

## The Fruit Dish Finds Nando

by

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So here's the deal—I sort of fled to Mexico. On a mission. And all doodied up, a sexy *señorita* on the loose. And me, a blonde no less: a girl, a *guera*, a *gringa*. My college Spanish was *bastante bien*—good enough—but I'd never been to Mexico. No cash.

My new job paid some bucks, finally, till my position was swept up in a round of layoffs. *Damn! Not today! On my twenty-third birthday! Now what?*

Clenching my teeth, I trooped out into the frosty air and trekked the two miles home on ice-encrusted sidewalks. *Damn winter!* My frozen hand fumbled the apartment key. *Wait... I know! I'll hang out with my guy, my novio, Antonio. Sweet. Muy Mexicano.* But that plan sure fell through. *Muy big time.*

I was sitting at my cluttered desk when the phone rang. It had to be him, calling the birthday girl—me! Sure enough, Antonio's slick voice slithered through the phone: “*Nena. Baby.*”

“Hey, sweetie. Guess what! I got laid off!”

“Noooo!”

“What ya doin’ now?” I asked, all innocent, the phone cord twisting in my fidgety fingers. “Should I come over and—?”

“Listen.” A silence slid through the phone.

*Huh?*

“We need to talk,” he said.

*To talk? What does that mean?*

He heaved a sigh and cleared his throat. “Baby,” he said, “you’re just too... too...”

I clutched the receiver and leaned forward in the swivel chair. And that’s when the punch in the belly came.

“You’re not girly enough.”

*What the hell? Me? Not girly?* So, of course, I wrenched on my black jacket, tied my Reeboks tighter, and marched the six blocks to his apartment on the slushy sidewalk, shivering and muttering curses. *Enough snow, dammit! It’s April!*

Skittering to a halt on his slippery porch, I beat on his burgundy door and stamped my frigid feet. The door swung open. And there stood Antonio in his tight-ass jeans, his muscles emerging from his gaudy glistening shirt.

“Uh... hi...” I blubbered.

He turned his back and strolled away, leaving me to stand alone in the doorway like an idiot. *Wow!* I clunked the door closed against the sharp wind, and watched him cross the room and settle his rear on the glossy vinyl of his maroon man-couch. *Hmph!* My stiff hands jammed into my jeans pockets. And I reluctantly headed his way, skirting around his spartan coffee table—no clutter, cups, journals or junk mail. Just one lone beer looking lost. I eased onto the couch beside him and kicked off my Reeboks.

My anger was caving. *Come on, Antonio, touch me... a kiss... a hug.* Last week he’d been all, like, hands in my shirt, pulling me onto his lap, a ‘he-man’ hauling me to his bedroom and murmuring his Mexican sweet-talk: *chiquita, muñequita, mamacita.*

*Now what the hell’s going on?* I sat by him in a stiff pose, clutching his maroon sofa pillow—a firm, cold cushion that reeked of rubber.

“Damn it,” he said, “you know what I mean.”

“Do I?” My glare snagged his. “I know nothing!”

A whistling sigh escaped his tightened lips, as he shifted his well-formed body back and slid his short sleeves higher.

*What the...? Is he never cold?* I huddled in my jacket and surveyed the room, the muted shadows, the taupe walls, the maroon shades. A nearby lamp poured creamy light on his aqua shirt, the silky fabric glistening above his taut, tan leather belt. As usual, my stare browsed his chest, his arms, his bulky biceps where his tattoos quivered and flexed—a gray wolf snarling, sneering, above a line of curly blue cursive: ‘*Bonita*,’ an ex-girlfriend.

Antonio grabbed his empty Coors from the coffee table and scoured my body with tapered eyes. “Look at you. Your jeans, your T-shirt. I wish you could be... well...” Lurching to a rigid stance, he stomped his man-steps to his man-kitchen, and dropped the can—*clank*—into the sink.

“Well, what?” I called out, squinting over the hard cushions.

He yanked open the fridge, fetched another beer and popped the top, then swaggered to the sofa and peered down at me, like a guard in a watch tower. “*You* know,” he said, his voice rising. “Normal. Dainty. You dress like a tomboy.” His cutting tone sliced the air in a sweeping swordplay.

*A tomboy?* Gasping, I raised my arms in a what-the-hell shrug. My blue-denim legs crossed at the crotch. My left foot rocked toward him, miming a sassy-girl finger. *Is he quite done?* “Ha!” A snappy response. *That’ll fix him.* But the ‘*ha*’ was too loud. It hung there in a hush, lost and hollow... waiting... while my face burned and flushed and my mouth hardened. *Damn you!* My brooding eyes shifted to the window where, beyond the bare trees, the sky

twirled and twisted in a muddy gloom. An unwelcome chill had slithered in under the sill. *Why is his place so damn cold? As if he never felt—?*

“Why can't you be normal?” He turned and paced the carpet, waving his beer, the brew scent swelling, hanging, fermenting the air. “You’ve seen my sisters. They know how to attract a guy.” His rich caramel eyes narrowed to slits as a strand of black hair fell on his bronze forehead.

“I *am* normal,” I announced, folding my arms into a firm weave. “Normal for here. In the U. S. of A. All the girls wear T-shirts and tennies.”

“Tennies?” His voice trilled high in toddler-talk. “See what I mean? You’re a kid.”

“Okay, so I wear sneakers. And why not? I’m a *gringa!*” My gaze darted to the ceiling. *Never happy. Never enough.* No matter that he lived the easy life in good old ‘*gringo-landia.*’ No matter that he had a blonde girlfriend—me!—who even spoke Spanish to his *mamá*. At least his *mamá* liked me. *What in the world does he want? Oh, yeah. A girly-girl.*

Antonio-the-sentry paced faster. Releasing another sigh, he shook his head and tossed back that strand of hair again.

“I... I wear what I want!” *Oh, yeah, that’s a strapping start.* My voice gave a tremble. “Just... because you don’t—”

“It's not sexy.” Antonio halted, his fists on his hips.

What he meant was *I* was not sexy. Not me, alone. He wanted me all doodied up. “Well!” I tugged my Reeboks on and laced them way too snug.

He joined me on the couch and fastened his arm around my shoulder.

I gave a jerk and scooped away.

“Man.” He arched back and raised a brow. “What the...? Hey, come on. I like you. You're okay.”

“I’m *okay?*” My breaths were coming fast.

“So?” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“You... you... I’m outta here!”

He was smirking now. *Unbelievable.*

“Forever!” I shot out. *Yeah, right. Did I say that?*

“Oh, you’ll be back,” he countered, his voice calm and clear.

“Really!” I zipped my jacket to my neck, dashed out the door, and ran the six blocks home on the brittle ice... till my Reeboks slipped and my rear end hit the walkway, hard.

*Damn! Some Happy B-Day!*

Swallowing tears, I rose on shaky legs and hurried home, then burst in through the door, flung my pack to the carpet, and collapsed onto the rolling chair at my desk. My shoulders hunched forward. My teeth clenched. My fist banged on the desk. With a great effort, I forced my chin up and tried to breathe.

A framed photo of Antonio sat staring at me by the monitor. His brows seemed to glower. *Why did I never notice that glare?* In the picture, I stood by him in a plain white T-shirt, smiling stupidly, while he stood tall, his chest thrust out in a proud pose, his copper face flirting with the camera. That drowsy, careless gaze belied the pinched lips and tight jaw. *How can he look so stiff, and yet so cool... dazzling... compelling?* I lifted the frame and scanned his burgundy shirt—gaped open enticingly—and the gold chain dangling from his tan, silky neck. *Sexy. Smooth. An Aztec god.*

Releasing a long breath, I replaced the picture on the desk and tilted back in the swivel chair. *Maybe Antonio’s right. I am boring.*

My eye caught a mound of mail heaped on the desk. I flipped through the stack—mostly junk: credit card offers and colorful ads. An aqua brochure protruded from the pile. *Hmm*. I slid the brochure out: a travel ad for museums and Olmec heads, the *Yucatán*, sheer blue water, pyramids, men in white costumes, women in embroidered blouses festooned with flower sprays of gold and ruby red. *Huh? I didn't order this.*

I tossed the ad back to the stack... hesitated... and grabbed it again. *Wait. Maybe this is just what I need—an Antonio-free vacation!* My mind swirled. The photos seemed to eddy and stir; they wept; they whispered a chant and a cry: *'Grow up! You're twenty-three, you're not a kid. And you're not a boring gringa!'*

The cry grew louder.

*'Blossom! Flower! Bloom! A la Mexicana!'*

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A week later, I was peering out the window of a Mexicana Airlines flight, descending to a sea of lights—the massive glitter that is midnight Mexico City. A young blonde to my right leaned over my lap for the view in her blue jeans and black T-shirt. But not me. I was blossoming, decked out in jungle patterns and a lacy blouse, *a la* the know-it-all Antonio and his Miss-Perfect sisters. A real *señorita* arriving in *señorita*-land.

After a hasty money exchange, I was soon heading east on an over-night air-conditioned bus, the sprawling mega-city receding behind me. The highway ran through wooded hills, the roadside lamps dimming in the dense shadows. The chunky Mexican man on the adjacent seat

shifted, snuffled, and let out a ruffled snore. I reclined the back rest, tucked my flowery outfit over my knees, and curled up to sleep.

Waking briefly in the wee hours, I blinked at the passing view, the snowy peaks lit by a half-moon glow. *Wow! Izta and Popo, the twin volcanoes!* Beyond the mountain summit, we began our descent into the lowlands, the Yucatan, toward the Palenque pyramids and the Caribbean coast. But first, a two-day stop in Villahermosa for the got-to-go museum, *El Parque-Museo La Venta*. I couldn't wait to lose myself in the open-air gallery of jungle, of jaguars, of ocelots, toucans and twisting boas. And to touch those colossal Olmec heads with the fat lips that some say are African, and others say '*who knows*'?

The quavering sway of the bus lulled me into an easy sleep.

When I awoke, the east sun was blasting through the window. The man beside me mumbled a: "*Buenos días.*" Good morning. We were deep in the spicy belly of Tabasco, the Gulf Coast state northwest of Palenque.

The bus turned onto the streets of busy, boisterous Villahermosa, which was no *villa* and no way *hermosa*—beautiful—but an industrial town, a mecca of *petróleo*. I could smell it. Black gold. Refineries. *Yuck*. In the central city, a mess of billboards whizzed by as we passed parking lots, warehouses, and auto shops. A McDonald's reared its repellent arches. A Walmart warehouse encased a whole city block, looming up high above a news kiosk and fruit vendors. A long building lined a sidewalk, its cracked façade in a clash of orange, red and gold behind a soda stand. And people everywhere.

*Am I happy? Amazed? Scared? No matter. The Olmecs beckon.*

The bus veered into an alley and parked in a rear lot on *Avenida Javier Mina*. Patting the secret travel pouch at my chest, I smoothed my blouse and fluffed my flowing jungle skirt. *Yes!*

It was time for this rainbow babe to disembark. Grabbing the metal rails, I struggled down the exit, my dainty shoes clacking on the steel stairs. The humid heat struck like a tsunami, turning me sticky and moist. *A sauna? In April? Oh, well.* Squeezing into the crammed station, I scanned the moving mob for *señoritas*. I was ready, and full of Antonio-sister fashion rules.

*Señorita* Rule Number 1: Luggage. No more boring college backpack. I was now hauling a heavy shoulder bag with jungle patterns and a straw basket purse.

*Señorita* Rule Number 2: Shoes. No Reeboks, of course. I was klutzing around on three-inch heels, my ankles lurching in petite pumps—slip-on lavender and pointy-toed-tight. *Ouch!*

*Señorita* Rule Number 3: Clothes. No tomboy T-shirts. Okay, I could have worn skin-tight jeans and spike heels like some *Mexicanas*. But no, I'd gone all out, in a florid skirt of carnation blue and prissy purple quivering at my calves. My frilly, fruit-bedecked blouse even showed a bit of bosom. Christ! I felt like a drag queen. But that was okay. I was 'finding myself.' And I looked like a regular Caribbean dish.

Before I could *click-clack* my dainty heels out of the building, a floor grate flurried up a breeze that lifted and lobbed my foofy flower skirt. *Stop!* My hands flew out, jerking the unruly fabric to my knees, while the rear side sailed up in the wind, fluttering free and wild. *No!*

A tall, tanned man stopped and stared. I glanced down at my florid outfit, and my mind flew to... what? *Rio, Carnival, Brazil! Yes, I am girly! Show him!* My white arms waved and my hips swayed in that exotic Carmen Miranda move—you know, the actress from *Copacabana*—her tutti-frutti *sombrero* sporting *fresas*, bananas, *melónes*, hanging down and dangling past her blood-red puckered lips. *Hmph! At least I have no fruit-basket hat tottering, doddering... I think.* My palm pitched up and tapped my bare-headed belfry. *Good!*



My wayward skirt billowed and blew. *Not again!* When I wrenched down the fabric, the bulky bag slipped off my shoulder and thumped to the floor, followed by my basket purse.

*Damn!*

The man sharpened his gaze. Our lean eyes met. Sporting a smirk, he set his straw peasant hat to his chest, clucked his tongue, and vanished into the swarm. *What the hell am I doing?* I returned the straps to my shoulder, cursing the day I'd said *adiós* to my tomboy-T-shirt, backpack-toting, running-shoes college-girl ways and decided to be 'normal'—whatever that meant.

Antonio seemed to know. Oh, yeah. The rules. The *señoritas*. So, onward.

Into the bustling street, I joined the lively crowds, and there they were, strutting along the packed sidewalk—a herd of sexy young women who, *sí*, were *hermosa*—those high-heel-sauntering, mascara-tinted, boob-teasing tarts that taunt the *muchachos*, the lovely *latino* boys. The girl-group flounced onward, two by two and arm in arm, in their too-tight jeans and impossible pointy shoes, their big hair and scarlet lips. As they passed, the boys puckered and kissed at them—*mwah, mwah*—and whispered “*mamacita.*” The *señoritas* jangled their copper bracelets, giggled, and ventured a twinkling eye, perhaps a wink, before darting their smiles away. So coy. Yes, they could do this. They could flirt and flaunt and flutter... for their brothers and *papá* trailed after them, patrolling not two paces behind.

And there was not a *gringa* outfit to be seen. *But no worries. This tourist is camouflaged.*

Tugging at my gaping blouse, I sashayed in all my fruitiness down the *calle* hunting for a cheap hotel, past a lunch-stand spread of chicken *tortas*, bananas, papayas, melons and mangos, all sliced open and smelling *mmm, rico*. A few more blocks, and I was peeking into the lobby of

the Hotel Maya Tabasco. The marble floor gleamed and beckoned, all light and lustrous. *Nice!* I marched in.

A young man was loitering at the maroon wall near the entrance, watching me—the fruit dish—enter. *Look straight ahead. Don't talk to strangers. Go!* I walked briskly by, passed three wicker chairs, and rounded a table festooned with purple-plum blossoms of passion fruit. After *click-clicking* my heels across the room, I dumped my jungle bag at the reception desk.

The clerk appeared. *Oh, my.* He was right out of *el cine*, that 1940's film *Una Carta de Amor* starring the dazzling Jorge Negrete, all mustache and muscles. The clerk's eyes glistened. His gaze dropped low and lingered, his stare stabbing my shallow cleavage—what there was of it—then moved up my neck to my face, to my fluttering lashes.

I almost laughed aloud, imagining my debut as Gloria Marín, Jorge's *señorita*, waltzing and twirling in a thrilling *baile*, her rustling petticoat and bell-bodied gown gliding, whirling, sweeping the majestic marble floor in the arms of her *amor*. But now he must flee... the *soldados* are after him! I took in a breath—perhaps to warn him, to call out, to croon. But, alas... nothing emerged. My gaze roamed the lobby and landed on the stairway. *Run, Jorge! Up the steps! Hide in the bedroom, you handsome little—*

The clerk tapped his pen on the counter. “*No hay cuartos,*” he murmured.

*What?* I spun around and blinked at him. “*No hay cuartos?*” I repeated, stupidly. *Damn, no rooms.*

He shot me a ‘Jorge smile,’ his thin mustache curving above his lips. “*No hay. Por la conferencia.*”

*Oh, what luck. There's a conference in town.*

I felt a steady stare burning my back, and half-swiveled to see the young man still watching me from the maroon wall. *Is he a man or a boy?* To my dismay, the fellow strolled over and joined me at the counter. *Who? Why?* Our eyes locked. *Oh, my God. He's gorgeous, a Greek statue, his long black lashes on a bronze baby face.* My breath seeped out slowly as I stood, stunned and gawking. *That delicate skin—he's a fledgling, a youngster. He hardly shaves.* The boy averted his eyes. *A bit shy? Or just polite?*

He returned his gaze and attempted a: “*Buenas tardes.*” Good afternoon. *Okay, it is past noon, barely.* He offered his soft, gentle hand and we shook *a la mexicana*, the Mexican way, his fingers limp and gentle for the lady. “*Habla español?*” he asked.

“*Sí, un poco.*” Yes, I spoke Spanish. Some. Enough.

“*Soy Fernando.*”

“Fernando?” Another great comeback from me. I was full of them.

“*Mis amigos me llaman Nando.*” So his friends call him ‘Nando.’ Cute. “*No hay cuartos,*” he said, repeating Jorge Negrete’s annoying news. The whole town was booked. He knew. He’d already called around for a single room—or any room—with no luck. “*Hay conferencia.*” His voice spilled out like nectar.

I could tell he was one of those sweet, middle-class Mexican boys, all pampered and primed by his *mamá*, his *hermanas*, never washing a dish or tidying a room, a little prince flaunting that beautiful face. Had to be sixteen.

“*Soy piloto,*” he said. *Okay, he's a pilot, so he can't be sixteen. Can he?* He explained how he’s flying government officials in for their damn conference, which had filled all the hotel rooms (that “damn” was mine—I could tell Nando was a *caballero*, a gentleman, and he would

never say “damn” to a lady, even if he spoke English). And Nando had taken the last *cuarto* in town. There was no room at the inn.

So, here was Mr. Beautiful standing in front of me and, for a moment, I couldn’t think of a darn thing to do but stare into his brown eyes as rich as Mexican *mole* sauce—that racy mix of *chocolate* and *chiles*—and feel glad there was no fruit basket balanced on my head, when he said, “*Mi cuarto tiene dos camas.*”

The bastard had two beds in his room. (Okay, the b-word. And why not? He was hogging an empty bed and teasing me.) But, no, he wasn’t teasing me. He was inviting me. *Huh?* Well, what could I do? It was too late for the bus to Palenque, and sleeping in Nando’s room would sure beat the park, all curled up clutching my bag, my foolish flower duds plastered over my knees.

So, there I went, back to my casual college days, sharing a ‘crash pad’ with a total stranger. In a foreign country. *Yikes!* We climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered his room.

A sunny glow poured through the wide window past tethered maroon curtains. Nando’s bed sat huddled against the left wall. A small travel case lay open on his comforter, revealing a neat stack of sensible dark shirts and slacks. To the right, the empty bed—mine—beckoned from the opposite wall below the window. *Whew! We’re ten feet apart. So far, so good.*

Nando reclined on his covers. *That’s right, buddy, you sleep there.* Skirting the dresser by the door, I headed toward my side, *clacking* my foofy shoes on the tile floor, and dumped my jungle bag on the coarse wool blanket, on a woven eagle, snake, and cactus. *Love it!* I caressed the eagle. *Now, to settle in.* I probed my bag for toiletries—hair brush, floss, coconut lotion—and laid them by a lamp on the dresser. My tongue ran across fuzzy travel teeth. *Yuck.*

Rummaging for toothbrush and paste, I held them high for Nando, pointing to my mouth. We exchanged smiles. *Uh, oh. Got to pee.* I scurried to the bathroom, to the pungent, piney scent of cleaning fluid, and fastened the lock. Afterward, the flushing roared on and on. When peace finally resumed, I brushed my teeth and returned to my bed.

It was early afternoon. Time to explore the town.

“*Te acompaño?*” he asked.

*Sure, why not. Come along.* I nodded, and grabbed my straw purse. We clomped down the stairs and out to the busy sidewalk amid the mouth-watering aroma of roasting meat. “Here, *aquí.*” I stopped Nando at a street stand. Retrieving coins from my hidden pouch, I ordered a *torta* stuffed with chicken, mayonnaise, avocado and *jalapeño*, and a *licuado* whirled in a blender with milk and banana, a raw egg and chocolate powder. *Yum!*

While I chewed and dripped, Nando told me about his *mamá* and his sisters. He’d never washed a dish in his life! *I knew it!* When he finished high school, he learned to fly—his big dream. The job even paid enough *pesos* for a maid to cook and wash dishes when he was not at his *mamá*’s. I wiped a drip of mayonnaise off my lip, as a yellow taxi screeched by and bellowed—*honga-honga*.

We walked to the corner to catch the bus to the Olmec museum. *Yay! Can’t wait!* A short, green city van stopped. Squeezing in, we sat on a torn, gray vinyl seat. A whiff of warm tortillas emanated from somewhere, perhaps from the red-cloth-covered basket on the woman’s lap across the aisle. A baby’s wavering cry quivered from the rear. Car exhaust poured in the window—*Yuck!*—and a radio blasted: ‘*Yo te quiero, como nunca...*’ The bus bounced and grumbled as I tried to read the bobbing guidebook, the part about the swamps. “*Oye, listen,*” I

said, pointing to the page. “*Marismas*. Marshes. Bogs.” I slicked on mosquito repellent. Nando declined.

At the museum, we entered a rainforest and wandered down a dirt path by walls of towering vines that twisted and looped up tropical trees. Broad leaves clustered beside the trail—silky elephant ears and spiky philodendrons, and green skeleton fingers that tickled when we came too close. *Creepy*. Nando bent a giant leaf-palm and grazed its prickly points on my bare calf. I jerked sideways and snickered, as in, ‘*ha, you can't get me.*’

Moving on, we stopped at a clear-paned enclosure where a boa constrictor ogled us, unblinking. My jaw dropped. *Creepy!* Nando pressed his face to the glass. *No!* My hand hooked his elbow. “*Vamos!*” I muttered, and hurried him on to the next pen—a fenced pond where a crocodile surfaced his coldblooded grin. “*Mira! Look!*” The reptile submerged out of sight.

A scream cut the air. We sucked in our breaths... then laughed at the spider monkey swinging and hooting in her cage. Nando placed a soft hand on my shoulder. *Nice*. I hid a half-smile and rejoined the tourists on the trail.

The dropping sun scattered light along the path like shattered glass. Nando wiped his forehead. *It has to be ninety-five degrees, maybe a hundred, and muggy*. I pinched my blouse and flapped the clingy material, fanning for air. *Ow! Damn mosquito*. My hand flew to my leg and swatted the sucker, and another buzzed my ear. A humming insect settled on Nando's shoulder. *No!* I smacked it. He jumped, and arched his beautiful dark brows.

We made our way to a giant aviary—a geodesic-dome—and entered. A slender creek murmured and babbled by two iguanas sun-bathing on a patch of grass. One lizard aimed a lazy eye on us. Above our heads, a scarlet macaw took flight in a burst of cobalt and sunny gold, with

a *whap-whap-whap* of wings and a shrieking *kra-kra-kra*. We both gawked, open-mouthed. I caught Nando's eye. He blushed and looked away.

Nando returned to the trail and motioned me over to a sleeping jaguar behind bars. *Yikes!* We walked on a ways and, finally, there it was! *Oh, whoa! The giant Olmec head!* That big guy was a basalt-stone boulder, fat and broad, and taller than me, nestled on a bed of gravel bordered by a low picket fence. His stony eyes stared ahead. His copious lips drooped in a pout that had lasted 3,000 years. The sign said not to touch the statue, but Nando stepped over the little fence and tapped his fingers on the head, then I did, and we giggled and glanced around for the guards.

Dusk arrived. On the bouncy ride back, our seat quivered and quaked. Nando settled his hand on the vinyl between us, near my leg. *Oh...* His hand crept slowly closer. Not all the way, but close. *Hmm...* I pretended not to notice and stared out the window at traffic. An orange Volkswagen swerved and blared its horn. Our driver answered—*honga-honga*.

We exited the bus and moseyed along, passing a row of cafés. “*Aquí,*” he announced, hooking my arm. He led me into a crowded restaurant and claimed the last open table. I was exhausted and hungry, and ready to sit. After hanging my straw purse on the wood-wicker chair, I scooted in opposite Nando.

“*Yo te invito,*” he said.

*He's 'inviting' me? That means he'll insist on paying.* I patted the money pouch beneath my blouse. *We'll see who's faster.*

Nando flagged the waiter. “*Cerveza. Corona.*” Beer.

I ordered papaya juice. *No beer for this tourist. I may be foofy, but I'm not stupid.*

My choice was *posole*, chock full of hominy and pork. Nando ordered *bistek*, green *calabaza*, and shrimp *ceviche*. The scent of roasting meat emanated from the kitchen. Scanning

the room, I spotted a dusky rancher seated nearby, a *vaquero* in a black hat and boots. The cowboy dug his knife into his rolled fried tacos smothered in green sauce—a macho man-meal packed with thin strips of beef. His knife met the plate once, twice: *clink-clink*. The aroma drifted, spicy and warm. My starving stomach groaned and I wondered when our food would finally—

Something brushed by my leg. *Nando*. His foot had migrated and found mine under the table. I pretended not to notice, and gaped at the *vaquero*'s green tacos amid the sounds of Spanish chatter and lively laughter.

A sudden ruckus filled the room—wood chairs sliding out, scraping and screeching on the floor. Eight *mariachis* streamed past the diners, sporting red bows on ebony jackets, their slacks, skirts and wide *sombreros* brimming with brass buttons and gold embroidery. They lined up at a wall and tuned their violins and guitars—*ting, twang*. A latecomer rushed to join them, hauling a *guitarrón*, his deep-bodied guitar. Their white teeth glistened in the lamplight. A trumpet signaled, and out burst the peppy “*Rancho Grande*.” It was too loud, too extreme, like all of *México Lindo*. I loved it, and sang along: “*Allá en el rancho grande, allá donde viviiiiii-aaaa...*”

Nando grinned at me and shook his head, as if surprised that I knew the song. He clasped my hand for a long moment.

The waiter set out our dishes and disappeared. My bowl of *posole* bubbled up a pungent scent of pork and *chiles*. I pinched a half lime into the potage. Nando's plate overflowed in a bounty of meat and rice and melted cheese on chunks of green and yellow squash. His *ceviche* shrimp lay clustered in a small bowl on a bed of leafy cilantro, and lemony flecks of red onion and tomato. Nando gripped his knife and fork, and delved in. He chewed a bit of *bistek* and



planted his eyes on me. A cacophony of sound filled the room: the brass and strings of “*El Rey*”... “*La Malagueña*”... and “*Jalisco no te Rajes.*”

It was suddenly 10 pm. By Mexican rules, the night had barely begun. But I was not Mexican. I yawned.

The waiter breezed by. I shot him a squeaky kiss—the Mexican service call—and requested the check. When he returned, I snatched the bill, because I’m a *gringa* and that’s what we do... sometimes. I loosened my fruity blouse at the waist and snatched *pesos* from my hidden purse.

“*Pues, no!*” Nando whipped out his own *pesos* and waved the bills at the waiter. The guy winked at Nando and took his cash.

On our after-dinner stroll, we stopped at a row of street vendors for *postre*, our final dessert. Nando bought two long, sugary *churros*. And we watched a thick-bellied man carve a succulent *guayaba*, that green-skinned ruby fruit, on a wooden board—*chop, chop, chop*—and wipe his dripping hands on a red-stained apron. I ordered a cup of the diced fruit and devoured the sweet slices as the rosy juice dribbled and ran, drenching my fingers, my chin, my neck. Nando laughed.

That moment was my downfall.

At the hotel, Nando followed me up the stairway, three steps behind, most likely monitoring my flowered buns *swish-swishing* at each footfall. He unlocked the door, swung it open, and flipped on the dresser lamp. The window loomed dark and gloomy. I slid the maroon curtains closed and slipped into the bathroom to change into my sheer-but-modest blue pajamas. *At least my sleepwear is practical.* Nando watched me on my path to the bed. The woven cactus caught my gaze again, and the eagle, who repaid my stare with predator eyes. A long breath

escaped my lungs. *The end of an amazing day.* Scooting under the covers, I kicked off the hefty blanket and snuggled beneath the cool sheet, turning my back to Nando. And slept... soundly.

It must have been midnight when the boy approached. He had to, I guess, bound by a duty that stretched all the way to Antonio López de Santa Ana, Hernán Cortés, Don Quixote de la Mancha, King Felipe, and even to Rome, to Romulus, and beyond. He must have mused: ‘Right there, stretched out on a bed, lay a lusty *norteamericana*. And weren’t they all lusty? *Y aquí mero*, not ten feet away, lolled a ripe papaya, waiting, wishing, wanting me.’ He had to try, of course, or his *amigos*, even his *mamá* and his sisters, would ask and tease, and he’d have to lie, and say, *sí, lo intenté*, at least I tried, or he’d never hold his head high. I got it. I understood. He was snared.

My deepest mind caught the muffled murmur of a body shift, twist, and ease off a rustling bed. Next, the slow *tap-tapping* of bare feet, a patter as quiet as a Mexican Bluewing butterfly. The flutter mingled, mixed, in a drifting dream—a dream where my body lay, reclining on a spongy bed of *guayaba* leaves in a dense, steamy forest, as a giant Olmec head pursed his fat lips and nibbled my ear. *Nip, nip.* Above the mist came a mutter... a whisper... and I emerged from the hazy-deep to hear: “*Tienes ganas?*”

*What?*

The mist faded. I fingered the pillow... and the sheet at my neck. *Okay, I’m in a bed.* My eyes blinked open to a dim wall in a darkened room. Minute rays of moonlight cut past the curtains, across my bed, and to... *Nando!* His face hovered close, his voice tender, frail, almost timid.

“*Tienes ganas?*” he repeated. Did I want it?

*Do I want it? Are you kidding me? At after-twelve-fucking-o'clock when I'm dreaming of Olmec heads on a bed of green foliage?* By now, I was mostly awake.

And that's when it hit me. The *guayaba*. *Oh, my God!* A throbbing wave, a rhythm, was rising, growing, and pulsing up *posole*, pork, and the ruby fruit with all its breeding bugs. I pushed Nando aside—more roughly than he deserved—then bounded out of bed and raced to the toilet where I squatted on the tile floor and hugged the bowl, purging, moaning, puking. The roar of Niagara Falls came to mind. A fire hose at full blast. A volcano spewing rocks and rivers of ash. After the hurricane had lashed my tongue and left, I lay, sort of, draped over the porcelain potty. Finally, I stood and *flush-flush-flushed*.

By the time my mouth was rinsed and clean, Nando was sleeping peacefully on his bed. I tiptoed over. He was smiling. His dreams must have been lovely, his duty fulfilled.

“Nando,” I whispered. “Sweet boy. It was nothing personal.” I knew he knew.

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At dawn, when the first sun rays slit through the curtains, a single beam sliced the blanket, carving the cactus, the eagle and the snake. The night must have grown chilly, as the scratchy cover had collected at my neck. I sat up and straightened the rough wool. The eagle held my gaze, his sharp eyes direct, steady, unswerving. The bird of prey appeared to move, to come alive, to claw the cactus and bite the sly-faced serpent... *What?* I leaned closer. He seemed to whisper something...

In that moment, my mission altered... it morphed... it emerged. *I've got it!*

Sliding out of bed, I tiptoed to my pack and dressed in the morning glow. Nando mumbled in his sleep and rolled to his side. *Rest easy, my friend. This day's mission is for me alone.*

Out on the street, I took a city bus to the *mercado*. At the entrance a mob jostled and swarmed, sweeping me into the massive open-air market. *Wow!* Men bustled around tending rows of tables, and short, thick-waisted women in flat heels scurried here and there, laying out bananas and *calabazas*, and hanging garments on the rafters. Bright colors everywhere. Red and blue buckets and plastic plates. Cassette tapes, puppets, *piñatas*. Boys' navy pants and girls' fluffy white frocks. Wicker baskets, dried fish, and painted skulls. Everything!

And that's when the prize appeared.

A weathered man in a white undershirt released the treasure from a box—the gaudiest glow-in-the-dark running shoes in the world, flashing bands of aqua-blue, hot blush, and lime-green trimmed in gold. The hues blasted my brain like an Aztec shield, a sunstone, a temple. *Oh, my God!* I tried on a pair of the magic shoes—a perfect fit—and pulled out my *pesos*.

*But wait... there's more.* The woman in the next stall was reaching high, hanging a bunch of embroidered T-shirts of sunset-orange, neon pink, and the deepest plum, with splashes of emerald leaves, and sprays of cobalt and crimson. *Sweet!* I grabbed my bills for five blossoming T-shirts, paid, and spun around on my awesome shoes, ready to run from the market. Till something else caught my gaze.

*No! Can it be? A rainbow selection of backpacks!* Laughing, I selected the garden-splash-of-petals pack, handed over my money, and rushed out to the street, trying to get a grip on my breathing and my silly grin. *Yes, yes, yes!*

At the hotel, I tiptoed into the room—now vacant, save for Nando’s travel case on his bed. *No matter. My mission’s on a roll.* I tossed my treasures to the bed, pulled off the flower-jungle skirt and frilly blouse, and threw them to the floor, then rummaged in the jungle bag. “Got it!” I yanked out my precious old jeans and pulled them on, feeling the nice, tight denim grip on my thighs. *Now, for the grand finale!* I donned my new flower-garden T-shirt and rushed to the bathroom mirror. “Ah, ha! Love it!” My head shifted for a side-view as I raised my fist and flexed my biceps. *Hey, why not?* My flesh rose firm and tan and vibrant by the splash of garden. For a final hurrah, I kicked off my foofy shoes, dumped them into the trash bin, and tied my glowing sneakers all snug.

The door clicked open. *Nando!* As he walked in, I stood tall and heaved out my chest, showing off my new embroidered garden, and pointed to the magic shoes.

His face brightened. “*Tan guapa,*” he said.

*So good-looking? Wow, I haven’t heard that in a while. I guess Nando likes me still, fluffy or not.* He had no need for pompous shoes, high heels, and fruits and frills. *Maybe Antonio doesn’t either. Oh, yes... Antonio.* My stomach tightened.

“*A comer?*” he asked, tilting his handsome head. *Yes, let’s eat.*

We left arm in arm and found a café. *No fruit, please.* I ordered well-cooked *huevos rancheros* and paid the waiter before Nando could say, ‘*Pues, no.*’

For the first time, Nando drilled me.

Did I have a job?

Yes... well, I did before I lost it.

Did I live with my parents?

No, alone.

Finally, the big one: “*Tienes novio?*”

Uh... yes, I have a boyfriend. *Well, I think so. But... gee, maybe not.* I blurted, “*No sé!*” I don't know! My heart fluttered. *I really don't know. But I don't think so. Not anymore.* To my surprise, the thought made me smile.

At the hotel, I carried my flower backpack to the lobby and stopped at the counter to cash some traveler's checks. My blooming T-shirt covered my chest to my neck. With no more cleavage on display, the Jorge Negrete clerk remained focused on business.

Nando waited in the lobby at the maroon wall. *That Greek god of a boy. Has to be young. Eighteen maybe? He never said.*

When I joined him, he took my pack and carried it the six blocks to the bus station. Like I mentioned, a *caballero*—a true gentleman. On the way, we spotted *señoritas*, *muchachos*, the fruit stand man. My magic shoes sparkled, propelling me onward. I was a walking blossom in a T-shirt and I smiled at everyone we passed. And laughed out loud—couldn't help it. Nando grinned at me. Then we both laughed and we didn't know why.

A bronze youth squeezed between us on the walkway, his gold chain jiggling on his copper chest. Antonio skidded into my thoughts. *Perhaps in my new flower duds, he will see me as 'guapa,' sexy. Or perhaps he will not. But, no matter. I am Caribbean-bound and free.* I shook my head and chuckled.

Nando threw me a quizzical look.

At the station, he waited by me in the ticket line for Palenque. When we neared the counter, he slid my flower pack off his shoulder and hung it on mine. I caught his eye. As at our first meeting, he averted his gaze. *Shy again?* Mr. Beautiful lifted his face, took my hand and kissed my cheek. And I kissed his.

There was no mention of the night before. Like it never happened. *It was nothing personal, Nando.*

After boarding, I picked a seat and parked my blooming backpack on my lap. Nando stood beneath the window. I retrieved a flowery T-shirt from my pack and held it to the glass. He gave me a thumbs up. Next, I puffed out my cheeks all round and fat, and curved my mouth down in the stony pout of an Olmec. *Impossible.* Nando smiled. *Now watch this.* My lips puckered into a kissy fish-face—*mwah, mwah*—against the pane. Nando shook his finger and laughed. I grinned. His soft hand brushed along his tender lips in a gentle arc, sending me a smooch on the wing.

My breath caught. I clutched my flower-chest where a deep ache had landed. My palm pressed the window, and he raised his, too. The bus growled to a start. As it left the lot, I pinned my moist cheek to the shuddering pane and watched Nando grow distant and small. And I waved and waved till he was out of sight.

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Yeah, so it all ended pretty sappy, the story of Nando and all. I know. But that's how I fled to Mexico. Found an angel. And found myself. Left on one mission and landed another.

For two whole months, I traveled around, scaling the Palenque pyramids in my jeans and magic shoes, and snorkeling the blue Caribbean reefs by that offbeat island, *Isla Mujeres*. Paradise. Came back all bronzed and brazen and blooming.

After a week at home, my job hunting resumed. I considered calling Antonio, just for kicks... and thought, *nah*.

One day, I walked into a café in my magic shoes, and there he was, sitting with this blonde. She was wearing—get this—a plain white T-shirt. *Ha, ha! Poor her!* As for me? All I could think of was blossoms and Olmecs and flowery duds... and Nando, Nando, sweet Nando.