

Spring 1993

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Recommended Citation

Ganz, Earl (1993) "Momma Yo Quiero," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 40 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss40/32>

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Earl Ganz

Momma Yo Quiero

"Open this, please."

As soon as Alex saw the x-ray screen, he knew what he'd done. Yet he couldn't believe it. How could he be so stupid? Instead of checking his mother's bag through, he'd checked his own.

"I can explain," he said.

"May I see your ticket?"

Usually Alex flew with only a single carry-on. He hated waiting for luggage. But his mother insisted. It's your inheritance, she said. It's all you're gonna get! That was true. She'd sold her antiques, the things she once said would be his. She had to. Because she wouldn't take anything from him, she needed the money. And it was a way of getting back at him.

"I can explain," he repeated but the security guard was using the wall phone.

So Alex stood to one side as travelers passing through x-ray gawked at him and his open suitcase. Filled to the top with trays, candy dishes, cake servers, vegetable tongs, napkin rings and other paraphernalia of fine dining, it must have seemed a treasure to them. You had to get close to see that the silver was plated: dented, pitted and worn in many places to the copper base. Secondhand stores are full of this kind of junk, he thought when she first offered it. He'd almost said it.

"Officer, I can explain." But the man was reading the information on the ticket into the receiver.

Alex looked at his watch. Was there time to go back and exchange bags? His crossword puzzle book was in his carry-on. No, he thought. It had to be on its way already. He looked down at the silver. Can't you use any of this? he had asked. Where I'm

going, she answered, I won't need it. It was gallows humor, a joke old people must make all the time. Yet there was something in her voice. She's eighty-six, he reminded himself. She's thinking about it. And, out of respect for that, he took the stuff.

"It's all right, Mr. Garth." The security guard was off the phone. "They told me who you are." He closed the case and pushed it toward Alex. "It's good to go First Class," he said. But he held onto the ticket. "Did you really write that book?" he asked after a moment.

"Which one?" Alex was alert. He knew which one. Though his third novel had won a Pulitzer Prize and though he'd written a dozen since, they always asked about the same one, the first one.

"The one about your mother."

"Flatbush Floozies?"

"That's it!" The man smiled. "I saw it on TV the other night! It's terrific." No, Alex thought, the movie's only pretty good. It's the novel that's terrific. "Did she really do that?" The uniformed man drew closer. Alex noticed his dark hair and swarthy skin.

"Do what?" Again he thought he knew what the man was referring to.

"Ride an elephant...." The guard's eyes darted to the x-ray machine and the two black women working there. "Across a stage...." He leaned forward as if he was going to reveal a great secret. "Naked," he whispered.

"Yup," Alex answered in a normal voice. "It was in 1925, a show called *Bombo* starring Al Jolson."

Though he offered the information matter-of-factly, as a way of ignoring the cop's prurience, Alex knew there was also an element of boasting in it. Why not? If truth be known, he had always been proud of his mother, the showgirl, the Follies beauty whose ca-

reer had climaxed with that daring ride on the ponderous pachyderm. Who else's mother had done that?

"You must'a made a mint," the guard said with a mixture of cynicism and admiration. Alex looked at the man. Miami International's finest. Then he looked at his watch. He had less than fifteen minutes.

"Gotta go," he said and with his left hand he lifted his mother's suitcase while with his right he snatched his ticket. Then he was by the cop and hurrying down the crowded corridor toward his gate.

In a sense Alex didn't have to hurry. Just as the plane rolled onto the runway, the sky let go and they had to wait on the ground while the storm raged. At first he didn't mind. On the ride to the airport he'd seen storm clouds building in the west so he wasn't surprised. And the sound the rain made on the plane's aluminum skin was not unpleasant. But, as time passed and it got hot, he began to worry about making his connection in Denver. So he pressed the overhead button requesting a Flight Attendant.

"We'll make up the time in the air," she assured.

As if to add credibility to her promise, the plane began to move. She smiled, went to her safety demonstration position and Alex relaxed. But he didn't open the book he'd bought until they were airborne. He preferred crosswords. They were part of his flight ritual. They relieved boredom and gave an illusion of accomplishment. Unfortunately, the magazine shop near his gate didn't have a decent puzzle book and, in the rush to get something to do, Alex chose a novel. It was Norman Mailer's latest, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

Though the reviewers damned it, Alex, an old Mailer fan,

thought it couldn't be that bad. Yet, from the very beginning he had trouble concentrating, and, after a couple of hours of disembodied heads and Provincetown malevolence, he had to admit the reviewers were right. And because the book wasn't doing its job and they were so late taking off and the mix-up with his bags, he became anxious again. This time, in an effort to relax, he pressed the button on the armrest, leaned back in his wide, first-class chair and closed his eyes.

But the conversation with the security guard kept coming back. Alex knew he'd been flippant about his book. *Flatbush Floozies* isn't to be taken lightly, he thought. After all, it was the reason he and his mother didn't speak for seventeen years. He never dreamed she'd get that angry. All her life she'd been an exhibitionist. He actually thought she'd like being brought out for one last ride. But she never even got to that chapter, never got by the first one, the infamous "Hall of Mirrors" that appeared in *Esquire* two months before the novel's publication.

That's where *Flatbush Floozies* begins, in Brooklyn, 1937, at Sophie Loehmann's first store on Bedford Avenue. The Hall of Mirrors was her name for her upstairs try-on area. That's where Lily Garth and friends, the ex-showgirls and models, the women who helped Mrs. Loehmann when she was just starting by wearing her bargains around town and telling everyone where they got them, received their after-hours reward, first crack at her latest acquisitions. Whad'ya think, Ali? they asked as they paraded by the four-year-old boy still in his pajamas. Is it me?

At first, sitting on Sophie Loehmann's lap, he would enjoy the attention and nod shyly. But, as they traded clothes, as they squealed and helped each other into and out of garments, they stopped using dressing rooms. and no matter where Alex looked,

there they were: fleshy breasts, thighs and buttocks. At home he'd seen his mother naked and thought nothing of it. But at Loehmann's it was different. The women became strange to him, frenzied, drunk on the clothes, screaming and laughing as they zipped and unzipped, buttoned and unbuttoned. And his mother's metallic clack was the worst.

So that's how he'd done "Hall of Mirrors," as if he were the sacrifice at a peculiarly New York Jewish bacchanalia. We were never naked! Lily Garth had shouted over the phone just before she hung up on him for seventeen years. It was your own dirty little mind! Of course it was. That's what the novel was about, his own dirty little mind. For *Flatbush Floozies* repeated the scene several times as adult orgiastic sex farce, each variation triggering the hero's cry for help. And that cry became a howl of laughter for a whole generation of Americans.

But that generation was growing old. Now their children wrote sex farces. And after awhile Alex began to think the silence between him and his mother had gone on too long. Not that they'd lost contact. While his children were still living with him, she'd call and talk to them and he would fly them to Miami once a year. Yet it wasn't until two years ago, after the death of her second husband when Alex phoned to offer condolences, that she invited him down. He came but they didn't really talk. He tried but she wouldn't.

"Good evening." Alex was startled by the male intercom voice. "This is Captain Grady." It was the same voice that told them the reason for the delay as they waited on the runway at Miami International. "Please return your seats to the upright position." Alex pressed the armrest button and the back of his chair came forward. "We're going above this rough weather." He looked at his

watch. Shouldn't they have begun their descent? He'd never make his connection now. "Flight personnel, take your seats."

A flight attendant paused beside Alex and he was about to ask if they could radio ahead to hold the Montana plane when he saw she was looking past him. He turned. Outside, white billows were rising with explosive speed. He looked down at where they were coming from, a line of darkness which, except for constant flashes of lightning, seemed as solid as earth. The line stretched as far south as Alex could see. He turned back to the attendant to ask about the weather but she was already up front in the jump seat belting herself in. And the man in the aisle seat looked worried.

Then the plane began a steep climb that jammed Alex into his seat. When it leveled again, it banked to the north and he leaned forward to look across the aisle and saw flashing darkness down in that direction too. Then they were climbing again. They seemed to be racing the billows. Alex thought of Vietnam and what he'd read about evade tactics and what Margo, his ex-wife who had a pilot's license, told him about thunderstorms and the phenomenon of wind shear. She knew he didn't like flying. It was part of her winning ways.

Then they were climbing again and he realized he could see the already set sun. How high are we? he wondered and turned to ask the man in the aisle seat. But now the man was saying his beads, something he hadn't done since their take-off into the thunderstorm at Miami International. A miracle, thought Alex looking at the rosary, two weather fronts in one trip. Again he looked at his watch. Over a half hour late. I'll never make it, he thought. I'll have to spend the night in a hotel in Denver.

Then the plane dropped. In the middle of banking to the south, the left, it slid off its slanted table of air and began falling sideways

toward the black anvils where the lightning flashed. Alex heard screams and sensed things flying around, things hitting him in the face. What was the matter? Was the plane falling apart? No. It was the man next to him. He'd broken his beads and they were flying around like BB's. Catholics shouldn't be allowed in First Class, Alex thought as he covered his eyes with his hands.

Then he was forcing himself forward and away from the window, forcing his forehead down against a placard of seemingly happy cartoon people using their seat cushions to float peacefully on a squiggly-lined ocean that was at least a thousand miles away. He closed his eyes and clung to the back of the seat in front of him. We're going down, he thought. This is it. We're going to die. And that thought seemed to anger Alex. And with all his might he fought the G-forces that were pulling him from his life raft.

The moment they touched down at Stapleton, the Catholic man apologized and offered to buy Alex a drink. "No," he told the man, "I've got to make a connection." But he knew he'd already missed it.

At the Continental counter they told him he was lucky. There'd been so many complaints, they decided to put up free all First Class passengers who'd missed their connections. Continental had just bought Frontier and was having trouble with the transition. "We don't have to do this," the girl said. "It was an Act of God." God again, Alex thought. But he was grateful to the airline. The pilot, he judged, had flown the shit out of the plane.

So, after calling his housekeeper in Bozeman, and riding the shuttle bus to the Airport Hilton and eating the free meal in the hotel restaurant, he found himself on a king-sized bed looking at a king-sized TV. But all it had to offer, beside the usual network

garbage, was a *Playboy* channel full of tits and ass on a Mediterranean cruise. The movie seemed to make no sense and he switched it off. I'm still tense, he thought and was about to get undressed and take a shower when there was a knock on the door.

It was a bellhop with Alex's suitcase. At the baggage counter they'd told him it had been sent on to Bozeman. How can that be? he'd asked. That plane left twenty minutes before we landed. The man winked, said luggage was handled quickly, and gave him a complimentary toiletry package. Alex had used the toothbrush, then spent ten minutes picking bristles from between his teeth. Grateful now but with only a hundred dollar bill in his wallet, he handed the startled boy *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and shut the door.

Then he lifted his bag onto the luggage stand and saw that side by side, the cases didn't look anything alike. How could he make such a mistake? He opened his. There, on top of his sport jacket, was his book of English crosswords. He took it, closed the case, got undressed, lay back on the bed and began solving. But the clues made even less sense than the tits-and-ass movie. I'm tired, he thought, and listened to the rain. In the air he hadn't thought of the rain. It was steady now, no wind. He put the crosswords aside.

And, forgetting a shower, he reached over and turned out the light. It was remarkable what he'd seen, a line of black clouds a hundred miles long, pulsing with lightning. And he thought of his mother's fear of storms that he'd always dismissed as phobia. What was she really afraid of? he used to ask himself when he was writing *Flatbush Floozies*. He thought if he could get at that fear, he could understand her better. But he never did. So this visit he'd

come right out and asked her. She'd looked at him as if he was crazy. Everyone's afraid of storms, she said.

He remembered the storms of his childhood and the games of solitaire she played to stay calm. But wasn't she always playing solitaire? Lily Garth, the show girl with no one to show to. Did he sense how bored she was? Why else would he take on the job of entertaining her? Those were his first stories, the ones he told his mother, tales of Mrs. Petrella, his fourth grade teacher and Elmer Quist, the world's dumbest boy, and the black Thompson twins who looked nothing alike and Enthusa Christadoulou and Concetta Frisoni, names that never failed to get a laugh.

So he was the jester for her boredom and that was the beginning of his life's work, stories for a bored world. And he remembered that once in a while she'd entertain him. She didn't mean to. She was doing it for herself. But he'd come home from school to find her dancing to music she heard in her head. Momma yo quiero, she'd mime, arms out, hands blessing the air with that funny samba motion. Momma yo quiero. And sometimes she'd even have on that turban she'd bought at Loehmann's, the one with the fake fruit.

Carmen Miranda was the rage then, the culmination of the Good Neighbor Policy. There was something about Latin music. Maybe it was just that it wasn't a part of Hitler's murderous Europe or Japan's oriental treachery. It was three minutes of a good time, a vacation that promised the innocence of Eden. Who knows? Perhaps for his mother it was the Follies and her youth brought up to date. Sing Ali! she'd order, hips swaying. Sing! She knew he could do it. She'd heard him in his room singing along with the radio.

So he sang. But it wasn't just to entertain his mother. It was

Carmen Miranda herself. Alex loved her. For one thing, she sang in Portuguese, a language he'd never heard before. For another, no matter how fast she sang, no matter how complicated her tongue and lip movements, no matter how quiet her voice, you could hear every word. But you couldn't understand them. So the words became music and the singer a magic, musical instrument. It was like speaking in tongues. Alex sang and his mother danced.

Then one day he stopped. Sing, Ali! she pleaded, but he wouldn't. Not any more. How old was he? Nine? Ten? Why? Why did he spurn her? In *Flatbush Floozies* he gave a Freudian answer. She was seducing him. It was all she knew how to do. And his father was sick. Of course Alex felt guilty. But they never talked about it, not then, not now. Last year when he tried, she refused. I'm so ashamed of that book, she said. All your books. My friends say you're an anti-Semite, that you make fun of Jews because you hate them.

This morning, unable to sleep, he'd gotten up at dawn and gone into her bedroom and stood by her bed. Angry, he wanted to answer the charges brought by her friends. It's what his critics always said. And he might have awakened her were it not for her face. It startled him. In the half light, on her back like that, her features were once again distinct. She looked almost young. He knew it was a trick of the dimness and gravity and the mask of cold cream he smelled. All her life she'd used it instead of soap. My stage training, she explained when he was a boy.

He just stood there studying her face. That's when he noticed that her once perfect nose had a bump at the bridge. And he remembered a time she wanted to have it fixed. No one could figure out why. But this morning Alex saw what she must have seen years ago, and he saw it only because her flesh was now so

loose, it seemed in sleep to have fallen away altogether. She was eighty-six. He was looking into the grave at a skull. Yet the skull appeared young, beautiful. Mom, he wanted to say, Mom, I....

Damn!

Alex switched on the light. He'd promised to call as soon as he got in. He sat up, looked at his watch. Ten thirty, mountain time, twelve thirty, eastern. She might still be waiting. He picked up the phone from the night table, dialed the long-distance code and then the Miami Beach number. In a moment it was ringing. He thought of hanging up. It was too late to call. She'd complained of late-night crank calls. They just breathe, she said. And she must have taken her sleeping pill already. She must be asleep.

"Mom," he said when she finally answered. "It's me." And he told her his situation. She sounded so sleepy he wondered if she understood. "You take your pill?" he asked. She said yes. "I won't keep you then. I'm all right. I'll get into Bozeman tomorrow. I'll call you then. You understand?" She said she did. "Mom??" Anxiety welled up again but he couldn't think of anything more to say. "I'll call you tomorrow," he repeated. "Goodbye."

Alex hung up, stood, walked around the king-sized bed to the window, circled a large table and four chairs and headed back toward the door. But before he reached it, out of the corner of his eye, he saw his image in the dresser's mirror and turned to it. All he had on were bikini undershorts. He stood admiring himself. Fifty-six years old. His father had died at fifty-five. Her gift, he thought, strength. And he struck a weight lifter's pose, bent at the waist, fists in front, shoulders, chest and neck flexed.

But he couldn't hold it. He sat down on the edge of the king-sized bed and looked at the phone. Now or never, he told himself. But what would he say? How could he justify himself to her?

How could he explain *Flatbush Floozies* or why he lived so far away? How could he tell her that he needed the forests to walk around in, the rivers to fish, the isolation to write in? Then he remembered a paraphrase of Sartre a critic once used to describe him. For Alex Garth, the man said, hell is other Jews.

Was that true? Alex looked at the phone. He wanted to talk to her, to tell her why he made fun of Jews. It was the same reason he made fun of her and himself. He wanted everyone to be better, more loving, more tolerant. But what could he say that he hadn't already said? She wouldn't listen. Still, he had to try. So he dialed again. This time she answered quickly. But she sounded just as sleepy. Alex hesitated, still didn't know what to say. And that's why he began as he did, because he didn't know what to say.

"Momma yo quiero," he whispered. He was only speaking the words, not singing them. "Momma yo quiero." Then he paused. For he could hear her short gasps as if she were frightened. He didn't want to frighten her. "Momma yo quiero," he began again, this time with melody and in a voice that was crooning and intimate. "Momma yo quiero," he sang. "Mommaaa mommaaa momma yo quiero!"

And as he sang, he realized it wasn't gasps of fear he was hearing but laughter, the same metallic clack he'd always hated. It wasn't bad at all. Over the miles of copper wire or whatever they used now to carry the human voice, it seemed somehow softer, as if under water. A trick of the connection, he thought and went on. "Da shupata, O da shupata. Dadadaa deda da da deda da da."

"Ali?" she asked into the receiver when he was done. "Is that you, Ali?"

He knew he should answer. But he so enjoyed hearing his old

nickname on her lips, and she just wanted to make him acknowledge what he was doing, acknowledge her power. Sing for me, Ali, sing! He rose from the bed's edge.

"Ali?"

Still he didn't answer. Instead, he began to hum and he found he was dancing now as he'd seen her dance, his hips moving to an insistent samba beat that had somehow become, for the moment, the rhythm of his life. Yes, it was just the way she danced. Sing for me Ali! Sing! I'll dance. You sing!

"Momma yo quiero!" he began again and heard her laughter. He didn't even know what the words meant. Momma, I want you? Momma, I need you? "Momma yo quiero!"

And Alex realized that what he was doing had all the elements of an obscene phone call. But he didn't care. In the hotel room mirror he could see himself at the end of the cord, moving to the accompaniment of her metallic gasps. Yes, there he was, Alex Garth, satirist, Pulitzer Prize winner, and author of the infamous *Flatbush Floozies*, singing and dancing his way into his mother's heart.

"Momma yo quiero! Momma yo quiero!"

"Mommmaaaa, Mommmaaaa,"

"Momma yo quiero!"