



Sometimes It's Better to Walk Than Drive

SHORT STORY

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Imagen: Jorge Dávila

Dora Rodriguez did not have the patience to wait for Soledad Santacruz to call her when the botanica needed an extra pair of hands. Soledad, once a free-spirited girl the color of fresh cream, the great-granddaughter of two Spaniards, a Taino Indian, and an African slave, had grown into the grand old lady of Calle Ocho santeras; as she had aged, her youthful generosity turned into an almost mythical tight-fistedness. She would rather have been overrun with customers, so annoyed at the long waits for attention that they left and went up the street to Botanica La Esperanza or Botanica Mistica, than pay for extra help around the shop. So Dora Rodriguez put on her orthopedic sandals and walked blocks and blocks to the store to ask Soledad the question face to face. If she telephoned, the lady might put her off, but if she showed up in person, Soledad usually gave in, and told her to get started in the back room. Dora had learned such tactics, not from the financial necessity that she and her husband had so recently experienced, but from the example of Josefina Feliz, her grandmother, a famed dancer and spiritual advisor to many important men (as well as their wives) in Havana. Josefina Feliz had never waited for a general, or nightclub owner, or businessman, to approach her for advice. She would march up to them, and, taking them aside, say something like, "Do you know what will happen to you next Tuesday if you eat out?" No one could resist such a provocative question. It was the morning after her husband Manuel saw Elena Ortiz that Dora set off for the botanica on foot, dressed in white and carrying a black leather pocketbook. More than fifty years before, in Havana, Elena Ortiz had nursed hopes of marrying the serious university professor Manuel Rodriguez; she had never forgiven Dora for, as she said, "seducing him with her unholy charms." Since that time, Elena had been a source of continual trouble, especially after her husband Berto died and she was left with nothing to do but spend the ample savings he had accumulated. Even in widowhood, she visited Manuel at his floundering stationary store, dispensing unwanted advice, and bringing him hot lunches filled with chiles, which gave him indigestion for hours afterward. The worst was when she offered to give Manuel rides in her long, navy Lincoln. Neither Manuel nor Dora drove anymore; they had sold their Buick three years before, resigning themselves to go only where they could walk. That had been the worst of it, until the day before, when Pilar de la Torre called to say that she had interrupted Manuel and Elena Ortiz in a passionate embrace in the aisle with the copy paper. Dora did not mention the incident to her husband whose excuses left her exhausted and confused; instead, she had decided to visit the botanica, and in some manner find a way to resolve the unbearable and undignified situation with Elena Ortiz.

It was only April, but the days in Miami were already hot, and by the time she reached Eighth Street she could feel the dampness down her back, in her underarms, behind her knees. Soledad said air conditioning was unnatural, but Dora knew it was only an excuse to save money on the store's electricity bill. Nevertheless, the woman never seemed to perspire, while Dora spent the afternoon as sweaty as a worker in the canefield. She liked to think, in those moments, how she would change things if the old lady died and somehow the store fell to her. First, she would take the statues down from the shelves close to the ceiling and give them all a good dusting. San Lazaro dragging his broken body with a wooden staff; Elegua masquerading behind the shining, innocent face of the Holy Child of Atoche; sacred hearts dripping fiery red blood; blond Santa Barbara holding her sacred golden chalice. In the display case, beaded necklaces lay like a tangle of so many snakes, black and white and red. Dora would reorganize the beads and shells in rows, and then would move the candles closer to eye level, so that the older people did not have to stoop and strain to reach the things they needed. Lastly, she would make some sense of the shelves, the incense and bottles of herbal infusions intermingled

with ceramic Chinese buddhas, plastic Plains indians, soup tureens for holy stones, and maracas made in Taiwan.

But there was no time for fantasies. Dora opened the door, allowing the bell to knock against the glass door and announce her arrival. As usual, no one came. "Hola?" Dora called, towards the back of the store, separated by a dusty, red curtain.

"Come," Soledad shouted, recognizing the sound of her friend's voice and the gait of her walk.

There Soledad sat, propped up on cushions like a Yoruban queen, eating her breakfast of mango that she had already sliced into pieces. "You want?" she asked, extending the bowl of deep, orange fruit.

"I already ate," Dora answered. "Bran cereal," she added apologetically.

Soledad studied her as though she had said something fearfully strange. "And what brings you to my store today, Dora Rodriguez?"

Dora smiled at the question. "To see if I can help you, of course."

"My Teresa is at that college. Classes, all day. She's taking business and economics. She wants to be a rich girl, not a poor old lady like me."

Dora did not contradict her, and when the front bell rang again, Soledad motioned her to go to see who it was.

"So, I can work today?" Dora asked, before moving an inch.

The lady nodded and sighed. Her bowl of mango pieces was almost finished, and judging from her expression, it seemed a great tragedy.

The face that greeted her at the front of the store was that of Esmeralda Alvaro, known as Esmi to everyone.

"Señora Dora!" she called, and embraced her friend from the old days, the days before they had crossed the water.

"Esmi, my darling," Dora answered, kissing the wrinkled cheek and wondering how they had gotten so old, when at one time the sight of the two of them together could have caused a minor riot on the street.

Esmi, with her hair chopped off like a child's, dressed in a striped housecoat that should have been converted to dust rags, looked in no condition to be out of doors. She nodded her head towards the curtain, in a question, and Dora signaled that they had better watch their tongues, for Soledad, although even older than they, was certainly not hard of hearing.

"What do you need today?" Dora tried to ask naturally, as if Esmi's appearance did not answer her question.

"Guidance," she said. The woman's face looked pained, and ready for tears. Instead, she seized Dora's hand and hissed, "I'd like to chop off his balls."

It appeared her husband, Francisco Alvaro, had discovered the joys of Viagra. After a lifetime of enduring his ridiculous betrayals, Esmeralda had settled into a twilight of peacefulness, without the disturbance of her husband's voracious sexual appetite. But now, Esmi whispered bitterly, the insurance company would pay for the pills to get his soft pee-pee hard, and the widows of the neighborhood were no longer safe. It was indecent, she said, to have a man of eighty years come home late at night, sneaking into the house smelling like a well-preserved female sex.

Dora shook her head. She could not help but think that that was what came of marrying the most handsome man in the neighborhood: sorrow, treachery, and an endless headache. "So," she asked, "do you really want to chop off his balls?"

Esmi motioned her closer, and Dora could catch the scent of her breath, which smelled like Listerine. "I just want them to take a vacation."

Dora patted Esmi's hand, and called to the back of the store, "Soledad, do you mind if we consult back there?"

They heard rustling of materials, and furniture, and then the lady herself drew back the curtain like a great actress, launching herself onto stage. "I'll guard the shop," she said imperiously. "And Señora Alvaro, pay me at the end of your session."

Ducking into the back, Esmi grabbed Dora's arm and said in a low voice, "Next time I should come to your house. Then I can give the money to you directly."

But Dora disapproved. If Soledad ever learned that Dora was luring customers away from the store, that would be the end of her extra hours.

Esmi was to formulate a question in her mind while Dora took a hammer to one of the coconuts that Soledad kept in a pile against the back wall. It would have been difficult to hold the brown, hairy nut steady and bring down the hammer with enough force to smash it into pieces, if Dora had not been doing so for decades of her life. Once split in half, she brought down the hammer again, forcing her arm to feel the strength that it had once had. At last, the coconut lay in pieces, with its thin, white milk spreading out on the wooden work table. As Esmi concentrated on a question of her future, Dora squatted close to the floor and threw four pieces of

coconut shell gently downwards. Three pieces landed face up, their white side showing. Otawe: maybe, but she should throw again. Dora cast the shells once more, and three pieces of coconut landed face up, but the fourth one broke off into two pieces. The two women looked at each other in surprise.

"We'll have to try something besides the obi," Dora said. "Obi does not want to give us an answer today."
"Caracoles?" Esmi queried.

"Caracoles," Dora confirmed. She went to her black patent leather bag and extracted a velvet pouch containing sixteen cowrie shells, although she removed only twelve. The opening of each shell, with its small ridges of teeth, was said to represent the mouth of an orisha. Dora said a silent prayer to her own patroness, the orisha Yemay, that Esmi should have her reply. 'Oh mother of the sea,' she thought, 'move the shells so that your daughter can hear your wisdom.'

When she tossed again, there were nine mouths of the cowrie pointing upward at their questioning faces. Standing back upright, Dora recited the ninth letra, the ninth letter of the Ordun: Osa Canengue Eriate. After then, with Esmi listening closely, Dora spoke the words that would interpret its meaning:

Your best friend is your worst enemy. Problems between man and wife. The marriage is at an end. There is no rest in the house. Too much noise and fighting. The neighbors will call the law. Stop thinking about moving it. Do it. Pray to Obatala. He will lift your sadness.

Dora gathered the shells back into their pouch and gave her friend a moment to collect herself. Sometimes, she knew, people came to seek the advice of the santos, but were not prepared for what they might hear. They walked together to the front of the botanica, where Soledad stood guard over the cash register.

"You had two consultations," Soledad said.

Esmi took her old change purse from her housecoat pocket, and paid Soledad without questioning. Then left the botanica without thanking Dora. Soledad shook her finger at the retreating figure of Esmi Alvaro.

"I hope she listened this once," Soledad said. "I can't count how many times I've thrown the shells for that woman, and always the saints say the same thing."

"Leave that miserable son of a bitch?" Dora asked.

Soledad shrugged her shoulders. "Of course."

Dora leaned against the front counter. She wondered if priests felt this despair, when they listened to the same person repenting of the same sin in years of confession.

"She comes when she's had a fight with her old man," Soledad said. "She tells him she'll go consult with the witches of santeria, and he gets into a panic. He'll behave for a while now, because he's heard stories about us."

Dora felt like sitting, for the truth about her friend Esmi was weighing down on her chest.

Soledad abruptly locked the front door, and turned to Dora. "You haven't come here just to work a few hours today. It doesn't take a santera to see that written across your face."

Dora went behind the curtain with Soledad, and sat down to explain about the unwelcome presence of Elena Ortiz in her life, and how she pursued her husband, Manuel. Elena had known Manuel since before he studied literature at the Universidad de La Habana, and it was said that his teenage poem which won a literary prize in Spain was written in honor of the aristocratic girl Elena Calderon. But he had married Dora and had proved to be the most faithful of husbands or so it had seemed, until the telephone call from Pilar de la Torre.

"How hard you want to hit this lady?" Soledad asked.

Dora pondered the veins in her hands which had never been a tool for the more extreme forms of revenge. No matter how much money a person might offer her, there were certain amulets she would not assemble and bless, certain omieros, those infusions of herbs, that she would neither prepare nor administer. She knew that such things, taken from the hands of Soledad, might be lethal in the extreme, and wondered if her present circumstances justified a more potent form of satisfaction.

"No," Dora said, more to herself than to the lady beside her. "I don't want anything final, or terrible. Only that the orishas might see their way to humiliate her. I want Elena Ortiz to be very embarrassed."

Soledad clucked her tongue in disappointment. The day was proceeding slowly, and she would have welcomed the opportunity to concentrate on something more difficult.

Then, the old ladies put their heads together, and in their own way, learned from previous generations and from a lifetime of attending to the needs of others, they began to appeal to their gods.

At the end of an hour, Soledad shook off the intense concern she had shown for Dora, and rubbed her short, curly hair, cropped close to her head. "I'm tired," she said. "You go re-open the store and watch the front. I'm taking a nap."

Dora watched her lie out on an old, battered couch, in a far corner of the room, and close her eyes. Almost immediately, the woman began to snore. Asleep, Soledad curled into herself, her long limbs contracting close

to her, like a strangely shriveled child.

Dora took the keys in her hand, and let herself out of the botanica, to go next door to get a beef empanada from Luisa's Cafeteria, so that she would have something to eat for her lunch. Back inside the store, she arranged herself on a padded stool behind the counter, and pulled out a book from her handbag, and began to eat and read. The afternoon passed slowly, and she sold only a few candles - the Siete Potencias, Saint Lazaro, and Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre. The customers, pious Catholic ladies wearing gold medals of the Virgin around their throats, asked for the candles by their saints' names. Only when a young man, African in origin and tall and straight, entered the store demanding candles of the orisha Shango, did Dora know that here was a follower of the faith. She pointed to candles depicting Santa Barbara, Shango's Catholic mask, the symbol the santeros had used for many years to disguise their forbidden faith, both from the government and the church. The man would have none of it.

"Mother, with respect, I don't want a picture of that pretty blond saint. I don't need to hide the face of the god," he said.

In a cabinet Dora found him two remaining votives with the fierce face and naked chest of Shango, the orisha of fire and lightening, holding his double-headed axe. The tall man dropped some pennies in Yemaya's shrine, picked out incense and a bottle of Florida water, and then paid for his purchases and left in a hurry. Dora went back to reading, from time to time looking up at the clock to see how the time was passing. Soledad continued to sleep through the coming and goings of customers, the opening and closing of the front door, and the clanging of metal bells against the glass.

At four Soledad woke and came to the front of the store, rang open the cash register and took out thirty dollars. "Here, take it. It's time to go home."

"But it's only four o'clock," Dora said.

"I want to be alone," Soledad answered, and put the money into her hands. Seeing Dora's consternation, she added, "Come back another day. Not tomorrow, but soon. I have work to do now."

Dora nodded, and put the strap of her handbag over her shoulder. She made her way out onto Calle Ocho, heading west with the sun, grateful that she would soon be home. With the thirty dollars in her wallet, she thought of buying something special for dinner, something that her husband Manuel would enjoy, like a large steak with white veins of fat, or some shrimp that she could cook with yellow rice. She had to walk past the grocery store on the way to her house anyway, and preparing dinner would take her mind off of her day. With meat two nights in a row, Manuel was sure to grow as sweet as a teenager lover.

At el Publi grocery store, Dora selected two thin steaks, a bag of rice, a bottle of Spanish olive oil, and a pint of Mamey ice cream, Manuel's favorite. The plastic bags of groceries grew heavier as she struggled home, and her feet began to swell beneath the leather straps of her orthopedic shoes. At the corner of 27th Avenue and SW 17th Street, Dora allowed herself to put down the bags and wait to catch her breath. It was then that she saw the navy blue Lincoln pull into her driveway down the street, and the lumpy figure of Elena Ortiz emerge, taking Manuel's arm as he walked to their front door. The lady did not go inside, but left him at the entrance, climbed back into her car, and left the opposite way down 17th Street. Without being conscious of it, Dora mouthed the words of a mayubo to Yemay as she continued down the street:

Yemay aguayo a kere odun a limi karabio osa ñabio legu eyin tebi, gw sitrueku yebw obini duato okuba okana kwana keku yanza ori er, gw mio agc.

Dora tried not to reveal her surprise that Manuel was home a full half hour early. She unpacked the groceries, and rinsed the black beans which had been soaking since the night before, so that they would not cause gas. She marinated the steaks in wine and garlic, to make them tender, and set the rice in the rice cooker. Before beginning dinner, Dora took a scented bath, washing away the smell of sweat that had grown over the day, and then dried herself with care, spreading a lotion of chamomile into her wrinkles. At last, she dressed herself in fresh underclothes and a clean housedress, the one with bright flowers. Then she placed an old record by Celina Gonzalez on the turntable, and started to cook their meal.

That night, towards the end of the evening, with their stomachs full, Manuel and Dora stretched out on the living room sofa to watch the eleven o'clock news. Manuel took her hand and kissed it, telling his wife that her cooking almost brought tears to his eyes. She knew he was exaggerating, and to repay his kindness, re-counted how handsome he looked, with his high cheekbones and straight, aristocratic nose, even at his age. Satisfied, they both started listening to the lady newscaster, and marveled at the story she told: that afternoon an elderly woman was observed erratically driving a blue Lincoln through Coral Gables, weaving back and forth across the yellow line of the road. Before the police could pull her over, she ran into the parked car of Juan Orlando Velez, the celebrated pop star, who was visiting his older sister on Alhambra Street. No one was injured, but the estimated damage to Juan Orlando's 1995 Jaguar XJ6 would possibly run into the tens of

thousands of dollars. The driver, a lady from Hialeah by the name of Elena Ortiz, screamed and raved as though drunk but when given a breathalyzer test, was found to be completely sober. There was speculation that the woman could be mentally ill, a suggestion which her son, Humberto Ortiz, Jr., a prominent cosmetic surgeon in Coral Gables, adamantly denied.

Manuel turned to Dora. "Elena Ortiz," he said.

"Elena Ortiz," she agreed.

He looked at his wife in awe.

"Sometimes it's better to walk than drive," Manuel reflected.

"Sometimes it's better to walk than drive," Dora echoed.

