

SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

The Laundromat *

Lisa Hernandez

There's a laundromat on the East Side. On Wednesdays, they give free soap. But only if you ask. And if you're not a regular customer, only if you insist. Anyway, it's really cheap soap and it ruins the rayons. But you can still use it on the tougher stuff, so I go once a month with my girlfriend, Chata, to wash the curtains, shams, bedspreads, blankets, that sort of thing.

But this morning, she brought that wetback husband of hers, Raul, and that's always a bummer. Raul's this short guy with a bush mustache and a short temper. He doesn't like me. It's o.k. though. I can't stand him either. In fact, I like seeing him in the laundromat because I know he hates it. It's his only day off. But Chata insists and since they're newlyweds...

Anyway, it all started when Raul fumbled trying to fold the flat bed sheet. He'd fold it in and Chata would fold it out. He was clumsy with the fitted sheet too. When they got to the sofa cover, he teased her about being a south paw. He said in Spanish, "It's not proper." And she said in her Spanglish, "Why is it malo?" Then he yanked the cover out of her hands, real chicken-shit like, and folded the sheet himself saying, "left-handed people are retarded."

Then they got to a black and blue checkered blanket, and they were about to do the twist again, but this time she let go of the blanket. He bent his knees forward and reached for it. Anyhow, he missed, nearly fell and the blanket landed on the floor. He said as he lifted it, "Today's my only day off and I'm spending it with my friends. Tu no mas me das un dolor de cabeza."

I hadn't mentioned a baby, but they have a really fat one named Raulito who was sleeping quietly on a folding table by the dryers. Anyway, it started crying, really loud.

I went to Chata, and took the screaming baby from her arms, and told her to finish folding. We were neighbors so we always walked home together.

Raul began shoving the baby's diapers in plastic bags, piling the bedspreads and curtains, then tying them in a bundle. He threw the bundle over his shoulder. Then took a bag in each hand. Chata took another bundle of baby blankets and placed them into a travel bag. Then she took the baby from my arms.

It was a long mile walk having to carry those heavy bundles and listening to that kid cry. We hadn't even reached the corner when Raul yelled at her, real asshole-like, "stop that baby's crying."

Then as we were turning the corner he screamed, "We shouldn't have brought all the curtains -- they weren't dirty anyway."

I walked up to Chata and took the bag from her hand at the red light. Her forehead tensed up as she stroked the baby's forehead. She gets real nervous.

With her index finger, she gently wiped the lines of perspiration running down the sides of his cheeks. Raulito's eyes were shut, and he belted out a screeching, panting cry. His whole body shook. Chata's eyes started to water.

Raul spoke with his back to her as he crossed the street, "And if we were in Mexico, the baby wouldn't be so spoiled because my mother would teach him discipline."

Chata held the hysterical baby tightly against her as she walked past Raul. When we reached the porch, Raul struggled with the keys.

"If you were more careful to keep these things clean, we wouldn't have to clean them every month," he snapped.

Both Chata and the baby were sobbing now.

As Raul opened the door for her, he yelled, "but you let the baby crawl everywhere... And you're not controlling him, and just because his mother is a loca doesn't mean my son has to grow up to be..."

Chata jerked the bag from my hand and yelled at him, loud and slow, "vete mucho a chingar tu madre!"

And those must have been the magic words because both the baby and Raul shut up. It's not every day that a Mexican's wife sends him to go fuck his mother. At least not Raul's "my mother is a saint" mother.

He stood on the steps with his hands on his hips, looking down as though he was trying to find the words to yell at her, maybe even beat her.

Of course, Chata didn't want to be hit so she ran up the steps, slid past him and into the living room. She picked the baby up, pulled out her tit and brought Raulito to her nipple, looking down the whole time. She glanced at me from the doorway as if to tell me to leave.

Seconds passed and he just stood there, holding the screen door open. He looked at me through the corner of his eye as I walked away. I walked around the house and peered into the window to see if I could see Chata through her organza curtains. Then, I went to my small duplex directly behind theirs, and began making jello for my little Cristina.

Thirty minutes later, Chata called. She was sobbing softly, "He's getting dressed. He's slamming the drawers, pulling clothes off of the hangers."

"Is he leaving?"

She whispered, "he put on new underwear, and he's cologning himself."

I heard the door slam in the background. "He's out of the bathroom," she said. "I'll call you later."

All his friends talk about is sex and poker. And they're lazy. Always encouraging Raul to go out and spend money we don't have. Raul is dumb enough to always get stuck paying for the beer. And two of them have mistresses. One of them sees this woman twice his age, just because she gives it up for free.

And if he's going out with them, why the hell does he need to get perfumed for? He sprayed the whole house. I can smell it in here.

Ever since I got pregnant, he's been different. I tell him I love him. I touch him softly every night. But he won't touch me. He hasn't touched me in seven months. All he does is kiss my forehead before going to bed. What the hell's that about?

His mother is always telling him that I don't know how to do anything, that Raul should have married a Mexican girl, not one of these "pochas." "She doesn't cook right. She can't clean well. And she has a bad attitude. She can't even speak Spanish. No mas vas a sufrir, hijo."

Through the half open bedroom door, Chata could see his bare chest, his pecks small but firm. His sacred heart medallion swung frantically around his neck as he ironed back and forth. He loved starch but he didn't like folds, so when he ironed his shirts never showed his meticulousness.

Before he slammed the bedroom door, Chata glanced at Raul in his baby-blue boxer shorts. The baby was on her tit again -- and everytime it would suck she'd get a weird sensation -- a pulsating sensation between her legs -- a ticklish, intense, rising sensations within her. She remembered when Raul would sit her on the bathroom sink, and rock against her until she'd say, "ya mi vida." That was when his mom visited them for a month. As soon as her favorite soap opera started, he'd yawn, complain about work, and go to bed early. Chata would stay fifteen minutes and watch t.v. with the old lady and then excuse herself. "These migraines!" she'd say. They'd meet in the shower and then silently make love on top of the sink. Every day, for three and a half weeks, they'd make love that way. She yanked the fat baby off her tit, put him on the sofa, and turned the t.v. on.

Raul walked out in his Sunday best. Ironed shirt, new jeans, gelled head, shaved cheeks and chin. The metal tips of his boots shined. He looked really handsome. His friends would tease him about having a "casita," and he'd play along, joke that he wasn't staying late, that his "other" woman was waiting for him. He had a neatly folded twenty dollar bill in his wallet for poker. He thought as he walked out the door, "I feel lucky tonight."

Chata is way too good for Raul, and I told her. She doesn't have to put up with that shit. The minute he starts spending too much time with friends, sooner or later, he starts whoring too. I told her. Eddie left me for a sleazy, T.J. tramp. And it all started with those goddamn friends of his. "And I'll tell you why?" I said to her, "Cause all they do is sit around, grab their dicks, talk about how big it is, and then pump each other up so they get the nerve to screw around." And all I have to say is that little Cristina doesn't have a father, some tramp has two more kids, and I'm scraping by and all alone.

And I guess I didn't calm Chata down, 'cause she kept on crying. Though this time it was an angry crying. And before I knew it, Chata was talking like me. Raul was a fucking asshole, the baby wasn't going to have a father, and his mother

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had performed fucking brujeria on them. Then I said, "I'll call you later. I have to help Cristina with her a-b-c's."

For the next two hours, she cleaned. First, the stove, then the bedroom closet, then the bathroom. For another two, she ironed his work clothes, then the baby's and hers. She turned on the television and watched soap operas. The last one finished at ten. She washed the baby, slowly combed his fifteen hairs, lotioned his body, burped him, then rocked him to sleep. She sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee. Midnight rolled by.

By four in the morning, Chata had drunk seven cups of coffee and things had never seemed so clear. She ran to the closet, and looked in the inside pocket of her raincoat and took out a roll of bills, then went to the crib and gently placed the baby in her arms. She called her girlfriend.

"Can I leave the baby with you?"

"It's not even five in the morning," her girlfriend replied.

"I can't sleep."

"He's not home?"

"I'm coming over."

Chata handed the baby over without explanation and walked to the 24-hour grocery store five blocks away. The usually busy East Side streets were empty but for a derelict here and there.

She roamed the aisles and put plenty of Gerber's baby food, peach flavor (it was Raulito's favorite), and a few cans of Similac in her cart. Her grandmother told her that women who breastfeed can't get upset because if they do, their milk spoils, and it makes the baby sick. She threw in diapers, two locks, nails, screws, and some light bulbs and struggled home. For a moment, she thought he'd be at home waiting for her, ready to explain, but when she turned the corner and saw the little house with the lights off, she felt a regained sense of resolve. She went to the back house and knocked on her girlfriend's door. Chata took the crying baby, and without more than a "thank you" walked away.

I hope Chata's not angry with me. I shouldn't have said everything I did -- even though it's true. Raul's an asshole, and if he weren't so in love with her right now, then he'd hit her, or cheat on her like the rest. Love doesn't last. It's a matter of time before he hits the road. Probably's already married in Mexico. And with a family too. I heard about those wetbacks. They just come down here and marry a girl, so they can get papers.

Chata took out the screwdriver, and slowly started to replace the lock on the front door. Then the back door. She relied on the pictures on the package to install the new dead bolt. Then she tightened the locks on all the windows. The lock on the kitchen window was broken, so she took out a four inch nail and hammered into the window pane. The wood cracked. She looked around the room then used every bit of her strength to push the refrigerator across the kitchen.

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It was six thirty in the morning when she called her mom in Fresno. "Raulito and I are planning to visit you tomorrow... No, I just want you to see how big Raulito is getting. He weighs twenty-nine pounds. I'll call you when I have the bus ticket."

It was early morning when Raul tried opening the front door. He dropped his key. He knocked. A soft tap. No answer. He went around the tiny house and tried the back door. "Chata, Chatita." No answer. He started knocking harder. Minutes passed.

Then with his flat hand he began to slam on the door, "Chata... Chata... ROSALVA."

He went around the living room window and tried to open it. He looked in. "Rosalva, open the Goddamn door," he said in Spanish. He banged on the bedroom window, "Rosalva, abre la puerta, Por Dios, que voy a llegar tarde al trabajo."

Raul ran to the kitchen window, and even though it was high, he managed to open it a little. His hand touched the dusty metal of the refrigerator. "Rosalva, open the Goddamn door."

Rosalva tiptoed from the bedroom to the kitchen tracing his steps outside the house. She was carrying the baby close to her chest, covering Raulito's one exposed ear with her hand. Finally, she yelled, "I'm leaving you. I'm going back to Fresno."

"Rosalva, open the Goddamn door."

"Go back to your whore! Raul."

"Rosalva."

"Go live with your whore!"

"I was with Juan. We played cards. I passed out on his sofa."

"Go to hell."

"Rosalva."

"I'm going home! I'm taking the baby!" She was crying hysterically now.

If you ask me, they'll probably split up. Running around, banging on the doors and windows like a lunatic. Locked out of his own house.

Chata's such a crazy bitch. Eddie would have kicked the shit out of me if I would have done something like that. He fractured my hand that one time I called him a bastard.

Anyway, all the neighbors will find out by noon. I'll bet you anything Carmen Mirabel is going to call Chata's mother. She LOVES to talk shit. I hope he doesn't beat her. I swear if I hear things breaking I'll call the cops...

Raul slammed on the front door, then kicked it with his boot. The metal cap of his boot made a dent in the wood. Then, he ran around frantically trying to find which room she was in. He went to the kitchen window. It was small and high, and he jumped to reach it, trying to push back the refrigerator, but his foot slipped and he fell back. Hard. He got up and started kicking the wall. Sharp, pounding kicks.

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All the neighbors were now awake and looking out their windows. His landlord, Don Vicente, opened his back door. He was in a muscle shirt and flannel pajama pants. Don Vicente had taken Raul into his home when he first arrived in Los Angeles, helped him get a job, let him borrow money to pay for his wedding, and now he charged them less than what he could charge for renting their one bedroom, worn but clean, little house.

Don Vicente stood in the grass holding a cup of coffee in his hand, looking at Raul.

"What's going on?" said Don Vicente calmly in Spanish.

"Rosalva's angry," Raul said defeatedly.

"You're late for work, aren't you?"

"She won't let me in."

"Why?"

"I got drunk last night."

"I'll tell my wife to talk to her. You stop kicking my wall, and go to work. Let her cool down."

Raul looked at the dirt on his boots. He took pains to clean and polish his things. He glared at his landlord, a burly guy with bushes of hair on his shoulders, and then began to walk away. At work, he began unloading the heavy, dirty crates in his Sunday clothes. His supervisor docked his pay for arriving late. Juan kept asking him what happened but Raul kept his mouth shut. Juan was a loud mouth and Raul didn't want anyone knowing that he was married to this crazy bitch, this woman possessed by the devil.

But at lunch time, Raul broke down. He didn't have any money. He lost it all at poker. And his stomach was growling. His head ached something fierce, and he started to feel a sharp pain in his back. He sat by Juan, hunched near him, and spoke softly as he told him what happened.

Juan nearly fell off the bench laughing, calling him a pussy, a "mandilon," a wimp of a motherfucker if he had ever seen one. Juan managed three runs to the restroom before lunch was over. He was a bastard. By the time 4:30 rolled by, all the men in the warehouse walked by complementing Raul on his fashionable clothes, asking him when he was going to invite them over for dinner.

Raul cashed his pay check at the local grocery store and bought carnitas, fresh rolls, and pan dulce, all favorites of Chata. He stopped at his landlord's house first, and asked whether his wife had spoken to Rosalva.

"She's a stubborn woman -- I don't think that my wife changed her mind, she was asking about bus fares," said Don Vicente.

You should have seen his face when I told him his wife was leaving him. I knew Raul since he was a boy. Couldn't have been more than sixteen when he first arrived. Straight from the mountains of Chihuahua. But he was a worker. And a miser too. Always had that little house of his clean. Never was late with the rent.

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And he isn't a drunk. He may drink every once in a while, but he isn't a drunk. That wife of his is one hard girl. A man has a right to drink. His wife can't pick his friends. That little girl deserves to be slapped. And I had a right mind to tell him so today but I wouldn't hear the end of it from Clemencia. Women side with each other even if they say they don't. For a young guy, as proud as he is, to be shamed like that in front of everyone -- it's just wrong. Her parents should have taught her better.

Raul went to the back house. He knocked on the door, then sat on the porch step, and said loudly and with resolve.

"Rosalba, I'm home. If you want to go to Fresno, I'm not going to keep you. But I took you from your mother's house, and it is my responsibility to take you back, if that's what you want."

She sat in the sofa next to the window and listened, then she shouted through the window glass, "I called Greyhound. The bus fare is \$45.00. Raulito is free. I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"How long will you be gone?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Have you called your mother?"

"This morning. Don't worry I didn't tell her."

"What are you going to tell her when you go up there? You're going to have to tell her the truth, sooner or later."

"I guess..."

An hour passed. Raul sat there on the porch talking slowly to his wife about his dreams of owning a home, of how he hadn't told her but that he had already saved some money from the bonuses his boss had given him when he volunteered to clean the locker room after work. And he wanted Raulito to go to Catholic school.

She listened, and eventually raised the window so that she could hear him better. The neighbors got tired of watching and began watching their soap operas. Chata's girlfriend kept calling her but Chata had turned the ringer off. Don Vicente occasionally looked out the window, and he thought it was a good thing Raul didn't break down his door -- and maybe the roof needed repairing.

Then with all the calmness he could muster, Raul said to Chata, "I guess you don't love me anymore." And at that, Chata started sobbing uncontrollably. Raul could hear her sobbing and the occasional blowing of her nose. Then the dead bolt opened, the lock turned and the door opened slightly. Raul walked in and sat with his wife on the sofa, wrapped his arms around her until she controlled her tears. Then he kissed her tightly on the mouth, and began to caress her, stroked her hair, licked her neck, reached his hand into her blouse, and touched her nipples. He took his shirt off and then took off her blouse. He was about to put his weight completely on her when he looked into her brown eyes. Dark eyes. Eyes fierce. Cold. Calculating. Conniving.

He grabbed her viciously by the hair, and brought her face close to his, so that she could see his anger. "Don't EVER call my mother that, do you hear me?"

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And he waited to see obedience, submission, at least some recognition of his feelings in her face, but he didn't. He saw only anger. He saw her hand clenched, in mid-air, ready to strike him. He felt the nudge of her knee directly under his balls. She shook her hand violently, "Then, don't EVER spend the night away from home again." Seconds passed. He thought of slapping her. Throwing her off the sofa. Grabbing her in a headlock until she admitted defeat. But he didn't. Something told him that life in all its complexities had become even more complicated because he had come to this country and had married this Americanized girl.

Raul let her go, got up off the sofa and muttered as if out of breath, "mujer imposible," as he walked into the bathroom, and turned on the shower water. Chata sat there and watched him as he walked away. Then, as her head sunk into the sofa cushion, she fell into a profound sleep.

Several hours later, she awoke. She could hear Raul in the kitchen. The smell of roasted hot peppers, garlic and onions made her hungry. The baby was fast asleep on the floor beside her. Aulito had been washed and his hairs greased. One fat curl stood proud on his forehead. The windows were open. The cool breeze felt good against her swollen eyes. She got up and ran the shower water, then slowly pulled her hair back. Her arms felt heavy. She rolled her hair into a bun and leaned against the shower wall and let the hot water drop on her face. Steam enveloped the room.

Raul was there when she got out. He came to her slowly. Stood next to her at the sink as she lowered her hair and looked at herself in the mirror. He pulled her close to him, then pushed her head gently against his chest. She sobbed. His eyes watered as he looked at the ceiling, and then he gently kissed her forehead. He lifted her, sat her on the sink, and then kissed her tightly on the mouth. His fingers pressed firmly around her neck. He kept pressing the lower neck and then her back trying to push out all her anger. He kissed her mouth, slower and softer until finally she took him in, and he began to rock against her in slow, circular movements. He went on, and on, until she bit his ear, and sighed, "ya, mi vida."

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