

Leah Griesmann
The Slave

Three thousand dollars? It seemed exorbitant, even for a work of, what was it, Meso-American era Nahuatl pottery? But Curt knew Aztec art and she was not going to tell him how to spend his own money, not when they had two modest pensions coming in and had already cut their living costs two-thirds by moving to Puerto Escondido. But there was always a price to pay, that money they'd saved on taxes, car expenses, housing, entertainment, medicine and food now funneled into her animals and Curt's ancient art.

Tlacotin—a slave, he had said, explaining that in Aztec culture slaves were treated better, that they could buy their freedom, their designation as slaves not determined by birth or race, but by circumstance. Of course, she wanted to argue, if they could afford to buy their freedom, they would hardly be slaves, and if they couldn't they were no better off than slaves everywhere, but she didn't want to dampen Curt's obvious joy at the dealer's rare find.

The *Tlacotin* was eight inches tall, of rust-colored clay, a primitive figure with a prominent nose, slanted eyes, long hair, and an abstract form that suggested a body. And yet, as she stared at that large head, the stooped frame bearing a round basket more than half its own size, it occurred to her such a totem didn't exactly tell of good fortune—not like the big-bellied Buddhas, red-eared cats or lucky bamboo trees—no, an icon like that was an omen.

This is why it didn't shock her as much as it might have when several weeks later as they were returning from their monthly pilgrimage to Wal-Mart—frozen sea bass, Lender's bagels, Wheat Thins, Oreos, Rice Chex, granola bars, Diet Dr. Pepper and blocks of cheddar cheese in tow—to find their gardener Rigoberto's son Antonio in the living room bouncing his soccer ball. He was bouncing it over and over, the sliding glass door open, Rigoberto yelling at him from the yard to stop and she said, it's all right, we'll give him some Oreos and some Wheat Thins, he loves them, and he bounced the ball softly one last time out of his father's sight, the ball sailing just over his shoulder, hitting the *Tlacotin* and knocking it to the floor where it shattered.

In the wake of the crash there was silence. Then a holler from Rigoberto who dropped the hose and came running. The Wheat Thins still on the plate, the ball bouncing several times out the door, Rigoberto's yelling, and the boy's deep inhale and sob. Curt was there within seconds, his face stiff as the Aztec masks that hung on the wall across from his pottery.

A few minutes later when the yelling had stopped, Antonio sat stuffing his mouth with Oreos though his eyes were still red, and Rigoberto stood in the yard talking to Curt. "How much? How much?"

There was infinite calculation in the look Curt gave her. She was pondering Rigoberto's weekly wages, who as their gardener and housekeeper earned forty pesos an hour, four dollars U.S., a generous salary by Mexican standards.

"It's a lot, Rigoberto," Curt finally said and she nodded approval.

"How much?"

"No, no." She couldn't help jumping in. "It's too much, Rigoberto. We need to leave it alone. We'll figure it out."

Rigoberto was growing more tense, the muscles in his neck protruding, his voice husky. He said, and even with her imperfect Spanish she understood, "In our family, we pay our debts. You tell me how much and he will work for it."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Curt said.

Unhappily, Rigoberto went back to the gardening. Antonio finished his plate of cookies and fell asleep watching TV. When Rigoberto was done he yelled for Antonio and drove off in his truck.

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