SHORT STORY

The Silent World of Jordi Soto

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"Ear" by Sophia Park

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1.

Squeal. Shriek. Skid, skid. The cars stop dramatically in front of Chez Henri. An undulating soundtrack of wailing sirens prevails over the competing urban sounds. The sidewalk is quickly cordoned off, caution tape fluttering, tourists gaping, cameras clicking, and selfie-stick giraffe necks poised to capture all the action.

Four men dressed head to toe in black with bulletproof vests and shiny helmets storm into Chez Henri, guns drawn. Inside the restaurant, the emergency lights from the unmarked cars give the old-school dining room a disco vibe. Red. Blue. Red. A little Donna Summer wouldn't be totally out of place. The show of force seems absurdly disproportionate given that their intended target, Jordi, is an old man crumpled on the floor, sobbing incoherently, altogether inconsolable. The men in black arrest Jordi, handcuff him, and drag him out to one of the parked cars. Red. Blue. Red. No Donna Summer.

2.

Jordi showed up at Chez Henri about six months ago, yet another food soldier in the army of hard-working, undocumented, impossibly cheerful Medellin natives that made it possible for Chez Henri and countless other restaurants in the city to function. They stationed him at the dish pit to replace poor, old Jorge who had a bad back and a noticeably worsening stoop.

The kitchen guys, because it was always guys, introduced Jordi to Eva and the other front-of-the-house staff.

Jordi, se llama Eva.

Eva, this Jordi.

That was the entirety of the introduction. The kitchen guys were economical with their words when speaking in English. It was the opposite in Spanish; nonstop chatter, singing,

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and shouting, all of it punctuated liberally with crude Colombian slang. *Bobo.* The language was colorful. *Pendejo.* It was ambiguously flexible enough to be used interchangeably as endearments or insults. *Cabeza de Perro.* They used it on each other. *Puta madre.* More importantly, and frequently, the endearment/insult was lobbed on unsuspecting servers and bartenders, who with the exception of Eva, spoke very little Spanish.

3.

Jordi stood out in the boisterous atmosphere of the kitchen. He was perpetually silent. Not only did Jordi abstain from the raucous ribaldry of the kitchen, but he also ignored occasional queries from the front-of-the-house staff as well as any attempts at exchanging casual pleasantries. *Hola*, hello, good morning, good afternoon, and good night were all met with silence. Complete and utter silence. People had heard him speak on rare occasions, so they knew it wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Rumors and insinuations spread among the front-of-the-house staff, as they are bound to, about the reasons for Jordi's silence.

Ron said it was because he didn't speak English. But he doesn't talk to the other kitchen guys in Spanish either, Louis countered. Well, not much anyway, he noted duly. Anthony was of the opinion that Jordi was simply antisocial. Simple as that. Paul posited that Jordi could be a serial killer. Raymond insisted Jordi was just another bitchy queen. Then again, Raymond thought every man was a bitchy queen waiting to come out. Eva decided she would keep trying until she broke through. Every shift, she made it a point to greet Jordi.

Hola Jordi.

Buenas días, Jordi.

¿Cómo estás, Jordi?

Jordi failed to respond. There was a slight shrug one time, but otherwise, the man was unreachable.

4.

It's easy to engage in gossip and play guessing games, let rumors prevail, and Jordi's silent intransigence didn't help matters. However, a more complicated history and its lingering aftereffects lurked beneath the speculated surface.

All around Jordi, there was a commotion, particularly during the dinner rush. The dishes came in faster than he could wash them. Sometimes a plate returned to the dish pit clean, a

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diner-magician's disappearing trick. Other times a plate would come back barely touched, tweezer-placed microgreens swaying unscathed. Maybe the woman was dieting, Jordi thought the first time this happened. He never thought to question his assumption that it was a woman who didn't finish her food. Dish-pit seers, too, have their blind spots.

Yet, such speculation was rare for Jordi. He had come to see no point in thinking about things, in imagining a world and a life outside of his dish-pit kingdom. Aside from the rare stray thought, he operated methodically and mechanically. From his solitary post, tucked away in a cupboard-sized space off the main kitchen, he took the dishes one at a time, scraped and sprayed off the food, and arranged them into blue and red racks, alternating the color of the rack with dogmatic precision. Into the machine they went and came out a couple of minutes later, hot, engulfed in a cloud of steam and cleaning solvent fumes. He left them alone while he loaded the next rack, then sorted them into piles to return to the kitchen shelves. In and out, dirty and clean, in and out; this was the pattern of his existence at Chez Henri. Eight-hour shifts with two brief cigarette breaks, seven days a week: in and out, dirty and clean, in and out again.

Despite the chaos and cacophony of a busy restaurant kitchen, Jordi felt like the world was wrapped in muslin and cotton wool; an insulating or discombobulating straitjacket. The sounds were erratic: soft, sharp, or garbled as if traveling via old-fashioned telephone wires, reaching and receding like waves. Sometimes the lights too danced to their own rhythm, creating halos, rainbows, and hallucinations. Jordi had started to appreciate this filtered reality, his very own island of muffled silence in a cacophonous world. The work was not only tough but also repetitive. At the end of the day though, Jordi was simply grateful to have a job. *Gracias a Dios.*

5.

On the afternoon of the raid there was the usual lull between lunch and dinner service, Edith Piaf on an endless loop, crooning to an empty house. Eva was the lone server, lazily folding napkins and resetting the dining room while sipping on an iced coffee to combat the midday slump and boredom. Chez Henri was open all day but quiet, if not empty, in the late afternoons. This was especially true in the summers when the locals fled the city for the nearby mountains or the distant beach.

Eva was on her phone, double tapping, swiping left, and right, when the two women showed up. The younger of the two women was probably in her twenties. She was beautiful, the kind of beauty that made you stop and take note. The women waited at the host stand where Eva

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went to greet them. The young woman seemed nervous, eyes darting this way and that, hands trembling. Eva didn't think much of it until later. The older woman asked for and obtained a photograph from her young companion. She showed the photo to Eva, asking her if a man named Jordi Soto worked there.

The picture was creased, one corner threatening to secede from the rest. It was a

little faded, taken maybe a decade ago, but it was unmistakably Jordi in the photo. Jordi looked confident, even brash, in the picture, a smile, no — a smirk on his mustachioed face. Yes, Eva told them, he did work there. The older woman asked if they could talk to him. Sure, Eva said, but good luck getting him to talk. She went into the kitchen to get Jordi, who wasn't pleased by her presence or the request but reluctantly followed her out to the dining room after intervention by the kitchen guys.

Eva brought him to the two women. When Jordi was close enough to see the mystery visitors, a curious thing happened. Jordi let out a sound that Eva would later describe as a howl. Jordi then buckled and collapsed. Crying. Sobbing. The women stepped away from him. The older woman called someone on her phone. It's him, she said, quietly.

6.

Alex, the manager on duty, looks pale when he returns to the dining room after talking to the agents who have just taken Jordi into custody.

Are you ok, Alex? What happened to Jordi? Eva asks.

Alex doesn't respond. He goes behind the bar and pours himself a healthy pour of bourbon. Old Grand-Dad, overproof, 57% ABV. He pours another one for Eva.

Why did they arrest him? Is it ICE? Those motherfuckers don't have anything better to do than to go after hard-working people? Eva fumes.

Alex contemplates his response, taking a swig, fire water, and then another one, hot enough to scald a lizard. They arrested him for aiding and abetting prostitution. For sex trafficking, he adds. He pours himself more whiskey. Some of his victims were children, for god's sake, he says, putting his head down on the bar. Eva is speechless for once. She sits down on a barstool. She finishes her whiskey in a single, giant sip. Holy Hades, the burn travels down her throat, lighting her insides afire.

7.

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The events of the day stayed with Eva. They colored her dreams and populated her nightmares. She felt a compulsive urge to find out the whole story if only to put an end to the psychological tug-of-war that was tearing her apart. Eva was naturally inclined to align with and advocate for immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants who, she thought, tended to bear the brunt of socio-economic hardships in this country, people like the kitchen guys. She was hoping that Jordi was the casualty of some sort of identification error, a victim of an overburdened, slipshod judicial system. This turned out to be a false hope, Eva realized, when she uncovered the rest of Jordi's story. Many months after the raid, she met with Alex at a bar where she recounted the details of the story to Alex.

8.

When Jordi was first hired at a brothel, he reckoned it was a good job, better than washing dishes in restaurants. (Little did he know that he was destined for the dish pit after all, but that's the type of joke fate plays on unsuspecting mortals.) It seemed better than the sporadic, seasonal, and unreliable construction work on which he had been supporting his family in Colombia until then. Those were the only two options available to him when he first arrived in the United States.

It was a good job if he didn't think about it too much. He manned the front door. He made sure the customers stayed in line. He made sure the girls stayed inside. At the end of the shift, he collected money from the girls and deposited the proceeds at the headquarters. For ten years, he did this without any major incidents or qualms.

Jordi restricted his interactions with the girls to a bare minimum. He remembered their names — real or fake, exotically hard to pronounce, or locally appropriate and conveniently adopted — so many names, and the corresponding amounts to be collected from each name at the end of the shift. It helped that the girls rarely lasted there for more than a year or two, because there weren't as many opportunities for developing sympathy or any kind of emotional connection with such a fast and constantly revolving cast of demi-anonymous characters. He never slept with the girls either. It was better that way, don't mix business and pleasure. Besides, the bosses would never tolerate it. The girls were there to earn money and anything that interfered with their productivity was strictly prohibited.

9.

The complete and total emotional detachment Jordi had maintained for a decade worked until it didn't. Gayatri arrived with two other girls, all three of them from Nepal, he found

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out later. She was young, beautiful, and terrified; none of which were unusual for the girls brought to the brothel, but Gayatri somehow managed to dismantle brick by emotional brick, the wall of delusions that Jordi had successfully employed to avoid thinking about what he actually did for work.

Jordi was curious about her story — a first for him. He found himself talking to her more than he normally talked to any of the girls before. He would think about her all the time. He brought her presents. Like the bag of mamoncillos, the sweet lime-like fruit that was so popular back home but only available infrequently at the neighborhood bodega here, a rare treat. Like the bottle of perfume, he bought for her at Macy's. Like the silk blouse, the lipstick, the chocolate croissant, the pirated DVD of a Nepali movie, and more. By the time Jordi realized he had fallen for her, it was too late to try to change course.

10.

Jordi's obsession expanded to fill his days and nights. It spread with the rays of the rising sun, chasing away doubts and shadows, spreading delusions of love, and forever and ever. It spread its tendrils in the dark of the night, invading his dreams and prayers. Every sign was examined, interpreted, and then reinterpreted in a more favorable light if needed.

Was that a smile? That was a smile. That must have been a smile.

She likes him.

Trembling, shaking, shivering.

She must be cold.

Cowering, hiding.

She was shy.

Rebuffing, rejection.

Temporary, she was just playing hard to get.

Refusal.

She didn't know any better.

Jordi had no doubt that he was the best option Gayatri had, and not because she didn't have any other options. It was because only he could love her as much as he did and she deserved to be loved.

He loved her. *Amor profundo.*

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He could protect her. Protector-in-Chief.

He loved her. *De nadie seré, sólo de ti.*

He could provide for her. Provider-in-Chief.

He loved her. *Mi amor, mi corazón.*

An obsession like that, laser-focused and unwilling to be tamed, has no match. Rhyme, logic, and reason fail, falling like toy soldiers in the path of a toddler's temper tantrum. Caution, too, gone with the wind, leaving behind a false fearlessness that squats on a throne of wishful thinking.

When the boss' goons came for him, they paid no heed to his denials, ignored his explanations, and laughed at his declarations of love. The beatings began when he resorted to entreaties of mercy.

Punch, kick, crunch, break.

Metal, wood, bone, pulp.

When consciousness returned Jordi's world was wrapped in cotton wool and gauze. The sounds were softer, erratic, reaching, and receding, and his vision had a pliable perimeter that expanded and contracted into the shadow-wrapped world in which he would live for the remainder of his time. In his pain pill-induced delirium and out of it, he was followed by a pair of almondine eyes, Gayatri's eyes. Her eyes in his dreams and waking visions weren't red-rimmed or brimming with tears and terror, or twitching. They danced with joy and delight, taunting, teasing, and tormenting him. The taste of cloves, which she used to chew all day, lingered on his tongue, breath, and clothes despite the scrubbing, sobbing, begging, wishing, and hoping.

Jordi cried in his sleep and upon waking, at bedtime, during the day, at night, in the evening, and in the afternoon until he had no tears left. He cried from the pain. He cried for Gayatri, he called her name like a prayer, plea, and penance, but Gayatri was gone. There was no trace of her, just the eyes and the ever-present traces of phantom cloves. That is until she reappeared at Chez Henri.

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