

Bike Riding, Salsa, and the First Line of *Anna Karenina*

1. After Dinner

It's an October dusk in Logan Canyon, Utah, and my husband and I are midway up Steel Hollow Trail on our mountain bikes. My husband tells me, "Be aggressive. Pedal harder and you will clear the rocks." We climb through chaparral and juniper until I can hardly pedal any more. I'm on my period. Finally my husband looks back and sees me struggling. He says we can turn around if I want to. I nod vigorously. Then we lift our bikes above our heads 110 degrees to make the turn above the brush, and we prepare to descend. My husband says, "Lower your seat, and sit way back. Brake evenly, and be alert." He rides ahead until I can't see him anymore and then until I can't even hear the skid of his tires hitting rock. I edge downward on my titanium frame, dodging, faking and alluding rocks as a running back might, but it's not how one's supposed to descend on a bike. It's quiet except for a few scolding birds and the whirr of my brakes against metal. The sun is already below the peaks and a residue of color lights up the Indian rice grass like candles.

Soon, in the periphery of my vision, flaming bushes appear in all directions under red maples and yellow aspen. My front tire hits a rock and I fly over the top of my handlebars. Powerless as a Hefty bag in the hands of a gardener, I land in a ditch. My bike lies crossways to the trail, jackknifed. I pick myself up, throw my right leg back over the frame, and continue slowly down the trail until I meet my husband. He smiles at me and I grin back. I tell him I flipped my bike. Only then do I check my body for damages. I feel my husband staring at my scrawny arms, criss-crossed with scratches. He says, "I'm proud of you." Above us the aspen leaves chatter like a sack of dry chicken bones. The Halloween moon is rising when we ride again. The spruce-covered cliffs are dark as menstrual flow. Steel Hollow Trail comes to an end and we load up the pickup—back to our three kids and a cluttered kitchen.

Later, I enjoy a long soak in the tub with a copy of one of my favorite novels, *Anna Karenina*. For about an hour, I think about Tolstoy's first line in that novel: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." While I often quote this line for my fiction students at the university, I'm starting now to wonder about it.

2. El Gringo De Utah

“Marlowe,” I say, thinking about a character in another book I’ve been reading. “It’s something like that.”

“Would it help if I said the first letter of his first name? Or his first name?” My husband asks. We are riding home from church on a Saturday evening, and the music inside the Camry is playing from a CD that my husband had inserted into the car stereo months earlier. Out of the corner of my eye I also see our teenaged son, plugged in to his own iPod with headphone wires dangling from each side of his face. The big box stores are passing on the right and left. I know I know the name of the keyboardist playing his Latin-styled piano on the speakers faded to the front of the car, as per request of our son. But all I can think of is Marlowe.

It’s been about six years since my husband emerged with a latent love for salsa music. It was like, one day he got out of bed and he was El Gringo de Utah. The man has no Latin blood in him that we know of; he’s 6 foot 6 inches, in stocking feet, and his Scottish background bequeathed him the fairest of skins. Lovely thick curly hair, now slightly graying, coronas his thin angular face. Nevertheless, he’s been relentless in pursuit of the perfect salsa collection, amassing CDs by the hundreds and remixing the songs on MP3s, just like the one currently playing.

Trying to collect music from the most authentic of sources, he came in contact with a man from New York, a *Nuyorican*, who first gave my husband the nickname, El Gringo De Utah, in response to an email order he made. For a while, my husband adored this guy, who had all the right suggestions for a truly superior collection.

Since he’s amassed his gigantic stash of the finest salsa available, my husband plays it constantly; it’s blaring from the speakers of his car until no one can hear the other speak. It’s on the home stereo when we will let him choose the mix. He loves Eddie Palmieri with his “wall of sound” and he’s drumming on the steering wheel the Palmieri clap—“duh-duh—duh—duh-duh.” Some of the songs go on for more than five minutes with one word repeated continuously. Our plugged-in son, who also happens to be a drummer in the school marching band, says he’s heard two thousand more claves than he’s ever wanted to hear in his whole life. I say that Celia Cruz’s voice is a bit low for me, and my husband

takes it personally. We're all trying to cooperate, but he's aggrieved.

"Larry," my husband says, raising his voice over the music, "is his first name. Does that help? He's called El Judeo Maravioso."

I hit my leg with my fist. Jeez, I say to myself, I already knew that. The Marvelous Jew. I've heard him say the name so many times, and yet, why doesn't it sink in? The last name is on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't think of it. I know Johnny Pacheco, Willie Colon, and Pete "The Count" Rodriguez. I can tell the difference between the music of Eddie Palmieri and his brother Charlie. But on this, I think I'm going to have to cave in to the pressure.

"I don't think I can get it," I tell him.

"Harlow," he says. "Larry Harlow. You were so close." He checks the line of cars in his rear view mirror.

I feel the way people must feel who were on Lets Make a Deal and Monty Hall asked them for a paper clip and all they have is safety pins. (Over forty years ago, my father was chosen by Monty Hall at the end of the show to produce exactly 99 cents in change, but all my dad had was dollar bills and a few small coins.)

So I don't have the answer, but I file away the name Larry Harlow once more in my porous brain, trying to pin down the elusive rhythm, trying to feel it in my bones like my husband does. In the driver's seat, my husband's still drumming on the steering wheel and in the back seat, our son's head is bobbing to the music playing separately on his iPod, but neither of them is missing a beat.

3. My wedding dress

My wedding dress is hanging from the top of the closet door. Next to the closet, framed, is a Hollywood star, just like you might see on Sunset Blvd. Inside the star is the name: Irving Berlin, in reference to that marvelous talent. For we are in Palm Springs, at the La Quinta resort, and everything here is the best, or nearly so. To me, it comes off as a bit over the top, but it wasn't my idea to come. The wedding dress is the lightest shade of petal pink, almost like the glow on a baby's skin, or the color of a pair of panties that you washed with a red sweatshirt. The bodice of the dress is adorned with the teeniest of sequins and silvery thread. I

would be proud to see it hanging there, except that it is not mine any more—it is my mother's.

In my periphery, I can see my mother glow in the warmth of her extended family. Unlike Dolly, Kitty and the ill-fated Anna of Tolstoy fame, my mother was lucky in love. My grandmother, who left an alcoholic husband but never divorced him, sits in the room's most comfortable chair, rocking forward slightly. She's wearing a red wool dress lined at the neck with real fur, the exact dress that she wore to my parents' wedding fifty years earlier. My mother is wearing a designer dress, geometric patterns emblazoned on a stretchy material, loose on her size 0 frame, her bleach blonde hair perfect in a long uneven bob. (I am wearing a traditional cotton dress from San Miguel, Mexico).

Twenty-six years ago, when I was sliding my own body into my mother's wedding dress, it looked a bit different then. I had asked the seamstress, with the permission of my mother, to remove the fifties-style cuffs from the armholes of the bodice, giving the dress an unfortunate eighties look. I also had to have each of the seams around the waist expanded by millimeters, and even then, my body was unliberally tucked into my mother's corset, expanding uncomfortably at both top and bottom. In the end, though, the buttons buttoned.

As different as the versions of the dress had been, so had the last twenty-six years been for the two of us. From my vantage point, she experienced very stable golden years, with tennis club parties, a reupholstering of her vintage bamboo sunroom set in bold tulips, and, weekly, a cocktail with my father in the lounge of a famous horse breeder's restaurant. My last two and a half decades, by contrast, were infused with the stress of loading moving vans and relocating the family several times, the uncertainty of the academic life, and heady trips to Europe while trying to maintain stability and breastfeeding. I'm thinking that it could have been easier for me had I not tried to do so much.

But then we all gather around my mother and my father for a posed picture, and the women congregate in front of the suspended wedding dress (I notice that my mother had reattached the sleeves) for an all-girls shot. Both of my parents have just recently passed their seventieth year but they are giddy as teenagers. As we prepare to walk out into the Palm Springs sun for an early dinner, I turn to my mother and

see her face glowing. None of it is over the top for her, for this is her day.

Red bougainvillea blossoms float in the turquoise pool lined with white tile. In the distance the Santa Rosa Mountains pierce the sky like brown gems. This bobbing line of relations, some slightly drunk, makes its way over the patterned tile toward the restaurant. The clicking of the ladies' high heels is almost like a drum solo. I join in the rhythm as the dry hot breeze caresses my arms and seduces my compliant heart.

4. Washing Windows in Winter, Or, Learning to Love Salsa Music

The squeak of rag against the glass cuts into the chill. The wheeze through my nose hits a sharp C as my breath steams the air. Behind the ladder where I perch runs the continuous slap of car tires on slush. The hedge of the arborvitae, which divides our small front yard from the road, muffles the pulse of sounds as if a drummer were running his brush over a snare. The only thing missing from this live concert is the cymbal roll of the little creek out in the backyard where the mallard ducks usually hang out. The creek's dried up for winter and the ducks have long since taken off for warmer climes.

Two doors down the neighbor's dog barks in a pattern of 1-2-3-pause, 5-6-7. For an extended moment the city bus motor drowns out all other sound and when it fades away, dog, car, rag and wheeze strike their pitches again. Through the window, a cluster of sheets tumbles in the dryer. This is the base drum that pulls this whole wall of sound together.

I think about the explanation my husband gives for his love of salsa music. In the type of music called *son*, he says, from the *pueblos* in Cuba, there is a dialogue between the singer and the chorus. In the interlude, the team of instruments—conga, drums, guitars, flutes, and other tools of percussion, the clave, the cowbells, the chimes, etc., form the wall of sound behind the vocals. For most gringos, he tells me, their ears are dulled to the subtlety of this sound, and they hear it just as noise. But for him, he says, it's the music he's been looking for since he was a teenager.

This very afternoon I decide to try it out for myself. Perusing my husband's CD salsa collection, I vocalize out

loud the names of the artists as if for the first time. Pete Rodriguez, El Conde; Johnny Pacheco, El Maestro. Bebe Valdez. Johnny Polanco. For my first foray on my own, I decide to go back to the familiar name of Larry Harlow, El Judeo Maravioso. If Harlow was a Jew who could play salsa with the best of them, surely I could learn to appreciate it. I pull out the CD, Hommy: A Latin Opera. I like opera, so I figure, why not start there?

As I close the CD player and strike *play*, the livingroom booms with the gravelly voice of a narrator announcing the birth of a son. Even with my limited knowledge of Spanish, I can understand the chorus. *Soy sensacional*. I am sensational. Horns blast. Drums rumble. Cowbells clang. But then something goes wrong in the narrative. I stop the CD and play it again. The son, the one for whom the father has hoped for so long, is blind. Not only blind, but mute and deaf as well.

I listen intermittently throughout the next hour as I finish washing windows and making beds. The music tells me that the boy in the opera grows up to be a fantastic drummer. It turns out that Hommy has perfect rhythm and, what's more, a direct channel to the Greatest Musician of all.

Our front door slams with half of a salsa beat as our three kids come home from school. Bang, bang, bang, pause. Three more slams of the bathroom door finish the basic beat. The heater clangs like a cowbell and water moving within insulated pipes sings like trumpets. Noise from the outside, always a dull roar through the clerestory windows that separate the kitchen from the livingroom, fades innocuously.

Before my husband arrives home, I have worked my way through two more discs, including a collection of Celia Cruz. I hadn't realized I was swaying my hips until he comes up behind me and catches my hip movement between the palms of his hands, 1-2-3-pause, 5-6-7. He doesn't say a word about the salsa music playing in the background.

"So did you accomplish anything on your day off?" he teases. "Or did you eat bon-bons and watch soap operas all day?" He flips a dishtowel against my backside.

"Actually, I washed windows," I tell him.

"Didn't you check WeatherChannel.com before you decided to wash windows?"

"No, I didn't do that, but I did consult a website on drying sheets. So I dried our sheets with a mint tea bag."

“Hmm, that could be interesting.” He bends over to kiss my neck. “Can we finish what we started last night?”

“After the kids go to bed,” I say. I reach my arms back around his muscled shoulders and hug him backwards.

Later that night after the music has long been muted, I can still hear as an echo in my brain: *Soy Sensacional*. My husband and I approach the stairs with our arms around each other’s waists, and our shadow on the wall is lit by the moon through the clerestory windows. The moon above us is smudged in the glass. Not a window I can clean, I say to myself. As I walk arm in arm with my husband, I think that while I don’t have a perfect marriage, I have what I want. Someday, we will no longer have car-noise in our house and ducks in the creek and muddy feet on the carpet and two boys sharing a room with a sister next door, but in this moment, at least, there is just one thing left to finish, and my husband and I don’t wait until we get to the top of the stairs.

5. Final Thoughts on Tolstoy’s First Line.

It’s entirely possible that all happy families are not alike.