

Edith

copyright 1997 by Candelaria Silva

If you hear on Monday, that I'd been walking in the park late on a Saturday night and was found beaten or dead, what would you think?

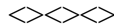
Would you think something like, what was she (meaning me) doing in the park that late at night?

I'll bet that's what you would do, turn your grief, your anger to me before progressing to the perpetrator.

What a stupid thing to do, you might think. She, meaning me, was always odd. I told her not to walk at night anywhere, let alone in the park.

Would you blame me because you really had felt a foreboding of my imminent demise? Would you search for an explanation to make you feel safe: that if I (meaning you) don't do what she did (walk in the park alone at night), I will avoid the harm that befell her?

Would you consider me brave or daring or ordinary? Would you see my walk as a refusal to burrow in my home, isolated and entertained electronically? Would anyone defend my right as a woman, as a human, as a walker, to want to walk in the late night air to clear my head, to wrap myself in solitude, to enjoy anonymity, to exercise my right to the park?



Edith was becoming my friend. She was a hairstylist; the lone black professional in a white salon that was near my house. She had only recently moved to town and was in the process of building a clientele. She'd divorced her husband, left her home and salon, taking her

skills, her three children, and painful memories that used to cause her eyes and mind to turn inward during our long conversations.

We used to talk about ex's: ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, ex-pectations, ex-penses. We both loved to dance. We both liked our hair long: mine grown, hers purchased ("it's on my head, so it belongs to me" she flipped), and our hair colored (mine darkly to hide the gray; her's light blond to accent the freckles and bronze coloring she'd been blessed or cursed with (depending on your point-of-view)).

She was short and shapely with a pixyish nose and the kind of bravado in her carriage many short women have. It was as if her personality strived to give her the extra stature her legs couldn't.

She always dressed as if she were coming from or going to aerobics or jogging or tennis - short skirts, socks and sneakers - her hair always bronze, long and smooth (never frizzy, not responsive to weather like mine).

She bought a wax kit when I mentioned wanting to get my brows shaped. She taught me how to keep my style between visits. She started Sunday hours to accommodate the schedules of her clients. She worked seven days a week yet, like me, she went out dancing every Saturday night, after checking on the kids, fixing dinner, and assigning one of the two oldest to stay with her baby girl until she got home, usually by 3 or 4a.m.

We always talked about getting together to go dancing. We'd been to the same clubs, "30-Something" and "The Max" on the east side. We never did get around to doing it although we ended up at the same club on the same night shortly before I left for my vacation.

She was with her "girls." They were all stylishly coiffed and sexily dressed: heels, fishnet, spandex, leather, perfume and attitude. They were out for the night and having big fun.

The Electric Slide was in its second year and Edith was leading the charge with a new set of steps she'd brought with her from Chi-town. That's the image I carry with me now:

Edith in front

Edith swaying hips and flinging hair

Edith, the guide

Edith in control, irreverent, smiling, flirting, dancing...

"You dance pretty fly there now, girl." She came up and hugged me, slapped five, introduced me to her friends.

"Wanna come with us over to the East Side?"

"Naw, thanks," I declined. "I gotta get home early tonight. Catch you-all next time."

I don't know why I didn't go with them. Truth was, I wanted to hang out all night, but my cousin, who'd driven, was acting stupid and "wanted to go home!" Truth was that Edith and her friends looked a little wilder in their style than I liked to be associated with: the "mothafuckas" and "bitches" were flowing from their mouths. That just wasn't my style. Edith and I alone, maybe. But then, I'd never heard her cuss like that before. A crowd of rowdy women, some of whom had already sized up where I was coming from with my diction (which often set me apart) and my bearing (from the military-inspired instructions on how to walk from my parents who'd both served in the Armed Forces) meant that the experience wouldn't have been fun. I'd have either had to act the fool too, or would have been an outcast for the evening.

I missed my next appointment with Edith, the last one before I went on my summer vacation.

A week after I got to North Carolina, one month after we'd dance *The Electric Slide*...How well I remember that slide and Edith: her hands waving, her hair flipping, her body

in front, bending, hips swaying, fingers touching the ground, calling out steps with her girls and the rest of us who could catch on, my sister called me: “Edith’s been murdered.” Said just like that. She never did know how to lay the groundwork for any kind of bad news.

“What...How...When?” I was shocked but not, for some reason surprised. Not much surprises in these last years of the 20th century.

Her body was found beaten, bound, partially burned, some dismemberment, on railroad tracks on the East side, only a few blocks away from the club where she’d last been see. Oh, yeah, and she’d been raped.

“I always knew she was kind of wild,” my sister said.

I flew into her through the glass fibers that connected us. “How’d you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, you know, the East Side and all,” she sniffed.

“I’ve gone to that club, too, plenty of times,” I said.

“She must have left with someone. It must have been a stranger,” my sister said.

“What was in the newspaper?” I asked.

There was no newspaper account until two weeks had passed and it was sketchy, just the facts of the murder, no facts on Edith’s life. Black women whose bodies are found murdered on the east side or anywhere for that matter, don’t get much press.

“Did you hear about Edith?” became the greeting between my relatives and friends who called over the next few weeks. We’d all been her customers.

“You’re got to be so careful these days,” my mother kept saying, sighing, judging.

Mother, I thought, but did not say, Edith *was* careful. She was no dumb-bunny, spring chicken. She carried mace, she was strong/fit. Mother, I have been careful, chosen carefully,

chosen someone long known and approved by you and gotten into trouble. I've been forced to fuck and been lucky that they haven't been a murderer or in a murdering mood. Mother, I have also been reckless: I have hitched rides based on the friendliness or familiarity of faces and nothing bad has happened – I have been taken straight to my destination.

Mother, family, friends, we circle what we knew of Edith's life, gathering like vultures to pick apart the bones we have to her story. If we can find blame with something she did, a decision she made, a way she walked, a place she went, we can avoid her fate. We can be safe. Murder will not happen to us or ours.

It wasn't your fault that you were murdered, Edith. It wasn't your fault. Even if it was a stranger. Even if it was someone you thought a friend. Even if it was your ex-husband who was picked up for questioning by the police.

It wasn't your fault.

There's nothing wrong with being a woman, dancing for release, proud of the body you've worked for, longing for a man, looking for a partner, walking wild, working hard. I will not let your vicious death put your life on trial.

It could have been any of us, Edith. It certainly could have been me.

I keep the card on which you wrote your name and home number: "call me sometime," you'd said, welcoming into your life without reserve. It's tucked into a corner of my mirror with flowers, perfume and jewelry. Every Saturday that I go out, I pass this monument and think of you.

###