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1

At the Table

DOLORES HAD set the table before I arrived. Plates, utensils, plastic cups, paper napkins for twelve. Glass bottles of Coke and small ceramic dishes of limes, sliced radishes, chopped onion, and oregano, arranged for easy reach. Our Sunday meal was in the dining room on the heavy, rustic, wood table for twelve, with matching chairs and a bright red and yellow tablecloth under clear plastic in the big two-story house. The year before, in 2015, I had lived in Dolores's family's terreno, their household compound. Back then, I would cross the courtyard from my little house whenever Dolores invited me to eat and sit with her in the kitchen at the smaller round table, also under plastic. Dolores was one of my landladies during the time I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City. She lived in a neighborhood called Buena Vista, in a terreno with four separate houses. I rented the smallest. Whenever I came back to town, I would call Dolores, and she would say, "We're here. Come see us." I always did.

That afternoon, when I had pulled the metal wire that rang the bell in Dolores's kitchen, the adults sent Tati, Dolores's youngest granddaughter, now seven, to open the glossy red metal door below the courtyard. I hugged her and exclaimed at how tall she was, then followed her between her father's acid-green city bus, which he rented out for a local route, and the stable built into the volcanic bedrock, home to a rotation of horses, goats, and chickens. We made our way up the stairs passing the terracotta Virgen de Guadalupe nestled in a niche in the rock. Dolores had placed her there as a greeting for those ascending into the courtyard.

It was Dolores who gave me the Virgen de Guadalupe medallion I wear around my neck to this day. The flat, smooth, heavy, stainless-steel oval is a perfect place to press my thumb when I need to ask for help. I had missed Dolores, with her carefully dyed hair and her kind, careworn eyes. She usually wore a checked, ruffled apron, and her agile hands were always in motion: cooking, managing people, collecting rents from the stores on the street beneath the terreno.

Because it was Sunday, Dolores's daughter Anabel and her husband Mateo and their two kids walked from Mateo's family's terreno around the corner for pozole (soup made with hominy and meat, usually pork). Moni, Dolores's daughter, and Dolores's mother Imelda, who lived in a little house on the other side of the courtyard, as well as Dolores's son, Clemente Jr., and his wife Amanda and their three kids who lived on the east side of the courtyard in the larger one-story house were all there too. After greeting, we all sat down at the table, now full, except for Clemente, Dolores's husband. He was upstairs in a stupor. Drunk.

Clemente was a courtly and gracious man, except when he was drinking. During these periods he stayed in his room, only leaving when he ran out of liquor, heading for the tavern down the street, staggering and wild-eyed. When it got unbearable, Dolores would send Clemente to a nearby low-cost rehab, called an anexo, to dry him out.¹ After his stint in the anexo he would come back, engage for a while, and then inevitably start drinking again and disappear.

A few weeks after I had first settled into my little house in Dolores's terreno, Clemente knocked on my window early one morning, calling out. I was confused. Where was the knocking coming from this early? Finally, I could make out his words. Clemente was begging for a drink. When I didn't respond, he slid open my kitchen window from the outside, crying out for tequila or a beer, then moved to the window in my living room. I was frozen in shock inside the back bedroom. I didn't know what to do. When I managed to gather myself, I dashed from my house across the courtyard in my pajamas, dodging Clemente, and knocked on the door of Clemente Jr.'s household. Tati, then five years old, opened it. In hushed urgency, I asked her to wake up her mother,

Amanda, to tell her what was happening. As I stood in the doorway, Tati walked toward the back of the house. From the back bedroom I heard Amanda sleepily direct Tati to get Clemente a drink. And then silence. She was back asleep. Apparently, this was normal. With practiced ease, Tati opened a bottle of tequila in her mother's kitchen, poured some in a glass, walked out into the courtyard, and gave it to her grandfather. As he drank it, they sat companionably on the embankment together, their legs both dangling down the side. When Clemente was done Tati took the glass from him and went back to her house and shut the door.

Later that day Dolores knocked on my door. I got the sense she had come to make sure I was okay in the wake of that morning's events. She sat down at my table, and I made her a cup of PG Tips, the British tea she liked so much that I brought from the US. "Clemente has a vice," she told me, as if that were explanation enough. I barely heard her, as I worked to hide how sad I was to see Clemente this way. I assured her I was fine. I told her many people in my family were alcoholics, including my sister, Annemarie.

Dolores closed her eyes, sighed slowly, and then opened them again. She began, "Yesterday when I got home, I was so drained and tired. We had some cubas," referring to cuba libres—rum and Coke—with its common nickname. "My grandchildren, my daughter, we were so relaxed. I can't live without alcohol, you know? We have our drinks. Our beers. Our cubas. But not him. There are good alcoholics who can live together, be convivial. What's the word? Social! Yeah, social! But Clemente has one drink. Then he drinks alone for fifteen days."

I nodded without absorbing much of what she had said. I just wanted to know what to do if Clemente came begging again.

"Well, if it happens again, give him a drink."

How could Dolores suggest giving Clemente liquor, which he was so clearly addicted to, and which so clearly damaged him?

Growing up white, in middle-class, suburban California during the Reagan era and his declaration of the "The War on Drugs," I had been educated about addiction. In high school, I made fun of Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No!" campaign while smoking plenty of pot and tripping on

hallucinogens. But still, I absorbed the message that those burdened with out-of-control dependencies were pathetic addicts, who inflict damage on themselves and on those around them. They needed to be treated with “tough love” and confronted with a stark choice: “just say no” or be cast out.

At least I was sure tough love was what my sister Annemarie needed to combat her alcoholism. Any time she drank, especially at family gatherings, her slurred demands for attention—falling into bushes, knocking into others—always took center stage. Annemarie claimed she only drank to control her panic attacks, continuously denying that she was an alcoholic. Her denial enraged me. And that rage was mutual: when Annemarie drank, she often exploded at our younger sister Candace and me for not drinking with her, hurling accusations that we froze her out.

Over the years I had endured so many of her eruptions. I would field endless screaming phone calls from California as I desperately tried to get her to tell me where she had driven drunk so I could send someone to find her. Once Annemarie ruined Candace’s monthly cabaret show at a night club in San Francisco by talking loudly and drunkenly through the whole performance. And even after trying AA, a thirty-day stint in rehab, and crashing her new car, she still insisted she wasn’t an alcoholic. She blamed her car accident on her recent gastric band surgery, claiming she couldn’t hold her liquor as well after losing weight. Annemarie kept drinking.

The car accident happened the night before Thanksgiving in 2012. We were all at our mother’s. Annemarie was hours late. We hadn’t heard from her. Candace and I were pacing near the landline on the kitchen counter. Annemarie’s young daughter, Frankie, was with us wearing a stricken look: her mother had disappeared again.

I was the one who picked up the phone when it rang. Annemarie was wailing incomprehensibly on the other end, and all I could make out was the word “jail.” Then the phone went dead. I spent the next few hours frantically calling nearby jails to find her, but failed, fueled by both rage and concern. It wasn’t until the next morning that Annemarie called, when she was released. I begged her to let us come get her, but

she snarled that she needed to be alone. She checked into a motel and went to sleep.

Annemarie's recklessness, attention-seeking, and anger, all of which I found impossible to bear, had gone too far. So I made a decision: I shut her out of my life, as best I could. I refused to be at family events where she might drink and avoided her calls. The toll her drinking had taken on our relationship and on our family caused whatever compassion I had for her to dry up. Clemente begging at my window for liquor felt mild compared to Annemarie. Unlike Dolores, there was no way I was giving Annemarie a drink if she came knocking. I wouldn't even answer the door.

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