

ALSO BY ANA CASTILLO

NOVELS

The Mixquiahuala Letters
Sapogonia
So Far from God

POETRY

Otro Canto
The Invitation
Women Are Not Roses
My Father Was a Toltec

NONFICTION

Massacre of the Dreamers:
Essays on Xicanisma

Loverboys

STORIES

by Ana Castillo



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

New York London

Copyright © 1996 by Ana Castillo
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

The following stories have been previously published: "Subtitles" in *Mirrors Beneath the Earth* (Curkstone Press, 1992). "Being Indian, a Candle Flame, and So Many Dying Stars" in *Prairie Schooner* (Winter 1994) and *Daughters of the Fifth Sun* (Putnam, 1995). "Loverboys" in *Bomb Magazine* (Spring 1993) and *Tasting Life Twice* (Avon Books, 1995). "Conversations with an Absent Lover on a Beachless Afternoon" in *Chicago Stories* (City Stoop Press, 1991). "Ghost Talk" in *Cuentos Chicanos: A Short Story Anthology* (University of New Mexico Press, 1984). "Christmas Story of the Golden Cockroach" in *A Gathering of Flowers* (Harper & Row, 1990). "Juan in a Million" in *U.S.A. Weekend*, 1996.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110.

The text of this book is composed in Trump Mediaeval with the display set in University Roman and Kabel. Composition by Crane Typesetting Service, Inc.
Manufacturing by Quebecor Printing, Fairfield
Book design by Charlotte Staub

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Castillo, Ana.

Loverboys: stories / by Ana Castillo.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-393-03959-5

I. Title.

PS3553.A8135L68 1996

813'.54—dc20

95-52048

CIP

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
<http://web.wwnorton.com>

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

◀ To all the women and the men
who ever loved me
a little bit.

▼ LOVERBOYS

Two boys are making out in the booth across from me. I ain't got nothing else to do, so I watch them. I drink the not-so-aged house brandy and I watch two boys make out. It's more like they're in the throes of passion, as they say. And they're not boys, really. I think I've seen them around before, somewhere on campus maybe. Not making out though.

One gets up, to get them each another drink I guess, and he and I check each other out briefly as he passes me up on his way to the bar. He's a white boy wearing a T-shirt with a graphic of Malcolm X on it.

This is the way my life is these days or maybe it's a sign of the nineties: a white boy with a picture of Malcolm X on his T-shirt and me, sitting here in a gay bar trying to forget a man.

Well, okay. He must not have been just any man and I'm sure not just any woman. Before him there were only women. Puras mujeres (¡sino mujeres puras)! A cast of thousands. Women's music festivals, feminist symposiums, women of

color retreats and camp-outs, women's healing rituals under a full moon, ceremonies of union and not-so-ceremonious reunions, women-only panels and caucuses at conferences, en fin, women ad infinitum.

And then one day a boy—not much older than either of these two loving it up in front of me, nor the half-dozen other clientele here on a dead Monday night for that matter—comes into my store asking for a copy of *The Rebel*. I point in the direction of Albert—whom once I was so fond of we were on a first-name basis—and he, the boy in my store, kind of casually goes over to check out what we got on the shelf. We're always stocked up on the existentialists, so I didn't bother to offer assistance.

My partner—who used to be my partner in all senses of the word and whom I bought out a year ago—and I opened up the store about ten years ago. We thought about making it a woman's bookstore, a lesbian bookstore, a gay and lesbian bookstore, a "Third World" bookstore, or even an exclusively Latina bookstore. Heaven knows, any town could use at least one of each of those kind of bookshops—stocked up on alternative-press publications that inform you about what's going on with the majority of the population when you sure don't hear it from the mass media. You know? But no, spirituality won out—since all roads eventually lead to one place, we reasoned.

So along with Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard, we . . . I carry almost anything you can imagine that comes out of the East and Native imaginations and ancient practices.

I sat back and picked up the book I was reading. I let the boy browse. I saw him leafing through some other things and, finally, he came over with a copy of *The Stranger*.

"Didn't you see *The Rebel* up on the shelf?" I asked, not really looking at him, just taking the book and ringing it up.

"Yeah. But I don't think I'm ready for it," he answered. "I

read this in high school. I think I'll read it again . . . I really like this translation anyway," he said, referring to the edition he had chosen.

I rang it up. But he didn't pick up his package right away. Just kept looking at me. I looked back and smiled, a little cockily. I'm a mirror that way. You look at me a certain way and I respond in kind. Just like with this white guy here who just passed me by again with two Coronas. He looks. He doesn't smile. He just looks like I don't belong here. *I* don't belong here? I helped start this joint about twelve years ago when you couldn't find a gay bar within ten miles of this town.

Me and Rosie and her compadre, who's over there tending bar—the big guy with the Pancho Villa charm and beer belly. He looks like someone's father, right? Not the kind of bartender you would expect to find in a gay bar. Well, just for the record, he *is* somebody's father. His oldest son enlisted in the air force—overcompensating for his dad's dubious machismo or patriotism, if you ask me. He just got shipped off to the Middle East last week. His daughter, Belinda, Rosie's godchild, got married last summer.

That's the way it goes.

Yeah. His wife knows he owns this bar. And she knows all the rest, too. But she's pretty religious and would never have thought to divorce him. Besides, Rosie told me that his wife really doesn't find the men in her husband's life a threat to her marriage. He's got it pretty good, huh?

Anyway, I say to this young man with Indian smooth skin like glazed clay, and the offhanded manner of a chile alegre if I ever saw one, after he's been staring at me for a good minute or so without saying anything, "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

His dark face got darker when he blushed, and he laughed

a little, "Naw, naw . . .," he said, shaking his head. "Actually, I *did* wanna get that one of his, too, but I can't afford it till payday," he admitted, referring to *The Rebel*.

Liking his white, uneven teeth, although I'm not very good with quotes, except to massacre them usually, I said, "I was placed halfway between poverty and the sun.'" With that he got this expression like I had just done a wondrous thing by quoting Albert spontaneously. I was ready to part the sea if I could continue to elicit that gaze of a devotee from those obsidian eyes, so I dared to continue quoting: "'Poverty kept me from thinking all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything . . .'"

He laughed out loud. He laughed like he had just discovered he was in the presence of Camus himself and he slapped his thigh, as if to say, "What a kick!" He stared at me some more and then he left, still laughing.

After that it was all out of our hands. He came back a few more times that week and finally one evening just before I closed. He wasn't buying anything, just browsing and talking with me when I had a minute between customers. By this time we were old chums—talking about all kinds of things, literature mostly. He likes poetry. He writes poetry. Well, at least he says he does. He never showed me anything. But who am I to question or to judge?

So we went to get a taco down the street at my favorite taco joint. I'm really a creature of habit, no doubt about it. There's only one place where I go for tacos and only one place where I go to get loaded. And there's my store. In between is home and sleep.

Anyway, then we came here, as you might have guessed, to have a drink. I used to come just on weekends but since about the time when we stopped hanging out I am here just about every night of the week, it seems.

That night we got pretty "hammered," his favorite word for what we used to do very well together—besides make love. We made love anytime, anyplace, as often as we could—like a happy pair of rabbits—with the one big difference that I don't reproduce—never did when I could and now I never will.

He's really gonna hate me for telling you all this (and I don't doubt that he'll find out someday that I have, since it was the very fact that I'm kind of a public person that scared him off), but little by little, his PMS started to get the better of him. You know, his "Pure Macho Shit." Maybe it's not fair to call what he started to feel towards me that, but I don't know what else it was. I can't explain none of it. I don't know why he's gone, why I'm here worrying about it . . . why *you're* here, for that matter . . .

Except to drink. And we know how far that will get you. It's just like that Mexican joke with the two drunks just barely hanging on to their bar stools. "Well, why do *you* drink?" one asks the other. "I drink to forget," the other guy replies. "And what's it you're trying to forget?" the first guy asks. The other looks up, kind of thinking for a bit, then says, "I dunno. I forgot."

Well, it's a lot funnier in Spanish. Or maybe you have to be Mexican. But for sure, you have to be a drunk to get it . . . or maybe just drunk.

I went over to the pay phone when I first got here and tried to call him. Although I promised myself never to look for him again, I broke down finally—because between books and drinks, there's only him in my head, like one of those melodies where you only know half the words. I called him without thinking about it, like I had done so many times before, and him always on the other end, and pretty soon, he would be with me.

I called the gas station where he *used* to work 'cause I can't call his house, but apparently he's not giggling there anymore. The guy that answered couldn't tell me anything. High turnover in those places is all the consolation he could give me.

Where do you think my boy went? Fired, most likely. Left town, maybe? I doubt it. He's not ready for that kind of wandering, the kind of wandering his soul takes when he's alone and the kind of wandering loving me gave his imagination. Unless I really underestimated him.

Well, see, in the beginning he seemed very cool about my life. The fact that I had not been with a man since college, just women . . . one woman mostly. Considering himself a sensitive progressive politically conscious self-defined young male of color—*of course* he was cool about my life, he said. How could he not be, he insisted.

But that didn't stop him from jumping on top of me the first night we were alone, did it?—when he came over to my place with the excuse to drop off a copy of Neruda's *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* that he bought in Mexico where he lived for a semester as an exchange student.

A bright young man, he was. Is. A bright splendid ray in my life. But like Picasso said, "When you come right down to it, all you have is your self. Your self is a sun with a thousand rays in your belly. The rest is nothing." But for a while, he was all mine. Mio. Mio. Mio.

Then his brothers started ragging him about running around with a lesbian—or worse, a bisexual, nothing more shady or untrustworthy (except for a liberal)—who plays soccer and who knows how to do her own tune-ups and oil change. And his mother, about me being a woman with a past. And his father, about me being an independent businesswoman, and what could he teach an older woman?

As if my loverboy were not tormenting himself well enough

on his own day and night over all this as it was. Once he was reading a book by a male psychologist that talked about the history of goddess worship and said that in early times the pig and cow represented the female and were considered powerful deities. So one night we were sleeping and his body gave a great jerk and we both woke up. He told me, "I was dreaming that I was at home in the kitchen and I was telling my brothers that a pig was after me . . . and suddenly this huge pig leaped right through the window at me . . . and I jumped!"

Well, of course it didn't take a genius to figure out who the pig was but I was pretty impressed by his metaphorical interpretation of what I was in his life. He was cool about us for a while, as I said, although he did spend the first months doing some hard drinking over it. Then he sobered up so that he could sort it all out with a clear head, he said.

And then he left.

I went on with my business without missing a beat. You know, I got the store to run. And I spoke at a pro-choice rally last weekēd. I started dating a woman I met some time back who had asked me to go out with her before, but I was too busy being in love with an existentialist Catholic pseudo-poet manito fifteen years younger than me to have noticed even Queen Nefertiti herself gliding by on the shoulders of two eunuchs. ¡Jijola! Was I cruisin' for a bruisin'—*¿o qué?*

I stopped drinking too. You know? For about a week. I couldn't take the hangovers, I told my new friend, who was already frowning pretty seriously on the extent of my alcohol consumption. "You drink too much," she told me at the end of our first date as she walked me to my door. Then she turned around and left me standing there feeling bare-assed with my drunkenness showing and my broken heart, which I would not admit to no matter what. Like everybody, she comes from

a dysfunctional family and all that brings up too much stuff for her, she said.

But the funny thing was that when I stopped drinking, I didn't feel any better about him, but I did feel worse about her. I just took a good, hard, sober look at her one day and thought, who wants someone around who's gonna be telling you about yourself all the time? Especially when you haven't asked her for her opinion in the first place.

So I told her last Sunday that we were gonna have to be just friends and we talked about it for a while on the phone (I didn't have it in me to tell her to her face) and she said, "Fine, I understand."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. After we hung up I went out. I came here, naturally, and around closing time I made it back home, seeing cross-eyed and hardly able to find the keyhole to get my key in the door when I jumped back and would have screamed like a banshee except that nothing came out of my mouth I was so scared by something moving suddenly out of the darkness coming right at me. And there she was. She had been sitting on the front porch all night waiting for me.

Now, I ask you: Is there justice to this life at all? Or maybe the question should be: Is life even supposed to make sense? Or maybe we shouldn't bother trying to figure it out, just go about our business tripping over it like that crack in the sidewalk that sends you flying in an embarrassing way and when you look back to see what tripped you, and everybody's looking at you, there's nothing there.

I mean, I have been half out of my mind since I said goodbye to my loverboy and I ain't heard nor seen hide nor hair of him since; and meanwhile this woman, whom I forgot the moment I hung up the phone saying goodbye, is convinced that God has put her on this planet for the sole purpose of rescuing me from myself!

Yeah, you heard right just now. I know I said earlier that he left me. But it was me who suggested we not see each other anymore. I mean, it was just a suggestion, right? A damn good one I thought at the time, driven by my self-respect as I am, since he had just told me that he was gonna take a trip and travel around South America with a college friend of his, and didn't know exactly when we'd see each other again. So I decided to give him a head start on feeling what it was to not see me anymore and said I was gonna be pretty busy myself and as of that moment didn't know when I could see him.

Well, let me tell you how it was with us. We had done all the hokey things people in love do. We stayed up in bed for hours after making love, just talking, confessing all our childhood traumas to each other; we cried together about a lot of things. We went to the zoo, the movies; we took walks and had picnics. We even kissed in the rain, making out in the downpour like nobody's business.

Which of course, it wasn't. He said to me once, "You are the kind of woman who deserves to be kissed in front of everybody."

We had only one fight in all those months. I don't remember what stupid thing started it, but the next thing I know I threw a cushion at him that must've been tearing already because it hardly had an impact and there was fluff all over the place like it was snowing in the room. Well then, he throws a cushion at me. And before you know it, we're laughing and pounding each other with almohadas destripas, a flurry of feathers and fluff all over the room.

That's the way it was with us. A lot of laughs. A lot of good times. It's real hard to find someone to laugh with, you know?

Like, you see those two guys still sitting there in the dark? Now they're not smooching anymore. In fact, it looks like they're a little pissed off at each other. Who knows why? I

was sitting here since before they came in and never once did those two laugh with each other. They came in, sat down without a word, and as soon as the one got the other a drink, they started making out. Now, they're mad at each other.

But those two will probaby grow old together because they really know how to be mad at each other, while me and my loverboy who didn't have a bad moment together have already gone up in smoke—with the force of burning copal and all the professed tragedy of *La Noche Triste*—succumbing to our destiny. Between the sun and poverty there was us for a little while.

Well, someone had to take my lunch away. I don't mind admitting it. I hurt Rosie pretty bad after being with her all our adult lives, practically. I just fell out of love with her and even out of like, since we fought so much toward the end. Actually, I know by then that she was seeing that woman who she ran off to Las Cruces with. But she would never admit to that. I couldn't prove it, but I knew it in my heart—the little emaciated excuse for a heart I had left when she took off. But I can't say I blame her for leaving since it wasn't happening with us anymore.

Anyway, I don't really know why I'm telling you about Rosie. That's all over with. But it's like the one who matters is too hard to talk about. I can't talk about it without thinking I look ridiculous—like the classic jilted older woman. Of course it wasn't going to work out. *I* knew that. *He* knew that. And his family didn't help it any either. But even so. Somewhere in the middle of all its fatality, *we*, me, him, even his mother, who was busy having Masses said for her son's salvation—and I'm not putting down his mother either, in case you ever run into him and tell him any of this—*she* knew that what we had was indelible.

I'm gonna stop drinking. This time not because someone

is shaming me out of it. And not because I can stand to go to bed at night thinking of him or waking up alone remembering waking up with him. But because it doesn't help anymore.

I'm gonna stop torturing myself in all the ways that I've been doing; I'll even stop playing all those Agustín Lara records he brought over—for us to make love to. And we did, over and over again.

I saw Agustín Lara perform in Mexico City when I was a kid. Did you know that? He was gaunt and very elegant. My mother was swooning. I was just a little kid, so I was just there. But when I mentioned it to my loverboy, he gave me the sign of *la bendición*—implying that I was among the blessed to have laid eyes on the late, great, inimitable saint of Mexican music:

Santa, santa mía, mujer que brilla en mi existencia . . . His saint he called me, his saint and his treasure. His first and only love.

I've been thinking about renting the storefront next to my bookstore and extending my business to include a café. You know, café latte, avocado-and-sprout croissant sandwiches, and natural fruit drinks. I think this town is ready for a place like that. Maybe I'll exhibit local artists there, not that there are too many good ones around. But there are a few who are going places—I'll get them to show in my establishment before they do . . .

I think he already split town with his friend; he's probably somewhere in Veracruz at Carnival at this very moment—having a great old time. Well, at least for his sake, I hope so.

You think that maybe he misses me a little bit?

Probably the saddest boy in Mexico right now, you say?

I hope so.

Let me tell el compadre over there to send those two unhappy lovers a couple of beers, on me. There's something

insupportable about being pissed with the one person on this planet that sends your adrenaline flowing to remind you that you're alive. It's almost like we're mad because we've been shocked out of our usual comatose state of being by feeling something for someone, for ourselves, for just a moment.

He made me feel alive, cliché or not. Drunk or sober. If he ever finds out I told you all this, he'll really be furious. I guess he felt like he was living in a glass bowl with me. Not that I'm not discreet, but everyone in town seems to know me, or at least think that they do. But I like my privacy, too, you know? Mis cosas son mis cosas. I just had to talk to somebody about it. Been carrying it around inside me like a sin, a crime, like that guy in *Crime and Punishment*. And it wasn't like that at all—far from it.

Anyway, I haven't used any names, in case you didn't notice, not even yours—even though people'll figure it out soon enough. And everybody already knows who I am. I run the only bookstore in town that deals with the question of the soul. All roads sooner or later will lead you there.

▼ WHO WAS JUANA GALLO?

They even named a drink after her. It's made the same as a margarita, except instead of tequila, you use mezcal. That's because mezcal is the official drink of Zacatecas—her hometown, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, United States of Mexico. Mezcal is also made from the cactus, like the tequila. Very smooth. But of course, it always comes down to a question of taste.

And who was Margarita? I don't know. But I know who Juana Gallo was and if you have the time and with your gracious permission, of course, I will tell you. I am the only one who can. I am the only one left who knew her.

Yes, I know, they made a movie named after her, of course, years ago now. You know what they say, if not for the Revolution of 1910 there would have been no material to build a movie industry on in Mexico. But that movie has nothing to do with Juana Gallo—the real one. Nothing at all. Although María Felix was quite good in the role of an anti-Porfirista soldier. That woman (woman I say, but with nothing but respect—after all, señoras in those days were plenty, while