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Dinner at Tierra y Mar

Bett Butler

They're going out together for the first time in months. The baby's ongoing respiratory problems, Gerald's long hours at work, and shortness of time, sleep, and temper have left Marisa feeling depressed and weirdly disconnected; but her mother-in-law—whose sole redeeming feature is enthusiasm for babysitting her only grandchild—is in town for a week, and Gerald has managed an evening off.

The early winter temperature is dropping rapidly, and she has skipped lunch in anticipation of a rare meal out. She takes time with her makeup, dresses carefully. A tunic and wool jacket to hide the baby weight she's been unable to lose, leggings, a colorful scarf draped around her shoulders, dangly gold earrings that are supposed to make her neck look more swan-like. She runs a comb through dark, straight hair that needs cutting (something else to schedule while her mother-in-law is here). Cologne, not too much. "Jeez, honey, you smell like a hooker," Gerald had said last time they'd gone out (so long ago), both sleep-deprived, both on edge. She'd wanted to ask him how he knew what a hooker smelled like; instead, she'd been silent, feeling diminished and resentful.

They slide into the booth, facing each other across the table at Tierra y Mar, one of the few places they can both find something acceptable on the menu, not too expensive, with decent house margaritas and the beer she likes. The TV in the corner, turned to Fox News with the volume muted, shows President Trump at a podium gesticulating and making faces. The waiter wears a nametag "Ignacio" and speaks with a heavy accent. She hands the menu back. She'll have the poblano cream tilapia—she always gets the poblano cream tilapia—and a Modelo Especial with a chilled glass, extra lime, no salt. He orders the ranchero platter—he always gets the ranchero platter—and a jumbo house margarita.

people inside makeshift tents are huddled against the cold on the border bridge the Cardeñas family came because a gang threatened to kill their four children if they didn't pay them \$1000 which was more than four months' income from their fruit stand they hid in their house for several days then snuck out at dawn leaving everything behind except a few t-shirts and toiletries in backpacks for six months now they tried to cross into the United States being turned back every time

The waiter returns with drinks. Her glass has a salted rim, and she wipes it off with a paper napkin, scattering the coarse grains on the table. Gerald frowns. She pours beer down the side of the glass, squeezes in the lime, rubs it around the rim. The cold beer is rich and musky, the citrus tart on her tongue. It tastes like Mexico before it got to be such a dangerous place. Underage, vacationing with her brother and his girlfriend in Laredo, they used to walk across the border and dine and drink like kings on the cheap, then stagger back to the U.S. at midnight without a second thought. Unthinkable now with the cartels and kidnappings.

Halfway through her beer, she feels her body relax, her mood elevate slightly. Gerald has already finished his margarita and ordered another. As usual, he is complaining about his job, for which he is exceedingly overqualified (he says), and about his supervisor, who's been on his case. "She's such a bitch." He laughs bitterly. "She hates me. Hates men, obviously. Can I file a sexual harassment complaint if she hates men?"

Marisa giggles a little drunkenly. "I don't think so. I think sexual harassment is a different thing."

The waiter brings their food: a cast-iron platter with enchiladas, a taco and chalupa for him; a small fillet of grilled tilapia for her, unadorned, with no poblano cream in sight.

“It’s supposed to come with sauce,” she tells him, smiling. He does a double-take, nods his head, walks briskly back to the kitchen.

María José was raped and beaten over and over by the men who controlled her hometown in Guatemala her daughter is now thirteen that’s when it starts she said that’s the age they get picked up so we came here but when we crossed the border into the U.S. they took her away I didn’t see her for a month when I finally got her on the phone all she did was cry

“Here, have some of this,” Gerald says, cutting into the enchilada with his fork.

“No, thanks. I’ll just have some of your guacamole.” She rolls up a corn tortilla and dips it in the pea-green spread. Creamy and salty, with tiny chunks of tomato and onion, it tastes like vacation.

The waiter returns, sets a small bowl of something that looks like mayonnaise by her plate.

“No, that’s not right,” she says. “It’s supposed to be poblano cream sauce.”

The waiter bows, says something—she can’t hear—an apology?—and walks back to the kitchen.

“Come on, have some of mine. It won’t hurt you.” Gerald shoves a chunk of chalupa into his mouth and pushes his plate toward her.

“No, I’ll just wait for the sauce.” Her fish, smaller and drier than when it arrived at the table, is shriveling by the minute.

“Aw, come on. You know you want it. Lookee—looks good, right?” He waves a forkful of enchilada in her face. Pale cheese oozes out between scraps of orange tortilla, and brown sauce drips with a greasy sheen.

Looking at it makes her feel queasy. Or maybe it’s the beer on an empty stomach. “No, thanks. You know I’m trying to lose weight,” she says.

“Well, if you’re gonna be like that, why did we even come here?” he says irritably. He always gets argumentative after a few drinks. She is silent.

he is six years old and doesn’t know where they’ve taken his mamá she said to be brave so he tries not to cry but can’t stop tears streaming down his face snot runs from his nose but he has no handkerchief he wipes it on his sleeve lies on the floor on a thin mat they gave him a cover to keep him warm something that looks like a big sheet of aluminum foil it makes crackling noises and feels muggy against his skin he looks around at the other children lying on mats some asleep lined up in rows wrapped in mylar they look like the foil-wrapped rellenitos his mamá used to sell from her cart until the bad men smashed it

The waiter returns. He’s sorry, but they are out of poblano cream sauce. Can he get her something else?

She sighs. She doesn’t want anything else. She had looked forward to the fish, which always brings back memories of sitting at her grandmother’s dinner table in Flour Bluff after her uncles went out in the boat, when there would be redfish gleaming with oil and topped with tiny crisps of fried garlic, or trout swimming in a pungent, creamy green sauce that she would sop up with a flour tortilla.

Gerald draws himself up. “Well, Ignacio,”— he pronounces it “Ig-nay-see-oh”—“why didn’t you tell us that when we ordered?”

Ignacio is so sorry; customers rarely order the fish, and the cook had not told him they were out. Can he get them something else? Can he get the señora another beer?

“Yeah, bring us another round. And I wanna see the manager.”

“No, don’t do that,” Marisa tells the waiter. She reaches across the table and touches Gerald’s hand. “Please, don’t make a big deal out of it. Maybe we shouldn’t have another drink? I won’t be okay to drive....”

“I’ll drive,” he says, slightly slurring his words. He looks belligerently at the waiter. “Bring the drinks, and bring the manager.”

She sighs.

In the end, the manager comps their meal. She feels empty, deflated; Gerald is triumphant. He doesn’t leave a tip.

the nurse practitioner told Border Patrol agents that sixteen-year-old Carlos who had the flu and was running a fever of 103 should be taken to the emergency room if his condition worsened surveillance video shows him writhing in pain for 25 minutes and collapsing on the concrete in his cell where he remained for four and a half hours without moving guards did nothing until the next morning when his cellmate found him lying in a pool of blood the youngest of eight children he was an exemplary student in his Guatemalan village where he was captain of the soccer team and played several musical instruments but work was scarce and sometimes he went to school with no lunch his brother was already in the U.S. and planned to help him find a job in construction

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It has not been a good night for Ignacio. The cook was even more temperamental than usual, the customers lacking in largess. His last table was oblivious to the signs of closing: yawning cashier, hovering manager, bussers gathering condiment bottles and vacuuming under tables. He is the last to leave, which means the rest of the staff already laid claim to leftovers. He packs cold corn tortillas in foil and ladles congealed chile con queso into a Styrofoam container. It’s just as well; the children will already be in bed, and he isn’t very hungry.

He will drive home carefully in his old car, watchful and well under the speed limit because he has heard the stories of those stopped for minor traffic violations and then deported. He and his wife have lived here for twelve years. They are paying a mortgage on a small house, and two of his four children were born here. He doesn’t want to leave.