

Sam

Lizbette Ocasio-Russe

The University of Texas at Dallas

Sam tried to act classy, but couldn't quite manage. The complimentary wine beckoned, and she was too weak to resist. Like for invites out, Sam couldn't refuse. God forbid she miss out on something or someone delicious. She was feeling quite scrumptious herself, making sure to take that last glance in the mirror before leaving her third floor apartment. Cracked as it was, it couldn't ruin the radiant image it reflected. Sam pouted, examining her burgundy lips, and dragged a finger slowly from one end of her bottom lip to the other, removing any lipstick that had veered off course.

She eyed the wine again, wondering whether five minutes would be an acceptable time to wait before going for it. Maybe she should sit. Yes, sitting seemed more appropriate. Let's not be the most ratchet ho here. She found a seat close to a real papí, typical tall, dark and handsome. Broad shoulders, mmmmm, sííííí, riquísimo. He looked over and gave her a polite smile. She smiled back, hoping he wouldn't linger on her Adam's apple like most men eventually do. He didn't. Satisfied, she sat, removing her compact from her knock-off Coach clutch. It opened with a click, reflecting her evening creation. Doing make-up really was an art, especially when your five o'clock shadow was darker than usual and you didn't have time to touch up the morning shave. She was particularly proud of this evening's look. For the most part, harsh, dramatic looks ruled her nights, but as of late she's had a hankering for the soft and subtle. It took a week or two to perfect, but she had arrived, and mami, she was slayin' the shit out of it.

All right, wine time. She peeked at her phone. The speaker was meant to begin at 8pm and it was 7:55. She had to move if she wanted to get a buzz going before the two-hour long talk commenced. There wasn't a crowd around the table, so she could be in and out in a minute. Was anyone else drinking? Ay santo, I'm such an alcoholic, she thought. Whatever, I'm a functioning alcoholic. She stood up, discretely smoothed out her skirt and headed toward the booze. ¡Finalmente! Her body immediately began to warm as the earthy liquid slid down her throat. Limbs loosening, muscles untightening—there was no better feeling.

Having downed half the glass, she looked down at the table still covered in full, plastic wine glasses. She should take one for the road. Two hours of LGBTQ activism, sober, nuh-uh. She polished off the rest of her wine and grabbed yet another. Five minutes into the talk, she was ready for another drink. Would it be rude to stand up and go grab another? Probably, pero coño. She looked around a couple of times; everyone seemed very much intent on what the

speaker was saying. All she could focus on was her hankering for more alcohol. Screw it. She stood up and made a beeline for the refreshment table.

Drink #3 es el mejor, always. That's when you really start to feel it, the melting of your senses. The first two are the warm-up, they awaken you, but don't quite get you to where you need to be. By drink #3, your engines are revving, and love is on your mind. That's where Sam was now, craving skin and wanting sex, not '¡RESPE TO, IGUALDAD Y TRABAJOS!' as the speaker demanded into the microphone. The audience roared in agreement, raising their fists into the air. '¡HAY QUE LUCHAR, MI GENTE! ¡EXIJAMOS LO QUE TODO SER HUMANO MERECE!' Sam was all about it, sure. It'd be nice to leave the service industry and have a stable salary with health insurance and whatnot. She'd miss the bar, she'd miss the one-night-stands, sleazes and provocative glances, but getting a career going would be nice. Fighting is exhausting, though. Contradicting, opposing, trying to get people to be accepting and trying to make yourself more acceptable got old bien rápido. Eventually, the fire just died. Que se joda. Had to keep up the act though, had to be involved. Thumbs up, high-five, yeah! Ugh. Gag. Can't we all just have a massive orgy and relax? They'll never give any fucks...

Ahora tengo la lengua alzá, I'm craving more wine. The rally was over, and there was nothing terribly interesting going on that night. Well, Ima get me some wine and groceries and make myself a nice dinner. Supermax de Diego was always a safe bet—it was open 24 hours and had a kick ass wine selection. Sam walked into the obnoxiously bright store. She preferred dim lighting, but that was almost never the case. The guy who worked security watched her closely, scrunching up his face and shaking his head as she passed. Sam took notice and made a point of walking more flamboyantly, swaying that booty from side to side. She headed straight toward the U.S. wine selection, recalling her father's most grandiose advice: 'All the best Pinots come from Napa.' She selected a moderately-priced bottle, not expensive enough that it would hurt her bank account, but not so cheap that it would be an embarrassment to pay. Then she made her way to the seafood. She snatched a bag of spinach on the way and took notice of a little boy struggling to reach a bag of carrots.

'Need some help? Here you go, cariño,' she said, handing him the bag.

'¡Gracias!' The little boy smiled and wrapped his arms around her legs in a tight embrace.

'¡Ay, que chulo!' Sam patted his tiny head.

'¡Marcos! ¡Ven acá! ¡Aléjate de . . . esa persona!' What Sam assumed what the little boy's mother rushed over and yanked him off her.

Sam walked on, trying to focus on the seafood extravaganza that she was going to create for dinner. Mussels, scallops and shrimp? No, squid, definitely squid instead of shrimp. She sifted through the assortment of seafood. Crawfish, tilapia, mussels, scallops, shrimp, squid and

octopus, all suffocating, jammed together, pressed against clear plastic for all the world to see. There was no consideration for their suffering. Sam sympathized. She'd put an end to the misery of a few of the unlucky.

So, asopao, paella, simple sauté? She thought about the possibilities and decided on asopao, pero con un poquito de arroz. You can never go wrong with rice, but brown rice, gotta watch the figure. There's only so much cinching can do. Ahora sí, caldo de pollo or just water with some homemade sofrito? She'd have to get some fresh veggies for the sofrito, though: garlic, onions, green and red peppers. Why must the vegetables always look like crap in grocery stores? And the fruit, ni se diga, even worse. Sam, as usual, though, made do and managed to fish out some decent veggies.

The lines at the register weren't that long. She only had to wait five minutes or so. The checkout girl did everything humanly possible not to make eye contact, but at least tried to be polite.

'Buenas noches, did you find everything you were looking for?' The moment the girl looked up, the smile faded from her face.

'Sí, gracias,' Sam said, taking out her debit card. When the girl failed to ask whether it was debit or credit, Sam specified for her. 'That'll be debit, please.'

'Aja, I can see that.'

Sam swiped her card and punched in her pin number. \$25.00, the price of an evening of happiness.

The machine processed the payment and issued out the receipt. The checkout girl promptly ripped it off the printer and slapped it down next to the groceries.

'Um, gracias. You've been so very helpful!' Sam smiled, grabbed her groceries, and pranced out of the store.

Sam placed the groceries on the backseat of her ferociously banged up '98 blue Corolla and took her place in the driver's seat. It took a couple of tries to get the ignition going, but it did eventually, bringing the radio to life with it. Oh, yay! The Mexican 80s pop star Gloria Trevi was on full blast.

'¡Voy a traer el pelo suelto, voy a ser siempre como quiero, aunque me tachen de indecente aunque hable mal de mí la gente!' Continuing to sing, Sam lowered the front seat windows and drove out of the parking lot. At the stop light, an older man was feebly walking between the rows of cars lifting an empty Burger King cup to the drivers' line of sight. Most everyone

ignored him; they looked at their phones or in bags and purses, changed radio stations, anything to excuse them from seeing his bloodshot eyes struggling to stay open. When he arrived at Sam's car, she fished out two loose dollars from her purse and placed them in his cup.

'Dios te bendiga,' he said, smiling and bowing.

'Y a ti también, papí. Take care.'

The rest of the ride home was spent singing along to whatever Samaris Rodríguez decided to play 'from the Magic tower in San Juan, Puerto Rico!' as the commercial breaks always informed listeners. Parking was no sweat, as usual, something that perplexed Sam's friends. Parking was impossible in Santurce day or night, but Sam had what her mother called 'good parking karma,' awarded 'por su dulzura and considerate nature.' She placed the heavy, red lock on the steering wheel and grabbed her groceries from the back seat. Creatures of the night were beginning to come out of hiding, fresh make-up and perfume ready to seduce and delight the young and hungry.

'¡Sam! ¡Hola, nena! You comin' out tonight?' It was Trini, one of Papi Bombi's girls. She was a regular at all the bars and everyone's late night friend. Day, night, drunk, high, Trini always greeted Sam when she saw her.

'¡Wepa, Trini! I'm staying in tonight, mi amor. No hay na', there's nothing going on.'

'Ah, bueno, well, if you get bored, you know where I'll be. We could grab a drink! Have a repeat of chichaito night! Hahaha!'

Sam couldn't help but laugh along. '¡Mira, perra! You crazy?! I got shit to do tomorrow!'

'Ay, charra. You getting' lame, bitch, you lucky you glamorous as fuck!' Trini winked at her.

'Always, nena! Maybe tomorrow, okay?'

'Anytime, mamita. Te cuidas.'

'Bye, mi amor.'

Once upstairs, she turned on the radio and got to work on dinner. Pitbull was on with one of his many hits, 'Sube las manos pa'riba.' Sam danced around the kitchen, gathering all the utensils and cookware needed. '¡Hecha pa'lla, to' lo malo hecha pa'lla!' Chop, chop, chop. The tiny bits of onion, garlic and pepper mixed together in a mess of red, yellow, green, and

white. Ah, the smell of nostalgia, grandma making lunch for all the aunts, uncles and cousins in the mountains of Morovis.

She opened the wine and poured herself a generous glass while the sofrito on the stove began to sizzle. Sam rushed over and placed the marinated seafood on the pan. The smell filled the small apartment, while Pitbull urged, '¡To'el mundo, pa'rriba, pa'rriba!'

At that, her phone rang. It was her sister Gladys.

'Helloooooooo . . . Pues de lo más bien, nena, how are you? . . . Que bueno and how's work? . . . Nice, well, same ol', bartending events . . . No, no more of that, it's tempting, though, believe me. Dios mío, the money I used to make . . . Yo sé, I know, it's not worth it . . . How's papí? . . . No, we still haven't spoken, but mom calls de vez en cuando. She always tells me papí says 'hi'. . . Si, no worries, I know, no pasa nada . . . It's great to hear your voice, though . . . When are you going to come visit? That's what you said last year . . . I know . . . I love you too. Adios.'

Sam threw the phone on her bed and walked to the window. She didn't have a balcony, but she had a clear view of the street below. La barra de Nelly's was starting to get full. Matoncitos and wanna-be bichotes stood around outside, Medallas in hand and pant waists bulging with both man-meat and cold steel. With her head out the window, she took a deep breath, sighed and smiled at the sight of a group of girls dressed up in fashion's finest rush past Nelly's, surely to the club down the street which now hosted a variety of 'art shows' and other 'hip' events.

The seafood was about done, so Sam got started on the salad. As she poured the light Caesar dressing on the spinach and carrots '¡Qué se joda!' by Algarete came on. One by one, Sam removed the bobby pins from her hair. Once they were all out, she took off the wig. She smiled as she ruffled her natural hair. It felt great to run her fingers through it. Then, the blouse and stuffed bra came off. Sam flung them, spun around and tossed the fork she was using to mix the salad up, sending creamy spinach and carrots flying across the kitchen as she began to sing:

Me tengo que levantar,
 ¡Qué se joda!
 Tengo que ir a trabajar,
 ¡Qué se joda!
 El jefe me tiene...mal,
 ¡Qué se joda!
 Pero que tengo que pensar...

Research Statement

'Sam' is part of an original collection of short stories written as part of my MA creative thesis, *Circo*, which seeks to give voice to the queer community of Santurce, Puerto Rico through the integration of characters and storylines based on real queer Puerto Rican individuals and the personal experience I acquired being actively involved in Santurce's LGBTQ community. These individuals' queerness has led them to suffer misrepresentation and exclusion, as well as a social oppression that often denies them the freedom and opportunity to live genuinely validating lives. They inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha calls the 'betwixt and between,' that 'in between' space that allows individuals to elaborate strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity (Mangham, p.4). Though inhabiting these spaces can allow for certain types of self-development, the largely traditional, heterosexual and conservative nature of Puerto Rico's majority culture constantly pressures them to abide by normative gender stereotypes. Trans people thus feel the pull of the desire for 'normalcy' and the desire to find their 'true' self, which can keep them trapped in a stagnant world of 'in-betweenness.' Rather than play the victim, though, they embrace their limbo existence and make it into a productive space of expression and personal development.

The naturalisation of cisgender identities also means that transsexual individuals' stories are rarely given credence; the status quo often brands transsexual women 'fake' and refuses to affirm their femininity. 'Sam' takes readers into the day-to-day of a transsexual woman confronting the many conflicts and insecurities transsexual individuals often face. In the course of attending an LGBTQ rally, going shopping at the supermarket and cooking dinner, the reader sees the self-acceptance and love she has managed to develop despite the social oppression and disapproval she faces on a daily basis. By showing a Puerto Rican trans individual through a quotidian lens, 'Sam' looks to demystify the trans experience and move readers to join the fight against inequality.

References

Mangham, A. (2013). *The Cambridge companion to sensation fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.