollars for food and nothing for clothes or anything else, and sometimes she would go to bed hungry; but she would never go out on the street and sell her body. "For myself," she said, "I don't like it. I prefer to work." Nor would she steal. "The only thing Muñeca would steal," Romeo told me, "is flowers. And that's the God's truth. Flowers. Not money, not food, or anything. Just flowers."

Some day, she hoped to have enough money to complete her sex change. She really wanted to do that. And then, if she had money beyond that, she would like to buy a house, and give some money to her mother and her family, and give some other money to a church or wherever, to the poor people. Because she really always thought about other people, too. She never thought only of herself. And any money that was left after that, she would keep to live, to buy everything she needed and to have enough to survive, herself. With her man.

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Romeo was born in Manhattan and grew up in Manhattan and the Bronx, "and a very small part in Queens." His twentieth birthday was next month. His father was part black and part American Indian; his mother was German and Puerto Rican. "So I ain't nothin'. Hah! I'm a little of everything, you know?"

He dropped out of high school -- Bronx Science ("You had to have honors to get in, but I was on the honor roll all through high school") -- two months before he was to graduate. When we met him, he was collecting unemployment insurance. "There's no basic

category to really make money by," he said. "It's kinda hard, 'cause first of all, you gotta have such a great education, somethin' worthwhile. And then the trades -- well, usually, so many people are takin' a trade that it's not worthwhile takin' one in the first place. So, I just basically look for a job and hope it works out and I make my money. When I get old, I'll get my Social Security benefits or whatever. Right now, it don't make much difference."

He had worked in restaurants mopping floors and washing dishes. He said he could cook. He loaded and unloaded trucks. He worked for a sanitation project in New Jersey.... "Basic things, nothing elaborate, nothing high class. Hah! Nothin' that anybody couldn't do if they put their mind to it."

He also used to fight for money. People bet on him against another guy, and he got paid for it. "I used to take martial arts -- Kung Fu, like that -- and always in my neighborhood there was a person that was supposed to be more tougher than the other one, so about every weekend, we used to get together and have somebody from our block fight somebody else. Somebody would come that I didn't even know, and I would fight him. Crazy."

That was when he was seventeen. When he was in high school, the thing he wanted to be most was a psychiatrist, "to understand people's problems and maybe find a way or explain to them a way they could help themselves." Maybe some day he could do that. "Maybe when I'm forty-five years old," he said, "I'll be in some school studying psychiatry. Hah!" He last worked for a city laundry. But "they started a job shortage here in New York," so since then he got his money however he could.

For a while, he got into hustling. Stopped working, said to himself: "Wow, I gotta make me some money." He knew a few things about it, so he went out and tried it. But he

stopped when they threw him into jail one time. Some bimbo set the cops on his tail -- claimed Romeo had robbed his house, just because he wouldn't spend the night for thirty-five dollars. "Thirty-five dollars! Hah! Everybody knows, in business that's no price." Romeo heard the guy had put a warrant out on him; when he ran into him again, they ended up squaring off. Romeo hit him in such a nice way that it ripped his nose to one side. That's when the cops picked him up.

"I don't hustle no more," he said, "but..." he looked around, and his voice dropped to a whisper, "sometimes I go late at night with a few friends and take a couple of people off. Seriously. We don't do it every day, but, you know, when things really get tight... That's truthful. I don't mean to lie." He showed me how he did it, coming up and choking from behind. "We don't hurt 'em or nothin', though," he assured me.

Muñeca had been washing their dishes and straightening up while we talked. I asked her how she felt about what Romeo did. She hesitated, and Romeo spoke for her. "She feels that if that's what I gotta do to make money, more or less to do it. She can't stop me, because I'm the man, and if I wanna get out there and make some money, I can make it, right? I don't like to always be asking her for things. I like to have my own."

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They met three months before, at the Gilded Grape. According to Romeo, most of the other gay bars in the city wouldn't allow a female impersonator in. "The police consider a queen a hazard," he explained, "because she feels like a woman. But when she goes to the women's bathroom she doesn't go for the same reasons I would, to see a piece of pussy or something. She goes to pee like anybody else."

They had lived together roughly two out of the past three months, on and off at first, and then steadily. In the beginning, Muñeca was living on 101st Street, but she was married to a guy named Daniel and seeing Romeo on the side. She dug him and he dug her, and one day, she said she was thinking about leaving Daniel. It wasn't because of Romeo exactly, she told him, but because she didn't want to be with Daniel anymore. And since she'd found somebody else she could understand and who could understand her, why didn't they see if they could get it together? Romeo was agreeable to that.

So, one day Romeo would stay with Muñeca, and another time he would stay with some people he knew. Daniel was working on Long Island then, anyway, so he wasn't around. Then Muñeca got into a jam where she had to collect unemployment insurance and she couldn't hold the rent for the room. Whenever Romeo got money, he'd run it to her, but she said to herself, "Well, I'm not gonna stay with Daniel, I might as well get a cheaper room." And that was that for Daniel. Muñeca moved downtown, to 48th Street between Ninth and Tenth avenues. Romeo, meanwhile, was living with another queen by then, and seeing Muñeca on the side. "That's the way it's done, you know."

So, Romeo hadn't seen Muñeca for a little while. When he finally went to see her, he figured she was still living on 101st Street, but then he couldn't find her. He couldn't find her for a whole week, so he did the next best thing: he met somebody else. He started rapping with Michelle, and they got very tight together, and pretty soon Romeo started living with her. And Michelle was Muñeca's best friend.

Well, after a while, Muñeca moved back to the Upper West Side. One day, Romeo was breezing through the block and somebody told him, "Muñeca just moved down here again and she don't want to see you. She hates your guts." Naturally, Romeo asked, "Why

does Muñeca hate my guts?" And this somebody said, "Because she found out you was livin' with her best friend."

So Romeo stayed out of sight for a while. Then one day, he was just running out of the subway, expecting to go to somebody's house, and bam! he ran right into who? Into Muñeca.

He said, "Oh, hi, Muñeca. How you feel?"

She said, "Uh-huh. You been around here hiding from me, trying to keep out of my way. I ain't going to fight with you. Are you happy living with who you're with?"

"What do you mean by that?" Romeo said; he was playing dumb. But Muñeca told him she'd heard the dirt. People had told her. So Romeo came right back and said, "It's workin' out all right." And that really got to Muñeca.

She said she really loved Romeo and wanted him to come back with her, if he wanted to. She left it up to him.

He decided to.

But things were rough in the beginning. Muñeca started in arguing every day about her best friend: What was Romeo doing with her? Was he messin' with Michelle when he and Muñeca first met? She wouldn't believe anything he had to say. Plus, she would argue with Michelle whenever she met her on the street; one day, she said she was gonna go cut Michelle. Finally, Romeo up and left and went back with Michelle. But then he and Michelle got into some pretty heavy shit themselves, fighting and so forth, and Romeo broke up with her and came back to Muñeca. "Now, I'm not going nowhere, no time," he said.

As for Muñeca (who had been married to Daniel for four years before she met Romeo), she loved Romeo, now, and didn't give a damn about the other one; she'd already changed. She hoped she and Romeo would stay together for a long time. She would even like them to adopt children some day, after she got her sex change. "I love kids," she said.

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Kids turned out to be something of a sore point. We'd been sitting together, the three of us, for quite some time, and despite our differences, we had developed a feeling of intimacy. I turned to Romeo and asked, "What about you? How do you feel about adopting kids?"

I was surprised at his frown. "Well, I don't expect to adopt any," he said.

I turned back to Muñeca. "Do you think that'll be a problem?"

She tucked her chin to her chest, again. "Well," she said, "I mean... I don't think we would, if he don't want them. But for myself, I would like to."

By this time, Henry was through setting up his equipment. We began shooting pictures. I assisted Henry, holding lights and placing umbrellas to get the shadows just so. He really had remarkable skill. Leaning into his camera, he posed Muñeca at the hot plate; then the two of them sitting on the bed, her head on his shoulder; then each of them alone, she coy and reticent, he pensive, somber, but at the same time wry. Henry shot several rolls. "Professional snapshots," he called them; they were his specialty. "Good," he said, as he instructed them to move this way or that. "Excellent. Very good. Beautiful."

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After the shooting, Muñeca made coffee. Their friend Carmen (who, as it turned out, lived down the hall, with Joey) dropped in. She and Muñeca spoke briefly in Spanish. On her way out, Carmen asked Romeo what he would tell us about her; she knew who we were, and why we were there.

"That you're a straight friend of ours," he said, "a straight person who's a friend. It would make sense, wouldn't it? That's what you are." We all laughed.

After she left, I asked about their other friends. "I work with straight people," Muñeca said. "But, I don't got too many friends. Well, I got a lot of gay friends, but not too close. I'm associated with them, you know; we're not really friends." Most of Romeo's friends, the people he grew up with, didn't even know he was gay. "They wouldn't understand what was happenin' with me if I was to tell 'em, anyway," he said. "They would still be my friends, but every time I see them, they would read me, you know? 'Damn, man, get yourself a woman.' They try to put you down, try to make you stop it."

Muñeca got up again to finish cleaning. Henry and I continued to sit with Romeo on the bed. "Why did you become gay?" Henry asked.

"Everybody has feminine traits in them," Romeo said. "I'm not trying to degrade anybody or so forth, but everyone has it. They say, 'He's a faggot' because he admires another man, but I'm sure you have looked at another man and said, 'Damn, he does look good. I wish I had his features.'"

Henry and I agreed we had.

"What happened to me," Romeo went on, "is that I went with a woman, you understand? I got married, I had a child.... My wife just fucked over me and she hurt me. I'm not saying that all women are alike, but, you know, once you love a woman once, you have no desire to love another woman again. And then, too, there's the way it was with a lotta girls. I could get many a girl, I had a lotta raps and what not, but the majority of them were just fulla shit. They expected the world, you know? I mean, I'd be with these girls, you had to take them out every Saturday or else you couldn't kiss 'em or something. Sick broads." He laughed. "Right? I'm sure you've been through that. So I tried the next best thing: gay life.

"Now, gay life, I understand because why? My father is gay. But he is butch queen: he's a man, but he feels feminine, then he don't feel feminine. My mother died when I was small, so that's what made him go gay. So many reasons....

"I've been in gay life about three years, but I've messed with it all my life because he raised me, and he's always been around other men who were gay and they bother you and fuck around with you. I was his son, I was living with him, so I always dealt with it. But yet he doesn't understand why I'm gay because I used to be straight."

Romeo grinned. "Truthfully speaking, when I first went to the Gilded Grape, my father took me there, and I thought they were all women. So he let me go ahead and be my little bad self and I rapped to somebody who sounded like a woman, looked like a woman, had titties and everything, and I went up to her house, started schemin' with her -- kissin' her and so forth. After a while I reached down there and she said, 'You know what you're doing, right?' And I said, 'Yeah, I know what I'm doing,' and I went ahead. Then I said, 'Oh, shit! What's that?' and she said, 'You don't know what I am? I'm a man.' So I said, 'But

you got titties!' Then she said, 'Yeah, they're real,' and I said, 'Let me see.' And she picked up her shirt and I saw the chest and I said, 'Well, I can't understand it. What's happening?' So, she said, 'Well, I don't got time to explain to you. Do you wanna fuck with me or not?'"

He went on: "I have one brother, and he's butch queen, and he's going into drag soon. He's younger than me. But, I'm trying to stop him, for what reason? Because he's young. He's had his girlfriends and so forth, but he hasn't really -- like me, I haven't really checked out life for what it's worth, but I've had my experiences and I feel like this is what's good for me now. At times I say, no, I don't want to be in this life, and then I say yes. But then him, he's not definite on it. He says he wants to be a woman, but yet, you know... it's just not him. You understand what I'm saying? It's just not him.

"Me, I could change my mind tomorrow. I could just happen to be standing somewhere and a young lady'll stop me and say, 'What time is it?' and so forth. You never know how life is gonna change tomorrow. I might not even be alive tomorrow. But, as far as I feel now, this is the way I want to live. I'm satisfied. I'm happy. I live my life straight. It's no big hassle.

"What I see in the future, hoping to predict, is that I start working while Muneca's working and we get, probably, an apartment and furniture and so forth and get ourselves together good. I mean, if we're supposed to be living straight, this is no place to be living for the rest of your life. I sure don't wanna live here, anyway."

It was close to ten o'clock, by then. Henry packed up his lights and cameras and I put away my tape recorder. We planned to reconvene at our place, and hoped to finish with Romeo and Muñeca that night.

Henry asked Romeo and Muñeca to get dressed up as if they were going out for the night, and then to come over to our place to have their pictures taken in a studio setting, with background paper and all that. I asked Romeo if they had time to do that; he said they had all the time in the world.

Henry wanted to see what they'd be wearing. Romeo showed him a pair of shiny, bright-red pants and a matching sleeveless body shirt. "That's fine," Henry said. "Very, very nice." But they couldn't find anything for Muñeca to wear. She said she had only one nice dress, and she had no shoes or stockings to match. "I don't want to look funny, you know," she said. She wanted to wear overalls instead, but Romeo wouldn't allow it. They whispered together; it looked to me as if they were arguing. "She can get something together," Romeo said. We told him we'd meet them at our place in half an hour.

* * *

What happened next took Henry and me totally by surprise.

When Romeo and Muñeca didn't show up on time again, we decided to walk back to their hotel and try to hurry them along. But on the way, we saw Romeo walking toward us, decked out in the fancy clothes he'd shown Henry back in their room. We waved to him, but he didn't wave back. We met him half-way down the block.

"That bitch won't come," he muttered. "I just come to tell you. I know I promised you and everything, but you're just gonna have to forget it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"She kept saying she had nothing to wear, right? I'd pick up a dress or a skirt or something like that and she would say it was no good. Then I told her, 'You're supposed to

be a drag queen, right? Look like a woman? But you don't do nothing to make yourself look good."

Muñeca started to cry, and she said Romeo didn't love her anymore. Then Romeo said Muñeca was hanging on him too much, and what did she mean about adopting kids? They argued back and forth for a few minutes, and then Romeo walked out -- for good, he said. He was on his way downtown.

"Where are you going to stay tonight?" I asked him. I felt we were responsible for what had happened. I planned to offer to let him stay at our place, though I was wary of what Henry might have to say about that.

"Oh, you can live anywhere in New York," he said. "You didn't know that? You just gotta be in the right place at the right time, and you meet the right person," he snapped his fingers, "and there's a new home for you. By the time I get downtown, I'll have a place. I can walk to the corner and stay there about ten, twenty minutes -- You see all them fags come up and down Broadway? Just give 'em a little wink, and I've found myself a new home. Tomorrow I move my things out, I have a new place to live, maybe a whole new relationship."

"I feel like this is all our fault," I said. "I feel terrible about it."

"A lot came out that should've come out a long time ago. It ain't your fault," Romeo told me.

We tried to persuade him to come up to our apartment for a while, and call Muñeca to try to patch things up.

It's just a quarrel, we said; don't worry about it. You know how women are. We'll call her in a little while, and you'll talk to her, and everything will be just fine.

"All right," Romeo said at last, "but it won't do no good to talk to her."

In fact, it did no good even to try, since Muñeca didn't answer the phone. But Romeo stayed for Henry to take more photographs, and then remained half the night to talk.

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"Muneca's gotta get herself together, man. Because anything I do, I got to be free to do it. I try to enjoy each and every thing I do. And she... she lives in a dry world. She lives like the whole world has collapsed around her and she's just driftin' along. She told me that now that we broke up, there's nothin' for her left in the world. She said she's gonna kill herself. But a lotta people say that and don't do it. Not Muñeca. She wouldn't kill herself; no way. She's got too much to live for, too much to look forward to.

"She's good people in many ways -- there's nothing wrong with her heart -- but the way she acts, even conversations that we have, it doesn't make it, man. I can't live with somebody that's quiet all the time, and that's basically what Muñeca is: quiet. She'll laugh and joke with her friends and they say, 'Oh, wow, we had a beautiful time with Muñeca today'; I say, 'Not with me.' Carmen told me Muñeca was scared to laugh and joke with me, but why would you be scared? That's kind of ignorant. Even if she were to tell me, 'You're an ugly fat slob' or something, I'd probably tell her something in return and we'd just throw things at each other and laugh it off. It's fun, sometimes, to goof on each other. But she doesn't even take time for that.

"When I first met Muñeca, she was always laughing and joking. Well, there wasn't nothing we couldn't sit and discuss; it was nice. It's really a drag now. We used to go to the park every day and have fun. Now, all we do is leave the house and go to the corner, and go from the corner back down to the house. Ugh! We could go to Central Park, walk around in there, have fun like we used to. Damn. She acts like, if the world's coming to an end tomorrow, she's gotta take time to pray.

"Everybody says it's me. They say, 'She loves you with all her heart.' But I don't feel that way. She expects for everything to happen overnight -- for us to get a big apartment and all this -- so she can show the other queens that I stayed with her the longest and look how great we are together. You understand what I'm sayin'? That since she knew I had this reputation of not staying with all those other queens for more than a week, two weeks, she figured none of them worked out. But now that I've stayed with her the longest, she's in a hurry to get a big, fabulous apartment with all new furniture and then to show it off. You know, like when you get a new car? You say, 'Check this out. Ain't this nice?'

"I'm not tryin' to impress nobody. I just wanna make it. I want to get with somebody that I don't have to go through changes with. I just wanna work, be cool, and be able to at least get along with the person or be able to have a conversation with 'em. If it don't work, it don't work. I don't got forever to keep trying with her. When you really find somebody who wants to make it with you, you stop.

"I think life would be much different if a lot of people would think about bein' sincere about what they're doin', you know what I mean? Be sincere. If this is what you're gonna do, do it. If you're gonna be with somebody, be with 'em, but be sure. You know, but it's kinda hard to be sure. There's a lotta if's and but's and why's; causes and so forth... Crazy,

man. I'm talkin' about everybody has this problem; I'm not speakin' of gay people in general."

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"When I was with my wife -- wow, I ran after her for the longest time. I would say if she was to take time to think about what I was tellin' her, then she would see the point and come back to me. But she loves her mother too much. That was one of the basic things why we broke up. Her mother told her that she couldn't get along without her, so I had to live in the building her mother lived in, and she was more with her mother than with me.

"I got married when I was seventeen. I used to play handball with my wife's brother, and I met her through him. We got very close to be friends and I loved her a lot and everything, and then one day I said, 'Will you marry me?' and she said yes. Then about two weeks after I asked her to marry me, she said, 'I'm pregnant.' I said, 'Oh, thanks.' Oh, God, no way, I couldn't believe it. So that delayed the marriage because I had to pay money for the child to be born into the world. Then Mandy -- that's my daughter that got killed -- started growing up and then we went ahead and got married. Nothing elaborate, but it was a nice wedding.

"I was married to her about a year and a half, but you might say we was getting more apart from each other eight months after we were married. We were, like, less together; she was more with her mother and doing her thing, I was more with my father doing mine.

"Now, my wife is twenty-seven. But she had the mind of a sixteen year old. She really had nothing to look forward to, and she acted like a baby. I mean, damn, man, I was workin' for the city and I had my own place; the furniture was new; I had credit; I was still in night school. I was really makin' something out of myself. But when I found out it

wasn't gonna work out between us, it's like she snatched the rug out from under me and I just fell on my face.

"I used to believe in God very strongly. I'll tell you why I don't anymore. If you pray to Him, He's supposed to give you what you want, right? Well, a lot of times I prayed for something -- basically speaking, on my wife and my daughter -- and I didn't get it.

"You see how I am now. I prayed the whole world that we wouldn't get broken up, or that now that we were broken up, that we could get back together and get a more better understanding. Then, when I heard my daughter died, I said to myself, 'Oh, God, why can't you say it's not for real?' You know, let somebody come up to me and say, 'Oh, they was just bullshittin' you, man. You wanna go see Mandy?' But it didn't happen like that. Somebody who I thought hated my guts came and told me that my daughter died.

"From the way Ralph told me -- that's my wife's cousin -- the baby was three years old, she grew up somewhat good, and she was playing in the street and the mother wasn't payin' no attention. A guy with a car can't see, you know, and he hit her, and just a short smack like that could kill her instantly, why? Because she's a baby. I was told two or three months after it happened, when she was buried and everything.

"Damn, that night I was like a maniac. If you was walkin' around and you seen me... I met a trick that night, somebody to make money by. I ripped him off, I beat the hell outa him. I wanted to take it out on the world. Somebody'd come and talk to me: 'Fuck you! I don't wanna talk about it.' Very e-vil. Then I said, 'Why didn't my father tell me?' He went to the funeral and he didn't even let me know what was happening.

"I loved that girl more than anything in this world. When me and my wife broke up, after we were apart two months, I had kidnapped Mandy and she was with me having fun

each and every day. Then finally my wife found out where I was living and she had me locked up for kidnapping. But she didn't press any charges. She just wanted Mandy back.

"Strange, huh? But you see, I knew that my wife wouldn't turn around and raise Mandy herself or just get one guy and stay with him and they would raise her. She would be showing Mandy father after father after father, getting together with different guys over and over again, and before you knew it, Mandy's gonna get used to the facts of it and she's gonna turn out to be a little whore or something. So it's probably better she got killed anyway, because they wouldn't give her to me or to my family.

"But, even what I do now, and the things that I've been through with my wife, knowing that my daughter died and everything, I think about it and I call up and try to talk to her, but she acts like she's talking to a stranger. Like, I say, 'Hello, can I speak to Rhonda?' and she says, 'Who's this?' I say, 'Romeo,' and she says, 'Oh. What do you want?' Like that. Then I say, 'Well, how you been doin'?' and she says, 'Why is it your concern?' I say, 'Are you going with somebody else now?' She says, 'Even if I wasn't, I don't wanna see you.' What a conversation! I say, 'Sorry to bother you,' and hang up.

"I see her on the street, she acts like she don't know me, and if I get too close to her, she'll scream or run. I'm not gonna hurt her, I just wanna talk to her; but she wants me to stay away. She figures if she screams I'll say, 'Wow, she's gonna get me in trouble, so I better get out of the way!' No chance of me getting back with her.

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"I feel I could get along with a woman again; of course. But it's the point of getting the right one. I don't want to get a nothing, you understand? I want to be with somebody who's really worthwhile being with, even if it's in gay life. The only thing that gay life really

strikes me against is the point that you couldn't basically have a family. It would be mostly you and whoever you're with.

"I dig children. I'd like to have my own. Even if Muñeca was to get her sex change and we was to adopt children, I don't want to adopt nobody else's children. Why should I, when I can have my own? Just because she couldn't give birth to a child doesn't mean I couldn't have one, because I know girls that, they don't necessarily love me, but they wouldn't mind just giving the child to me because they know that I would take good care of it. They want to have children, but they don't want to support them, or they feel that they want to have them and be able to see them when they want but that somebody else could raise them for them. Or they just want to see what their children would look like. You know, there's a lot of sickies; I've been around a lot of them. Damn!

"But, two gay people raising a child? More or less, I don't even dig the point of us raisin' a child together if we was to stay together, because imagine a child growing up thinking this was a woman all the time, never knowing the fact of what it was. Damn. One day findin' out? You wouldn't dig it, right? All the time he thought that was his mother, and to find out he's a man? Shit! That would automatically put me through some changes, man.

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"I would like to go back to school. I couldn't believe it when I stopped. I just started working two jobs and then the next thing I knew I said, 'Hey, man, I'm supposed to graduate this year.' Really, it hadn't dawned on me that I was messin' myself up, so I said, 'I'll go back to school and I'll try to make it up again.' But then I said, 'A whole year again before I graduate?' Forget it. I couldn't take the year again; they'd call me 'super senior.' I lost all interest, and I said, 'Look, I'm working, and I got a daughter and a family to

support.' Now look at me. I wish I had finished. But then, just that paper's not no good no more. A long time ago, if somebody had a high school education, they could get almost any job, but now you have to have at least two years of college....

"I've always thought about just getting myself a place and stop tryin' to make it with people, tryin' to get it together with somebody. Shit. Just let it come to me. If it don't come, it don't come. But if I'm gonna be in school, I'm gonna meet other people, and eventually I'm gonna meet somebody that's on my level, got my kinda mind or whatever. Male or female.

"I'm thinkin' about what I'm gonna do now.... I wish I was working. If I was working right now and not collecting unemployment, I would just say fuck it and get myself a room somewhere uptown and stay by myself and get to know people of my age bracket, because, you know, almost entirely the queens I've been around are a lot older than me.

"To me, I feel that life is life and take it for what it's worth, and today you'll be happy, tomorrow you'll be sad. It's still life. Why should I kill myself over petty shit, right? I can always find somebody else, very easily. I'm truthful: I know I'm not ugly. Even if I was ugly, even an ugly man can find someone to like him, no matter how bad he looks.

"I've heard other people tell me some stories about their lives and you say, 'Damn, did that happen to a person and they're still out here?' New York City has a lotta sad stories. Look at the majority of the black population. They got twelve and thirteen kids in one family, they're on welfare, the kids are dirty and bein' bit by rats and livin' in the slums and all this. That's a pretty rough life. And the father's a wino, the mother's a whore and the kids gotta cook for themselves. You didn't know about all those things? So how could my life be that bad?"

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The next night we saw Romeo and Muñeca at the corner, sitting together, arms around each other, as if nothing had happened. Romeo seemed a little on edge, though, and looked at us as if to say: "Be cool."

A week or so later, Romeo came by our apartment to pick up some prints Henry had made of the pictures he'd taken, and to see if we wanted to buy any of the jewelry he'd stolen recently; Henry bought a watch. A couple of weeks after that, I saw Carmen in the laundromat. She told me Romeo had gone back to the Bronx.

I bumped into Romeo a few months later at the hot dog stand in the Columbus Circle subway station. He asked me about the project, and Henry, and I told him I wasn't working with Henry anymore; I was on my own. Romeo said he'd gone back to school and was living with his wife again. When I asked him what he was doing to get by, he winked. "You know how I make my living, man," he said.

I saw Muñeca for the last time a little after that, just before I left 98th Street. She said she'd moved to 97th Street, and she was fine. But she was wearing a little more make-up, then.