

Border Thief

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The first time Lalo Ramírez saw Adolfo Cuernava pocket the twenty-dollar bill and look around as if nothing had happened, the young man wasn't even sure he'd seen right. Lalo didn't trust himself. God knows they were paid poorly to play an hour of Tex Mex at the Taco Naco bar, but pocketing the tip money was against code. Lalo turned around to see if Guillermo or his brother Carlos had noticed the same thing he had, but they were old timers, probably illegal, so if they'd noticed anything at all, they would have kept it to themselves.

Lalo went home that night still ticked off. He should have gotten his share of the tip. He should have gotten an extra five dollars. It didn't mean that much, maybe, but it added up over time.

He still couldn't even believe it had happened. But that's what you got along the border. A bunch of low lifes. Moral trespassers. Phoenix had gotten to be too much trouble, all that traffic, the drug gangs, the construction, but at least the musicians had codes. After three months in Douglas, he could already see it was a different story. His sister let him live with her for cheap now that her husband had gone off, and Lalo could get almost anywhere in a ten-minute drive; hell, half the time he got everywhere he wanted to go on foot, so he didn't waste money on gas or car repairs. But he had to put up with low lifes. He wasn't used to it. He wasn't sure he could get used to it.

On a practical level, the easiest way to make up for the loss of the tip money, the measly five dollars, would have been to steal it right back, to pocket the next tip himself

without sharing it or letting on that he'd gotten it. The process was easy enough; the musicians had a tip jar, but lots of times customers handed money to whomever they were closest to. But that would mean cheating the old guys too, cutting them out of the extra little bit of cash, and Lalo didn't feel right about the idea.

Then he met Kathleen, Adolfo's much younger, say twenty-years-much-younger wife, and then he came up with a simpler system. Turned out she was as hungry as a starving wolf. Lalo didn't have to do much to give her the idea, just whisper something in her ear one night when she came to the bar to hear Adolfo. Her face brightened, and when her husband was busy talking to a customer, she told him her phone number, three times, to make sure he'd gotten it.

After that the operation became straightforward. Adolfo would accept a fat tip on what he thought was the sly, pocketing it instead of putting it in the jar to share with the others, and within the week, Lalo would call up Kathleen while Adolfo was at his day job at the hardware store and set up a visit with Kathleen. Lalo thought of himself as a love thief. It was a win-win-win situation. Adolfo got more money; Lalo got sex often enough without having to go on dates and pay for dinner; Kathleen got completely satisfied. In fact, his sessions with Kathleen became more and more enjoyable. Turned out Adolfo had been having a lot of trouble, and she was a young woman Lalo's own age with a sex drive. From then on, when the group performed, Lalo watched his lover's wife like a hungry cat on a fishing boat, willing him to pocket another tip. Oh, a few dollar bills here and there didn't count. Or a five. That wasn't even worth splitting. But anything else, a ten or twenty or a fifty that Adolfo took and pretended not to, and Lalo would be ringing up Kathleen and setting up their next session.

Not that Kathleen knew what Lalo was up to, of course. He would merely give her a set of platitudes about how he missed her and she had such a nice touch and all that other stuff. The truth was that he wasn't even that great a lover. Didn't always have control. Couldn't go as long as he wanted to. Turned out that didn't matter. Her love life was that bad. She just turned the music up real loud and let herself fly.

Then on a Friday night at the end of February, a shriveled-up *abuelito* was so happy to hear "*Las nubes*" that he nearly choked over it. The man had started singing along. Then he asked the group to play the song again. And they did. And again. And they did that too. It was a common phenomenon, to get a customer so stuck on the memories that came out of one song that he asked for it again and again. But the hassle of repeating the song over and over was nearly always well rewarded. Hence, Lalo started watching Adolfo even more carefully. If they didn't get a fat tip out of all that repetition, there was something wrong with the old man.

The *abuelito* didn't rush their table, didn't shout out, hey, take some extra money. But when he got ready to go home, he came over, thanked the musicians. When he shook hands with Adolfo, he slipped him some bills. Three twenties. The trouble was that while Adolfo usually took the money and then looked around to make sure no one was watching, this time he did both at the same time.

Lalo immediately looked down at his guitar, but he was pretty sure Adolfo had seen him, knew that Lalo knew. What bad luck. That meant Adolfo would be forced to split the tip, and Lalo would have to make do for another whole week with him and his own hand.

To his surprise, at the end of the night, when Adolfo divvied up their paltry fifty bucks, which is all the bar was willing to pay them, Adolfo didn't mention the tip.

Could have forgotten, Lalo thought to himself. He'll probably mention it when we're ready to leave.

"How 'bout some tacos?" Adolfo asked the group. "On me."

"So that's how it goes," Lalo thought. He gets caught, feels guilty, and makes it up to us in another way. That's all right. That's not exactly the right way to do things, especially since the brothers didn't want to stay, but it wasn't too wrong a way, either. So he suffered Adolfo's company while they swallowed a few tacos, fish tacos with extra hot sauce. Adolfo was all right. In the time that Lalo had known him, all the man talked about was his wife, his music, and his soccer team. That limited the conversation, but when you were trying to eat fast and go on home, it didn't much matter what you talked about.

After they said goodnights, Lalo walked into the dark so comfortably with his full stomach that he didn't notice Adolfo following him out to the car. Lalo was putting his key in the lock when he heard the click of a safety. He held up his arms, expecting to be robbed by the most recent drug gang, but instead it was Adolfo, pointing a revolver at him as if they weren't in a public parking lot, as if surroundings didn't make any matter.

"What—what's wrong?" Lalo cried, suddenly aware that his voice had changed register.

"What are you stealing from me?"

"Me? I'm not stealing anything."

“Sure you are. You’re young and you’re sharp. You saw me tonight, and yet you didn’t say a thing. Think I’ll split with you, fifty-fifty, and cut those old farts out?”

“I—I didn’t think anything.”

“I’m asking you again. What are you stealing from me?”

“I’m not a thief,” Lalo said, trying to sound strong.

“Sure you are,” Adolfo said, sliding on the safety and turning back around.

“When I catch you, you’ll pay for it.”

Adolfo threw a twenty over his shoulder as he walked back to his own car.

Just as well he didn’t cheat me, Lalo thought. Otherwise he would have had to act on his principles and call Kathleen.

For the next few gigs, Lalo and Adolfo watched one another, playing side by side without saying a single word. Adolfo didn’t steal any tips, not that Lalo saw. And Lalo didn’t call Kathleen. When she called him, he didn’t answer.

Then a big drug ring got busted and the bar’s clientele changed. There was a big to-do about the border and illegals and the government program and this and that, so the few people who might have had enough money to leave tips stopped going out as much. The bar cut the musicians back to two nights a week. Lalo didn’t look for a better job, but he felt on edge whenever he was around Adolfo. The fact that Kathleen kept calling him all the time and begging him to come over didn’t help any. One night she even cried.

He felt bad inside, real bad. He wanted to help her. She was a nice girl who had married the first jerk who offered to get her out of the house. She hadn’t realized what she was getting into. It wasn’t her fault.

Then on a Sunday night she called him and said she was about to explode and she really needed him and anyway Adolfo had gone over to Agua Prieta to play a wedding, so why not?

Why not indeed? He wouldn't be stealing, exactly. Adolfo just—couldn't. So why shouldn't his wife have a little fun with someone who could?

Lalo didn't regret walking over to her house, a little mobile home not too far from his sister's. Kathleen was wearing his favorite lace shirt, high heels that made her taller than he was, and a little too much perfume. She ushered him inside so fast he tripped over the rug and they both went tumbling to the floor, laughing. Then they tumbled in the bedroom, laughing. They had such a swell love-making session that he barely had enough strength to get back out the door, let alone go to the work of buttoning his shirt

He'd barely reached the edge of the property when Adolfo's gruff voice ordered him to turn around.

"I'm not surprised too see your brown ass around here. I knew you were stealing something from me. Took me a long time to figure out what."

Words choked in Lalo's throat.

Adolfo pointed a bony finger. "Don't go blaming Kathleen. I told her some crap about some wedding gig because I wanted to see what would happen."

Lalo still couldn't speak. The complication had never occurred to him, and now he wondered how he could have been so simple minded.

"Yep. Stealing my wife. Clever. She went along with it just because I was having a little trouble. Lord love her, I know she's a sex pot. Can't help herself. Course, that's

partly why I married her.” He patted his groin. “But it’s okay. I’m on the mend. Doc says I should be back to normal any time now. Or at least in another month.”

Lalo took a step back, wondering how fast he could run through the yard, but Adolfo shook the revolver at him. “Got anything to say for yourself?”

“It won’t happen again!” Lalo said in a soprano voice.

“Damned straight it won’t.”

Adolfo took aim and shot Lalo in the center of the face. Blood went everywhere. Lalo’s face went everywhere. Adolfo hadn’t jumped back quickly enough to get out of the way.

“Nine-one-one?”

“Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“Lucy, never mind the *witty-witty*. Caught another one.”

He kicked Lalo’s torso over onto its stomach and took the wallet from the corpse’s back pocket, slipping it into his own.

“No. No papers.”

He took a plastic bag from his jacket pocket. With the help of a tissue, he pulled out a knife and pressed it into Lalo’s right hand.

“Tried to rush me with a knife. Can you believe that? So what could I do? I defended myself. I aimed for his chest, but he ducked.”

He paused while Lucy took notes.

“That’s right,” Adolfo continued. “Hit the poor fellow right in the face.”

“We’ll send a squad car.”

Adolfo clicked shut the phone. Another night in Douglas. Trespassers everywhere. The police got fifty of these calls a day.

Granted, this asshole had been trespassing in a different way. But one scum bag one way or the other wouldn't make any difference in the long run. The police wouldn't even bother to investigate. They probably wouldn't even bother to file a report.

That was the beauty of living on the border. It was full of low lifes, but if you looked hard enough, you could always come up with some advantages.

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