

5th October 2006

A Four-Letter Word

Gina Cariño



Something was said to me when I was six that I have never been able to forget.

The occupant of the other swing saw me approach and called out to someone, who made a barefoot sprint for the vacant swing. Accustomed to resignation, I leaned on the post and watched.

“Martina, give the little Chinese girl a chance to swing!” yelled a grown-up voice from a bench behind me.

Martina screwed up her nose. I glanced back at the source of the voice but no one was looking. The female grown-up chitchat had resumed. I thought of my mother. My mother never chitchatted with other mothers in playgrounds. She never set foot on playgrounds.

One seesaw was free. I could sit in the middle and concentrate on the balance. Again I was preempted, this time with a sneering “No Africans.” Up and down, down and up, went Martina and her friend, the former’s sneakers kicking up a cloud of dust at my face. I looked down at red patent shoes turned a matte ochre.

“Snack time, Martina! And do leave that poor little Japanese girl alone!”

A general rush for the benches, a collective pulling out of bread, cheese, cold cuts. My stomach groaned. I thought of my

mother. My mother never had a snack for me on her.

Munching children soon reclaimed the swings and seesaws. I headed for the empty jungle gym and climbed high and deep into the heart of it. I had a skirt on but there was no one near.

Settling on my chosen bar, I ripped open the small paper bag that Irene had handed to me after helping me into my white cardigan. I took out a Chiquita banana and peeled it halfway. I was placidly chewing an oversized bland first bite when Martina’s smirk reappeared before me, two or so squares away.

“*Affe*,” she sneered. She stuck her tongue out. I retched.

Blinded by a thick liquid lens, I didn’t see my mother return to her shiny new red Beetle parked across the playground.

“Gina! I’m done! We can go now!”

Through the lachrymose curtain I made out a few things, such as a head turn, a jaw drop. Farther on, beside the Beetle, shiny red as my shoes had been, moved a pair of pretty calves and graceful ankles over delicate beige slingbacks. Above them, a small waist and the pert bounce of a black flyaway bob.

Dropping the fruit, I made my way down and out the monkey bar as coolly I could. Soon I was taking in a whiff of Blue Grass.

“You crying? I told you I wouldn’t be long. But didn’t I say to keep out of that sandbox? We’re having tea at the Hotel Vierjahreszeiten with Daddy’s guests!”

Safe ground, Black Forest snowed with whipped cream.

I got into the car, knowing I was being watched. Her obsession made her mine. The car slid forward and I glanced. She hung by a hand from a top bar, dangling.

Enroute to the Jungfernstieg, I pulled down the sun shield for the mirror. I pushed my tongue up the elastic recess between upper gum and upper lip and did the simian hunch, the scratching motion. U-u-u.

I looked forward to my cake.