

*Non Liqueur*

Maira was Nepalese. Jake, who was white, had started to worry that this was the only reason he hadn't broken up with her. The thought arose once again about half an hour ago, while the two of them sat at the small cafe below Maira's apartment, discussing the possibility of moving in together over vegan chilaquiles. Well, really, Maira listed the pros of cohabitation, and Jake listened. Well. Pretended to listen. Mostly, he sat there, smiling and nodding and wondering just what, exactly, was wrong with him.

Jake knew Maira loved him. He didn't love her, but he did really like her, and kept hoping he might wake up one morning in love. However, when he was honest with himself, Jake knew that probably wasn't going to happen. He thought of Maira fondly, like a good friend with whom he happened to have sex. But the thought of her with someone else didn't particularly upset him. When he imagined his future, Maira was not there. Yet Jake acted the enamored, doting boyfriend. He never hinted there might be anything wrong. Why?

Because Jake knew he was actually falling in love with the particular prestige that came with being in a biracial relationship. The little smiles people offered them when Jake and Maira walked down the street holding hands. The way women, in particular, seemed to confer a different moral standing upon him, now that he was dating someone brown. The way he was sometimes exempted from white men's collective iniquities. These thoughts made him feel guilty, but Jake couldn't stop them. And honestly, they didn't make him feel that guilty. They made him feel like he *should* feel guilty, for being so contriving, and for leading the exceptionally good-hearted Maira on. So then Jake felt guilty about not feeling guilty, and also vaguely concerned that he might be a sociopath.

Maira had been upset when Jake asked for a few days to think about the move, although she had swallowed her frown and said, “Of course,” in the high-pitched voice she used whenever her feelings were hurt. Now Maira was flicking through rompers on the other side of the boutique they’d walked to after breakfast. Jake examined a glossy lookbook full of kitchens from around the world.

They had met here, in Mexico City, at Lisa’s New Year’s Eve party. Jake noticed Maira as soon as he walked in, standing by the window with Carlos, Lisa’s latest boyfriend. Maira had black hair shot through with blonde streaks, skin the color of a chai latte, and phenomenal eyebrows. A gold stud flashed in her nose. Jake handed Lisa a bottle of mezcal, kissed her cheek, then whispered, “Who the heck is that?”

“The one humoring Carlos?” Lisa asked. “Maira. We lived together for a year in Providence, she just moved here.” Lisa smiled conspiratorially. “I’ve already been working it. Should I open this? Or do you want a beer?”

“Man, what did I do to deserve you?” asked Jake. He hung his jacket by the door. “I’ll take a beer. Sorry I’m late, the metro was more nuts-to-butts than usual. I guess they’re letting people ride for free tonight.”

“I don’t know how you can stand it down there,” said Lisa with a shiver. “Oye, mi amor?” she called across the room. “Ya basta con la música electrónica.” Lisa’s vowels sunk into the soft fricatives of her porteña accent. A torrid, three-year-long relationship with a psychologically abusive polo player from Buenos Aires had permanently softened her *yuhs* into *shus*, and Lisa couldn’t shake the accent, no matter how hard she tried. As she liked to joke, there was nothing worse than people thinking you were porteña, only to find out you were actually gringa. You went from stuck-up, wannabe Eurotrash to clueless, obnoxious imperialist.

“Claro, mi reina,” said Carlos, and bowed. Juanita, sitting on the couch with Sarah, giggled.

Lisa turned back to Jake and rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna break up with him soon. He’s been such a little bitch ever since the hot tub thing in Holbox.” Lisa had blonde hair, pale skin, and round wire glasses. In the States, she would be considered pretty, but here in Mexico, she was gorgeous, attracting stares and catcalls wherever she went. Lisa lived across the street when Jake was in middle school. The pair of them spent countless afternoons at each other’s houses, playing *Age of Empires* together. Jake hadn’t seen Lisa since eighth grade, when her family moved back to Tucson, but he occasionally scrolled through her Instagram. When Jake was offered the job with XochiCoin, he had DMed Lisa to ask for advice about Mexico. They went for dinner his first night in town, and since then, got together every couple weeks, usually at La Culpable, a bar in el Hipódromo. Lisa was the center of an eclectic social circle, full of expats and chilangos, artists and actors and activists. Her friends often came along for drinks, and they’d discuss Mexico’s ongoing crisis of femicides, or indigenous rights, or the movement to make Spanish a genderless language. Jake was often chided during these conversations, for his whiteness, or his maleness, or both. He learned quickly that getting defensive would invite ridicule or, occasionally, genuine hostility, so instead he just nodded along remorsefully. It wasn’t that different from college, really.

About two minutes after Jake arrived, seven people from Lisa’s office at *La Linterna* showed up, coming from the same cocktail party, and all talking over one another. The women crowded around Lisa, telling her in alternating bursts about how they had seen two of their coworkers groping in the bathroom. They were breathless with excitement, making complex

gestures with their fingers, and interrupting each other to tell Lisa how beautiful she looked, and how spectacular her apartment was.

Jake fumbled through introductions with the two men in the group, Pablo and Oscar. Pablo was chubby, with a neck beard, and spectacles that kept sliding down the bridge of his nose. He was complaining about the protest that had gone on all day in the Zócalo. Each time he finished a thought, Pablo pushed his glasses back into place with his middle finger. Jake wondered if he had intentionally bought them a size too small, in order to punctuate his sentences with this gesture.

Oscar was gaunt, with a stringy goatee. He wore a white Ralph Lauren t-shirt with faint yellow crescents staining the armpits, an imitation Rolex, and battered penny loafers. Oscar's cologne smelled of antiseptic and baby powder, and his lacquered hair gleamed beneath the tungsten bulbs of Lisa's apartment. Jake offered to make them a drink. They both agreed, so Jake poured two palomas. "Entonces," said Oscar, taking a sip and clenching his jaw. Jake briefly worried he had fouled the tequila-to-soda ratio, but then Oscar swallowed and smiled. "De donde eres?"

"Soy gringo," said Jake. One of the first bits of advice Lisa had given him was to always say "gringo" when people asked where he was from. Using the universal epithet for "American" helped soften the antipathy some Mexicans felt toward their northern neighbors, she'd explained.

"Claro," said Oscar. "Pero de qué parte?"

"De Chicago. Ustedes?" Jake always tried to move past this part of the conversation as quickly as possible. Discussing his nationality made him itch.

Just then, one of the women chatting with Lisa grabbed Pablo and said something too fast for Jake to understand. Pablo snickered and said something in reply, angling himself toward the

group of women. Oscar said, “No mamen. Es una pendejada.” The two men began arguing and laughing with the women, and Jake slipped away, to where Sarah and Juanita sat.

“Hey. Happy New Year,” said Sarah, offering her cheek, which Jake leaned down and kissed. “Got any resolutions?”

Jake kissed Juanita as well, then sat down beside Sarah. “Yeah. I’m gonna start biking to work. I don’t even wanna know how much I spent on Ubers last month. What about you?”

“I downloaded one of those meditation apps,” said Sarah. “My sister sent me the link, she said it *totally* changed her life.” Sarah closed her eyes and touched each index finger to its respective thumb. “Also, I’m fully switching to vapes. After tonight. Which, actually, do you think Lisa cares if we smoke in here now?”

“I think she prefers people to do it on the balcony, yeah,” said Jake. The mention of nicotine made him touch his mouth. He and Lisa had agreed to a cold-turkey pact two weeks ago.

“Traitors,” said Sarah. “Anyways. What about you, Juanita?”

“Yes,” said Juanita, who was thumbing her phone. “I am going to seduce my phonology professor by the end of the semester.” Jake and Sarah glanced at each other. Juanita was a petite girl from Sonora, who was finishing her masters in linguistics at la UNAM. Her English was flawless, after four years of studying in Dublin. However, like Lisa, Juanita’s accent produced a slight cognitive dissonance. The thick brogue sounded strange, issuing from a small Mexican woman. It also made discerning her jokes rather difficult.

Sarah was Black, with a small, perfectly round afro Jake wasn’t supposed to acknowledge, much less touch. A recent graduate of Oberlin’s MFA program, Sarah had a grant to live in Mexico and write poetry for nine months. Jake once correctly supplied the name

*Claudia Rankine*? while Sarah snapped her fingers and tried to recall an author at another one of Lisa's parties. Since that night, Sarah occasionally invited Jake out for coffee, where she would inevitably ask him to read her latest piece. Jake decided not to tell Sarah that he'd just happened to see an Instagram post about the National Book Award finalists that particular afternoon.

When he read Sarah's work, Jake pulled his face into contemplative expressions and made "hmm"-ing noises, while she blew grainy steam from her oat-milk macchiato and watched him. Sarah was an excellent writer. Often, a line of hers would come to Jake during some quotidian experience, and suddenly, eating an avocado or walking past a homeless person would feel bizarre. But her poems about the injustice she faced as a Black woman made Jake suspicious. He'd recently discovered some podcasts that, among other things, compellingly outlined the myriad advantages Black women enjoyed in modern society. Like being more competitive for prestigious, well-funded scholarships to live abroad and write poetry, for example. Granted, the hosts of these podcasts were all white men, but Jake wasn't sure that made their points any less valid. Either way, he kept his listening habits a secret.

Lisa called everyone to the table at eight, and arranged so that Jake and Maira sat next to each other. Jake had caught Maira looking at him a few times while he'd been listening to Juanita explain a series of memes that had gone viral on Mexican Twitter, so he'd sat extra close to Sarah and made lots of jokes. Jake thought he might look cooler with Sarah's arm around him, or Juanita playfully shoving him. Like he was the type of white guy with a very diverse friend group.

"I'm Jake," said Jake, holding out his hand.

"I know," said Maira. "Lisa has told me lots about you. I'm Maira. So. Is it true that you sang *Cry Me a River* for the middle school talent show?"

“Lisa!” said Jake as she set a plate of spinach tortellini in front of him. “What, have you been telling everyone my all-time most embarrassing moments?”

“Just Maira, calm down,” said Lisa. “He’s sensitive in the good way, too. Don’t make her think I oversold you. Maira, I have some without cheese if you want.”

“It’s okay, I’m back on dairy,” said Maira.

“Thank goodness. Because I actually don’t have any without cheese,” said Lisa. She walked back to the kitchen, throwing Jake an apologetic grimace. He stuck his tongue out at her and turned back to Maira, who was forking one of her tortellinis. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“Okay. Yes. Justin Timberlake was my hero in seventh grade. Also, I had frosted tips, and my AIM handle was bigpimpin97. Tell me about your childhood,” said Jake.

“Well, I grew up in Spokane, and spent most of my time trying to make sure no one noticed I was brown. Turns out, they noticed,” said Maira.

Jake took a bite and whispered, “I noticed too. Sorry.”

He was surprised by how effortlessly they flirted. Normally, talking with pretty girls was an acutely stressful experience, like dancing salsa with someone who actually knew what they were doing. But Maira giggled at his jokes, touched his arm, and called him cute. Twice. Bantering with her gave Jake the clicking, satisfying sensation he could normally only find deep into a *Halo* session. They mocked themselves and teased each other, and somehow, agreed to kiss at midnight. However, their conversation was so contorted with irony that Jake wasn’t sure it was actually going to happen until they were standing on the balcony, making out. Above them, something exploded. They paused and looked up. A point of blue light spiraled away with a keening whistle and burst. The bright ribbons trailed into smoke, and then a cracking scattershot

peppered the night. Jake nervously tried to come up with a joke about having arranged for the fireworks, to fill the sudden silence between them, but then Maira was kissing him again.

By two a.m., everyone had left besides Carlos, Maira, and Jake. Lisa yawned pointedly, and Jake announced that he was ordering an Uber. Maira asked if they could share one, and Jake said, with forced nonchalance, “For sure.” Lisa complimented them on their ecological responsibility, while beneath the table where only Jake could see, she repeatedly inserted her index finger into a circle she made with the other hand. Jake blushed and checked his phone, willing the small cartoon car to move through the cartoon streets faster. When his first Uber canceled and the app found another driver who was 11 minutes away, Jake briefly contemplated hurling his phone against the wall.

Finally, Jake and Maira were flagging down a Nissan Versa, and after exchanging pleasantries with the driver, they pressed into each other once more. They were both timid kissers, neither venturing far with their hands. But when Jake pulled away and asked if she wanted to come to his place, Maira bit her lip and nodded. Jake smiled and whispered, “Heck yeah.” Then he started kissing her again.

The elevator in his apartment building was broken, so they climbed the three flights of stairs to his floor. They didn’t talk on the way up. Jake resisted the urge to take the steps two at a time, worried that Maira would change her mind about sleeping with him, given enough time to contemplate it. But she didn’t. In fact, once they were inside, he tried to offer her a glass of water, and *she* pulled *him* to the bedroom.

In the morning, Jake made them coffee and they sat in his bed, laughing and joking and complimenting each other. Maira said she didn’t normally sleep with people on the first night, and Jake said he didn’t, either. They discovered they were both vegetarian, both loved house



music, and had both seen every episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Jake showed her an *SNL* clip of Larry David she hadn't seen, and Maira showed him a Palestinian DJ on SoundCloud he pretended to not know.

Later, they got breakfast at a small restaurant a few blocks from Jake's apartment, across from Parque España. They watched middle-aged women in athleisure outfits march behind tiny white dogs. Teenagers zipped by on electric scooters. Across the street, a clown played the saxophone. Maira told Jake about her older sister, a lobbyist in DC who couldn't understand why Maira had moved to Mexico to work for an NGO that focused on restorative agriculture in rural communities. None of her family understood, actually. Her parents had moved *from* a rural community outside Dhankuta, and now she was returning to the developing world? She didn't totally understand it herself, Maira said, because her plan had always been to go to law school. But after taking a climate science class on a whim, all of a sudden, the idea of studying tort reform, while sea levels rose and the Amazon burned, seemed ridiculous.

While researching her term paper for the class, Maira explained, a malaise had settled over her. Maira felt worse than helpless. She felt like no matter what she did, she was contributing to the planet's slow death. She read Peter Singer, watched documentaries about the ocean crisis, listened to podcasts about positive feedback loops and the point of no return. "I became unbearable," she said. "Vegan to the point of disorder. Vicious to people who drove SUVs. I physically couldn't bring myself to throw things away. Lisa was always freaking out, because our apartment was full of garbage. But finally, I got involved with a student group that built community gardens in low-income neighborhoods. And it sorta, like, saved my life." Maira pushed little chunks of sweet potato around her plate with a fork. "Sorry. I have a tendency to word-vomit when I'm nervous. Do you think I'm crazy?" She looked at Jake, her eyes wide.

Jake felt a rush of tenderness toward her, like she was a young, defenseless animal. “I think that’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever heard,” he said. He leaned over and kissed her.

They talked every day for the next couple weeks, sending long voice messages back and forth on WhatsApp. They swapped workplace gossip, rants about the latest outrages in the news, and stories of misadventures trying to navigate the cultural mores of Mexico City. They went on dates, to unlisted speakeasies and artsy theaters. Then, gradually, they started staying in, cooking recipes they found on the internet and streaming movies.

After two months, Jake and Maira were together more evenings than not, and one Saturday afternoon, on a walk through Chapultepec, Maira asked Jake if he was seeing anyone else.

“No,” said Jake, immediately nervous. “Why?”

“Well, I’m not either,” said Maira. “And I don’t really want to. Do you?”

“No, I mean...no. I don’t,” said Jake. They were leaning over a fence that surrounded a manmade lake. On the other side, rising above the trees, the Torre Mayor glittered, 55 stories of tinted windows filled with the afternoon sun. Jake watched Maira, who gazed out over the water, her face arranged in a neutral expression. The truth was, he didn’t really know if he wanted to be with Maira. He was fond of her, but something was missing. He didn’t feel the same wild intoxication he’d felt with either of his previous girlfriends. When all he wanted to do was touch them. When he knew he would die for them, if it came down to it. When sometimes, Jake imagined scenarios where he *could* die for them, and the thought made him giddy. He wouldn’t die for Maira. When they weren’t together, he didn’t think about her all that much, to be honest.

But maybe this was a different kind of romance, Jake rationalized. Adult romance. Maybe that had been childish infatuation, while this could develop into something lasting.

Something mature and stable. Both of his previous relationships had left him heartsick for months, after all. He could try it, at least. No harm in that. Right?

“So,” said Maira, a tremor in her voice. “Do you want to be my boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” said Jake, and she turned to him. She looked so happy. “Yeah, I do.”

They went out that evening, to a fancy restaurant in Roma Sur, and Maira spent the night at his house. She spent all day Sunday there, too, waking up early to cook pancakes. Jake needed some new clothes, and she came shopping in Condesa with him. Told him over and over how sexy he looked, as he tried on different jackets. After he finally decided on one, when they were leaving the store, Maira handed Jake a small box. Inside was a watch he had admired at one of the stores.

“When did you—“

“While you were in the dressing room,” Maira said shyly. “You said you liked it, right?”

Jake wrapped her up in a hug and twirled her around, then set her down and kissed her. “I have the best girlfriend in the world,” Jake announced, and Maira looked like she might cry.

The next day at work, while idly scrolling through Facebook, Jake saw that he had a new notification. *Maira Sarri would like to be In a Relationship with you.* He hesitated, then clicked the *Accept* button. His boss, Omar, started walking toward his desk, and Jake exited out. Omar, who was brilliant but on the spectrum, lectured Jake about the buggy UX in their latest payment stack. Jake tried to overemote with his apology. After Omar moved on, Jake pulled his phone out and sent Maira a WhatsApp: *FBO!* followed by three confetti emojis.

By the time he got home, the post announcing their relationship had 522 likes. Before that, the most likes Jake had ever received on any platform was 117. Maira had also posted a selfie of the two of them in front of a Frida Kahlo painting at the MOMA, which got 768 likes

and 83 comments. Kids Jake barely remembered from middle school, people from the bar he worked at in college, a second cousin he hadn't seen since Grandpa Willem's funeral when he was nine, they were all on the little pop-up list. It seemed like every single person Jake had ever met had liked the photo. Imagining all these people looking at a picture of him and approving of it filled Jake with a bright, sparkly glow.

Then Lisa threw another cocktail party, to celebrate the birth of Benito Juárez. Her new boyfriend, Rogelio, made tapas, while Lisa mixed mezcal mules. Juanita introduced a sheepish woman in her mid-forties to Jake as Profesora Martinez. "Please," said the woman. "Call me Angela." One of Lisa's friends from high school was in town, and he came over, along with the two guys he was traveling with. The three of them were "total Chads," in Maira's assessment, polo-wearing frat boys who drank three times as much as anyone else at the party, spoke a few decibels above the prevailing conversational volume, and used words like *lit* and *ratchet* unironically. Jake actually didn't mind them, and talked to Nathan, Lisa's friend, about the current crypto landscape for close to an hour, nitpicking different coins and theorizing about the potentials of web3 together. It felt good to chat with another American guy, even if he was a bit of a douche.

But then Nathan's friend Brent got into an argument with Sarah about Colin Kaepernick. It started quietly, but soon Sarah was shouting, "Black people are three times more likely to be shot by a cop! You don't have any idea what you're talking about!" while Brent, bright red, mumbled something about his cousin who was in the Marines. Lisa eventually defused the argument, but a lingering discomfort remained until the three boys left for a nightclub in Cuauhtémoc.

Toward the end of the night, Sarah, Juanita, and Profesora Martinez started talking about male fragility. How now, on top of everything, white guys wanted to be victims, too. Most people had left. Jake, sitting with his arm around Maira, felt very conspicuous as the only white guy in the room, and desperately wanted to leave as well. But then Sarah looked at him and said, “Honestly Jake, you might be the only one I’ve ever met who actually gets it.” Maira rubbed his shoulder, and Sarah kept venting about Joe Rogan, Trump, and, for some reason, State Farm.

That was the first time Jake fully realized what having Maira as his girlfriend might mean. An exoneration, from the omnipresent, formless guilt that had hung over his life since he could remember. An unclosed loophole. A ready-made objection to the accusation “straight white man.”

After that night, Jake began to notice it everywhere. The Chinese shopkeeper who knocked off twenty percent whenever he and Maira bought fruit at his corner store. The way the barista’s rudeness evaporated when Maira reappeared from the bathroom and wrapped her arms around him as he ordered lattes. Even his boss, Omar, had warmed considerably toward Jake after meeting Maira, inviting the two of them over for dinner and a screening of his favorite movie, *Relatos Salvajes*.

Now Maira wanted to move in together. Jake knew that she deserved someone who loved her as much as she loved him. But maybe Jake could *learn* to love her, somehow. And moving in together wasn’t that big of a deal, was it? It wasn’t like they were getting married. Really, what was the harm?

Jake watched Maira for a moment, as she held up a cowl-necked sweater near the register. The clerk, a black man wearing a tight crop top, blew on his freshly painted fingernails. Across the boutique, a teenager examined her reflection as she slipped on one pair of sunglasses,

then another. Jake walked up behind Maira, hugged her, and said, "I've thought about it. Were you thinking your place, or mine?"

Maira turned in his arms, and looked up at him. "Really?" she asked. Jake nodded, and she kissed him, hard. When they pulled apart, the clerk said, in a thick Haitian accent, "You are one lucky guy."

"I know," said Jake without looking at the man. He grinned.