

Celebrate

By

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It was an odd group, and it got odder still.

But we'll talk about that later.

The three celebrated authors, who I had never heard of, hung around outside while we sat in the living room with our wine and goodies, waiting. Meggie had told us something about them online when she sent out the invitation for the reading. They were all part of a local writer's workshop. Look them up, she wrote in her invitation. One of them has been on the *Today* show.

OK, life was a little placid in Queretaro, so I would just take her up on it and go over to the reading on a Sunday afternoon. Meggie, a generous ex-pat from Michigan, was the type of person who made a livelihood out of knowing people, consequently, most of the people I met in Queretaro knew Meggie. The retired couple trying to learn Spanish, the ex-Peace Corps volunteer who opened New York Pasta Delite (NYPD—he got such a kick out of that), and then this woman writer from Minneapolis who knew someone in Alexandria who had a cousin in New York, who offered his house for the writers workshop every year in Queretaro, Mexico. “Oh, the world is getting so small,” Meggie pointed out one Thursday night over a treat of fettucine con chipotle at NYPD. Her hospitality preceded

her, and it was full-blown for the Sunday reading. The bottles were chilling on the tile counter, and trays of stuffed and creamy things floated among the guests.

I took a large gulp of the Mexican semi-seco. I had tasted worse but I didn't know where. It didn't matter because Meggie had really laid out a spread to make us forget the wine. I loaded a plate with empanadas, humus and carrots, to be good, and churros, to be bad. I would regret this, but what the hell. It was Sunday, and the sun was shining in Quertaro, like always. What could be more perfect. Besides, the celebrated authors were on parade. We were ready, about 40 of us, seated in comfy chairs and sofás pushed back along the white stucco walls of the bright salón. Yes, I will call this a salón, I said to myself— Today, this is much more than just a living room with all this celebration going on.

First, came the tall beautiful blond in lovely grey linen pants and a pale green shirt that said "GIN WITH SUGAR DONUTS" in sequins I never would have thought up that combo. I would try to remember the outfit because it was stunning on her large breasts and long legs. (Alas, I have small breasts and short legs and I hate gin.) She limped. She must have had a bad prosthetic hip or leg, but that didn't prevent her from wearing high wedge sandals that looked lethal. I kept thinking, I must tell her later about Dr. Mick.

She was much too perky during her reading about a visit to Diego Rivera's house in Guanajuato where she saw paintings of children in beautiful white dresses—which the author assumed were baptismal gowns but were actually burial gowns. The children were dead, their glossy round heads and caramel skin preserved forever upstairs at that museum. She had been particularly awestruck because she had lost a child to a rare disease at age two, the parallel sadness suddenly entering her tone as it dawned on her that she had no

more pictures, no paintings, of her child except for the fake arrangement of a last birthday party where everyone was gay and celebrating. She had little to celebrate, but she was celebrated on the *Today* show.

“Los angelitos,” she said. “Baby angels.” That affected her.

She continued to read her essay, in the same perky tone as before, sun lighting her remarkably bright blond hair, while the smile did not leave her face. The door slammed behind her, someone dropped a glass.

Eyes set upon her in wonder. How could she tell it, how could she live it?

“It helps to write it,” Meggie said, wistfully, out loud, when she heard the murmur from across the room.

The blond author adjusted herself in the armchair. She teased, conspiratorially, the second celebrated author, who sat on a sofá next to her, his disheveled appearance calculated: terribly scuffed combat boots without laces, rumpled black shirt and black jeans, rings on various random fingers. His little-boy face showed too many signs of celebration over the years. He had been a cute boy, you could tell that from his manner and his shock of black hair and straight little nose, but he wasn't cute any more. He had an earnest, self-satisfied look about him, as did the other celebrated ones, but, now faded slightly, still keeping up the hippie look, he gamely accepted the attention of the group, mostly old ladies (myself included) who adored writers from afar, some who wanted to be writers, most who didn't know a damn thing about writing but read Danielle Steel, and they knew a good story when they saw it. The little French woman, drinking Mexican

semi-seco before the reading, pointed that out to me. “You should just see her mansión in San Francisco. She must be doing something right.”

But I didn’t want to listen to the French woman any more. She had followed me to a chair alongside mine, yolk from a deviled egg sitting on her upper lip, chatting on about a Vietnam vet who came home to nothing in one of Danielle’s stories. “It was so sad,” the egg still there.

I focused on Celebration Number Two sitting next to the blond, now coquettish. He had crossed one floppy boot over a thin leg and he wiggled it.. I couldn’t take my eyes off his scruffy foot, but then I did. He told of his love for a gifted lesbian painter, how he had kissed her eyelids, but not her lips, and how they lay together in bed, for comfort. She ended up raped and murdered in an alley in Buffalo. He read the excerpt of his writing on his phone, from his memoir, one of five published books he’d made. “It does me good to read this, to almost bite it off,” he said, “this part of my life, and then just spit it out.” He deferred to the beautiful blond, that theirs were sad stories, and then, still wiggling a boot, he looked down, away, lost in thought about the time when his love was with him. She was clearly there with him in that momento.

The third celebrated author was thin of face, of rear, of arm, and bouncy, if that could be, but she was. She had short black hair, a bit greasy and stringy. Her publisher was St. Martin’s Press, she told us right off the bat. Her reading was totally incomprehensible, something about a woman in Africa being in love (presumably white on black) and realizing it wouldn’t work when she saw him leaving town in the back of pick-up truck. That was the jist I got from about 15 minutes of the pages selected in the middle of the

book, *Men Don't Get It*. I didn't get it. I don't think anyone else did either, but this was a polite group, and one that was getting slightly drunk and bilious on satay, cucumbers covered in tuna, and piles of humus.

The blank expressions did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of this celebrated author. After all, she had St. Martin's Press, and she was the one who had started the writer's workshop in Queretaro! She threw out her arms. "We are the roots," she said, like they (or we?) were a gigantic, lush tree that had sprouted here in the middle of Mexico. Yes, they had sprouted, this writing workshop that was her baby, her love, of mostly Americans, here in Queretaro. Her lovely friends, Roberto and Sean, had a house in the Centro, vacant most of the year when the weather was passable in New York and they could abide el norte, and, they had offered her Mexico. Who wouldn't be happy? Would she like to use the casa to bring some would-be writers together? Sean asked. Yes, she definitely liked the idea, and so it happened. From places in the US to here, to my temporary hometown of Queretaro, Mexico.

A bit quietly, and with some embarrassment, the reading ended. No one had questions, not at first. We wanted to drink more, so we did, following each other to the roof top to watch the sun brighten the sky with a few gold streaks before it retired for the day.

"So," the professor with thick white hair in a booming voice said, "Tell me. How do you write?" He must have liked the sound of his voice because he repeated, "No, I mean, just how do you do it? How do you write?"

He was addressing a clot of MFA students from Chicago, most of them on scholarships to the workshop for their celebrated embryonic efforts.

“Oh, I dunno,” said one. “A writer writes.”

That shut him up.

I had mistaken the sonorous professor all evening. At first, I thought he was with the students, then with the French woman, but, no. He had no one checking on him, clinging to him, correcting him, or bringing him food.

I asked him,. “Where do you teach?”

He said, “Oh, God, no. I’m not a teacher. Who would do that?”

“Well, I would,” I said. “I do.”

That shut him up, too. We both looked into our wine glasses.

I took a rather large sip. “Where are you from?”

He said, “I’ve lived here eight years.”

“Really? You sound so, American.”

“I lived in France for 20 years.”

“Uh, huh. And?”

“Originally, I’m from Tampa.”

The little Mexican attendants, wearing black aprons with skulls printed on them, circulated with trays, offering miniature ham and cheese tortas, olives and radishes. I didn’t see a tortilla all night. The semi-seco and red wine flowed.

That little devil, Meggie, I thought. Got to love her, getting us all a bit off our rockers. I filled my glass again with the white wine, although I could hardly choke it down. I really wanted a buzz of some kind Red gave me a headache, and this probably would, too. The whole afternoon was giving me a headache so I decided to drown it and see what would float my way.

The non-professor was shoveling in the last of his empanadas and knocking back the red. He wasn't alone.

Then odd things happened. The combat boots guy was nuzzling the tiny French woman in the corner, the Peace Corps guy was arm and arm with Meggie, and the blond was pawing the bouncy, skinny, black-haired one over by the last of the satay. It was getting cool up there on the roof, I thought, but not for some.

I wandered downstairs, the non-professor trailing behind, and we casually sat on the white leather sofá in the salon. Someone had magically turned on lamps in four corners of the room and lit candles, which immediately put a silken glow on my world. The non-professor shifted his knees in my direction. "So, what do you teach?" He was slightly abashed. The French doors were open. I looked out at the blue-black Mexican sky. I heard the MFA students leaving, the heavy metal door clanging behind them: They were laughing. "What a bunch of old farts," one of them said as the sound of them got smaller and smaller.

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