

## Friday Afternoon Aperitif at Casa de Tortilla

by Shabs Rajan

Sometime during Ana's lengthy speech about how the state had failed people again and how those evil banks should have been held accountable, Merche noticed that Pablo, who had to take a call, had left his anorak draped over his chair and was pacing outside, his phone against his ear, and a concerned look on his face. Temperatures had dropped below zero in recent days, and he had only just been discharged after a hip replacement.

"There's one poor soul that really gets to me," Ana said. Merche leaned in to hear her.

Aperitif at Casa de Tortilla on a Friday was like a geriatric auction house, packed with regulars waiting to get a bite of the best tortillas in town, while complaining about their hearts and knees. Every few minutes, the grumbling was punctuated by a shout from the kitchen announcing a new tortilla, like the arrival of a dignitary, which was immediately followed by eager hands claiming it.

"Yes," Merche said, "I think I know which branch you mean," though she knew perfectly well. Her son had recently moved into a flat nearby. It was one of the nicest parts of the city, something she preferred not to mention.

Earlier that day, after dropping off her granddaughter, she had paused outside Carolina Herrera a few doors down. The chrysanthemum-embroidered designer coat she had been eyeing since Christmas had been marked down again, and she would have snapped it up if she had not been meeting Ana and Pablo. It was all the ammunition they needed.

She felt absurd taking such precautions, but although the three of them had built stable lives in civil service posts, she had always sensed they judged her differently for having come from money.

"Tortilla with ham, cheese, and spinach!" A plate appeared from the kitchen and was claimed immediately by the table behind them.

"Never mind, I don't like that one so much," Ana said as the waitress passed them, leaving a whiff of ham in the air. "Let's wait for the cod. Anyway, this man. He's been there for months now, with blankets and cardboard. It's awful. It just shows how badly the state has failed."

'Or just failing the wrong people,' thought Merche.

"Why don't you give him something?" she asked, "or take him to the parish. Padre Carlos would help."

"I never give coins," Ana said, "I pay taxes for that."  
Merche felt herself stiffen.

She had prepared all week to bite her tongue, especially with the local elections approaching. But something always surfaced in their conversations, and it always ended the same way: a long debate that went nowhere and left her blood boiling for days.

They had known each other for decades, attended one another's weddings, their children's weddings, baptisms, holidays, and, more recently, funerals. They had once been six, spouses included, until illness took them one by one. Aperitif at Casa de Tortilla had become a fixture in Merche's week, now largely organised around her grandchildren.

Politics was the only thing that divided them. Since Fernando had left this earth, God bless his soul, she was the only one who was not a socialist, or as Ana and Pablo preferred to say, someone working for society's benefit.

What made them think that who you voted for defined a person? She, too, had suffered. She had lost family to the war. She had stood beside them in the fight for democracy. She went to church every Sunday, knelt, and prayed for forgiveness. She was a good person and believed in giving to the poor. And unlike Ana, she did give. Every month. It was what decent Catholics did.

She realised she had drifted again. Ana was now talking about underfunded social services.

Merche felt relieved when Pablo returned. He clipped his phone to his belt and lowered himself carefully into his chair.

"Everything alright?" she asked.

"Did I miss the cod tortilla?"

"The only thing you missed," Merche said, looking at Ana, "was Ana's global poverty plan."

"Oye, Madre Teresa, careful," Ana replied, poking Merche lightly, "I'll get you yet."

"Come on, Pablito," Merche said, "you were gone ages. Was it your doctor?"

"It was Rafa."

"Oh no. What's he done now?"

Rafa was Pablo's godson. He never seemed to land on his feet, and Merche suspected he took advantage of Pablo's kindness.

"He's found a job," Pablo said.

Merche felt a flicker of guilt.

"But it's in Utebo. He'll need a car." Pablo rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "I said I'd help him. I'm just not sure how to send the money."

"You can wire it from the bank," Merche said, reaching for her phone, "it's simple, look..."

"I know how to wire money," Pablo interrupted, "the problem is he'll get taxed, and half of it will disappear."

"Give it to him in cash," Ana said without hesitation.

Merche leaned back, hoping her surprise did not show.

"I can't just take out twenty thousand in cash, I might as well walk into the Hacienda and declare my plan."

"Over time, Pablito," Ana replied, already typing into her phone. She slid it towards him. "It's not complicated. I've done it before, and if you like, I can give you some of it. They won't be able to trace it back to you."

Merche had stopped listening. She felt as though she had bitten her tongue so hard it must have drawn blood.

"Cod tortilla with green peppers!"

Pablo and Ana raised their hands at once.

From the next table, someone called out, “Always taking the best tortillas, eh, Pablito? You scheming old man.”

“You have to be quick in this life, Chema,” Pablo replied, getting to his feet, clicking his fingers, and doing a twist. And then, smoothing his hips exaggeratedly, he added, “Eyyy - I think they replaced my hip with Carmen Amaya’s.” The bar erupted in laughter as he gave a brief flamenco flourish before sitting down again.

Later, after settling the bill and saying goodbye, Merche made a beeline for the coat. As she crossed Gran Vía, checking left, right, and left again as her granddaughter had taught her, she smiled despite herself. For all their faults, Ana and Pablo were the kindest people she knew. She loved them. She was already thinking about the next meeting, though by then the election results would be out.

Bite your tongue, Merche, she told herself.

She was almost at the department store when she noticed the bundle of blankets tucked into the doorway of the bank.

She thought of Ana’s words. I never give coins.

You’re not Ana, she told herself, reaching into her purse. You give.

The bundle shifted, and a man sat up slowly from the blankets and cardboard. He smiled up at her, his teeth white against his dark skin.

Merche hesitated. Then, without breaking her stride, she closed her purse and walked on. That coat wouldn’t wait forever.