

The Ecstasy of Pupusas

Filled with Love

By Stephen Rocco

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“The Ecstasy of Pupusas, Filled with Love,” by Stephen Rocco. ISBN 978-1-63868-074-1.

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*To my late brother, Salvatore Rocco.
"The toughest kid in Everett."*

Chapter 1: The Departure

A HUMAN LEAF FLOATED slowly from the highest Sequoia in a sea of Sequoia, startling Chelsea awake before she hit the ground. "Another nice dream ending badly," thought the still-sleepy Chelsea. From what she could remember, she was flitting from tree to tree one moment, and plummeting to the ground the next. As she pulled the covers from her bed, Chelsea looked down at her feet. "Even my toes are ugly," she thought. She hated her snow-white complexion sprinkled with freckles, even on her toes.

"No time for this dialogue today," thought Chelsea. She could not wait to tell Maria the good news. Maria Gomez was the family's El Salvadoran housekeeper, whom Chelsea considered her best friend. She quickly dressed and raced to Maria's Kingdom - the kitchen. Chelsea was met by her somber

mother there, who typically glamorous even at this hour, said that she had bad news. "Maria has taken another job in another home closer to her own Boston home." Chelsea immediately felt dizzy as her eyes welled up. Incredulous, she asked, "How?" "Why?" Her mom hugged her as Chelsea's body went from joy to grief in seconds. Finally, Chelsea sobbed, "Does dad know about this?"

"Of course," answered her mom. "Maria called him this week and apologized that she could not give a two-week notice." "Where is Dad now?" demanded Chelsea. Her mom told her that he was at her brother Jon's basketball game and would be home for dinner. "Naturally," thought Chelsea.

Chelsea retreated to her bedroom and buried her head under the pillow. She was graduating in one month from Wellesley High School, class of 2005, and the person most responsible for that would not be with her. She could almost touch the features of her best friend, whom she first saw five years earlier. Stout, with beautiful thick brown hair, and matching skin, Maria's face radiated warmth. At 40-something she had a round face, broad nose, and curved mouth that seemed to radiate up to her ears when she smiled. That mouth smiled so often that she had crinkled laugh

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lines in the corner of each eye. In those five years,

Maria's short arms had enveloped Chelsea and squeezed out all of her high school troubles.

Half asleep, Chelsea remembered the first time she had seen Maria make pupusas. She remembered grabbing a seat near the stove, the better to study and admire Maria's artistry. Maria's fingers moved deftly from one ingredient to another, one pan or skillet to another, as she inquired about Chelsea's plans for the day while she prepared her corn dough with flour, butter, and oil. She knew instinctively when to add each ingredient—too early, and the pupusas would be too moist and the cheese would leak out; too late, and the dry pupusas would crumble in your hands.

When the dough felt right in her stout fingers, Maria carefully folded and refolded the dough. When the texture felt right, she twisted each one into hockey puck-like discs, one after another. Maria then added cheese, beans, and some sort of meat—today it was chorizo or sausage, her dad's favorite—to each disc. Like the aristocrats who folded and refolded their napkins at dinner, Maria refolded each pupusa into purse-like forms, each edge sealed so

perfect that nothing oozed out of Maria's treats until it was tasted.

These jewels were then lightly fried in El Salvadoran oil that only Maria was able to find. Her puposas were so lightly fried that they tasted like perfect Spanish croissants.

Startled awake by the sound of the garage door opening, Chelsea ran downstairs to confront her dad. "How could you let Maria leave?" demanded Chelsea. "Wow, calm down, honey," said Dr. Ryan, which was how most people referred to him, given his stature as chief of orthopedics at Wellesley Hospital. "I could not stop her, Chelsea," said her dad. "She had a golden opportunity to work closer to her home, and to work fewer hours, too." Chelsea knew that the five days Maria had to make the twenty-mile trek from Boston to Wellesley was tough on her. She also knew that Maria wanted to spend more time with her husband Carlos, and her children—Roberto, age 15, and Alisa, age 12.

Dr. Ryan added that Maria's new job had to be decided quickly, and naturally he allowed her to leave without proper notice. "Maria knew you would be upset, Chelsea, but she said she will call you as soon as she gets settled." Chelsea's brother Jon broke in, "We will get another housekeeper, Chelsea, no big deal."

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As usual, thought Chelsea, in Jon's entitled world, one person could easily be replaced by another.

That night, at a dinner of steak and vegetables cooked by her dad, since her mom rarely cooked, the family ate largely in silence. Chelsea could almost smell Maria's pupusas, yucca frita, or seafood ceviche. Sipping from her glass of wine, Chelsea's mom commented that they would have to hire another housekeeper. Tall and statuesque and in her mid-forties, Helene Ryan was a Sophia Loren lookalike, with a perfect olive complexion reflecting her Italian heritage. Always fashionable, her mom knew she was good-looking and always reminded Chelsea to try and look her best.

"I do have some good news," said Dr. Ryan. Tall, lean, and athletic, Dr. Ryan appeared older than his wife, although they were the same age. He was prematurely gray and wore glasses that gave him a distinguished image of competence. He'd passed his deep blue eyes and fair skin on to Chelsea. "I have been selected by the hospital to lead the merger between Wellesley and Boston Hospitals." "Oh great," said Helene. "There goes our trip to Italy."

“Please Helene, this promotion is a sign of respect.” Respect was a common word in Dr. Ryan’s vocabulary. He was proud that he was the first person in his working-class Irish family to go to college. He was revered in the community for both his compassionate bedside manner and his superb surgical skills. Even the many professional athletes whose careers he had saved referred to him only as Dr. Ryan. As Chelsea saw it, respect to her father meant status, money, and living in a big home in Wellesley.

Turning to Jon, Dr. Ryan praised his son, “That was a great shot you made.” “Thanks, Dad,” said her brother. “The coach didn’t even want me to take it.” “What’s wrong with your coach?” said Dr. Ryan. “He should know that you are the team’s best shooter!” “He’s a jerk,” scowled Jon. Typical, Chelsea thought as she listened to this exchange between father and son – complaining like friends, instead of talking about something important like Maria.

Jon, age fifteen, a sophomore at Wellesley High School, was already a starter on the varsity basketball team. Everything came easy to him in Chelsea’s opinion. He was smart and popular, plus he had inherited the good looks of his Mom. Already six feet tall, he possessed the physique of his dad but had his mom’s

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dark hair, dark deep-set eyes, and a strong chin.

While Chelsea's high school years were marked by self-doubt and a need to "fit in" somewhere, Jon's were marked with confidence that everyone noticed - even her dad. While her dad was always on her in high school to improve her grades, his professional ceiling for her was to become a nurse. For Jon, however, Dr. Ryan talked about him following in his footsteps and becoming a doctor.

Even when Jon had a blemish in eighth grade involving a female classmate, he escaped any repercussions. Apparently, as Chelsea learned about the incident from others, Jon found out that a classmate was deathly afraid of dark, confined spaces. With the help of some male classmates, Jon engineered an escapade where the girl was locked in a school closet for the entire lunch period. Dr. Ryan blamed the "prank" on Jon's friends and never reprimanded him about it.

"Want to watch the Red Sox, Dad?" asked Jon after dinner. "Sure, bud, provided you finished your homework." "Of course," Jon replied as he left the room. Chelsea observed that her dad failed to congratulate her on her admission to her number one college choice. She had been admitted to a top nursing

program at Southwynd College in upstate New York.

Helene poured another glass of wine as she and Chelsea sat in silence. Chelsea started to discuss Maria's sudden absence when Helene interrupted her to complain about her new job as a library aide. Her mom had not worked since her children had been born, and Dr. Ryan thought it would be good for her to be out of the house. Chelsea also thought her father encouraged the new job to save money as her mom's favorite pastime was buying clothes. She constantly lectured Chelsea about her appearance and her need to work out more. Chelsea naturally interpreted these comments as her mother thought her daughter was fat. "Now that you will be off to college, you will want to look your best," said Helene.

Chelsea knew instinctively that her mom did not want to talk about Maria any further because of Helene's distracted, almost absent gaze. Seeming to return to reality, she gazed at Chelsea and talked about her second favorite subject beyond clothes, and that was Chelsea's future. "Remember, don't you get married before you are thirty," said Helene. "Concentrate on your career and friends. You have plenty of time to have kids."

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Feeling even more isolated without Maria's presence, Chelsea went upstairs and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 2: Old Soul

DRIFTING IN AND OUT OF SLEEP, Chelsea could hear Maria's Spanglish, combining El Salvadoran and English. Chelsea soon became "Bicha" and Jon "Bicho." Maria had a certain lilt to her voice that made you want to understand her and laugh over her need to be understood. She explained that Bicha was a female bug in her country. Certain Spanish slang might interrupt any conversation with her, such as "a dundo" for a dumb person, or "puchia," translated as "oh shoot," which was as close to anger as this amazing woman would get.

Maria was such a culinary artist that Helene had surrendered all attempts to cook when Maria was hired. Initially she was hired as a housekeeper three days per week, but when Dr. Ryan tasted her pupusas and cerviches, he increased her time to five days, and she

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became a Monday to Friday fixture at the house.

During the summer months, her full-time work required her to occasionally bring her daughter, Alisa, now age twelve, and her son Roberto, who was now Jon's age, fifteen. Chelsea recalled an incident when Jon and Roberto got into an altercation while playing soccer together. After that incident, Roberto never came back. Maria's husband, Carlos, whom Chelsea met only once, worked as a painter. He seemed as quiet as Maria was effusive, and he spoke little English.

Chelsea recalled those summer days when Alisa would beg her to go to the nearby playground. She never had to beg hard, because Chelsea loved those visits as much as Alisa. A miniature version of Maria, with huge, almond-shaped eyes and glorious curls in her raven hair, Alisa radiated innocence. On the way to the playground, Alisa would pepper Chelsea with questions: "Why do you have so many clothes?" "How come your bedroom is so big?" "What is high school like?" Chelsea was so happy to be around children. Their innocence and curiosity made her feel special and relaxed.

From her conversations with Maria, Chelsea knew that Alisa shared a bedroom with her

brother. The family shared a Boston apartment with Maria's brother Ramon, and they were trying to save enough to get their own apartment. She also knew that Alisa loved the playground because she was not able to play at the

one near her home. Maria and Carlos had seen hypodermic needles near the swings on one visit.

Chelsea's emotions that night ranged from anger to guilt over Maria; anger that Maria could leave her, and guilt that Maria's actions were done only because she was trying to give Alisa and Roberto the same things that Chelsea had.

In the weeks that followed, entering the spring of her senior year, Chelsea rationalized that at least she would be away at college next year. She had time to reminisce about her high school years and Maria's influence on that journey.

Early in her eighth-grade year, Dr. Ryan, over dinner, proposed that if Chelsea's grades did not get better, he might send her to a private high school. He even suggested that she live there. Chelsea, terrified at this idea, promised her dad she would work harder. Later that day, Chelsea complained to Maria that her dad treated her differently than her brother.

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Wrapping her large arms around Chelsea, Maria reassured her, "Bisha, Dr. Ryan only wants the best for you."

Her dad, with her mother's blessing, also coordinated her attendance at the public high school with extracurricular activities. In addition to playing soccer, Chelsea joined the school band, where she played clarinet.

High school had also meant the loss of her best friend, Lucille, who hated her name so much she insisted that everyone call her "Lou." Pint-sized teammates in youth soccer, she and Lou were inseparable throughout middle school. A superb athlete in soccer and basketball, Lou literally had town coaches fighting over recruiting her for their youth teams. Unlike Chelsea, whom coaches had to remind to play harder or faster, Lou had an aggressive edge. She was also pretty and popular, unlike Chelsea, and feisty enough to yell at coaches on occasion.

The change in their relationship coincided with Lou's parents' separation the summer before freshman year. She recalled a ride to soccer practice that summer with Lou's dad that was largely silent. Her father's only question was to ask if Lou's

Mom was seeing anybody. When they got to practice, Chelsea watched as Lou's dad gave her a quick kiss and handed an envelope to Lou. "Give this to your mom, or she will take me back to court."

Chelsea's mom picked the girls up after practice. Lou was noncommittal about going to a movie that weekend, and in fact saw Chelsea less and less that summer. Chelsea recalled asking her mom that day if Lou's parents' divorce could be affecting Lou. Helene absentmindedly murmured that people sometimes had to make tough decisions.

That summer, over one of Maria's chicken pupusas, Chelsea shared with Maria how nervous she was about entering high school. Maria's eyes glistened as she revealed how nervous she had been when leaving her own country. "You will be fine, bicha, because you have an old el alma."

Curious, Chelsea asked what that term meant in English. In broken English, Maria said, "An old soul." She explained in a painstaking translation that in her village people believed that one was born with either an old soul or a new soul. From what Chelsea could understand, old souls have lived before and have a certain wisdom and affection for

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people. They instinctively know what is important in life. New souls experience everything for the first time and take time to acquire this knowledge. When Chelsea asked what kind of soul her brother Jon had, Maria quickly said, "New soul."

It was the Monday before school for her freshman year, and Chelsea, as usual, was chatting with Maria as she did her laundry chores. "I'm really scared about tomorrow, Maria. The school is so big." Maria laughed one of her big belly laughs and hugged Chelsea. "You will be fine. You have a mucha heart."

"Have you ever been scared, Maria?" For once, Maria grew misty-eyed and said, "Yes, bicha. Mucha scared when I had to leave my country." "Why did you have to leave El Salvador, Maria?"

"I never wanted to leave my beautiful country. I lived in a small farming village called Arcatao, high up in the mountains. My father grew sugar, coffee, and white corn with the help of my brothers, Luis and Ramon. I was the baby and my job was to care for the chickens. My brothers called me the chicken girl. We all enjoyed our life in the mountains. I never wanted to leave, bicha. I had a happy life."

Maria told Chelsea how much she loved school and didn't mind the three-mile walk she made each day with her village friends. In the summer months after chores, they played in the river, although Maria laughed and said she always feared the water.

Nights, she would watch her mother cook as the men came in from the fields. The family loved to laugh and sing with her brothers, who played guitar. Maria seemed to be at that table singing as she looked away from Chelsea.

"Then why did you have to leave, Maria?" Maria sighed, "Someday I will tell you, bicha, but now you'd better get ready for soccer practice."

That night Chelsea googled El Salvador's political history. She quickly saw that the country was historically ruled by a dictator, who would last until another despot succeeded him. Chelsea read that this pattern changed in 1979 when the military, or "Junta," took over the government, deposing its president, Carlos Romero. Chelsea calculated that Maria would have been about her age then. Over the next thirteen years, until a United Nations-supported peace agreement was reached in 1992, the country became increasingly violent. The Junta battled peasants, farmers, even the college educated,

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whom they labeled “*comunista*.” Another divergent group opposed to military rule organized, and became known as FMLN. Chelsea read about the unbelievable violence that evolved with both groups. An estimated 75,000 people died in this civil war. Chelsea was aghast to read about the murders and rapes. No one was safe, including priests and nuns. Massive graves containing one thousand women and children were uncovered near the border of Honduras, close to where Maria lived.

Chelsea googled maps and eventually found Maria’s village of Arcateo, located in northwest El Salvador in the Sierra Mountain range, close to the Honduras border. Chelsea read that as the civil war escalated, rebel groups who committed atrocities retreated to Honduras to escape. Chelsea vowed that at the right time, she would ask Maria how she managed to escape this violence and come to the United States.

That night, as Chelsea prepared for the first day of high school, she felt guilty as she compared her anxiety to any that Maria had suffered. “ If Maria could overcome her troubles, mine are nothing in comparison,” she thought as she fell fast asleep.