Pia's Story

Edith Conner

I skipped along Broadway, wanting to run but stopping now and then to let my mother catch up. She was carrying my small suitcase, taking me to live with Pia. We'd walked a few blocks through our neighborhood where the buildings were mostly brown walk-ups, some four stories, some five, the streets alive with kids, boys playing stickball in the road -- there was almost no car traffic since no one who lived here or came here had a car -- and girls jumping rope on the sidewalk or playing potsy, a kind of hopscotch.

Mothers and grandmothers in flowery cotton housedresses, stockings rolled down around their knees, sat on the front steps of the buildings. They smoked and talked, usually complaining about their husbands and their landlords, except for a few righteous souls who bragged about how good their husbands were and how smart their children. You heard the same conversations in a consternation of accents -- mostly Spanish here but some Italian too and some Yiddish.

Eventually my mother and I turned a corner and suddenly were in another world. New York was like that then. Neighborhoods could change abruptly, on streets just around the corner from each other. Riverside Drive had only tall white elevator buildings with uniformed doormen out front and plants growing in big cement pots. You almost never saw kids in the street because there were playgrounds to keep their shouts and noise at a comfortable distance.

Pia was my mother's friend, improbably, one would think -- my mother, clinging to the middle-class standards and ambitions of her childhood but impoverished now and making a hard living in a downtown sweatshop – "I may be poor but I'm not trash" was her mantra -- and Pia, a rich South American, a complete hedonist.

Anyway, they were friends.

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My family and the people they knew best were Spanish-speaking immigrants from many countries -- from Venezuela and Spain like us, and from Cuba and Mexico, Argentina, Chile -- a group at once diverse and clannish, our numbers so small that we were invisible in the population -- most Americans seemed hardly to know we were there. The newcomers arrived in America, such a strange place to them, and gladly formed friendships from outside of their own caste.

Pia was, to put it euphemistically, past the first blush of youth, when I first knew her. She kept her age a secret but did acknowledge having two grown sons living in Uruguay.

"I was so young when I had them..."

Still quite beautiful, she was terribly afraid of growing old.

Even though she could afford to settle almost anywhere in New York, Pia spoke no English and so chose this place very near to Spanish speakers from whatever circumstance.

She didn't have to go to work every day, of course, and that, as well as where she lived and many other things, set her apart.

An insomniac, she slept whenever she felt like it, day or night.

"I don't need a clock or a calendar to tell me when I'm tired or what to do on which day," she proclaimed, and she was understood to be -- not boasting -- just independent, just Pia.

She didn't cook but sometimes, even in the middle of the night if that's when she got hungry, she'd boil some potatoes or a chicken. Mostly she just lived on take-out from a coffee shop on Amsterdam Avenue and pastries from The Fancy Bakery near Riverside.

Every afternoon she did an elaborate make-up with special attention to the huge, expressive eyes and she dressed in her expensive clothes, a tight corset pushing up her breasts to emphasize cleavage and the curves of her voluptuous figure, and she puttered around her apartment playing solitaire, reading the Spanish newspaper and drinking strong Spanish coffee, very hot, black, lots of sugar.

People liked Pia. They enjoyed dropping in after work to spend the evening with her and with each other. They told stories and traded harmless gossip. She served sweets and made them laugh. Sometimes they shook their heads and tut-tutted about her strange lifestyle. Some of them thought that was the way all rich people lived.

"Well, that's Pia for you," they'd finally agree, remembering some amusing thing she'd said or done.

Pia did cause chaos sometimes with her outlandish fixed opinions on just about everything, but she was candid and without malice so her antics were easily forgiven.

Two things Pia took very seriously. One was Romance. She was utterly in love with Love. Her daily life spoke of it, her apartment decorated for Love -- *El Amor* -- with fresh flowers, dim lights, perfumed pillowcases on her bed.

The second thing, Pia's preoccupation with youth and beauty, followed logically. She thought if she spent enough effort and money, she might never grow old and then Love might be forever possible.

"Don't forget Ninon," she admonished, referring to the fabled French courtesan. "She was so beautiful that even when she was quite old, every man in Louis' court was after her."

"Oh, Pia, how do you know that?" people asked.

"Everybody knows it," she'd answer indignantly."Besides, it just makes sense. You know? Without Beauty and Love, what good is life?" she'd ask.

End of argument. No one had an answer.

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The time I'm talking about is when I was nine, maybe ten, and I lived with Pia for a whole summer.

At home, life was hard for my mother and me and she paid a heavy price for giving up her dreams of a rich life. I knew about that because although she tried and did her best to hide the resentment she couldn't help feeling, it wasn't managed gracefully and I felt it. Too much was forfeited because of me. The grown-ups often -- too often -- reminded me that I'd better be a very good girl and do very, very well in school.

"Your mother works awfully hard for you. She sacrifices a lot."

My mother never actually spoke those words. That she thought them was always clear. I sometimes wondered if she thought I was worth it.

So she struggled with her guilt and tried to make it up to me with as many educational advantages as she could. Hence the private school, even when it meant we had to live with relatives or in a furnished room so she could pay the tuition.

The Academy of Notre Dame, which I attended, was an expensive private school on Convent Avenue, a Day School, but they took some boarding students. Rumor was that the nuns who taught there were all high society women. Maybe they were. They ran the place like a Finishing School for Well Brought-Up Young Ladies, starting with First Grade and on through High School, which was the end of formal education at that time for the majority of American women, even many wealthy girls.

We were offered all the usual academics plus religion, naturally, and French every day. A Madame Povich came once a week to pass out soft-soled leather sandals and teach us to prance around and wave our arms to music. She called it Modern Dance. The rules and intricacies of etiquette were heavily stressed and ongoing, presumably to get us ready to enter high society. Athletics were unimportant, usually squeezed in at odd times.

We wore little brown pleated uniforms and were required to call all the nuns "Ma Mere."

"If a thing is free," my mother would say, "how good do you think it can be? No, no. Private school is worth what it costs. You get a real education so you can be a real American, not just a poor foreigner."

I used to eavesdrop every chance I got in those days. Except for my school and her job, my mother and I went everywhere together. When she visited her friends on Sundays and on those evenings when she wasn't working, I'd sit in a corner of the room as quietly as possible, with my eyes lowered and a book on my lap, disguising my real activity of listening to them. Mostly they forgot I was there and talked freely.

I put together bits of conversations I overheard, careless comments, and I guessed even then that my mother's sacrifices came from a sense of duty, of moral rightness only, not from her heart. Because she believed that ultimately what matters is what you do, never mind worrying about whether you feel this way or you feel that way, I don't think she would have disputed what motivated her or made excuses for it.

But, getting back to that long-ago conversation my mother had with Pia, at some point I heard her hesitate.

"I don't know what to do about the child this summer during school vacation. My sister Amparo, who usually takes her, is going to spend two months this summer with the family in Caracas."

There was a pause. Pia suddenly had a look of discovery, of a person stumbling over something she wanted and hadn't even known she wanted.

"I'll take her. We'll have a good time."

My mother seemed both relieved and surprised. Pia was a good-time friend, not one who would go to the wall for you.

"Are you sure, Pia? She's a good girl but, you know. . ."

"Of course I'm sure. She'll be my little companion. We'll teach each other things."

My mother appeared to hesitate again, probably wondering nervously what Pia might teach me but need overcame doubt, finally, and she agreed.

I was ecstatic. Pia, so free and easy, she confidently ignored all the tribal taboos and just had a good time.

When my mother looked away for a moment, Pia gave me a big theatrical wink as though we were already secret allies.

The evening a few weeks later when my mother delivered me to Pia's apartment, she lectured me.

"Drink your milk. Bed by seven. Remember your manners."

And, "No coffee for her, Pia. It's bad for children."

Years later, when I recalled the way things were that summer, it came to me what it was that made it so special. Much would have been different, I would have been different, if not for that summer.

Even though things turned out the way they did.

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After my mother left, Pia brewed a pot of Spanish coffee and served us each a cup, hot, black, lots of sugar. I could hardly believe it, though I said nothing. At home, I begged and begged for coffee and it remained forbidden. Yet here it was in front of me.

Pia never explained why she did that with the coffee but as the evening went on we talked and talked, my chatter fueled by the caffeine, probably. She asked me about my school and my classmates, my favorite books, where I'd like to travel.

She told me about growing up in Caracas and seeing Europe with her husband, a career diplomat. Pia didn't talk down to me the way the others did, when they spoke to me at all. Every once in a while she'd interrupt herself.

"Don't you think so?" she'd ask. Or, "What do you think about that?"

And she didn't go on with her story until I told her what I thought.

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Soon I was mesmerized. Pia was my best friend, her preference in everything, my own. I loved her coffee, her apartment, her clothes, her looks and, most of all, our talks and our life together. She encouraged me to eat when I was hungry, sleep when I was tired. Sometimes she put make-up on me and said I was pretty, which I desperately wanted to believe since everybody else said I looked like my father -- always referred to as "that miserable good-for-nothing Spaniard" -- and what a shame it was I didn't look like my mother. They said she was beautiful, small, graceful and well-formed, with light brown wavy hair and amber cat's eyes.

Often Pia and I would go for walks with her dog, Joli, even inside a playground a few blocks away where a large sign said dogs weren't allowed.

"Rules, rules," Pia said and laughed boisterously when the angry park matron chased us out, with Joli barking and jumping, drunk with excitement.

Then we'd go and buy ice-cream cones -- one for Joli too.Pia knew how to live.

One thing didn't vary that summer, our first coffee of the day. When she served us, Pia cooled down a portion for Joli, put lots of sugar in it, and he slurped it up.

"His name means 'beautiful' in French, I told her.

"I know."

"I learned it in my school. They teach us French from the First Grade."

"Really? What else?"

"You mean besides arithmetic and history and catechism, things like that?"

"Yes. What else?"

"Oh, etiquette -- that's good manners -- and music and modern dance and other things they say are the social graces."

"That's good. You'll need to know those things when you grow up."

"I hope so. The school costs my mother a lot of money and it's why we're so poor, even though my mother says we're not. Otherwise how could I go to private school? Besides, she says when I'm grown up I'll have lots of money."

Then I said what was bothering me.

"I hope I will. Or else it won't be worth her having to work so hard."

"No, no. Don't say that. Never. You're worth it whether you get rich or not. You have your own value." Then an after-thought. "But I think you probably will be rich some day."

I really wanted to believe that too.

"But to get back to Joli," Pia said, "I give him coffee only at breakfast, just to get him started for the day. More than that makes him nervous."

In fact, Joli was always somewhat hysterical, what with the coffee, the bizarre diet -- he ate what we ate -- and the erratic agenda of our days. He barked and ran around in circles a lot, chasing his tail.

Some of the others in our group had taken puppies from the dog pound, called them Rex or Freddie or Joey, and taught them to bark and threaten strangers.

That wasn't Pia's style, of course. When her apartment was broken into, someone took her to a pet shop and she bought a pure-bred collie puppy, for protection. He was elegant enough to satisfy Pia and she named him Joli. Unfortunately, Joli wasn't very smart or easily trainable and he never learned to discriminate. He'd as likely as not give a joyous slobbering welcome to every salesman, repairman, probably even any hostile intruder. Pia did have reservations about the affection he lavished on everyone he could get near, but she forgave him, ignoring his meager intelligence because he was elegant and gentle.

So much for Joli. I was thriving as an Important Person.

Pia's husband, the traveling diplomat, sent her a generous check every month. I'd heard that because of the circumstances of their divorce -- what those were, no one knew -- he wasn't obliged to do that. It was a gesture.

"Maybe it's his way of keeping her happy in New York," people said, "away from wherever he is and where she would no doubt embarrass him."

"Listen," she assured everyone, "I'm a free spirit and he isn't. That's the whole of it. Except that he's a gentleman. But I know what I know and he takes care of me this way, with the money, because he still loves me."

"Well, excellent," I thought. "Much better than my mother's ex-husband, my miserable-good-for-nothing-Spaniard-absent-father who never sends any money."

Anyway, Pia was profligate with hers so it never lasted quite to the end of the month. The last few days we didn't visit The Fancy Bakery, we just ate what Pia cooked up in her barren kitchen, boiled chicken and potatoes. Then the check would come and she and I would go shopping. She always bought me something, a blouse, a book, candy. We'd take the downtown subway to Bloomingdale's to re-stock her stash of cosmetics and on these expeditions, I was her interpreter. She insisted that I translate every word exactly. As I did this, if my English version sounded too short, she'd quiz me to be sure I hadn't left out anything.

Typically, Pia never remembered, or bothered to save, the empty jars so we'd go up to the cosmetics counter and she'd call out, "Miss, Miss," to get the sales clerk's attention.

To me, "Please tell her that I want a night cream I buy here, a special one. Tell her it has the scent of an Arabian garden and it makes your skin feel like rose petals. Tell her."

The clerk would give me a funny look when I did, then examine the many jars and hand one to me.

Pia would look at it, shake her head and say, "No, that's not the one. Did you tell her everything I said?"

I'd tell the clerk again and eventually she'd find the one Pia recognized, the one that would drive a man crazy with Love, according to her.

"You're a wonderful interpreter," she'd say afterward, "the best. What will I ever do when you go back to school?"

I wished the summer would never end.

Another memory of Pia that still makes me smile when I think of it -- the English lessons. Pia had a gentleman friend, an American named Edward MacDougal, who called on her sometimes. People speculated about him. Did he

really come around to visit her? He didn't even speak Spanish. They didn't hint that Pia lied, exactly, but . . .

"You know how dramatic she can be," they said.

Myself, I believed. I knew.

Pia met Eddie MacDougal when her apartment was broken into. Someone called the police for her and related the details of the burglary to Eddie, one of the investigating detectives.

I caught a glimpse of him once, broad-shouldered and large, much bigger than the men in our group, very handsome, I thought. Pia was smitten instantly and urgently, the moment she met him, and even though they couldn't communicate much, not verbally anyway, romance blossomed.

Maybe the group wondered but the love affair didn't puzzle me any. Wasn't Pia glamorous and beautiful? So what if Eddie didn't speak Spanish? What about the role of Romance and *El Amor*? Love conquers all, I'd read somewhere, and here was a perfect example.

But Pia had set out to learn English. She started going to a class, then dropped out after a while.

"They teach us to say the book, the pencil, the chair, the table. . . That's all fine but I want to talk with Eddie about *El Amor*. You're a smart girl, you can teach me. All right?"

I eagerly agreed and we started the lessons.

I remember I was usually stretched out in the bathtub, an exotic floral scent in the air -- an Arabian garden, I wondered? Bubbles fill the room and I'm a princess. Pia is pacing the length of the hall that leads from the front of the apartment to the bathroom door.

"*Eddie, mi amor, te amo*," she intones.

I say, "Eddie, my love, I love you."

Up and down the hall, "Eddie, my love, I love you," over and over. Then back to the bathroom door.

"*Eddie, que guapo eres*."

"Eddie, you're so handsome. . . So handsome."

Every evening we reviewed the previous day's lesson and learned new endearments, overblown in English because polite Spanish is a very flowery language and Pia, as always and especially now, wanted everything translated word for word. So we practiced things like, "When you're with me, my heart is happy," and "You're always in my thoughts."

One day Pia told me she thought I needed rest, the special kind that comes in the early evening, just after the sun goes down -- something in the air,

she thought. It's true that most of the time people should just sleep when they're tired, but sometimes . . .

Even though at home I'd trained myself to stay awake in bed after I was sent there, in case I might overhear something interesting, that night I didn't keep myself awake. I'd do anything Pia wanted and I made myself sleep right through Eddie's visit.

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A problem came up for Pia that summer. Everywhere people said it looked as though we'd have a war. That would be World War II, called "the big one," and aliens had to register. You did this at your neighborhood post office and I went with her, as usual, to interpret.

We stood at the window and answered questions while the clerk wrote things on a form. Name. Address. Place of Birth. Date of Birth.

This last question made Pia turn silent.

Sensing the tension, I felt compelled to repeat it anyway but she just said "No."

I realize now she so feared aging that she couldn't confront the reality of it even to herself, even though it was right there on her passport. So she just refused to name it.

The clerk got cross and insisted and, again, I translated the demand.

"Tell the gentleman that I'm a law-abiding person. I never trouble anyone. I'm not a minor and I'm self-supporting. Why must I say the year I was born? It's rude. *Insolente."*

I told the clerk, but by then he was digging in his heels and repeated that she was required to answer every question and then swear to it and sign it.

"I have no time to waste," he groused.

I told Pia. She glared at him, took my hand and we left.

"It makes no sense. I ... will ... not."

That night there was some discussion of the incident among Pia's friends. They said she had to tell her birth date. She had to say it and then sign her statement, swearing to it.

"Don't be stubborn, Pia," they said. AIt's only the post office man, he won't tell anybody. He doesn't care how old you are."

"You never told them when you got divorced, but now they'll find out and you won't have diplomatic protection any more. They'll deport you back to Caracas when they find out," someone warned.

I thought about what she'd said, "I ... will ... not."

We never went back to the post office, Pia and I, and school started again before her registration deadline. I still don't know exactly how the crisis developed because soon after the calamitous post office incident, I was suddenly sent away to boarding school in Quebec.

For several nights, once I was in bed and my mother thought I was sleeping, she sat sewing nametags into my clothes. One night she dragged out a trunk and started putting my clothes into it. The next Sunday she told me I was going away in a few days to a wonderful school.

"You'll love it and you'll come home for a visit at Christmas."

That was that. No arguing with my mother.

I know how strange it must seem but I didn't ask her about it. We didn't talk, my mother and I, that is, we only spoke to each other when it was necessary, no chitchat. If I did ask about something or wanted to comment, she'd sigh.

"Questions, questions. You know I'm tired. Just let me be."

So I almost never asked any more. It wasn't animosity in our habitual silence, just the way we'd always been with each other. Anyway, that's why I wasn't around when Pia left.

From boarding school, in my weekly letters, I kept asking my mother how Pia was but she never answered the question. When I came home for Christmas, she finally told me. Pia had refused to complete the application and sign it. But the status of aliens was now precarious because of the looming war and Pia's refusal to cooperate started an inquiry into her residence here.

"It's just her stupid vanity," my mother said. "She made her stupid choice and they deported her."

At first I wouldn't accept that Pia was gone. Not without letting me know. She could have written me a letter, I thought. Why didn't she? Was she ever really my friend?

For a long time I raged silently, betrayed. Even longer, I grieved. Eventually, of course, as I grew to adolescence and began to have a life as something other than spectator, I forgot. Well, actually, I filed it away in my memory.

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Many years later, when I was a mother myself, the newspapers were full of stories about an earthquake in Caracas.

"I heard that Pia took in a little girl whose family perished," my mother told me.

That started me remembering Pia. In fact, I couldn't stop thinking about her and I saw that I'd never resolved the old conflict. I kept trying to figure things out. Maybe Pia thought that because logic, as she saw it, was so clear, the Immigration people would let her stay. Maybe they wore her down so that after a while she just gave up -- she could just as well live in Caracas as New York. I never knew, of course, no matter how hard I tried to remember our conversations, especially the ones right after the whole problem started and just before I went away, our exact words, where we were, what we were doing, everything.

After a while I came to see that Pia was a true friend and I understood how much she had enriched me. My mother gave up her dreams for me and I knew I owed her for that. Relatives bought me things and did things for me because they felt sorry that I didn't have a father and I owed them too. But Pia thought me an Important Person and taught me that I was reward enough and there was no debt.

So I forgave the old hurt and when I think of Pia now -- rarely, it's true -- I remember the time when I found out about *El Amor.*