

An Acquittal, of Sorts

Jake had started to think that the only reason he hadn't broken up with Anushka was because she was Indian. This thought had materialized again about half an hour ago, while they sat at the small, chic cafe below Anushka's apartment, discussing the possibility of moving in together over vegan chilaquiles. Well, really, Anushka discussed why she thought it would be a good idea, 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 Anushka loved him. He didn't love her, but he did really, really like her, and kept hoping he might wake up one morning in love. However, when he was honest with himself, truly honest, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Jake thought of Anushka fondly, as a good friend with whom he happened to have excellent sex. Not with the all-consuming, rapturous torture of love. The thought of her with someone else didn't particularly upset him. When he imagined his future, Anushka was not there. Yet Jake acted the enamored, doting boyfriend, never hinting 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 Anushka walked down the street holding hands. The way women, in particular, seemed to confer a higher moral standing upon him, a white guy dating a brown girl. The way he was sometimes exempted from the evil bloc of the heteropatriarchy. These thoughts made him feel guilty, but Jake couldn't stop them. And, honestly, they didn't even make him feel that guilty. They made him feel like he *should* feel guilty, for being so shallow, and for leading the exceptionally

good-hearted Anushka on. So then he felt guilty about not feeling guilty, and also vaguely concerned that he might be a sociopath.

Jake knew he had upset Anushka when he 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 Anushka was sulking, flicking through a t-shirt rack on the other side of the boutique they’d walked to after breakfast, while Jake pretended to examine a book about Rufino Tamayo.

They had met here, in Mexico City, at Lisa’s New Year’s Eve party. Jake noticed Anushka as soon as he walked in. She stood by the window talking with Carlos, Lisa’s latest boyfriend. Anushka had dark hair shot through with blonde streaks, teak-colored skin, and big, liquid eyes. A gold stud glittered in her nose, and a slinky blue dress hugged her gymnast’s body. Jake handed Lisa the bottle of mezcal he’d bought on the way over, kissed her cheek, then whispered, “Who the heck is that? In the blue dress?”

“The one humoring Carlos? Anushka. We lived together in Providence junior year, she just moved here,” said Lisa. She cocked a thin eyebrow and smiled conspiratorially. “Already been working it, lover boy. Should I open this? Or do you want a beer?”

“You’re the best. Ever,” said Jake. “And 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. “*Cambia el tema, porfis? Pon algo con ritmo.*” Her impeccable Spanish rolled over the loose fricatives of her porteño accent, which often caused double takes, coming from the mouth of this Brooklyn hipster. But a torrid, three-year-long relationship with a psychologically-abusive polo player from Buenos Aires had permanently

softened her *yus* into *shus*, and Lisa couldn't shake it, no matter how hard she tried. As she often joked, there was nothing worse than people thinking you were porteña, only to find out you're actually gringa. You went from stuck-up, wannabe Eurotrash to clueless, obnoxious imperialist.

“*Claro, mi reina. Enseguida,*” said Carlos, and bowed slightly. 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 incident in Baja.” Lisa had dark red 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 had been Jake’s first real friend in the city. They had been neighbors during middle school. Nerdy and shy, they spent countless afternoons hiding from the world in each other’s house, playing *Age of Empires* together. Jake hadn’t seen Lisa since eighth grade, when her family moved back to New York, but he had kept up with her on social media. When Jake was offered the job with Volaris, he’d DMed Lisa asking for advice about Mexico. They had gotten dinner his first week in town, and since then, saw each other twice a month or so, usually for drinks 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. Sometimes one or two would come along for drinks, and they’d discuss the latest corruption scandal, or indigenous rights, or whether Spanish should be a genderless language. Jake was often chided during these conversations, for his whiteness, or his maleness, or both. He learned quickly that getting upset would invite further ridicule or, occasionally, genuine hostility, so instead he just nodded along, and frowned. It wasn’t much different than college, really.

During his sophomore year at Gonzaga, Jake noticed that, on Instagram, Lisa had transformed from a spindly, plain-faced girl into an attractive woman. Once he decided to accept Volaris' offer, and exchanged a couple messages with Lisa, Jake imagined that she would fall for him when he arrived in Mexico City. Her relationship status listed her as single, and Jake had also changed since middle school. He had started going to CrossFit, cut out carbs, grew some facial hair. His biceps had veins. Well. A vein. Some mornings before breakfast, if he twisted a certain way, he could sort of see abs in the mirror. He learned the keyboard, and briefly played in a band.

That first night at dinner, however, there wasn't even a whiff of chemistry. While he ate his pozole, Jake remembered a podcast about an olfactory process that scrubs any mutual sexual desire from boys and girls who grow up together, which is why siblings aren't typically attracted to one another. It was strange, and slightly thrilling, to eat with a woman he recognized as objectively pretty, and feel none of the pressure that came with wanting to sleep with her.

At the New Year's Eve party, about two minutes after Jake arrived, nine people from Lisa's office at TV Azteca showed up, coming from the same cocktail party, and shouting over one another. The women crowded around Lisa, telling her in alternating bursts about how they had seen two of their coworkers groping in a cubicle after the party. They were breathless with excitement, making complex gestures with their fingers, and interrupting each other to tell Lisa how beautiful she looked, and how *espectacular* her apartment was.

Jake fumbled through introductions with the two men in the group, Emi and Oscar. Emi was chubby, with a chinstrap beard, and glasses that kept sliding down the bridge of his nose. He began talking about the protest that had gone on all day in the Zócalo. Each time he finished speaking, Emi pushed them back into place with his middle finger. Jake wondered if he had

intentionally bought glasses 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 yellow crescents staining the armpits, an enormous imitation Rolex, and battered penny loafers. Oscar's cologne smelled of antiseptic and baby powder, and his lacquered hair gleamed beneath the muted lights of Lisa's apartment. Jake offered to make them a drink. They both agreed, so Jake poured two palomas. "*Entonces, dígame,*" 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 Mexicans felt towards their northern neighbors, she'd explained.

"*Claro, pero de que parte?*" asked Oscar, chuckling.

"*De Chicago. Ustedes? De donde son?*" Jake always tried to move past this part of the conversation as quickly as possible. Discussing his nationality made him buzz with discomfort, because nowadays, the first thing America brought to mind was Trump. Especially down here.

Just then, one of the women chatting with Lisa grabbed Emi and said something too fast for Jake to understand. Emi laughed, then replied, angling himself towards the group of women. Oscar laughed as well, and said, "*No mamen, es un pinche pendejo ese vato.*" 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. "You got any resolutions?"

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

“I downloaded one of those meditation apps. My sister sent me the link. She said it *totally* changed her life,” said Sarah. She closed her eyes and touched each index finger to its respective thumb. “Gonna get, like, centered. Or whatever. Also, I’m fully switching to the Juul. After tonight. Which, actually, does Lisa care if we smoke in here?”

“I think she prefers people to do it on the balcony,” said Jake. The mention of nicotine made him itch. He hadn’t smoked a cigarette in over a week.

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

“Hmm?” said Juanita, who was slowly thumbing her phone screen. “Me? No, I don’t really like resolutions. They always make me feel bad.” Juanita was a petite girl from Sonora, who was finishing her masters in linguistics at *la UNAM*. Her English was nearly perfect, after four years studying in Dublin. However, like Lisa, her accent produced a jarring cognitive dissonance, the thick brogue seemingly too dense for her small body to carry within it.

Sarah was black, husky, and a recent graduate of Oberlin’s MFA program. She had a grant to live in Mexico for nine months and write prose poetry, which mainly focused on the way people stared at her. *The scuttle of eyeballs across the Serengeti of my skin*, as one of her pieces put it. She lived in Roma Norte, a few blocks from Jake. Even though he didn’t especially like Sarah, he still agreed to get coffee with her whenever she Whatsapped him. Their cafe dates usually consisted of his reading her latest poem while she watched him, slowly blowing grainy curls of steam off her macchiato, and Jake very consciously making little noises like *huh!* or *oh?* or *hmm*, and nodding, and pulling his face into contemplative expressions. He didn’t know

exactly what prose poetry was, what elevated it beyond mere prose, but judging from Sarah's work, it was the fact that she called it prose poetry, basically. There was never a rhyme scheme, or a discernible meter, or the ineffable verbal fission that made reading poetry worth the extra effort; instead, there were overwrought metaphors and flabby phrase-turns and bizarre punctuation decisions. Most were stream-of-consciousness screeds about fatphobia (whatever that was) or racist store clerks, or, once, a meditation on Sarah's own vagina (17 pages, single-spaced, entitled *Unflappable, Unwaxable, Untaxable*, the only rhyme Jake had come across in her work). The one time he had offered a bit of criticism, suggesting that a piece titled *Ode to the Deplorable*, about a Trump-supporting, neo-Nazi truck driver, might lack nuance, Sarah had sighed and told him that he "didn't get it."

Lisa called everyone to the table at eight, and arranged so that Jake and Anushka sat next to each other. Jake had caught Anushka looking at him a few times while he'd been listening to Juanita explain a series of memes that had recently gone viral on Mexican Twitter, so he had sat extra close to Sarah and made lots of jokes. He 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 lots of POC friends.

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

"I know," said Anushka, smiling. "Lisa has told me lots about you. I'm Anushka. 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 goat cheese molletes in front of Anushka. "What, have you just been telling everybody about my all-time most embarrassing moments?"

“Just Anushka, calm down,” said Lisa, setting a plate in front of Jake as well. “He’s sensitive in the good way too, I swear. Don’t make her think I oversold you. Anushka, I have some without cheese if you want.”

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

“Thank goodness. Because I actually don’t have any without cheese,” said Lisa. She whisked back to the kitchen, throwing Jake an apologetic grimace. He stuck his tongue out at her and turned back to Anushka, who was cutting into her mollete. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“So. Yes. Justin Timberlake was my hero in seventh grade. Also, I had frosted tips, and my AIM handle was bigpimping99. Tell me about your childhood,” said Jake.

“Well, I grew up in Brandon, Mississippi, and spent most of my time trying to make sure no one noticed I was Indian. Turns out, they noticed,” said Anushka.

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

He was surprised, how effortlessly they flirted. Normally, talking with pretty girls was a humiliating experience, like dancing salsa with someone who actually knows what they’re doing. But Anushka giggled at his jokes, touched his arm, and called him cute. Twice. Talking 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, although 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, the night split open with fireworks. They paused and looked up. Watched a point of blue light spiral away with a keening whistle and burst. The bright ribbons trailed into smoke, and then a second later, a

scattershot crack ripped the night. Jake almost made a bad joke about having arranged for the fireworks, to fill the sudden silence between them, but then Anushka was kissing him again.

By two, everyone had left besides Carlos, Anushka, and Jake. Lisa yawned pointedly, and Jake announced that he was ordering an Uber. Anushka asked if they could share one, and he 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 an 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 cancelled and the app found another driver who was 11 minutes away, Jake briefly contemplated hurling his phone against the wall.

Finally, Jake and Anushka were in a musty Nissan Versa, and after exchanging pleasantries with the driver, they found each other’s mouths 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, Anushka bit her lip and nodded. He 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 Anushka would change her mind about sleeping with him, given enough time to think about it. But she didn’t. In fact, once they were inside, he tried to offer her a glass of water, and *she* pulled *him* towards the bedroom.

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

and abhorred rap, had both seen every episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Jake showed her an *SNL* clip of Larry David she hadn't seen, and Anushka showed him a Brazilian DJ on SoundCloud he had never heard of.

Later that morning, they went for breakfast at a small restaurant a few blocks from his apartment, across from Parque España. They watched middle-aged women in athleisure outfits march behind tiny white dogs and teenagers zip by on electric scooters. Across the street, a clown played the saxophone, the hat in front of him overflowing with multicolored bills. Wafts of rising dough and molten sugar floated from the bakery next door. Anushka told Jake about her older brother, a lobbyist in DC who couldn't understand why Anushka had moved to Mexico to work for an NGO that focused on restorative agriculture in rural communities. None of her family understood, actually. She didn't totally understand it herself, she 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, Anushka explained, a malaise had settled over her. Anushka felt helpless. She 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 Netflix documentaries about the ocean crisis, listened to podcasts about positive feedback loops and the point of no return. "I got pretty nihilistic, and cynical, and also, totally unbearable to be around. Vegan to the point of disorder. Vicious to anyone who ate meat in front of me. I legitimately couldn't bring myself to throw things away. I would pull yogurt containers out of the trash, wash them, and use them to store my earrings. Lisa would freak out at me, because our apartment was full of trash I planned to repurpose. I lectured strangers for not recycling. It felt like I was insane,

or the world was insane, or both. And there was nothing I could do. Finally, I got involved with a student group that organized sustainability seminars for local middle schools. And it sorta, like, saved my life. Working with those guys, I dunno. It was the first time in my life I ever felt powerful.” Anushka pushed little chunks of *camote* around her plate with her 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 towards her, like she was something delicate he might break. “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 from back home, stories of misadventures trying to navigate the cultural mores of Mexico City. They went on dates, to restaurants and artsy movie theaters. Then, gradually, they started staying in, cooking recipes they found on the internet and watching Netflix.

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

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

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

“No, I mean...no. I don’t,” Jake said. 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 Anushka, 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 her. He did really like 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, he imagined scenarios where he *could* die for them, and the thought made him giddy. He wouldn't die for Anushka. 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 love, Jake rationalized. Adult love. Maybe that had been childish infatuation, while this could develop. Become something mature, stable. Both of his previous relationships had left him heartbroken for months, after all. He could try it, at least. No harm in that. Right?

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

“Yeah,” said Jake, and she looked at him. Her face split into a grin. “Yeah, I do.”

They went out that evening, to a fancy restaurant in Roma Sur, and Anushka spent the night at his house. She spent all day Sunday there, too, waking up early to cook pancakes. Jake needed to buy a new suit jacket for work, and she came shopping 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, Anushka handed Jake a small box. Inside was a watch he had admired at the first store they'd gone to.

“When did you—“

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

He 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 Anushka looked like she might cry.

The next day at work, while idly scrolling Facebook, Jake saw that he had a new notification. *Anushka Randahawa would like to be In a Relationship with you*. He hesitated, then clicked the *Accept* button. His boss, Omar, started waddling towards his desk, and Jake exited out. Omar, who was obese, lazy-eyed, and constantly grouchy, lectured Jake about a mistake he'd made in one of his latest spreadsheets. Jake nodded and apologized. Once Omar moved on to grumble at Lilia a few cubicles over, Jake pulled his phone out and sent Anushka a WhatsApp: *FBO!* followed by three confetti emojis.

By the time he got home, the post about their relationship had 522 likes. Before that, the most likes Jake had ever received was 117, on one of his profile pictures. Anushka had also posted a selfie of the two of them in front of a Frida painting at the MOMA, which had received 768 likes, and 73 comments. People 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, it seemed like every single person Jake had ever met had liked the photo. Imagining all these people looking at a photo of him, and approving enough to actually like it, filled Jake with a bright, sparkly glow.

A month later, Lisa threw another cocktail party. Her new boyfriend, Rogelio, made tapas, while Lisa mixed mezcal mules. 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 Anushka'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 Michael, Lisa's friend, about the current state of the NBA for close to an hour, nitpicking the

Lakers' defense and theorizing about potential trades together. It felt good to chat with another American guy, even if he was a tad douchey.

But towards the end of the night, Michael's friend Brent got into an argument with Sarah about athletes kneeling during the National Anthem. It started quietly enough, but soon Sarah was shouting, "Blacks are three times more likely to be shot by a cop than whites! You don't have any idea what you're talking about!" while Brent, bright red, mumbled something about disrespecting the troops, and his cousin who was in the Marines. Lisa eventually calmed Sarah down, but a lingering discomfort remained until the three boys left for a nightclub in Cuahtemoc.

Towards the end of the night, Sarah went on a tirade about white male fragility, griping about how ridiculous it was that now, on top of everything, they wanted to be victims, too. Most people had left. Jake, sitting with his arm around Anushka, felt very conspicuous as the only white male 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." Anushka rubbed his shoulder, and Sarah kept venting about Joe Rogan, Trump, and Charlottesville.

That was the first time Jake fully realized what having Anushka as his girlfriend might mean. An exoneration, from the omnipresent, formless guilt that had hung over his life since he could remember. A chance to escape universal villainhood. A readymade rebuttal to the accusation 'straight white male.'

After that night, Jake began to notice it everywhere. The Asian shopkeeper who knocked off ten percent whenever he and Anushka bought fruit at his corner store. The way the barista's rudeness evaporated when Anushka reappeared from the bathroom and wrapped her arms around him as he ordered lattes. Even his crank of a boss, Omar, had warmed considerably towards Jake

after meeting Anushka, inviting the two of them over for dinner and a screening of his favorite movie, *Relatos Salvajes*.

Now Anushka wanted to move in together. Jake knew 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 Anushka for a moment, as she held up a t-shirt imprinted with a Basquiat self-portrait. Then he walked up behind her, hugged her, and said, "I've thought about it. Let's do it."

Anushka 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, a young, handsome black man, said with a thick Cuban accent, "You're a lucky guy."

"I know," said Jake, and smiled.