



MARK TOWNSEND

# WIDE-EYED IN THE GAUDY SHOP

POE BALLANTINE

*A man is not complete until he is married. Then he is finished.*

— Zsa Zsa Gabor

### Jerez de García Salinas, Zacatecas, Mexico

**A**t a backyard barbecue under the tangled mesquite trees around his run-down but peaceable home, Victor, one of my fellow English-as-a-second-language teachers at the Instituto de Inglés, insists that there is nothing in the States for me, no reason for me to return. I know, I admit, but Mexico is not my country; I can't go on pretending. Besides, I'm broke, and my visa is up. On the grill Victor cooks pork chops marinated in orange juice, garlic, and beer, alongside *anchos* and *helote*: chiles and corn on the cob. His two dogs run in mindless circles around the great shady yard with its crumbling stone walls. Victor was born here in this Mexican valley town, but he grew up in LA, and as comfortable as he is in this place, he will always be an American at heart: Eric Clapton albums, In-N-Out Burgers, Buffalo Bills football (Thurman Thomas was his man), separation of church and state. I am the only one in his circle of acquaintances who can satisfactorily discuss these areas of knowledge with him. We also talk a lot about his favorite subject: women, our students especially. He's amused that I like the dark ones, he the light ones. He's dark (he likes to point out); I'm light.

Victor married twice in the U.S., taught in various LA public high schools, lost two houses in two divorces, then got tired of the traffic jams, the gangs, the drugs, the incivility, the cost of living, the relentless individualism. So he moved back here, where he lives with a local girl he intends to marry. Despite his matrimonial flops, civil-sanctioned union is still one of the three pillars in his triumvirate of happiness, along with fire (he turns a marinated chop on the grill) and a dog. "You ought to get yourself a wife," he says to me, as he does every time we talk, and as usual he makes the case for the servile, steady, faithful Mexican woman over her implacable, masculine American counterpart, she of ceaseless acquisition who files for divorce and takes your house.

I can't begin to explain my situation to Victor, nor to any of the Trumpeting Army of Eternally Optimistic Matchmakers. Though I've had my share of romance in my life and dream of picket fences and pudding in the evening as much as anyone, I've never understood how two people can stay together. Just going steady as a youngster created mind-boggling anxiety for me. Proms and other serious courting rituals were most often salvaged (and then savaged) by drugs and alcohol. I haven't found the "right one" in thirty years. Not even close. I'm forty-four, and unless you're talking about some kind of shuffleboard-and-square-dancing arrangement, I'm long past the usual age of marriageability. Some of my contemporaries already have *grandchildren*.

I tell Victor, as I tell all my nosy matchmaker friends, that even though I'm not altogether opposed to the possibility of an amorous adventure strolling in while I'm having my grapefruit and coffee, I'm also not so lonely or horny or discontented that

I would take a foreign bride. And I doubt that a wife, exotic or otherwise, would have any effect other than to complicate my malaise. I sleep in odd fits and am fiddle-footed, insecure, and inclined to depressions. Even *I* have lost all patience with me. Often I wish I would die just so I could run down that dark tunnel with the white light at the end and kick God in the balls, and I've said this out loud in a variety of perversely imaginative forms. I don't need a live-in housekeeper or a loyal companion who will become annoyed at the way I chew my potatoes. I've been doing my own housework since I moved out of my parents' home at age seventeen. My once strong and steady sexual appetite has atrophied over the years into a merciful dormancy, and I don't care to reawaken it for the purposes of satisfying a set of lowbrow, pop-song platitudes. I'll be single until I die, and I like it that way; at least it gives me more time in the evenings to read.

**T**wenty-two days before my visa expires, I'm standing in the doorway of the Instituto de Inglés, and here comes Cristina across the street: tight red sweater, the sun doing tricks in her hair. I've admired her a dozen times from afar, but we've never talked. Though she is busty, her metal-rimmed specs give her an academic look: the head librarian as played by Jane Russell. She also reminds me (the slight incisor spaces, the clapping eyelashes, and the labored, bashful smile) of a girl I slept with for a whole summer long ago.

And tonight Cristina is my student: strange luck, that. I have only two students all night, both hoping to pass on to advanced status. I don't like either of their chances. We have fun, though. I give them my best. My lessons are unconventional. Since the goal of most students is to live and work in America, I put them there: in a store, in a rental office, in front of an employer, at a car dealership. We act out scenarios: the bus has dropped you off three miles from home; the cashier has given you the wrong change; there's a sale, and all the handbags are half off. Can you tell me where Oxnard is? Can you say "Sha-CAH-go," not "CHEE-cah-go"? Instead of useless textbook phrases like "Will you have my trousers pressed by Monday?" I teach them such utilitarian indispensables as:

I need to rent an apartment.

I'm looking for a job.

Let's go out for burgers, then go to Wal-Mart.

The car needs to be fixed again. We should've bought a Toyota.

Duck! He's got a gun!

Get out of my way.

Why don't you learn how to drive?

I'm going to sue you.

I'd like a lottery ticket, please.

As I regard my new student, I feel as if I've been drugged. I'm aware of the potent arsenal of tricks at lust's disposal, but this has an altogether different feel. I offer to walk her home. On the way I suggest we have coffee somewhere. "OK," she says. I ask where. "Bizarro," she says, naming a wacky artists'

cafe six blocks south and west. We go there and drink coffee and trade pasts. The motley bohemian club is decorated like a fun house, with paintings by local artists on the walls, *mex-clado* dance pop and Pink Floyd on the jukebox, and patrons playing backgammon, Chinese checkers, and chess. I think it rather ominous that our table is made from a bed. Cristina is a courteous young woman, good eye contact, a bit intimidated perhaps to be dining with *el maestro*, but easy to talk to, even if her English is poor. She's been dabbling at her language studies for nine years, moving from one school to the next, as if through the exercise of attending classes she will somehow absorb English without having to work at it. She plans to pass the test to graduate to the advanced level in two weeks. Not a chance.

I tell Cristina I'll help her study, which means another "date" tomorrow. I haven't been on a date since I can remember. Is an arrangement to help a student study really a "date"? Oh, well. Nothing will come of this — how could it? — though my socks and brain are full of helium, and even the haziest suicidal inclination has veered off like a wildfire to the east. And what is this peculiar rustling in my loins, like a paper flower unfolding? She's a dentist, by the way. Imagine dating a woman you can't afford to see. I haven't told her I'm leaving for the States in twenty-two days.

Our second date begins with cakes and ale at the Café Azul, a more sedate club with high ceilings and almost exclusively American and British music on the stereo. I'm shocked that she likes Echo and the Bunnymen. Unlike almost every other Mexican I know, Cristina is punctual: another point in her favor. She also insists on paying, and though you might think, *Well, of course, she's a dentist*, she and I make about the same hourly wage. Her diffident reserve, her regal sadness appeal to me. I wonder if her sadness is the same as mine: the sorrow of having been dealt a poor hand by Cruel Affection. But she has a good excuse for not having found a mate: all the men have gone north to work. No wonder her two big dreams are to learn English and see the U.S.A.: that's where all her potential suitors are.

I walk her home, taking the street side, as we American boys used to do with our girlfriends thirty years ago, in case gangsters came rumbling down the street spraying their machine guns at the sidewalks. (It's called "chivalry," a mocked institution today in the U.S., where men are slobs and women barely have the patience to civilize them.) I feel this strange combination of hunger, sympathy, and paternity for Cristina. She's eighteen years my junior, and I really have no business being with her. Yet in the short time we've known each other, we seem to have formed some kind of bond. On the sidewalk in front of her house, while her dog scratches and snorts on the other side of the metal gate, we arrange another study date.

In the evenings I'm eager to see her walking out of the Clínica Dental del Oro in her white jacket. My feelings cannot be a result of loneliness, for I have lived alone for too long and am too good at it, and I have no real desire to incinerate myself in another foolhardy liaison. Cristina has reason to be

wary too. She has confessed that the men in her life always leave her; she doesn't know why. Perhaps this explains our cautious, low-key approach, our reluctance to touch. (By now the pretense of "studying" has expired.) There is little expectation on either side. We are both accustomed to being let down and close to the end of our periods of romantic eligibility — she on the brink of a devout spinsterhood (by Mexican standards), I wondering whether it will be assisted or long-term care. In this land, disappointment is expected, and tragedy has ruled since Cortés scraped his first merchant ship upon the Mesoamerican shore. Yet there's really nothing to lose, so why shouldn't we enjoy one another's company for whatever brief time remains to us?

Only thirteen days before my departure, I sit in Cristina's parlor under an oversize religious oil painting, her growling poodle Zeus jumping in and out of my lap. I've just met her skinny dental-student brother and two grinning, beautiful sisters, one an accountant, the other getting her computer degree. Macho Papá is the equivalent of a high-school principal. Mother is a traditional, hand-wringing, financially cloistered sweetheart. In the parents' expressions I see that I have stolen their daughter's heart. I have rescued her from ignominy; we are going to have twelve white sons who will all be pitchers for the Toronto Blue Jays. Boy, if they could just talk a little *slower*. Afterward my Latina girlfriend and I walk the jasmine-and-orange-blossom-scented streets to the only theater in town (she pays), where we watch a Spanish film about transvestites, the third Spanish movie about transvestites I've seen this year.

Earlier this evening I showed Cristina how to get an e-mail account so that we can correspond while I'm gone. I've suggested that I might return. Though I believe romance is often just an excuse for avoiding obligations, such as growing up or going somewhere you don't really want to go, I still feel it: this tugging in my stomach and rush of ringing, hayseed pleasure that I have not known in a long time. I dread the thought of returning to America. If I stay here, though, and let my visa expire, as many expatriates have done, I might have trouble getting out.

I'm lying sleepless in bed one night when an idea sprouts wildly in my mind: Why not take her with me? She's lonely and bored here, and though she is *la doctora*, a woman of prestige, she's chained for a pittance to a dental chair owned by an overlord in the capital city, who will keep her indentured as long as he can. The concept of women working *en masse* in the professional ranks in Mexico is fairly new: part social evolution, part necessity since most of the men have left. Employers have discovered that the women are easier to manipulate, browbeat, and underpay; they are more content to live with their parents, to resign themselves to a courtyard life of dresses and shoes and thus sustain the magic, dancing aristocracy. If Cristina had just five thousand dollars, she could open her own *consultorio*. And if her English were serviceable, all the gringo business — the root-canal cash crop, the Canadians drifting down for 65 percent savings (dental coverage for adults under retirement age is not part of the social package there) — would line up at her door. A few months in the U.S.



could help with both the money and her English. And since I have no other obligations outside of paying tobacco taxes and filling a modest casket soon, there's no reason not to suggest it. This could be exciting, even useful. Who knows?

When I announce to Cristina that I'm willing to take her to America with me, she regards me with the open mouth and glassy-eyed stare of a goldfish. She's convinced I'm joking. I explain my plan, which revolves around her eventually returning to Mexico with five grand. She seems upset now. "I don't want money," she says. "I want us." Of course, I sputter. I only meant . . . But, look, we'll be together. We'll travel and point at mountains and billboards, dip our tater tots in the same ketchup, and see how harmonious we are. The famous American test drive. Who knows what will happen? I can't give you any guarantees, but let's see how we do together. (Oh, my Spanish really begins to suck when I'm backed into a corner.) She says she will talk to her parents.

The answer is yes! Wow, that was quick. She already has a tourist visa, which I'm convinced would have expired unused had I not appeared. Her parents look as if they may have me canonized in the church. I'm happy too, of course, though a single question has begun to plague me: What the hell am I doing?

Well, too late to turn back now. I'm good for my word. (What else have I got?) Besides, I want to do one worthwhile

thing on this planet before I hang up my hat. This excellent young woman has a dream, and I hold the cards to help make it come true. And her father has given her the equivalent of *two thousand dollars* American, which looks frighteningly like a dowry. (He does seem a tad relieved to get one of his three unmarried daughters out of the house, now that I think about it.) But don't you worry, Papá. I'm an honorable man. We're going to make this work. You're not going to be disappointed. Even if we don't live happily ever after, she's going to have her own *consultorio*, free bridges and crowns for the whole family, and she'll be able to order competently off an American menu, her virtue intact.

*(end of excerpt)*