

QUESADILLAS

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LONDON · NEW YORK

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‘Go and fuck your fucking mother, you bastard, fuck off!’

I know this isn’t an appropriate way to begin, but the story of me and my family is full of insults. If I’m really going to report everything that happened, I’m going to have to write down a whole load of mother-related insults. I swear there’s no other way to do it, because the story unfolded in the place where I was born and grew up, Lagos de Moreno, in Los Altos, Jalisco, a region that, to add insult to injury, is located in Mexico. Allow me to point out a few things about my town, for those of you who have never been there: there are more cows than people, more *charro* horsemen than horses, more priests than cows, and the people like to believe in the existence of ghosts, miracles, spaceships, saints and so forth.

‘Bastards! They’re sons of bitches! They must think we’re fucking stupid!’

The one shouting was my father, a professional insulter. He practised at all hours, but his most intense session, the one he seemed to have spent the day in training

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for, took place from nine to ten, dinnertime. And when the news was on. The nightly routine was an explosive mixture: quesadillas on the table and politicians on the TV.

‘Fucking robbers! Corrupt bastards!’

Can you believe that my father was a high-school teacher?

With a mouth like that?

With a mouth like that.

My mother was keeping an eye on the state of the nation from behind the griddle pan, flipping tortillas and monitoring my father’s anger levels, although she only intervened when she thought he was about to explode, whenever he chose to choke on the stream of dialectical drivel he was witnessing on the news. Only then would she go over and give him a few well-aimed thumps on the back, a move she had perfected through daily practice, until my father spat out a bit of quesadilla and lost that violet colouring he loved to terrify us all with. Nothing but a lousy ineffectual death threat.

‘What did I tell you? You need to calm down or you’ll do yourself a mischief,’ my mother scolded, predicting a life of gastric ulcers and apoplectic fits for him, as if having almost been killed by a lethal combination of processed maize and melted cheese wasn’t enough. She then tried to calm us down, exercising a mother’s right to contradiction.

‘Leave him alone. It helps him let off steam.’

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We left him to suffocate and let off steam, because at that moment we were concentrating on fighting a fratricidal battle for the quesadillas, a savage struggle to affirm our own individuality while trying to avoid starving to death. On the table there were a shitload of grabbing hands, sixteen hands, with all their eighty fingers, struggling to pilfer as many tortillas as possible. My adversaries were my six brothers and sisters and my father, all of them highly qualified strategists in the survival tactics of big families.

The battle would grow vicious when my mother announced that the quesadillas were almost finished.

‘My turn!’

‘It’s mine!’

‘You’ve already eaten eighty!’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Shut your mouth!’

‘I’ve only had three.’

‘Silence! I can’t hear,’ interrupted my father, who preferred televised insults to those transmitted live.

My mother switched off the gas, left her post at the griddle pan and handed us each a tortilla. This was her view of equity: ignoring past injustices and sharing out today’s available resources equally.

The scene of these daily battles was our house, which was like a shoebox with a lid made from a sheet of asbestos. We had lived there since my parents got married;

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well, they had – the rest of us arrived gradually, expelled from the maternal womb one after another, one after another and finally, as if that wasn't enough, two at a time. The family grew, but the house did not as a consequence, and so we had to push our mattresses together, pile them up in a corner, share them, so we could all fit in. Despite the years that had passed, the house looked as if it was still being built because so much of it was unfinished. The façade and the outside walls brazenly showed the brick they were made of and which should have remained hidden under a layer of cement and paint, had we respected social conventions. The floor had been prepared ready for ceramic tiles to be laid on top of it, but the procedure had never been completed. Exactly the same thing occurred with the lack of tiles in the places reserved for them in the bathroom and kitchen. It was as if our house enjoyed walking around stark naked, or at least scantily clad. Let's not distract ourselves by going into the dodgy state of the electrics, the gas and the water; suffice it to say there were pipes and cables all over the place, and that some days we had to get water from the tank by means of a bucket tied to a rope.

All this took place over twenty-five years ago, in the 1980s, the period when I passed from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to youth, blithely conditioned by what some people call a provincial world view, or a local philosophical system. Back then I thought,

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among other things, that all the people and the things that appeared on TV had nothing to do with us or our town, that the scenes on the screen were taking place on another plane of reality, an exciting reality that never touched and never would touch our dull existence. Until one night we had a terrifying experience when we sat down to eat our quesadillas: our town was the main item on the news. A silence so complete fell that, apart from the reporter's voice, all you could hear was the rustle of our fingers carrying tortillas to our mouths. Even in our surprise we weren't going to stop eating; if you think eating quesadillas in the midst of widespread astonishment is implausible, it's because you didn't grow up in a big family.

The TV was switching back and forth between two still images while the reporter repeated that the town hall had been occupied by rebels; the main road in the centre was blocked off with piles of rubbish – which the presenter called 'barricades' – and a burning tyre, with its inseparable comrade, an arriviste plume of smoke. Then I looked out of the kitchen window of our house, situated high up on the Cerro de la Chingada, and confirmed what was being said on the news. I could see four or five sinister, black, stinking clouds tarnishing the view of the illuminated parish church. The church deserves a special mention: a pink-stoned piece of shit, visible from anywhere in the town and home to the army

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of priests who forced us to follow their creed of misery and arrogance.

The news explained the whispered conversations between my parents, the repeated phone calls from my father's colleagues: *Professor So-and-so speaking, let me talk to your father. Professor Such-and-such speaking, put your father on.* If I'd been paying attention I wouldn't have needed to watch the news to realise what was going on . . . if it weren't for the fact I was living through that period of supreme selfishness known as adolescence. Finally my father interrupted the national lynching of our local rebels by gesticulating angrily, scattering little bits of cornmeal pastry into the air.

'What do they expect if they steal the fucking elections? They don't want to lose? So don't organise the damned elections and let's all stop fucking around!'

That very same day, a little later on, a truck with a megaphone drove slowly past our house, loudly exhorting us to perform the incomprehensible civic-minded act of withdrawing from the street and staying shut up in our houses. Until further notice. If the order had been sent as far as the Cerro de la Chingada, where there were barely any houses, and each one was separated from the next by vast spiny expanses of acacia trees, it was because things were really fucked up.

My mother ran into the kitchen and came back with her eyes full of tears and a quiver in her voice.

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‘Darling,’ she announced to my father, and at home this affectionate opening gambit always served as a prologue to catastrophe, ‘we only have thirty-seven tortillas and 800 grams of cheese left.’

We entered a phase of quesadilla rationing that led to the political radicalisation of every member of my family. We were all well aware of the roller coaster that was the national economy due to the fluctuating thickness of the quesadillas my mother served at home. We’d even invented categories – inflationary quesadillas, normal quesadillas, devaluation quesadillas and poor man’s quesadillas – listed in order of greatest affluence to greatest parsimony. The inflationary quesadillas were thick in order to use up the cheese that my mother had bought in a state of panic at the announcement of a new rise in the price of food and the genuine risk that her supermarket bill would go from billions to trillions of pesos. The normal quesadillas were the ones we would have eaten every day if we lived in a normal country – but if we had been living in a normal country we wouldn’t have been eating quesadillas and so we also called them impossible quesadillas. Devaluation quesadillas became less substantial due to psychological rather than economic reasons – they were the quesadillas of chronic national depression – and were the most common in my parents’ house. Finally you had the poor man’s quesadillas, in which the presence of cheese was literary: you opened one

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up and instead of adding melted cheese my mother had written the word 'cheese' on the surface of the tortilla. We were yet to experience the horror of a total absence of quesadillas.

My mother, who had never voiced a political opinion in her life, came down on the government's side and demanded that the rebels be routed and the human right to food be immediately reinstated. My father abandoned his stoicism and retorted that dignity could not be exchanged for three quesadillas.

'Three quesadillas?' my mother countered, despair inciting her to feminist sarcasm. 'It's so obvious you do nothing around here! This family gets through at least fifty quesadillas a day.'

Still more confusingly, my father insisted that the rebels were a bunch of idiots, even though he defended them. It would be ungrateful not to, since it had been they, during one of their sporadic periods in government over ten years ago, who had brought electricity and phone lines to the hill we lived on.

Basically, all the rebels did was shout 'Long live Christ the king!' and pray for time to go back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

'These poor people want to die and they don't know how. They're trying to die of hunger but it takes ages – that's why they like war so much,' said my father by way of explaining to us that the rebels would not

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negotiate, would not accept any agreement with the government.

We called them ‘the Little Red Rooster’s men’, in part because their party logo was a red rooster, but mainly because they – like most political parties – were given to referring to themselves by unpronounceable acronyms. As there was no other party with a blue or yellow rooster, which would have created a source of ambiguity demanding the use of the adjective, a lot of the time linguistic economy – that is, laziness – led us to call them simply ‘the Little Rooster’s men’. They were cooperative farmers, small-scale ranchers and schoolteachers, always accompanied by a loyal circle of devout women of diverse origin. They called themselves synarchists and their mission was to repeat the defeats of their grandfathers and their fathers, who had waged war way back in the 1920s, when the government decided that the things in heaven belonged to heaven and the things on Earth belonged to the government.

Faced with this exciting scene, my siblings and I – semi-rational beings who ranged in age from fifteen (Aristotle, the eldest) to five (the pretend twins), meticulously separated from each other by two-year periods that suggested a disturbing sexual custom of my parents – set to acting out fist fights between the rebels and the government. I headed up the rebels, because Aristotle refused to be anything except the government – the forces of order,

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as he put it. The government always won in our battles, because Aristotle was already applying his fascist methodology, which combined using excessive force with buying off his opponents. As if that weren't enough, he always had in his army the pretend twins, who didn't bat an eyelid at anything; didn't speak, didn't move, didn't blink. They liked to act as if they were two plants and, generally speaking, it's impossible to force plants to surrender. They were a couple of ferns in their pots: we knew it was enough to reach out a hand and apply the minimum amount of force to hurt them, but we didn't do it, ever, because we had the impression that the ferns wouldn't hurt a fly.

I tried to wade in with my rhetorical skills, but was condemned to failure because no one understood me.

'Fellow countrymen, there is still time to step back from the profound abyss, still time to return to the path of good and leave to our children that most precious inheritance: liberty, their inalienable rights and their well-being. You are still able to bequeath them an honourable name that they will remember proudly, merely by being addicted to revolution and not to tyranny . . .' I exhorted my men, until Aristotle grew bored and curtailed my speech by thumping me.

It meant nothing that I'd won poetry contests at school for six consecutive years, improvising oratory pieces and reciting poems: my own, other people's and anonymous ones. Sometimes the anonymous poems were properly

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anonymous, sometimes they were my own anonymous efforts and sometimes those of my father, who had – by a long stretch – a greater talent for vulgarity than he had for metaphor. The poems' authorship was determined by the level of embarrassment they caused me as I read them.

From our strategic position high up on the Cerro de la Chingada, we could hear random detonations and shootouts, and glimpse new plumes of smoke. From the phone calls my parents made to my uncles and aunts, who lived in the centre like normal people, not right in the middle of the shit, we knew it was pointless to risk leaving the house, since all the shops were shut. According to my father, the families who lived in the centre had regressed to walking on all fours and were crawling around in their houses, eating lying down and sleeping under their beds. Such a display of circus skills served only to avoid the stray bullets, a waste of talent and energy, considering that without exception we were all going to die one day anyway.

Despite the precariousness and the risk of starvation we experienced in those days, they were a relief for my father, who was finally able to justify his hermit-like decision to build our house on the edge of town – but on top of a hill? You've got to be kidding! He went around saying that while people were praying for their lives in the centre, we were safe, nothing was going to happen to us, which led me to consider the possibility that we'd