Todos Los Años

by Robin Hirsch (February 2015)

MR. S

I will tell you a secret. I am in love with my dishwasher. Not my Hobart. That's a machine, and only a fool or an anti-Semite can love a machine. No, I am in love with my Mexican dishwasher, Miguel. Now, this is no blind passion. I am sixty-three. The time for blind passion is over. No, he evokes in me mature, tender feelings for which the appropriate term, if I understand such things correctly, is love.

Now this understanding my wife Rose might question. After more than thirty-seven years of marriage, she might say, what do you know of love? That you leave your family every night for another, that you are never home, that your son, his first baseball game, you aren't there, when he walks, when he talks for the first time, you aren't there, when he becomes Bar Mitzvah it's a miracle that you are there and then only because the reception is in your *vershtunkene* restaurant. What do you, Samuel Grant, born Shlomo Ganz in Bialystok, Poland, know of love?

Ah, Rosele, my little Cracow sparrow, I know one thing—I used to love you, oh, how I used to love you, and some nights when it is late and I am still here and we are closing, I wonder, did it fly away, this love, has it gone for ever or one morning when I open up will it be there as it used to be, sitting on a broken railing of the park across the street, saying, "Don't forget. Don't forget. I didn't go anywhere. Things get lost is all, in this big city. But I'm still here." Where are you, Rose? My little Rosele, who saw so much, who said so little, what has become of you? Now, how you speak, how sure of everything you are, how you forget the past. The children, grown, strangers almost, strong, healthy, American, sure of themselves, that I can tolerate, I am almost even proud. But you, that I do not understand.

Oh, it's no good reasoning with love. It comes out of the abyss and it hits you like a mugger. And then it vanishes around a corner and even the police can't find it.

MIGUEL

My dearest, sweetest Maria,

I am sending this with your nephew Raimundo, together with 1200 dollars which I have saved

since March when I found the new job. When we spoke on the phone—so short—I told you I was happy, that I have a good job and enough to eat. We have also an apartment—the four of us plus Efren and Ismail. We sleep two to a room and we have a living-room with a TV—here it plays all the day and night and there are programs in Spanish. I even see sometimes the soccer games—imagine!—a week late, but still it reminds me. When I think of you and the children it hurts in my heart. I sleep with Ranulfo in the bed but ache for you. How are you? Please send me a letter back and pictures of the children. Does Juanita need shoes? In school now is she reading? I fear sometimes I will be gone so long they won't know me when I come back. One day Alberto will be a judge and Federico a doctor—I can see him with his little fingers in the operating room at Santa Theresa—but will they be ashamed of their father, an illegal, washing dishes in a Yanqui restaurant?

Your brother Plutarcho's children are almost grown, their father is a drinker, it makes not so big a difference. But I ache for my little ones and for you, my sweet, dark-eyed angel of Atlixco. Is your mother well? Is your father still working for the oil company? How do you pass your day now with all the little ones at school? My wish for you is to be a lady of leisure, and to work no more for Señora Guzman.

Here it is terrible and wonderful. In the city—in Manhattan—the buildings are so tall there is no light. In January when I came it was winter and the cold so bitter. February was worse. March I started here and Carlos, the day manager, gave me a sweater. How good and kind some people are, even in this hard city. Now it is summer and it burns so hot. The heat is wet and stays in the streets—there is nowhere for it to go, it is trapped. I travel every day except Sunday on the train from our apartment in a place called Queens to my stop—23rd Street—in Manhattan. Sometimes when I come out into the air, the buildings are so beautiful—sometimes in the day the sun hits just right, sometimes at night the lights in the buildings are like a million *luminarias* as high as you can see. But mostly now the day is dark and heavy and wet and the night is hot.

I am sending a postcard of the building where I work—the National Fidelity Building. At the bottom you can see—if you look—tables and chairs outside. This is the restaurant. I clean those tables. I set them out in the mornings when I work days, I take them in at night when I work nights. Mostly I work alone. Carlos, the day manager, speaks Spanish, one of the cooks also. Sometimes they speak to me. Sometimes Ismail is working in the kitchen downstairs and we have our meal together and speak of home—it is different for him, he is young, it is an adventure and if the Inspectors catch him it is for him no problem. Carlos tells us we cannot talk to anyone—you never know who is an Inspector. But who are we to talk to anyone, and no-one talks to us—we don't speak English.

Spanish is spoken in this city—I can always find my way—but it is the poor who speak it—so many people from Puerto Rico, some from Colombia, some from Mexico. But they don't come in the restaurant. In the restaurant are all white people, big fat men with ties and women with big diamonds on their fingers and red lips. And sometimes young people—beautiful, like in the movies—they are so elegant, they have so much money. I see them, but they don't see me.

When it gets busy—at lunchtime—everybody is rushing and shouting and throwing things—and then suddenly at 2:30 it is calm. The bartender has a cigarette. The waitresses count their tips—they give me something—the cooks come out of the kitchen, and Mr. S, the owner, sits down and has his big meal. Mr. S likes me and I am blessed. Twice he has asked me to sit down and he talks to me in English. Some I understand. Sometimes I say a word in Spanish and he laughs. Yesterday he said, "I teach you English. You teach me Spanish." And he clapped me on the back. He went behind the counter, rolled up his sleeves, cut me a plate of meat. When he rolls up his sleeves, there is a number tattooed on his arm.

Maria, I am sending you also a necklace and for Juanita a bracelet. For the boys I am sending two baseball caps from the Yankees. I wanted to send bats but Raimundo has no room. Please with some of the money buy them bats from me. You can also pay Jaime the last of the money—two hundred dollars. This is it. We owe him no more. Raimundo will owe him for this trip—and the trip back. But he is a grown man now, your nephew, and he has his own money. In two months it will be my turn to come. The journey is long and difficult. But I will see you and my big growing ones and we will have a week of sunshine and *ostiones* and a trip to the beach.

You are in my thoughts and in my heart and in two months you will be in my arms. I think of you all and send with Raimundo all my love,

Your husband and father,

Miguel

MR. S

It was my son, Sammy the Doctor, the apple of his mother's eye—Dr. Samuel Grant, Jr.—who gave my business the name it enjoys in my family to this day—Grant's Tomb, where his father, he said, fifteen years old, the little *chochom*, goes to die. But he is wrong, they are all wrong, they forget too quickly. The restaurant I own, the little business we started, Rose and I, thirty-seven years ago, with the money I saved from driving a cab twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day, the corner luncheonette which grew so I could send the little *pische* to medical school, so his little sister Amy, Her Royal Highness, can now see her analyst four times a

week at my expense and complain about the terrible things her father didn't do to her because he was never home, this little business which is not so little any more is where I go to live.

Rose, once it was true for you, too. For you, it's over. For me, it's like yesterday. Thirty-seven years. My little Rose. We ate, we breathed, we slept, we dreamed success. Rose's Luncheon Specialties. We made our bed in the back and when we closed, oh, how you made it nice, with a candle and flowers from the counter. And how you begged me, "No, no, NO," when I had to leave, and how I loved you for that, and how your smell and the last look of you in your shift at the door lived with me in the cab on the dark streets and how I longed to be back with you in that hard, short, narrow, lumpy bed with your little breasts like birds in my rough hands. And when I came back at six in the morning there you were, up, ready, bright as the day, with the coffee and the steam table and the stove and the griddle going. But the fire on the stove was nothing compared to the fire in your eyes. Oh, Rose, where is that fire now?

Now—now she is happy in the suburbs. Peace she wants now. Only the best for her children—I want less? She would rather forget, blend in, no waves. For me, how's it possible, no waves? Every day I deal with the City, screaming, crying, shouting, *tummling*—cops, truckers, short-change artists, *gonifs*, not to mention our Italian friends who collect the garbage. I have every nationality under the sun, some good, some not so good, some hard workers, some not so hard. But this is America: you work hard, you shout, you scream, you push—you get ahead. Here in the city I come alive, out on Long Island I die.

Rose is right. I have two families. Here, when I come in the door, Mike the bartender says, "How are you, Mr. S? What can I get you? Everything alright?" Nobody says, "Where have you been, why are you so late," everyone is glad to see me and I am glad to see almost everyone—and it is everyone. If you had known us thirty years ago you wouldn't recognize us now. The Madison Square Deli. How did we get so big? It's a long story—New York, tearing down, building up—I won't bore you. We're big, bigger headaches now, but underneath, she's right, it's still family—just a bigger family. And for every one of them I have a word and each one has a word for me. Even the dishwashers.

Now I say even the dishwashers, but I am wrong to put it that way. You think, if you don't know, that dishwashers are the lowest of the totem pole. But it's not true. If you want to know the truth, the heart of a restaurant, it's not the chef, although the chef thinks it's the chef, it's not the bartender or the manager or even the owner, it's the dishwashers. Because, if the dishwasher doesn't do his job, the whole *meshuggene* edifice falls apart. And you want to know something else? If Reagan with his amnesty, which is just another way of rounding up illegals, is really going to send the Labor Department in to restaurants to

check green cards, you can close just about every restaurant in the city. Because Americans can do a lot, but one thing they cannot do is wash dishes. I don't care what color they are, as soon as they become a citizen they forget how to wash dishes. The only people who can wash dishes, who are not afraid of work, are illegals. Like Miguel. And Ranulfo. And Plutarcho. All of whom I love. Deeply. But especially Miguel. Miguel, sweet, smiling Miguel, with his Yankee cap, who never complains. Miguel, if I were not already married, you I would marry.

RAIMUNDO

I am never frightened. I came all the way to New York City and I was not frightened. I travel the city day and night, I am not frightened. I earn good money. Late at night when I finish work I go sometimes down to a club on Avenue C. There is dancing, there is drinking, there are drugs—I do not touch—there are girls, even sometimes white girls. I am frightened of them sometimes, but if you have two tequilas it is not so frightening. There are girls here who, if they came in the restaurant, they would not see me. But here I know they like me. Sometimes we dance. Sometimes I stay till it is light. Back home in Mexico my father would beat me if I came home late. But here it is different. He has nothing to say. We work together. We are men together. He calls me Raimundo. I call him Plutarcho. Some of the clubs he was the first to take me to. He dances well. He drinks, too. More than me. Too much. I told him once. He hit me. For the first time I hit him back. I am no longer frightened of my father.

But now, here, in the dark, midnight or later, the river flowing black below, more than an hour since the last lights, only wind in the trees, and the sounds of strange animals, I am almost frightened. Jaime said between midnight and two. When we came it was easier—Uncle Miguel had been before. I was so anxious to see the big city and also my father and to find work. But now, here, alone, it doesn't seem so easy. There have been two trucks, one with soldiers. And the river, dark, below, a hundred meters. Uncle Miguel said Jaime's truck will dip his lights twice and stop to fix a tire and they will put me where the tire was. I can see the bridge and Mexico from here. It is a hot night but I am cold.

MR. S

When I came to this country I was nineteen years old. I came on a boat, packed like a herring, the crossing was terrible, but believe me it is better than a train. I had been in a place you had better not know. And there we arrived—hundreds, thousands—on a train. And ahead of us trains. And behind us more trains. And every train bursting. Unlike my father, my mother, all four of their parents, my brother, my little sister, my two uncles, my four aunts and all eleven of their children except my cousin Jakov, I survived. I was young and strong and lucky.

By the end I was just lucky. If that's what you call lucky.

After it was over I spent my life in camps—from one camp to another. Thousands of us, bedraggled, spent, crossing Europe in trains—again, trains—like flies on a corpse. Europe was dead, the past, finished. In people's eyes I could see we were all dead. One day on a train, twelve of us in a compartment, I look into a dead man's eyes and I see my cousin Jakov, whom I never liked. But if you've survived what we had survived, it's a miracle and we kissed. We spent three months together, in camps, on trains. Enough is enough. In Vienna, they offered us we could go to America or we could go to Israel. I had seen the American soldiers, young, strong, healthy. My cousin Jakov decided Israel. I decided three months is enough. I decided New York.

America was the future. But when I arrived in Ellis Island they tell me the Land of Opportunity is not New York, it's Ohio, it's Mississippi, it's California. I say does it mean trains? In that case I stay. So I stayed. I got a job, any kind of job, a *shlepper*, a packer, a porter. And at night I studied English. And one night at a dance, a workingman's dance, I met Rose. What she had seen she wouldn't tell me. She couldn't tell me. She couldn't talk. What she had seen was so bad she had lost her power to speak. I thought first she was ignoring me. But she had a friend who said no, try again. So about the tenth time, she agreed to dance. And the words that came were only her name and Cracow. But I talked enough for two. And there was something tender and determined about her and over the next few months, gradually she talked and then I started driving a cab and the rest, well, you know the rest.

But New York, forty years ago, was a different city. There was still a chance. It wasn't all so written down, four hundred forms. For this you need a permit, for that you need a license. And the rents—well, two Jews from Poland could open a luncheonette. Now, forget it. If I were a Jew from Poland arriving in the City today I'd take a train and go to Mississippi.

MARIA

This load is heavy. These steps are steep. Every day they get a little steeper. Señora Guzman is impatient. If I do not get the laundry to her by 11 she gets angry. One day last week Juanita had a tooth, it ached her so I kept her home from school. When I got to the house with the laundry it was almost one. Señora Guzman is furious, her pink face is red. "You know our arrangement. Before 11." "But, Señora Guzman, . . ." "No buts. Before 11. Now it is lunchtime. Dr. Guzman is having an important meeting. I won't have him disturbed with this kind of nonsense. Two hours late. And why did you bring the child?" "Juanita has a bad tooth." Not a word to the child, as though we are animals. Dr. Guzman is so important—these

Europeans. He's not a doctor, he's an engineer. I know. He works for the oil company, like my father. "You Mexicans are all alike," she says, "late, slow, *mañana*. You're late again, I don't pay. You understand?" It is true, she pays well. I need the money. Miguel is in New York—the money he sends comes only sometimes. When Raimundo comes next week it will be better. I worry for that boy, making that hard journey alone. He owes Jaime a lot of money, not just for him, but for my brother Plutarcho. Oh, Plutarcho, always running and drinking and too many women. One wife here, another in Atlixco. Five children, how can you pay for them all, even with Raimundo working. You owe Jaime so much money. We all owe Jaime money, but not so much. To owe money is not good. But to be owed so much money is not good either.

I do not like that man. With his American cigarettes. "Plutarcho owes me money," he says. "Raimundo will pay you when he arrives." "Raimundo owes me money for this trip." "He has the money." "I may just leave him there sitting on the border if he owes me money." "Jaime, you can't do that." He shrugs and looks at me. "You wouldn't like that?" "Jaime, you don't make enough? Your fancy boots, your cigarettes? Raimundo will pay you when he gets here." "If he gets here."

Jaime wants me to sleep with him. He is tall and thin and hard and sometimes in my bed I miss a man. What is a woman to do when her man is gone? Tall and thin and hard. Sometimes in the dark when the children are sleeping, finally all three, breathing like one, I too relax, my fingers find themselves down there and I think maybe, maybe the rains will come, this murderous heat will subside, money will pour down like moonshine, and then, no more white sheets, no more towels and tablecloths and petticoats, no more Señora Guzman, but I, with lipstick, stockings and a dress like Rita Hayworth, and something sparkling at my throat . . . And, oh, if the rains come, Jaime, you bastard, if they come, oh, Jaime, oh, will Raimundo, oh, Jaime, what will Miguel, oh, mother Maria, oh, oh, oh . . . In my bed at night it is still hot. And here in the sun as the bells of San Martin strike eleven the stones under my feet are burning. This load is heavy. These steps are steep.

CARLOS

I thank God every day for the opportunity to work. I come from a good family. I was born here in New York—in Brooklyn, but in a good part, the best part, Brooklyn Heights. From our house I could walk down to the river, half a block, and see Manhattan. The island. Where my life would be. I was the youngest. My brother and my two sisters are long gone—to the West Coast, to Texas. They have families, cars, houses. They are rich. Pablo is a doctor in San Antonio. Emilia and Victoria, they don't have jobs, they never worked a day in their lives. Emilia when she came East for Papa's funeral had rings this big, even her husband had a ring. And

Victoria, with all her education, where did it get her, she's now just a fat married lady in San Diego.

I work out every day at the gym. It's important to me. Fit in body, fit in mind. My mama brought me up to work hard. All the years I worked here, she said, "You just keep working. One day you'll be rewarded." And she was right. I came here eight years ago when Papa died and I needed a job. I washed dishes for three years. Now I am the day manager. When my mama died last year I almost went under. She was my rock.

I am thirty-four years old. All I have left now is my grandfather, Victor, my papa's papa. He lives in a big house on the Hudson. He is a famous writer in Spanish. I go up weekends to look after him because he is weak. He is dying, he has so many things wrong—too much living in his youth, he says, but he outlived my papa, his son. When he goes, then the family will come East again, like vultures, and fight over the will. I know. It happened the last time. The house he will leave to me and to the gardener, Manuel. He has always loved me. Then I will have no-one.

That's why I work so hard, that's why it angers me to see cooks and waitresses idle, smoking cigarettes. But Mr. S says I can't impose my standards on other people. Their job is different, their rhythm also. He is right. But it is a difficult lesson. I like everything to be clean, shipshape. I like everyone to work like me. The ones who do are my dishwashers. Their life is not easy. When Miguel came he had no winter clothes. I give them a sweater here, an old coat there. Otherwise they would never buy. All the money is for the family in Mexico. And Mr. S does not pay bad. They stay a few years. Then their children are free and they can go home. If they are not caught.

RAIMUNDO

It is cool in the dark. But I can feel sweat under my hair. It collects behind my ears, at the nape of my neck. I wipe it away but still it trickles down my back. My shirt is stuck to my body. I stick my hand inside my pants and it comes out wet. On my thigh a shape is beginning to appear, blacker than the black of my pants in this black night. It is the envelope, wrapped in plastic, strapped to my thigh. I feel it. Twenty-seven hundred dollars. It is my comfort and my cross.

I have been here more than two hours. What if Jaime doesn't come? What happens when the night is over? I do not even know where I am. Where can I hide? Oh, Raimundo, you were a fool to drink the water—what will you drink tomorrow? The river is wide. With twenty-seven hundred dollars, maybe one of the guards . . .

If Jaime doesn't come I have to hide out till tomorrow night and wait again. I am nineteen years old. I am strong. I will find water and I will hide and I will wait again tomorrow night.

If Jaime doesn't come, with twenty-seven hundred dollars I am free. I can get a bus to California, to Los Angeles. I would be rich there. No-one would find me. I would start my own business—construction. I would hire only gringos. I would become rich, a millionaire. I would fly to New York in a plane. I would walk into the restaurant in a suit with a hat and a cigar and I would order the most expensive dish—what Mr. S has for his main meal. And then I'd say to the waitress, "Send Mr. S over here," and he would sit down at my table and I would take off my hat and he would not recognize me at first and then I would say, "Mr. S. Years ago I used to work here. Do you still have Plutarcho and Miguel and Ranulfo working here? Are they still illegal? Shall I report you? Or would you like to sell? And there and then on the table I would pull out one million dollars in cash . . . God in Heaven, it is cold. Where is Jaime? I am frightened.

MR. S

I can deal with anyone except the City. And the union. I won't deal with the union—the minute they try and organize in here it's over, finished. I have nothing against the idea in principle, but it has nothing to do with principle any more. Bunch of fat cats lining their pockets, and nobody works. It's as bad as the City. And the City I have to deal with.

It's not the corruption—the corruption you manage. When we opened it was after the war, there was some cockamamie ordinance, no new gas installations—how can you cook without gas? I tell Rose I'll fix it. She is frightened. The uniform. I tell her don't worry. The Con Ed inspector comes over, he looks at me, I look at him. A hundred, he says. A hundred was a hundred in those days, a lot of money. A hundred? I say. He doesn't move. So I paid a hundred, I got gas. You see, I tell Rose, it works. But Rose was still frightened.

With the City you pay and pay and pay and you get nothing. I had to deal with nine city agencies to get those tables and chairs out on the sidewalk—nine—and then it took three years. In the old days you paid the guy something when he came around, he overlooked it. Now it's all cleaned up, you get nowhere.

No, it's not corruption. You know what it is? It's dehumanization. That's right. They're not human beings any more—they sit in an office, no windows, terrible light, all that paper, dust, dirt—cages. They sit in cages. No soul, no spirit. When the phone rings, it's not a wonder they don't answer. Let it ring, what do I care?

You know the biggest bribe? Rose taught me. She did it without thinking. It takes a little longer but it works like a miracle. It's not money. It's to take them in, give them a bowl of soup, listen to their troubles. It's to treat them like a human being.

MIGUEL

Oh, Maria, if I could tell you everything that's in my heart. I am not like your brother. I do not need parties and tequila. I need you. When I work, in my head I talk to you. I do not need to talk to anyone. I am content. And yet today someone spoke to me. For the first time in the restaurant, a customer spoke to me. A young woman, very nice, very pretty, with a bow at her neck and a briefcase. She said, "*Como esta*?" as I was loading a bus tray. I nodded and I said nothing. But she continued. It was slow, after lunch, there were three or four tables still with coffee, and one or two at the bar. But all my dishes were done and it was time for my break. She said she had studied Spanish at school, that New York is a Spanish city. I do not think it is so, but I said nothing. She had been to Mexico. She knew Mexico City and Acapulco. Was I from Mexico City? "Nearby," I said. She liked Mexico, the churches, the art, the people. She has some Indian silver and some pottery. She wants to go back again, away from the tourist centers. She would like to meet the real people. If she went again, could she meet my family? Oh, Maria, I cannot explain, it made my heart explode. And then Carlos walked in, snapped his fingers at me and went into the back. She has lunch here quite often, she said, she would like talk to me again, she likes to practice her Spanish.

CARLOS

Things are not in order. First, there is a thief among us. One of the cooks had money taken from his coat. This is bad, when you cannot trust your fellow worker. I knew who it was, of course. Efren. When he came in this morning to open up I was already here waiting. He was quite open. Yes, he had taken money. Also cleaning materials, toilet paper, bottles of wine, beer. It was all around. There was so much. No-one would miss it. I asked him for his keys and told him "*No mas*." "Be a man," I said. "Develop self-respect. Maybe you can learn from this. But here for you it is over." Mr. S, when he came in, was quite impressed. "You did the right thing," he said, "You did better than me. I could not have done it." "But it had to be done," I said. "Yes," he said, "it had to be done."

I worked Efren's shift until Miguel arrived. Later I spoke to Miguel—he was talking to a customer, I don't like that. Miguel said Efren is a bad apple, he is not really family, he had to leave Mexico because he got into trouble. He and Ranulfo had taken him in, but he had lost a job already for stealing a ladder, and now this. But it was for the best. He had wanted to

speak to me, he said, but he was afraid. I will speak to the manager at Le Jardin and see if they can use a porter.

There is another thing—Plutarcho is drinking. Too much. He comes in some nights staggering. I spoke to Miguel about this also. But it is difficult. Miguel and Plutarcho, they are no older than me—well, Plutarcho, a few years—they work for me, but in some ways they are like an uncle or a father to me. I explain their job to them—Tuesday nights are slow, we close early, clean the ovens; the greasetraps, twice a week, open them up, clean them out; the toilets, twice a day. Nothing I haven't done. But these are men with families, a wife, children—Plutarcho has five—and they smile and nod and the work gets done. I admire them, I respect them. I even—in a certain way I love them. Plutarcho, he works for me, but—how shall I put it?—he advises me. Not directly, but a look he has, as much as to say, about my private life, my mother dying, my sisters, my grandfather Victor, "It will be alright, Carlos, it may hurt, but you will deal with it. You will be gracious, magnanimous. They will be greedy. You will give them what they want. You will feel good about yourself. As a man." But this drinking cannot go on, I tell Miguel. "*Si*," he nods. And he, too, like a father. He says, "When the time comes, whatever has to be, you will know it, you will do it." But Plutarcho has a son here working who is nineteen years old. Raimundo. How can I fire a man in front of his son? And Raimundo is away. And Efren is gone. So I need Plutarcho now. But if it happens again, I will have no choice. Miguel, Ranulfo, Ismail, they are my perfect boys.

MR. S

Miguel is teaching me Spanish. Yesterday we had a celebration. It was July 4th. We always have a celebration July 4th, not so much because of America but because on the weekend which was July the 4th thirty-seven years ago Rosele and I opened our little luncheonette and, now, all these years later, it has become a big place, a landmark even. But also of course it is July 4th. I put out flags, we make sangria for the customers—very American, very Jewish—and I hire a band which plays on the street outside. In the old days Rose and I used to dance, and everybody would dance, it was a party. Now she rarely comes by, sometimes the children, but for them all this is too sentimental. Rose says I cling too much to the past. But for me the past is everything. Without yesterday there is no today. Without today there can be no tomorrow. So I keep up the tradition. Old friends come by, old customers, even the cops who give me a hard time the rest of the year. I give everyone a bonus, I work behind the bar, in the kitchen, on the floor. It's a holiday. The streets are deserted, everyone is out of town, the only life for blocks around is my little party. And by the evening it slows down.

So in the evening I went into the dishwashing station and told the dishwashers '*basta*'. I told

the cooks to feed them and I ran the Hobart myself for half an hour. I can still do it, but it's not so easy. They have their own systems, where everything goes—dishes here, glasses there, silver in a basket. It's become much more complicated, and I am slow, slow, compared to them.

Anyhow, the night is ending. I sit down with Miguel and Ranulfo and I ask them if they want a drink. "*Anniversario*," I say. They smile. "Drink?" Well, of course, any Mexican is going to drink if you offer, but not sangria. "Margarita?" "No, no." Miguel a tequila and Ranulfo a beer. "*Cerveza*," Ranulfo tells me. "O.K.," I say, "you teach me Spanish. I teach you Yiddish." I explain to them the restaurant, how I came here forty-three years ago, how I drove a cab, how today is the birthday of my business and of America. I have two children, both *grande.* Ranulfo? He shakes his head. Miguel holds up three fingers—*tres*—and tells me their names, a girl and two boys. They are all in school. It is true, Rose, I am sentimental, an old fool—but to me it is amazing. We understand each other, we make conversation, almost with no words.

Ranulfo goes back to clean the kitchen. Miguel and I sit for another hour. He touches something in me. He could be a son. But he is also a man, a father. Rose has no patience any more, but for me this is America, this struggle, this coming together. I want my son the doctor to have half the dignity, the humility, the dedication, the sense of right, that such a man has, struggling for his family. Ach, enough. When I left for the night Miguel and Ranulfo were cleaning. I gave them each fifty dollars. "Once a year," I say. "*Todos los años*," says Miguel, smiling—"every year." And I smile, too. But, who can explain it, in my car when I drive home I start for the first time since . . . I start to cry.

MARIA

Tonight Jaime comes knocking at my door. Juanita is asleep. Alberto is running around like a hornet stung him, and the little one is crying. Not now, Jaime, I say. But I have a present for you, he says. No, no, Jaime, go away, can't you see, the children are crying. "Oh, Marichita," he says, "I have such lovely stockings—from Hollywood—and tonight Raimundo is waiting at the Rio Grande for my boys to pick him up." "Oh, Jaime, go away, please, please, go away." "But my boys will not pick him up tonight," he says, "And he will come back one more night. And will they pick him up tomorrow night? Such lovely silk stockings." Alberto has jumped on the bed and Juanita has woken up and they are fighting, and Federico is still crying, harder now. "Children, go to bed, now, quickly, I have to talk to Jaime." "I don't like that man," says Alberto. And he marches up to Jaime and says, as high as his knee, "I don't like you, Mister." "That's alright, *muchacho*, I understand. You don't have to like

me. But I like you well enough." "Get out of my house," says Alberto and kicks his boot. "Oh, you are a kicker," says Jaime and then, suddenly, and at the same time gently, he picks him up and kisses him tenderly on the cheek. Alberto is so surprised his face begins to burn. And his eyes burn also. And Jaime kisses him again. And suddenly, Alberto's burning eyes begin to cry. Oh, my big boy, seven years old. I rush to hold him in my arms. And no, he says, "No, I hate you, I hate you all, you grown-ups, with your tricks and lying," and crying, crying, he runs into the sleeping room. "Jaime, you must go. I will meet you to-morrow in the square by San Martin. The children will go to my mother. Go. Go." And he left. But the stockings lie on the table. They are burning a hole in my heart. Oh God. Oh God.

MIGUEL

Maria, I am talking to you, you must advise me. If I had talked to you about Efren, you would have said, "Speak up." And I would have told Carlos, frightened and ashamed though I was. Carlos found out himself and I am more ashamed. He was stealing already in Atlixco, why should it be different here? Now, Efren has left our apartment and I am happy. It had to happen. No more big telephone bills to Mexico, no more supplies under the bed. It is good. Also good is my job.

But Plutarcho, your brother, is a different story. He is drinking too much. If he loses his job now what hope is there for him? He can stay here still, of course, he has to stay. Ranulfo and I will look after him. But I am afraid for him. I have tried to say to him, slow down. Raimundo tried also, but Plutarcho hit him and now it is worse, and worse still since Raimundo left. It has never been good between our families. Plutarcho is still jealous that I married you. If I speak to him now, will it be the end? Carlos explained to me today that in churches there are meetings for people who drink, even in Spanish. No questions. No police. No checks. No green card. Can this be true? What shall I do, Maria?

RAIMUNDO

Jaime is not coming. But the rains are coming. I feel them. I can feel them. Let them come. Oh, let it come. I cannot bear the waiting.

MR. S

Plutarcho was drunk tonight. One of the waitresses came upstairs with fresh tablecloths and said, "Mr. S, something is wrong with Plutarcho. He is ill. He is out cold. I think maybe he's dead." I go downstairs and there he is in the prep kitchen, lying by the cold station, rag in hand, eyes closed, dead. "Plutarcho." I shake him. He groans. "Plutarcho." I slap his

face. “Oh, yes, mister. Sorry, mister.” Sorry, mister! I help him up. I pour cold water on his face. To-morrow morning, Carlos will let him go. There is no choice.

RAIMUNDO

I am running. I am running. The rain is falling out of a thick sky. I am wet already and more wet. There is no shelter, only trees. And the lightning has struck a tree already, huge cracking and a fire like the end of the earth. Where can I hide, where can I hide?

CARLOS

I can control nothing. My hands are shaking. The manager at Le Jardin told me that Inspectors came for the second time—he’d seen them as customers a week ago. Yesterday they came with the police. Two of his dishwashers and Efren whom he’d hired as a porter were arrested and led away in handcuffs. Imagine. Miguel, I told you, you speak to nobody. Nobody. Now, it’s all in pieces. Why can’t they ever listen?

MR. S

Rose told me it would come to no good. You hire them, you’re a fool, they will only cause you trouble. Oh, Rose, have you forgotten who we are, who we were. Efren a thief. Plutarcho drunk. Alright. Alright. But those bastards, those *verbissene* Feds, can they not leave us in peace? They’re hunting down illegals as though they were animals. They smile, of course, and they present papers, and then the police come and make an arrest. My God, they crack down like this, don’t they understand what they’re doing? Who’s going to do the dirty work? Americans? And to send a girl. They’re getting smarter. I liked them better when they were slow and stupid. I tried to talk to her like a human being, Rose. Such people are not human beings. Oy, Miguel, my beloved dishwasher, how can I protect you? Miguel, Ranulfo, Ismail, where can you hide? We can’t pay them off—things don’t work so easy any more. What do I do now? My God, I came to this country to get away from this. *Todos los años*, Miguel, *todos los años*. Does it never end? Is it always the same?

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