

THE
Wedding

A NOVEL



MARY HELEN PONCE

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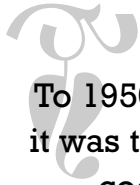


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To 1950s guys and chicks who remember what it was to be "hep to the jive:" dress sharp, drive cool cars, and dance till they dropped.



Part I

Blanca

Blanca Muñoz had known Sammy-the-Cricket most of her life. He was just one of the local guys, a nondescript dude that hung around Main Street with his buddies, smoking Lucky Strikes while trying to look tough and waiting for something to happen. She didn't think him handsome, but he wasn't that ugly either. His thin face was dotted with pockmarks from a childhood bout with *sarampión*. His dark, slanted eyes, like those of a Japanese, gave him a sinister look.

From Lucy, Blanca heard glowing reports about the guy called Cricket—and how he could fight. Since Lucy liked to exaggerate, Blanca paid no attention. For one, Cricket was not among her circle of friends, as was Tudi (who dated Sally). He was much older than her friends, all of 22! Worse, folks said he was a pachuco who carried a knife in his socks! He was always with the Tacones, whom the cops hated with a passion. It was said half the guys had, at one time or other, been in trouble with the law.

It was a fact: the police were biased toward Mexican Americans—and Blacks. The only time they treated brown-skinned guys with respect was during the war when a contingent of dark Puerto Ricans were housed near Taconos; it was not patriotic to round them up, so the cops steered clear

of them. White folks who ran stoplights or made illegal turns were ignored, but the coppers preyed on gangs like the Tacones and the Planchados, whom they picked up on “suspicion” of one thing or another, and held for 72 hours, until a relative, roused late at night, met bail.

The bailbondsmen did a thriving business. It took forever for poor folks to pay them back. Once *la chota* busted the *vatos*, they confiscated their cars, towed them off to a local garage that also fared well. Although uneducated, the girls in Taconos were leery of dating men whose chances of camping out at *la* county were high.

Blanca vowed not to get mixed up with a zoot-suiter, a guy with a record, who could never get a steady job. Her Tío Ernie (a former pachuco and ex-con) drilled her: “Stay clear of guys in drapes; they smoke weed and booze. They’re nuthin but trouble—and I oughtta know. So listen to the voice of experience.”

“But drapes *are* the style,” Blanca protested. “All the guys wear em.”

“Well, that’s all I gotta say. Just remember me when you . . .”

The first time Blanca thought of Cricket as a potential *novio* was the summer she turned seventeen. She had recently dropped out of school and was working in a ceramic factory that, according to her, paid peanuts. She hated everything about it: the constant smell of wet clay and the damp floor, but as Lucy often reminded her, at least it was a job. On weekends she went dancing with her friends. Dressed in the draped dresses (with huge shoulder pads) that were the rage, and with her hair in a pompadour, eyelashes thick with Maybelline, Blanca and her friends hitched rides with whomever, to the Los Angeles dance halls. The Zenda Ballroom was a favorite. If the Tacones weren’t around, the girls had to settle for a local dance, which they hated.

Tacones chicks disliked guys they considered too square. *Santuchos*, who went to church on Sunday and drove their mothers to the store, were seen as more than boring. According to Lucy, “them *vatos* not only dress like squares, they drive cars with no class. Gads!” In the worst category were those who either didn’t know or care to know jive, or pachuco talk, a combination of Spanish and English that often made sense only to the guys. When Tudi referred to his new shoes as just that, the guys made fun of him for days. “These here are *calcos*, dummy,” screeched Cricket, as he gave Tudi a playful punch. “Man, you are so lame,” chortled Frankie, as he polished the brass knuckles he was never without. After that, Tudi tried speaking slang, but told Sally, “It don’t sound right to me.”

One June night Blanca had second thoughts about going out with Lucy and Sally, her best friends, both of whom lived up the street. She felt a cold coming on.

But Lucy urged her to make the effort.

“You gotta go, man!”

“Yeah?”

“*Simona*, all the cute guys are gonna be there! Even from Horcasitas!”

“Gosh! Do we know any of em?”

“Neh, but they drive cool cars. Come on, start getting ready.”

“Okie dokie!”

Blanca took her time getting ready—she wanted to look picture-perfect. The pompadour she took such pains with was at least four inches high; it was held in place with bobby-pins and green Wave Set from the Five & Dime. When the clerk wasn’t looking, tubes of Tangee lipstick found their way into Blanca’s pocket.

She first coated her face with Max Factor pancake makeup (she liked the lighter shades), then slathered Maybelline on her eyelashes. With a steady hand she penciled a curved line over her shaved eyebrows; it often melted when she perspired. She added Tangee Red to her wide mouth, and just a tiny bit on her cheeks. Last of all she dusted her face with powder to “set” the makeup. It would not do to have her eyebrows smear while dancing.

Maybe tonight I’ll meet a nice guy, she sighed, blotting her wide lips with toilet tissue. Just maybe I’ll be lucky and find a guy who ain’t been in the can and has a steady job. Like Tudi. Sally’s lucky to have him as her guy. He always buys her nice presents and never cusses in front of her. As for Lucy, she only cares if a guy dresses sharp and is hep, even if he doesn’t have a pot ta piss in. She smiled at her reflection, satisfied with how she looked.

The dance, celebrating a birthday, took place at Salón Parra, a freshly painted wooden building tucked in a remote part of Taconos, far from the church, yet close to Main Street. Wedding dances and private parties took place there. Its owner, Señor Parra, a mild-mannered, church-going man of medium height, with a slight paunch and thinning gray hair, was an astute businessman. He went out of his way not to anger the local zoot-suiters, most of whom he hated and, given the option, would have run out of town. During a fight he never called the cops but looked the other way. He knew the Tacones got even with “stoolies,” who ratted to the cops. It was said, anyone who put the finger on a Tacón had better watch out.

Once, on a dare, Cricket slashed the tires on a police car while the officer was inside the hall settling an argument. Although Señor Parra witnessed the crime, he said *nada*. At all times he remained calm, thankful he had demanded a rental fee in advance. He replaced shattered windows and

broken chairs (which were insured) on a yearly basis. What Señor Parra did best was mind his own business—which is why the dance hall was booked solid throughout the year.

The night of the dance Blanca, Lucy and Sally met their friends Rosie and Josie at the corner. In their three-inch heels they sauntered down the street, across a dusty field (where dirt got on their shoes), and on to Main Street. Once inside the hall, they stopped at the bar to sip Singapore Slings, considered a sophisticated drink, and to take stock of things. As befitted her rank as the most hep, Lucy pointed out guys she liked, both single and married. Sipping her drink, she examined what the other girls wore, then gave an evaluation.

“See Sadie over there? She’s worn that same dress to at least three parties! Man, somebody oughta tell her to change it. And look who just came in! That’s Fish! He asked me out once, but he’s not cool.” Lucy flexed her fingers to better show off the purple tinge of her fingernails.

“Who says he isn’t cool?” Sally liked to challenge Lucy.

“I say so, that’s who.” Lucy glared at Sally. How dare Sally question her taste!

Just then the band began to play. Blanca stepped in between her snarling friends and started to swing her hips. She could hardly wait to dance!

Gato Cortez & His Cats was the most popular group in town. They knew the latest love songs, *boleros*, and *corridos*, even the mambo, a dance imported from Cuba that was difficult to dance. Few in Taconos dared to mambo. Not even Skippy, the sharp leader of the Planchados, knew its intricate steps, which called for a series of turns and twitching of the hips. At first Gato played the basics, among them “Blue Moon” and “Prisoner of Love.” Once he saw that

folks were in a dance mood, he was in his element: the dance floor filled with guys and gals dressed to beat the band.

Throughout the night Blanca danced with different fellows. Now and then she and Lucy danced together, but only if Lucy got to lead. They passed the time doing the boogie-woogie, sipping whiskey sours, and sizing up guys decked out in the latest *tacuchis*, as the Tacones called suits. Tonight, pin-stripe suits with wide shoulders and draped pants were mandatory. Shirts with French cuffs were also in style, as were black shoes with thick heels.

Then, as the band took its final break, all hell broke loose. The fight began when the Planchados, undetected in the dark night, cruised by the dance hall. As they turned the corner on Main, they slung beer bottles at the Tacones standing outside the hall. One hit Sapo, who was smoking a Lucky Strike; another barely missed Tudi, talking with Sally. Sapo, who was quick, picked up a rock and hurled it at the retreating car, a low-slung blue Ford with gleaming white walls. It was a direct hit! The sound of splintered glass filled the air. The Ford came to a screeching halt, the driver slumped in the front seat. The Planchados, stuck inside the stalled car screeched obscenities. Their screams, and those of bystanders, turned into a cacophony of sound.

The commotion was heard inside the hall. Within minutes the doors opened. Out poured Cricket, Topo, Frankie and Paulie, nicknamed Pan Tostado because he was as dark as burnt toast (or as Cricket put it, blacker than the Ace-of-Spades). They ran to the stalled car, yanked out Los Planchados, dragged them to the parking lot, and began to punch away.

When Blanca and Lucy saw the guys run out the door, they slammed their drinks on the bar, crushed cigarettes with their shoes, and dashed to the parking lot. They elbowed

their way to the front of the crowd and began to egg on the Tacones.

“Knock em out”

“¡Dale en la madre!”

“Watch it! Here comes *la chota!*”

With one arm looped around Lucy’s waist, a fascinated Blanca stood mesmerized by the Tacones, now trading punches. “Gosh, what a really good fight,” Blanca screamed. “Man alive!” She was more impressed when she saw there existed a code-of-honor among the pachucos: They fought one-on-one, rarely ganging up on one guy.

“Ye gads!” gushed Blanca, “What a cool fight!”

When she saw Cricket in a tight clinch with Skippy, the leader of the Planchados, she could barely take her eyes off him. She was captivated by the way Cricket dodged in and out, waiting to connect with his victim! Just like Joe Louis! Gosh, thought Blanca, Cricket sure can throw a punch. Just like the champ!

In the dim light, Cricket appeared graceful, his lithe body swaying to and fro with the punches. Blanca was caught up in the excitement. She saw Tudi trading punches with a short husky Planchado now against a wall.

“Man alive! The guys sure gots lotta guts,” cried Blanca, as she squeezed against Lucy. “They gotta win.” Mostly she stared at Cricket, her eyes about to pop, mouth agape. Blanca Muñoz liked what she saw.

“The guys from Taconos are so good. Just lookit that,” screeched Blanca to a bored Lucy. “Just lookit that!”

“Ain’t that good. I’ve seen better fights,” said Lucy as she lit a new cigarette.

Topo was an expert with chains, Frankie preferred to use brass knuckles, and Sapo who worked as a plumber, used a lead pipe. Tudi used his bare fists. Only Paulie lacked a specialty. What Paulie did best was look out for the cops, which

is why when sirens were heard, the fight moved behind the parking lot.

When Blanca spotted Cricket again, he was still sparring with Skippy, of the peroxide-yellow hair. In a sea of dark heads, he was hard to miss. Just then as two guys locked in a clinch fell at her feet, Lucy pushed Blanca to safety—which is why she failed to see Cricket perform his solo dance, stomping on Skippy just like a cricket. When next she looked, a bloody Skippy struggled to rise, only to fall back again. The fight ended when everyone was punched out.

The Planchados, their tailor-mades reeking of sweat and blood, took off in the splintered Ford as the cops came roaring down the street. The Tacones who could still walk shook off the parking-lot soot, broke out a bottle of Hill & Hill. After the disappointed cops left, the Tacones strutted back to the dance hall, Cricket in the lead. The dance continued as though nothing had happened, yet their rumpled clothes spoke volumes. And although Cricket didn't ask Blanca for a dance, she could hardly take her eyes off him. "Gosh! Whatta he-man. ¡Hijole! ¡Qué vato tan suki!"

After that, when she heard bad things about Cricket, Blanca defended him. She felt that, regardless of what others—including her Tío Ernie—said, Sammy-the-Cricket was an okay guy, a clean fighter who never carried weapons, as did Frankie and Sapo. No one had ever seen Cricket with anything resembling a knife. So there! Forget what Lucy said of Cricket and his nickname! That night, as she lay in bed, she played with the buttons on her faded nightgown. Everything is gonna change once I get to know him, she sighed. I just know he's the guy for me. Forget Lucy!

The next day, being Sunday, Blanca took the long, long way to church, one that went past the railroad tracks—and Cricket's house. Before leaving, she gave herself a quick sponge bath: scrubbed her neck and armpits, and then lay-

ered on Mum deodorant. She checked her legs for the cuts made while shaving. She smeared on more Max Factor pancake #2 to hide *las ojeras* that now rimmed her warm brown eyes. She traced eyebrow pencil over the eyebrows she regretted shaving (on Lucy's advice), which refused to grow back.

In a panic—it was getting late—she rummaged through her clothes. She rejected them all, including the outfit worn the night before; it would never do. Cricket had already seen her in that! She chose the pink jersey dress in the back of the cardboard closet. The dress had wide shoulders and a draped skirt; it had not been seen by her “honey,” as she now thought of Cricket. The material clung to her generous hips and full bust. “I wanna look so fine,” Blanca sang, as she squeezed into the dress. She hummed along with The Ink Spots, a favorite trio, singing on the radio kept at full blast. I want Cricket to know I'm a hep chick!

She stared at her reflection in front of the dresser mirror, turned this way and that. There was no time to re-roll her pompadour.

I look tired, Blanca frowned, but the dance last night was sure fun. Ummm!

Last of all she hitched up her seamed stockings, then dashed out the door. As she neared Cricket's house, she reached for her plastic compact. With the tip of her finger, she extracted lipstick from a tube, painted a red line on her full mouth, then slowed her pace. Gosh! Cricket was nearby!

As luck, or fate would have it, Blanca later conceded, Cricket was just then getting up. He slept late most weekends, as his job at the garbage plant and partying kept him out most nights. But that warm morning, when he looked out the bedroom window and spotted Blanca coming up the street, he splashed water on his sleepy face, ran a comb through his greasy duck tail, dressed, then walked to the

street. He was curious about the hefty girl who the night before had gushed all over him. Cricket had a high opinion of himself. Was he not the unofficial leader of the Tacones? “I better give this poor girl a break,” he smirked as he approached Blanca Muñoz, “or she won’t leave me alone.”

“Oh, hi, Sammy! How ya feelin?” murmured Blanca, eyelids fluttering up and down. “How ya feel after last night?”

“*De a todas.*” Cricket fell in step with the husky girl in the slinky dress. Behind the dark glasses, his bloodshot eyes squinted against the bright sun. “Did ya watch the fight? *Wachaste el fighte?*”

“Yeah! It was so cool! Did ya gets hurt?”

“Neh.” Then remembering who he was, Cricket switched to pachuco jive. “*Nelson dijo Wilson.*”

Cricket’s eyes gleamed with pride; his hawk-like nose sniffed at the air. Here was a chick that knew a good fight when she saw it.

“Neh, nuthin happened ta me. I took care of Skippy real good. He ain’t gonna mess with me for a while.”

“I know! Gosh, ya sure know how to fight,” gushed Blanca as she smoothed her dress. “Just like Joe Louis!” Lips glistening with Tangee Red, she smiled at her honey. “Ya fight just like the champ,” she added, adjusting her limp pompadour. “*Como el champ.*”

As they crossed the street, Cricket glanced down at the chubby girl walking alongside. She ain’t so bad. Just a dumb broad who don’t know much bout nuthin. But she’s got some nice tits. Maybe I’ll give her a break. As they approached the corner, Cricket spotted Tudi’s blue Chevy. Tudi was driving Sally to church!

Cricket flexed his bony shoulders, adjusted the dark glasses. “See ya later, *esa*. I mean Blanche.” He had to get away from her before Tudi saw him and assumed Cricket was going to church too! A disappointed Blanca moved aside to let him pass. Once more Cricket secured his boppers, then quickly moved away from the girl in the pink dress. If the guys saw him walking with a chick on a Sunday morning (of all days), they would accuse him of being hung up on the chick, tease him for days. I gots my pride, he reasoned. No chick gonna haul me off ta church. He straightened his shoulders, sneaked a look back at a retreating Blanca, then pranced to Main Street.

After that, Blanca and Cricket were seen cruising the streets of Taconos on Sunday afternoons, along with other couples, all dressed up with nowhere to go. Sometimes they took a chance and went to the movies in San Cristobal, where Cricket made sure he sat next to the aisle. In case the Planchados spotted him, he could make a fast getaway.