

The following Friday night was the big dinner. I picked out subdued colors. I didn't want them to suspect I was gay. Well, at least not on our first encounter. Beige Dockers and a button-down striped blue shirt would make an excellent impression. Nerves were jumping.

Hauling myself to the valley elicited *Where was I?* I'd never been to their area of North Hollywood. It wasn't on my bucket list. I would never be considered a "Valley Girl".

The traffic from West Hollywood was obscene. I'd given myself an hour to ensure I'd be spot on time. God, this neighborhood was nightmare scary. I hoped my car would survive. Where were the street lights in these deserted streets? I heard a loud shot. Did someone have a gun? Maybe it was a car pissing noise into the street. Where the hell was I going? I instructed myself to calm down and stop being a drama queen.

I saw the apartment building and my blood pressure returned to my version of normal. Thank goodness there was a spot right in front. I'd brought some sparkling lemonade from Trader Joe's. I couldn't come empty-handed. This was so different from West Hollywood. It wasn't even a secure building. I just walked up some steps, opened the glass entrance doors and entered without having to ring a bell. What was I getting myself into?

When the door opened, I saw a short woman with Pablo's pitch-black hair. The yellow apron around her waist partially covered a folksy dress with earthy embroidery.

"You must be Isaac. Please come in. You're early but that's fine. Pablo helped me with dinner and he's cleaning up now. It's amazing the way he handles food. He should have gone to culinary school. I bet he would make a great celebrity chef. I hope you like chicken."

"Of course. It's nice to meet you. Mrs. Besugo?"

"Call me Gladys."

"Here's something to drink with dinner."

“Thank you. I love lemonade. I wish we had a Trader Joe’s near here.”

I was usually affectionate when I met someone’s parents but I held back. I didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize the evening. It was important to Pablo. The apartment was decorated with floor to ceiling brilliantly framed pictures. The extreme opposite of the neighborhood and the cliché of what I thought Latino furnishings would look like. I expected garish reds, not the subdued warmth of this room. My eyes shot to the dining room hutch. For a moment my eyes tricked themselves into seeing tarnished brass candle holders with Shabbat candles. I must have been hallucinating.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d lit candles. When I was with Randy, we always lit candles on Friday night and followed the tradition of lighting the candles 20 minutes before sunset. Our ritual had started after our trip to Israel. We’d laugh when the tour guide told us, “You know that you can finagle the 20-minute rule because in Haifa it has to be 30 minutes before sunset and 40 minutes in Jerusalem. The mountains in those cities obstruct the horizon, so no one knows if the sunset has arrived.” Jews loved having choices as to what was the best custom to follow.

Randy would bring home a freshly baked *challah* bread and we’d splurge on Hafagen wine made from Napa Valley that ran between \$30 and \$50. We couldn’t stomach diabetic sweet Manischewitz.

I had a pain in my gut if I tried to recreate a solo Shabbat dinner. I was surprised that the initial chill of North Hollywood had created a wistful memory when I sucked in the balminess of the apartment.

“I love your place. And all this artwork. It’s stunning.”

“I do enjoy paintings. I know these are prints but it feels like the originals when I stare at them. I have one original that my grandmother painted when she lived in Mexico. After I quit nursing, I took up painting. I guess you could say I am an amateur artist but I don’t display them. It’s just a hobby.” Gladys took my hand and walked me into the dining room. The painting was of a destitute woman with her two children. But the background looked like a desolate *shtetl* landscape. My mind flashed to scenes from *Fiddler on the Roof*. The child was holding a broken pitcher and there was milk dribbling onto the street. I gasped at the sense of doom and poverty. The milk nourishment had been destroyed. I was glad there weren’t any pictures of Jesus hanging from a cross that I’d witnessed in the Italian gangster films directed by Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola.

“Where’s Mr. Besugo?” I asked.

“Oh, Hector will be home soon. Pablo, your friend is here.”

Pablo came bouncing out of the hall. God, he was a smash. Good enough to gobble. And this white shirt against his skin was perfection. How could I stop from hugging his solid frame?

“Hi, Isaac. Did you have any trouble finding the apartment?”

“No problems.”

Then the front door opened and Hector made his presence known. I saw the resemblance with Pablo. Their big ears linked father and son. Hector was large boned. Slightly scary. I noticed his callused hands as he gripped my hand. I think Pablo said he did construction work. I saw the leftover acne scars on Hector that Pablo had inherited from him.

“Welcome to our home. Pablo has told us a little about you. He doesn’t have many friends so I was happy you guys connected.”

I tried to keep my jumpiness in check as I looked at Pablo’s father.

Thank goodness Gladys piped in with, “Dinner’s ready, folks.”

As we walked to the dining room, a wall crucifix of Jesus hanging on a cross stared at me. Because I avoided Christian religious paintings and art objects at museums, this was the closest I’d been to the image of Christ. I tried to understand the raw visual reminder that the crucifixion represents for Catholics. Thankfully my ruffled thoughts were broken when Gladys began lighting the candles I saw earlier. Are they trying to make me feel comfortable with the Shabbat candle lighting? I could picture Gladys with a napkin on her head with her hands motioning over the flickering flames as she chanted the Hebrew prayer that illuminated the spirit of truth. Although both my parents were atheists, they had always remained cultural Jews, and mom would tell me that the flickering candles brought her serenity. Watching Gladys had triggered memories of mom.

“Those candlesticks look like antiques. Are they a family heirloom?”

“Yes, Isaac. We always light candles on the last Friday of the month. I don’t know why. My mom, her mom and my great, great grandmama did the same thing. My great grandfather was born in Spain. Must be a Spanish tradition. We surely didn’t learn this ritual in Mexico where my parents grew up. I never got an answer when I asked why.”

Pablo told me his grandparents immigrated to Los Angeles in 1939 from Mexico City shortly after they married.

“Can I pour you some wine?” Gladys continued.

“Sure thing.” My goodness, it looked like Manischewitz. I hoped it wasn’t sickeningly sweet. The room stilled like the silence in a library. Pablo and his parents were touching their foreheads in unison, then below the chest, left side, right side and finishing with open hands on

the chest again with bowing their heads. Hector began speaking, “Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty.” The spell of Shabbat evaporated.

After the four of us had wine glasses in hand, I said my blessing to myself. The slurping red stung my throat. I quickly gulped to disguise my distaste. My stomach was gurgling. Please don’t let them hear it. It stopped growling as the mouth-watering first course of shrimp over red leaf lettuce hit my mouth.

“This shrimp salad is delicious, Gladys.”

“Oh, this isn’t shrimp. It’s fake crab. We never eat shellfish or pork. My grandmother used to say, ‘*un animal muy mugroso y no buena para comer.*’ Pigs are dirty animals and pork is not good to eat.”

Hector giggled.

“I know my Spanish has gotten rusty. We’ve been so Americanized. We never used Spanish after my grandparents died. I’m not even sure if Pablo knows any Spanish,” Gladys said.

Pablo smiled, “Only a few words, but otherwise English is my only language.”

Later, Pablo explained another reason why Spanish was never spoken in their household: the passage of Prop 187 in 1994. During the late 1980s there had been a surge of attacks on Latinos in Los Angeles. Anti-Mexican sentiment had been flourishing. By the time Proposition 187 appeared on the ballot that would prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency healthcare and public education, the public was in favor of this hateful referendum.

The solace of Shabbat returned. I expected to feel like an extra-terrestrial with the Besugos yet I was feeling integrated into their life. Does this have anything to do with my immediate cohesiveness together with Pablo? Was I experiencing that with the Besugo’s? That it was fate, encountering Pablo? Wait. I didn’t believe in destiny. I’m a realist. But I was into new

terrain with Pablo. At the initial sight of Pablo in temple, I had that eerie feeling of having met him before. If I believed in reincarnation, might we have been lovers in a past life? I bet Eric would have an explanation. My friend for life and temple buddy was into all that hogwash and had visited psychics, channelers, and regression therapists. He told me, “I really believe the soul or consciousness lives on through multiple lifetimes.”

The aroma of the baked chicken smothered with love brought me back to being present at the dinner table. The side dish of refried beans had competing flavors of cilantro, sweet onions, cayenne pepper, and chili that were opening my membranes. With warmed tortillas that Gladys bragged were homemade, I had entered food heaven. This was gourmet food for the soul swirling through my mouth. Then my pre-diabetes roared and resulted in exhaustion from the cuisine. The anxiety about meeting Pablo’s parents had prevented a seven-hour sleep, so a caffeine fix was required.

“Gladys, would it be trouble to ask for a cup of coffee?”

“No problem, but it will have to be black. We don’t use any dairy when we serve meat.”

I would swear she was talking like an Orthodox Jew. I was revived when the coffee hit my bloodstream. I got into a caffeine high zone.

The daydream ended with Gladys talking. “Pablo says you are an accountant. Good with money.”

“I love working with numbers.”

“Oh God, that was my worst subject. I bet you are a real catch for girls. You’d make a great husband.”

I turned into an ice cube. So, they had no clue. Yes, Pablo had said his parents would murder him if they found out he was gay. Really, Pablo? His parents appeared to be easy gentle

loving people. I couldn't imagine that discovering their son was gay would change that. At least among reformed and conservative Jews, I hadn't heard any horror stories of parents rejecting their children because they came out as gay. Unfortunately, it was common among the Orthodox sect, which I considered a cult, to disown their flesh and blood over homosexuality.

Pablo quickly changed the subject, "I've got great news. I'm getting a raise at Pavilions. 15 dollars an hour. It's still part-time, but they promised me that for my next annual review they would make me a permanent employee."

Hector beamed, "I'm so proud of you. You're moving up. I see you as a manager. Time for a toast. Gladys; do we have some champagne in the refrigerator?"

Gladys didn't answer because she saw a strange aura around Pablo.

I tried to grab Pablo's attention. I wanted to share my pride in him, too. But I saw anxiety in his eyes. What was going on?

Pablo stood, "I have other news. I've been afraid to tell you. I hate keeping secrets. I want you to know me."

Both Gladys and Hector stared at me as they awaited Pablo's announcement. Tranquility permeated through the room before Pablo spoke. It made me stop breathing for a second. I wanted to stop Pablo from any revelation. This was too new for him. How could he tell his parents when he wasn't sure about himself? It had only been three months since he discovered his sexuality.

"Isaac isn't just a good friend. He's my boyfriend."

"What are you talking about? You must be confused. This is how you tell us?" Gladys barked. Hector and Gladys reacted as frightened deer bombarded by headlights.

Hector wanted to protect Gladys and tried to mediate her exploding emotions. Gladys was rising, pushing her wooden chair away from the mahogany table. The chair made a screeching sound against the floor tiles and left skid marks. The veins in her neck turned crimson. Her arms were raised. If Hector hadn't restrained her, Gladys might have detonated.

Hector said, "Stop, Gladys. Let him talk. I'm sure he's made a mistake and he wants to correct himself. Apologize for offending his parents. That he doesn't know what he's saying. My son would never do anything like this. If this was true, I'd whip him."

Pablo came within inches of Hector and screamed, "You want to hit me. You think that will knock the demons out of me. What do you want me to do?"

I could see spit flying from Pablo's mouth targeting Hector. Hector backed away as though he'd been hit by splattering grease and I saw him deteriorating. I stared at Hector's eyes and searched for an ounce of sympathy for his son.

Gladys said, "Act like a man. You don't have a grip on who you are. I never understood why you worked for a kosher butcher. You aren't Jewish. Why would you want to travel over an hour on a bus? Then I knew something was really wrong when you told me you worked in West Hollywood. It's that gay city, isn't it?"

Pablo said, "Come on, Isaac. That's it. I'm done. We're leaving." He tugged at me. What could I say? I tried talking to his parents, "Pablo loves you. He wouldn't have told you if he didn't love and respect both of you."

"Respect. This is how you honor your parents. Get out. I don't want to see you again." Gladys's voice had gone up an octave and her shouts turned to the squawking sound crows make before they pounce.

As we departed an altered Hector followed us to the door.

“She doesn’t mean it. She’ll cool off. I don’t understand but you’re my son. Listen to me, you need to think about what you are saying. You can’t be gay. It’s impossible. I know we should love you but you are going against the bible. But I will do anything I can to help you get through this. I don’t want to lose you. I can’t take another loss.”

Pablo had inched toward his father and when his arms curled around Hector, it looked like they had breached the black hole between them where the gravity was so strong that no particles of light could escape. But the separation that came within seconds returned them an emotional dissonance. Hector pushed Pablo away and said, “Go. Don’t come back until you are better.” We were gone.

The quivering drive home rendered each of us speechless. It was so much to process. After five minutes of silence, I felt like a woodcarver was chiseling me to talk. I couldn’t let him marinate what happened and stew about it.

“Pablo, I had no idea you were going to out yourself tonight. Where did that come from?”

“I can’t talk. Please let’s wait until we get home.”

“Promise me please. I don’t want you to feel walled in.”

“Yes, Isaac. I will.”

At the condo his stoic demeanor completely changed course. He burst into a volcano of tears. While I was hugging him, I was afraid he would collapse to the floor. Between my palpitations and his relentless quaking, we became hostages of our emotions, unable to comfort each other. He kept repeating, “Oh God Oh God Oh God. What have I done?”

Then I couldn’t stop him from descending to the floor so I followed his lead. Laughter broke our awkward position as our butts rubbed against the wood floor.

“I was on such a high after getting a raise. It was the first time I could make my parents proud. They hated that I dropped out of college. They thought I’d never be successful. I was jealous that your parents accepted you. Why couldn’t I have that?”

“I did it gradually and I didn’t have a boyfriend when I told them. It gave them a chance to adjust. Look, they were unusual. I think they knew I was gay. Or at least they thought I was unique, not like the other kids. So, it wasn’t a shock when I told them. It was 1970 right in the middle of the sexual revolution. It was a generation of free love and hippies. And because my parents were older, they made it a point to keep up with current trends. They didn’t want me to feel like they were out of touch. It’s different for your parents. Even though they are second generation Americans, the Latino culture is very different.”

“What’s going to happen now? It’s like they’ve disowned me. That’s not what I wanted to happen.”

“Give it time. You dropped a bomb on their world. At least your dad is trying to adjust.”

“Yes, that surprised me. Can we just blot this evening out? Make believe it never happened? Take a time machine?”

“No, Pablo. You are out. No more hide and seek. You’ll see the beauty in what transpired. You exposed your vulnerabilities. For the first time your parents witnessed the authentic Pablo. You’re a 25-year-old gay man. You’ve owned it. It’s a well-earned reward to yourself.”

“Oh, my love. I know why you stole this Latino boy. I have a reward for you, Isaac. Going to bed now so we can feast on each other. But first I have a surprise for you.”

His fingers tangled with mine as he dragged me to the bedroom. We started to remove each other’s clothing. The collar of Pablo’s white shirt was stained from sweating and I noticed

my underarms were damp. We were both a mess. The electric tingling was beginning as he peeled off my Jockey shorts.

Once we were naked, Pablo started moving his hands along my spine, stopping at each vertebra and gently massaging the discs. When I smelled the fragrance of oil and how he dug into the muscles, I got lost. It took him 30 minutes to excavate the knots in my ligaments from head to toe. After he completed me, I said, “Where did you learn how to do that?”

“I don’t know. I used to massage my grandmother’s feet and I just used those same techniques through the rest of the body. I guess I just like using my hands. It comes to me naturally.”

I was jealous that Pablo had a close relationship with his grandmother. My grandparents had died before I started kindergarten so I didn’t have the luxury of having second parents.

But once we were splayed on the mattress, I couldn’t perform. Not only had he drained the toxicity in my organs but he had also sapped my strength. The evening had taken a toll on me. The fighting and screaming I’d witnessed tonight was new territory. I had never fought with my parents and with Randy we never raised our voices. Randy and I had perfected the art of closeting our thoughts, despite his profession. Now I had a new fear. I was 20 years older than Pablo. His sexual needs would be stronger. Oh, wait a minute, Pablo was stationary. His eyes were shut and his mouth was open. He must be a mouth breeder and hopefully he doesn’t snore. My catastrophizing was misguided. Both of our bodies were on the same page. We agreed that massaging would be added to our lovemaking but only as a dessert rather than an appetizer.

