CHAPTER TWO

Bikinis & Tiaras: Quinceañeras

With a Giotto blue ceiling sprinkled with gold stars, gargoyles (the only ones I’ve seen both indoors and with wholly intact ears), and two fountain-sized cages in which colorful birds chirp along to Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” and pick at artfully prepared plates of lettuce and fresh fruit, the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel in Miami, Florida, has clearly been designed to scream “luxury.” Three times a day—ten, noon, and two o’clock—use of the space is rented out for $175 to brides and quinceañeras who want to have a room—or rather, an opulent backdrop—of their own.

It’s one of my first days in Miami and I’ve come to the Biltmore to observe the noon photo session because that’s when fifteen-year-old Monica is scheduled to pose for her quinceañera (Keen-se-an-yeh-ra) photographs. The quinceañera, or quince (keen-say) as it’s commonly referred to in America, is the coming-of-age ritual for Latin American girls that transforms them from niñas to señoritas when they’re fifteen years old—quince años. In fact, many girls simply refer to the ritual as “having their fifteens.” The reason I’m down in Miami, a hotbed of quince activity, is to learn more about the current state of the ritual in America.

Although the quince is often considered akin to the debutante
ball, there are some substantial differences between the two fêtes: Unlike the debutante ball, in which upper-middle- to upper-class girls are presented to society, quinceañeras can be of any class (tales of cars being sold and second mortgages taken out on homes to cover the cost of a quince are not uncommon), and while the debutante ball is usually held in honor of a group of girls, the quince party is typically thrown for one girl, who, as symbolized by her tiara, is queen for the day.

In addition to the requisite tiara, for her photo session today Monica is sporting a cotton-candy pink dress. The dress has six layers of organza ruffles that drape out around her like a multi-tiered cake. A heavyset woman who’s wearing blue jeans and red high heels, Monica’s mother issues stage directions to both Monica, her sister, and the photographer. “Have her stand over there,” she commands. “Would you mind moving over there?” the sister says to hotel guests sitting in couches that could conceivably edge their way into a photographer’s border. “Gracias. Muchas gracias.”

The quinceañera holds a rose in her gloved right hand and leans against a piano she doesn’t know how to play. Next, she stands beside a gargoyle, her non-rose-holding hand resting on its head as though it’s a child, or a dog. Some photos are meant to showcase the back of her dress, with its elaborate stitching and beading, and for these, Monica glances back at the camera over the puff of her leg-of-mutton sleeve.

All this is merely preparation for an even more impressive backdrop. For about half an hour Monica’s mother has been eying the window that a large party of hotel guests has been congregated in front of, lounging and drinking. When they finally disperse, Monica’s mother wobbles over to the window and stands there territorially, the way someone might save a parking space. Monica takes her position in front of a curtain held back with a wide sash and looks wistfully out a window she’s never looked out before. The window affords her, and more important, the camera, a view of the hotel’s manicured grounds—complete with fountains—and beyond, the upscale neighborhood of Coral Gables.

Like mannequin dresses in a department store, Monica’s mother and sister tend to her. Her mother pushes back her shoulders to fix her posture and secures one of Monica’s curling-ironed ringlets behind the tiara. Backing away, so as not to miss the spectacle for a moment, she smiles exaggeratedly at her daughter, the way mothers smile at babies whose pictures are being taken, hoping that this will encourage them to smile back.

The photographer glances at the mother and she nods and then holds her hands together, as though in prayer. “Smile,” the photographer says to Monica. “You’re not always going to be fifteen.”

From the way Monica is dressed and the way her mother and sister are acting, I’m sure that she is headed off for the biggest party of her fifteen-year life. So when the photo session is over, I ask Monica where the quince festivities will be held.

Wearing perfume that smells like hibiscus, she smiles an equally sweet smile and says, “I decided not to have a party. Instead, my mom and I agreed that for my fifteens I would have my pictures.”

This is it, she is telling me, and this, I think, is bizarre.

After a few more days in Miami I learn that increasingly, many Cuban girls who turn fifteen forego the ritual of the quince altogether and instead, like Monica, opt for what is known as “having your pictures.” This isn’t because the quince parties are any less popular than they used to be, but rather the opposite, because quince parties have become so important and elaborate and costly and competitive, many lower-to-middle-class families in Miami today opt to devote all their time and effort to the end result: the photos.

No one knows the precise origins of the quince—some say it dates back to the Aztecs and Mayans. Michele Salcedo, author of Quinceañera!: The Essential Guide to Planning the Perfect Sweet Fifteen
Celebration writes that the Duchess of Alba, in eighteenth-century Spain, is credited with starting the custom.

The duchess would invite girls on the cusp of womanhood to the palace and dress them up as adults for the first time. Similarly, although a century later, the Empress Carlota of Mexico invited the daughters of the members of her court to be presented as young ladies eligible for marriage. In both cases, there would be a party, with a feast and the dancing of intricate figures, as was the custom of the time, a custom that is carried over to the quinceañera celebration today.

Whatever its origins, in most Latin American cultures when a girl celebrates her quince she has a church ceremony, followed by a reception at which she has a court of fourteen couples, one representing each year of her life. Once the quinceañera has made her entrance in her simple white gown and her father has crowned her head with a tiara, removed her flat shoes, and fitted her feet with high heels, and she has waltzed with him, then boys her age, and finally, with her escort, her chambelán de honor, it is finally understood that she is now an adult. What being an adult in quince terms means is that as of the day of the ritual, the young woman is allowed to start wearing makeup, high heels, and more revealing clothing; shaving her legs; going to parties; and dating men.

But much of this simplicity and tradition is a thing of the past.

"Quinces are all different now," says Angela Lopez, a fifty-year-old Miami woman who went through her quince in Havana, Cuba, before her family moved to America. "It used to be the experience of the day of your quince that was important," she says. "My parents kept me at home all the time before I turned fifteen. My quince was a ritual that said I was allowed to start going out and be seen. I was allowed to start painting my lips and wear makeup in public."

"Quince parties today have turned into carnival theme shows with women in Marie Antoinette dresses pulling elaborate stunts," con-...
Of course, the extravagance of quinces exists all around the country, and so do its critics—many of whom are church officials and educators. Although, unlike the bat mitzvah, the quince doesn’t have a particular religious significance, many families choose to have a private mass for their daughters on the day of the party so they can thank God for bringing them into the world. But many in the Catholic community feel that this is not enough, that the dress often becomes more important than God, and that the ritual—not to mention the photographs of bikini-clad poses—can emphasize a girl’s sexuality. Addressing these concerns, in the past ten years many archdioceses, such as the archdioceses of Phoenix, Arizona, Los Angeles, California, and San Antonio, Texas, have begun issuing guidelines. The guidelines vary, but they can include advising that girls take five classes of Bible study, Hispanic history, quince history, and modern morals, and that the girls go on a church-sponsored retreat with their parents before the event.

After Father Antonio Sotelo, a vicar for Hispanic affairs and a pastor at Immaculate Heart in Phoenix, Arizona, circulated his guidelines around the diocese, several churches, including Immaculate Heart, started sponsoring quince classes and retreats. When I call Father Sotelo to ask what he thinks of quinceañeras who opt not to include a mass in their quince celebration, he bluntly tells me, “That’s not a quince, that’s just a party. The mass shows their special relationship to the Lord, to the community, to their parents.”

“Do you think people should have to have masses as part of their quinces?” I ask.

“Well, it’s a free country,” he says. Despite his words, there’s disapproval in his voice. Then his tone changes as he adds, “But all the girls who come here to Immaculate Heart are really committed to the quince mass. We have them write letters saying why they want to be a quinceañera and some of the letters are so personal you can hardly read them. In the letters they thank the Lord for their families and, if they’ve been fighting with their families they talk about how they want to start getting along, they talk about mistakes they’ve made, how they want to renew their baptismal vows, about how they miss their grandparents who have died.

“The girls are all so sincere in what they say,” Father Sotelo continues. As his enthusiasm and praise for these young women increases, so does the speed with which he speaks. “People say the wild years are twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. I think the wild years are eighteen and up. Some of the young brides who come to me to get married are spoiled brats. At least with the quinceañeras they mean what they say. I’d rather do ten quinces than one wedding. I could do quinces all day long.”

One person in the Catholic Church who makes it her crusade, as she calls it, to educate and assist parents with their preparation of the quince is Sister Angela Erevia. Sister Angela, who has written a book about quinces entitled Quince Años: Celebrating a Tradition, travels around the country leading workshops that encourage parents of all religions and nationalities to plan at least one coming-of-age celebration for their daughters and their sons. In fact, she calls the quinceañera, the quince años, because she suggests young men go through a ritual at age fifteen as well.

When I ask Sister Angela what she thinks about the amount of money families put into their children’s quinces, she says, “There’s not a right way or a wrong way to celebrate. I don’t tell people how much to spend on their weddings, so I don’t tell them how much to spend on their child’s quince años. But,” she adds, “it doesn’t have to cost a lot. In Dallas I helped the diocese organize a quince años for seventy-five teenagers and it only cost twenty dollars per family.”

“Five hundred years ago in pre-Christian times in Mexico, kids went through ordeals to test their maturity and if they were successful they were considered mature members of their community,” Sister Angela says to me during a phone conversation. Her voice is patient yet firm and I can’t help but envision her as a Hispanic Julie Andrews in a modern adaptation of The Sound of Music. “Today we don’t have to put our kids through ordeals. There is already so much pressure in the environment, with alcohol, divorce, suicide, pre-
marital sex, teenage pregnancy, and there's nothing that affirms teenagers' presence."

In her workshops Sister Angela encourages parents to use the quince años to help their children understand who they are and where they come from. "It's an opportunity to develop their identity," she says.

Esther Nodarse who, with her husband, Aurelio, runs a successful party planning service in Miami called Pretty Party, says that she's seen a change in the quince in the twenty-five years since she started her company. It used to be that girls born in the U.S. thought the quince was "a tacky, Cuban tradition, and they wanted to be more American than Cuban and celebrate their sweet sixteen." But today, she says, many of the girls encourage their parents to have quinces, and therefore in Miami it's becoming more popular than ever before. She estimates that nowadays about 90 percent of Cuban girls have some sort of celebration.

I spent some time at Miami High, talking to girls about the quince to find out what it meant to them. Miami High is an inner-city high school with a primarily Latino student body. It's not famous for much except that Porky's was filmed there. No one really knows for sure if the peephole still exists in the boys' locker room; many of the students haven't seen Porky's, they just know that an American movie was filmed at their school.

"I'm having my fifteens next month," says one sophomore in a pink halter top and denim miniskirt that exposes cheerleading-toned thighs. All the other girls in the room—those who have yet to have their fifteens, and especially those who have had their fifteens—ooh and ahh as though this weren't something they all went through.

But while these young women believe that getting their driver's license, or graduating high school, or even turning sixteen will all be significant transition points in their future lives, they don't pre-
tend that turning fifteen is in and of itself transformative, because it doesn't give them any new sought-after independence.

So if it's not a big day in that it grants them license to wear makeup, or shave their legs, or date boys—most Miami High students have been doing all of the above for years—then why do they make such a big deal about their fifteens? One reason is that they have inherited their mothers' love for quinces. (This is where the oohing and ahhing comes from.) Their mothers are the ones with the memories and the stories of their quinces or the regret at not having had one, and they are the ones with the dreams of their daughters' celebrations, and their daughters are born into these dreams. As one young woman with manicured red nails tells me, "I wasn't even born yet and my mother was already saying 'I can't wait for her to have her fifteens.'"

Just as they don't pretend that it means anything more to them than that they're fifteen, these young women don't pretend they go through their quince for the sake of tradition. As one young Cuban girl wearing a tight T-shirt with a Betty Boop decal says, "Your parents want it to be as important to you as it is to them, but it's not. Like, we want it because of the party, and they want it because of tradition so their friends will be 'Oh, wow.' To us, it's just a party."

"Yeah," says another, "Having my fifteens wasn't a turning point. It was just a way to celebrate."

A well-groomed young woman who has charm bracelets from both her quince and her sweet sixteen, explains why she wanted to have a party, even though her parents offered her a car or a cruise instead, simply to avoid the hassle: "I like to party, and I like being the center of attraction."

The prospect of being the center of attraction is one of the most appealing aspects of the quince for these girls. For a day, they get to have their photographs taken by professionals who specialize in child models. For a day, they get to pose in bikinis as though for a fashion spread in Seventeen magazine. For a day, they get to wear
ball gowns and tiaras and hold roses and when the camera snaps they look like they have just been crowned Miss America.

Even those who are at first reluctant usually enjoy their night in the spotlight. "I didn't want to have a quince, because I'm a liberal kind of girl," says Juanita, a sixteen-year-old of Colombian descent who lives in New Jersey. "I always thought that the quince was a way for people to say, 'Look at how pretty my daughter is. Look how much money I have. Don't you want to marry my daughter?' When I was fourteen, my mother asked me if I wanted to have one, and I told her 'Look, we're living comfortable, why waste the money?' and I thought she would leave it at that."

But Juanita's mother, Yolanda, who had four hundred people to her own quince in Colombia, did not leave it at that. For her daughter's sixteenth birthday, she threw her a combination surprise birthday party and quince because she wanted to keep up the tradition and also, she said, "It was more to have the pictures to send back home."

I went to the party, held at a banquet hall in Union City, New Jersey, complete with disco ball, a DJ who spun salsa, and figurines of Venus de Milo. There I saw an unsuspecting but happily surprised Juanita greeted with a chorus of "Surprise!" and colorful ribbons thrown in her direction before she was ushered off to the ladies' room to be changed by her mother into clothing fit for a quinceañera—a white gown, long white gloves, and slippers. (Yolanda took Juanita's measurements for the dress a few weeks earlier, under the guise of saying, "Juanita, you look like you've lost weight. Let me take your measurements so we can have a record.") When Juanita reentered the banquet hall, Yolanda stalled the start of the ceremony so she could load her camera with film (an oversight in all the excitement) and instructed the guests to make sure to give her their negatives so she could send the pictures to her mother, and then the ritual commenced.

Because Juanita's father left when she was three months old, his duties were fulfilled by a cousin who changed her slippers into size 8 white high heels (her mother tried them on Juanita, a heavy sleeper, in the middle of the night to make sure they fit) and crowned her curly-haired head with a tiara. All the while, Juanita held a rose in her gloved hand and sat upright in a wicker chair decorated with pink bows that had been placed in the middle of the banquet hall. "The chair is her temporary throne," her mother explained to me. "Tonight she is queen, but tomorrow she will be a regular person again."

After her shoes had been changed her mother made a toast: "I am toasting the birthday girl because I have been a mother and a father. Juanita, we are here to toast your future because you are starting a new future that's going to be harder." Then she danced the quinceañera waltz with her daughter—traditionally reserved for the father—and there were tears in her eyes and tears in Juanita's eyes and tears in my eyes. At the end of the waltz, Juanita spun her mother around because even at that moment, she knew the ritual was more about her mother than her.

I spoke with Juanita the day after the party, and she said she now understood why the quince tradition was alive. While it made her want to celebrate her own daughter's sweet sixteen, however, she maintained that she won't incorporate elements of the quince into her daughter's party. "I think the quince is sort of a lost tradition among the second generation," she explained.

"For my fifteens I had my pictures," says a young Cuban woman named Rosa. When I ask her why she thinks young women are increasingly having their pictures taken in lieu of a party she says, "So we can have a memory. We could have a party but we can't, like, keep that to show our children. But if we have the pictures we can show our children, our grandchildren, and they can see, like, our favorite age."

Rosa is a nice girl but she hardly strikes me as having an easy
time as a teenager. She complains that she's never been asked out by a boy and she suffers some standard teenage afflictions like being overweight, having a poor complexion, and wearing heavy glasses.

Is fifteen really your favorite age? I ask.

She gives me a winsome smile and answers, "You're only young once."

I am sitting in the courtyard of Miami High during a recess with Rosa and Melissa, a petite seventeen-year-old beauty with aqua eyes who also opted to just "have her pictures" for her fifteens. Unlike Rosa, Melissa has had an easy time making friends at Miami High, an easy time being a teenager. While Melissa's role model is Gloria Estefan, Rosa loves the Colorado Rockies, and she's wearing a jacket with their name across the back. The black jacket is much too hot for the Miami sun, but Rosa will do anything to show her loyalty to the team. Melissa's wearing a spaghetti-strapped sundress. What's striking is that both these girls—one thin, one fat, one popular, one with few friends—are prematurely nostalgic about the fifteenth year of their life that quince photographs capture.

"The day of your pictures is just the best," gushes Melissa. "It's the biggest rush and everything. Everyone's pampering you and everybody's helping you get dressed and the photographer's super nice and he's saying 'Look here' and 'Do this' and you feel like a model."

"Yeah," chimes in Rosa, "you feel like a model. For the one day you look beautiful—you're like, yeah, I know it, it's cool. You want to see some pictures?"

Before I respond Rosa pulls out a photo album from her backpack. The photo album says "Mis Quince Años" on the front and a gold-encircled peephole features her favorite picture. It's a little like looking though the peephole in Porky's because there is something prurient about the way Rosa has been made up. She's wearing a low-cut white dress and smiling seductively, leaning against a column that looks like it could be part of a costly mansion but isn't (it's just a solitary column in Coral Gables that doesn't support anything; it is, however, a popular spot for many photo shoots of quinceañeras).

The first page of the album is designed for filling in the details of the party; it has spaces in which the names of all the fourteen couples who make up the quinceañera's court of honor are to be written. Since Rosa didn't have a party, this page is blank, as it is in the photo albums of all the other young Latinas who increasingly decide just to "have their pictures." In the back of her album are pictures of other girls' photo sessions. Students at Miami High exchange quince photos the way schoolgirls trade stickers. The other photos show the quinceañeras posing in front of fake backgrounds, blow-up photographs of waterfalls, white sand beaches, castles. Some even have magazine-like headings embossed on top: "Get attention"; "Looking good"; "Super body."

One of the photos in Rosa's album is of her sister with the president of a club she was trying to get into. "They took pictures and everything, but they didn't end up letting my sister in," Rosa says accusingly, as though they did something deceitful. "My father bought the pictures anyway."

There's something sad about this but not unexpected. This is, after all, a place and an environment where pictures mean more than the truth, where a day in a young woman's life is special because photographs are taken of her in various poses.

Of course, photographs from a young woman's fifteens aren't just collected in her album and wallet and those of her friends, they're sent to all the family's friends and relatives. Rosa sent some of the photographs to her grandmother and her parents' friends in Cuba. She says that she saw some of the photographs from girls' fifteens that were taken "over there" (Cuba) and that "the color was faded and the dress wasn't so pretty and the hotel where the pictures were taken was a cheap motel, a roach motel."

For Rosa and others who see the difference between quince pictures taken in Miami and their parents' homelands, that is really
the issue—the difference in the quality of the photographs and the
difference in their dresses. To these girls' parents, however, the dif-
ference is that between two worlds, and two social classes. Their
parents send the photographs to all their friends in the countries
they have left behind as though they were Hallmark cards. This is
America—America!—these photographs say, and we have made it.

CHAPTER THREE

Dipping: Debutantes

CRASHING

When you turn onto River Oaks Boulevard, the street that leads to
Houston's River Oaks Country Club, and you first lay eyes on the
club, your initial reaction might be like mine: Whoa! Even from
five long Texas blocks away I see the country club's gate and behind
that, its fountain, and behind that, on top of a rise, its multi-
columned facade. The club's architecture is like that of a capitol
building—which seems appropriate when you consider that it is the
social capitol of the exclusive residential area of River Oaks.

It's December and I'm not wearing a coat because this is Houston
and it's still sweetly warm out in the early evening and I hold my
sleeveless arm out the passenger-side window to feel the air. My
tuxedo-clad escort for the evening speeds down River Oaks Boule-
vard and we pass oak tree after oak tree, their trunks illuminated
with white, spiralling Christmas lights that dangle as casually as
tennis bracelets as if to emphasize that yes, we have entered River
Oaks, home to hundreds of mansions and swimming pools and
Houston's wealthy. The entrance ways to the mansions usually have
only one step up between horseshoe-shaped driveway and front
door, and in comparison, the River Oaks Country Club's stairs seem