

Please see the additional complaint information as requested by the South Carolina Instructional Review Committee on November 21, 2024 and the State Board on December 3, 2024.

Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes

Chakara Troupe

I am not in the mood for Tyrone's sorry "Baby, gimme some loving" routine, so when I see him in the hall, I storm past as if he's not even there. Eventually, he'll figure out why.

I come to school sporting shades and a johnny-print across my left cheek, Johnny being the name of the idiot who smacked me last night. Naturally, Porscha is the first person who notices my new tattoo. She walks straight up to me and says, "You deserve better, girlfriend. And you know it." No hello. No how are you. Just: "You deserve better." Then she turns away and walks into the classroom. Typical Porscha. No nonsense. That's why we get along.

Then here comes Sheila Gamberoni. The minute she sees me, she demands to know the name of the guy who gave me my shiner, like she's gonna send her brothers after him or something. I keep his name to myself, just in case. She commences to call the guy everything but a child of God, which makes her feel

better, I think, then gives me a hug and says she'll see me later. Sheila is a bit over the top with this sister act, as if she's trying to make up for being white, but she means well. I can do without some of the other girls who stare at me, though. I know they're just looking for something to talk about, so I rip off my sunglasses, let them get a better look. Might as well stare all you want. This is the first and last time you'll ever see me like this.

Of course, that's what they all say. Nobody knows that better than me. My sister's boyfriends have been beating on her for years. I made up my mind a long

time ago, I'm not having none of that.

Last night I tried telling this to Johnny, who seems to be hard of hearing. He'd brought me home from a movie. He came in for a while, got comfortable since Mom was working overtime and we had the apartment to ourselves. We locked lips for a few minutes. Next thing I know, he's fingering my shirt buttons. I push him away, gently at first. "I think we better slow down," I say. "No, no," he says, voice all husky. "It's just getting good." This time, his hand shoots up my skirt. Bad move. I jump off the sofa like it's on fire. "Maybe it's time for you to go." He grabbed my skirt and tried pulling me back down, which is right about when I hauled off and smacked him. He leaped up and smacked me back.

My jaw dropped from shock, and I looked in his eyes and saw my sister's reflection.

I turned away, strode to the door, unlocked it, and held it open for him.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," I said, "'cause that's the last time you'll ever lay a hand on me. Now get out!" He actually looked like he was studying on staying, so I stepped out into the hall and screamed at the top of my lungs, "I said get out!" Fearing trouble, he left.

Now I've got this ugly tattoo on my cheek. I thought about skipping school today, but I hate to miss English. Besides, the bruise is temporary and so is the pain. Still, I'd rather not have kids gawking at me all period, so I park myself in the back of the room and wait for Mr. Ward to call our English class to attention.

Mr. Ward is funny. Sometimes he asks us a question with no warning, and tells us to answer quick, without stopping to think about it. The truth is always right on the tip of your tongue, he says. It's the fabrications that take a lot of time. Yesterday he

asked us: "What do you know?" Yesterday I said my name, but today would be different. Today I'd tell him a woman ain't no punching bag. That's what I know.

Lape Algarin

Janelle's got a thing for Devon, but she ain't the only one. Last week I seen some girl named Beth in here staring at him like he was chocolate ice cream she couldn't wait to spoon up. She don't even belong in this class. Come to think of it, a lot of extra kids been showing up in our class on Open Mike Fridays. They heard about the poetry and they been coming to check it out. A bunch of teachers are getting mad at Mr. Ward with all these kids skipping their classes. Everybody's talking about it.

Poor Mr. Ward. He sends students back where they belong—when he catches them. Our class is big, though, and it's easy to duck down behind someone in the back of the room and hide. Sometimes we're halfway through the period before he notices someone who doesn't belong. But he caught Beth last week, and I saw Janelle grinning. She don't have Devon yet, but still she wants him all to herself. I know that feeling, when you love somebody like that. And not just a guy.

I love my Rosa.

Rosa is so beautiful. I wish I could bring her to school. Mr. Ward would love her. Her toes are like tiny churros you want to nibble all the time. And I do, whenever my big sister, Christina, has me over to baby-sit. She smiles more than she did before she had Rosa. Or maybe she's just happy to be out of the house. I would be. There's nothing for me there, that's for sure.

My brother, Tito, left long ago, and then Christina. So it's just me now, with Mami and her husband, Berto. Besides her factory job, all she cares about is him. As for Berto, he's got no use for nobody's kids, even Mami's.

Why does she put up with him? All he does is belch beer and scream at her to bring him and his buddies more while they sit around playing dominos or watching fights on TV.

"T bet Papi doesn't guzzle beer all the time," I often say to Mami.

"You don't know what he does, Lupe," she always says. "How could you? You were only five when he left. And he left on his own, Lupe. Pero, what did I expect? He was a jibaro through and through. He couldn't wait to get back to his precious mountains! And this is the man you love? But Berto, who puts food in your mouth, him you despise. ;Dios mio!"

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I hate it when she calls Papi a hick, the way she spits the word out.

I used to write him. So many letters. But he never wrote back. Why, Papi? There's nobody here to love me now. Mami has Berto, Tito has his carnales on the streets, Christina has Chooch and Rosa. And me? Raul's been giving me the eye lately, but he can forget it. He's too much in love with himself, always drawing pictures of his own face. What's that about? Besides, I already got a man. My Marco. Except, Marco hardly has time for me, even though he claims I'm his woman, his one and only.

Sometimes I say my rosaries and beg for someone to love. I lay in bed under the crucifix and pray 'til

my fingers go numb on the beads.

Lately when I look at Rosa, I think I should do like my friend Gloria Martinez. I should make a baby of my own. Maybe that's the answer.

I like Marco good enough. I don't want to marry him, but he's cute. We'd make pretty babies together, I think.

I've always loved babies. When I was younger, I would wrap my doll in the lace from my first Communion and I'd show her off to all my neighbors. "Mira, mira," I'd say. "See my baby. Isn't she perfect?" And she loved me better than anybody, because I was her mother. It was only pretend, of course. But if I had a real baby, she would love me

like that. The way Gloria's baby loves her. The way Rosa loves Christina.

I saw Gloria and her baby in the grocery last night. I waved to them and all the time, I'm thinking, Gloria, you have no idea how lucky you are.