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Bayaminiña

From the distance, if one went by its colors, it was a snappy little cart parked on the corner of 116th street. It had blue, red, and yellow stripes, and the box on top—full of cod fritters, blood sausage, and banana fritters—had glass on all four sides. From close, however, you could see that its snappiness was no more than a front that disguised the wear and tear and the rot which were consuming it from the wheels up to the push bar. On a piece of tin nailed to the front you could read in red, shaky letters: BAYAMINIÑA.

But no one paid attention to the cart. The crowd was watching the argument between the vendor and the policeman. The black women heading toward Lenox Avenue stopped in their rapid, ass-swinging tracks to see how it would all end. The customers in the nearby bar neglected their drinks and the TV set to follow the altercation through the glass window. And curiosity even turned heads in passing cars and busses.

"I pay no more," the vendor was saying, tense. "I pay last year other fine . . ."

The policeman only shook his head as he finished scribbling in his notebook.

"This has nothing to do with last year, buddy."

"I got no money. I no pay more."

"And the fine you'll have to pay next year will be a bigger one, if you don't get rid of that thing there."

"You're killing me," said the vendor. "Why you do this?"

"The Department of Health"

"Okay, you gimme a job an I"

". . . is after you guys."

"I have to eat," said the vendor. "Don't gimme no fine, gimme a job."

"I have nothing to do with that," said the policeman. He put the summons in one of the vendor's pockets and added: "You keep that . . . And remember to go to court."

The vendor took out the summons, furious, and tried to read it. But he could understand no more than the numbers.

"All right, break it up," the policeman said to the crowd. And to the vendor: "And you get going before I lose my patience."

The vendor turned to the school kids, slight and cinnamon-colored like him.

"These bastards," he said to them in Spanish. "Sia la madre dehtos policías!"

"C'mon," said the policeman. "Get the hell out of here." Suddenly the vendor bent over, picked up the rock which served as the cart's brake, and stood up again with it in his fist. His face was already crumpling with a conning sob.

"Gimme a job, saramabich!"

"You'd better get your ass out of this neighborhood before I throw you in jail!" said the policeman, not raising his eyes from the threatening fist while moving his hand to his gun holster.

The vendor hesitated, grimaced angrily, turned, and threw himself on the cart. Crash! went the panes and crack! the

wood. And he shrieked: "Gimme a job, saramabich, gimme a job!"

And the tin—clank! clank!—where you could still read BAYAMININA, turned dirty with blood, spattered with tears, and, freed from its nails, once again became a tin can.



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