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## Whatever Makes You Happy

Gina Willner-Pardo

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## Gina Willner-Pardo

*Whatever Makes You Happy*

When Linda Solomon retired, the office threw her a party. She had been dreading the day: tired congratulations, forced jokes about how she had managed to stand them all for so many years, questions about future plans, a tasteless sheet cake. She expected to smile until her cheeks ached, assure everyone they'd been lovely co-workers, and then say something vague about a cruise. Wasn't that what single, 65-year-old women were supposed to want to do? Perhaps to the Galapagos, she would say, as though she'd longed to go for years.

In truth, the party went better than she'd thought it would. Blythe and Anne in Production gave sincere toasts. Phil, her boss for ten years, took her aside to tell her she'd been the most exceptional copy editor he'd ever had— never a misplaced comma—and also that he wouldn't have survived his second divorce without her shoulder to cry on. He put his hand on her arm and she flinched a little, remembering how at one time she'd hoped he might ask her out for coffee or maybe a drink. Not that she'd been terribly attracted to him, but it was hard to meet unmarried men her age, and lots of single gals were writing articles for the magazine—replete with exclamation points and split infinitives—about dating safely in the workplace.

When Linda got home that afternoon, she called the girls. Abby, who was living with her boyfriend in L.A. and making a half-hearted attempt to finish her dissertation in cultural ecology, said “Wow, Mom, that's great” and then apologized for needing to be somewhere at six. Melanie, a nurse living in Miami, didn't pick up—and Linda, who hadn't expected her to, left no message.

The loneliness, when it hit, was knee-buckling, a ferocious, drenching wave. She sat on the couch and let it wash over her, lapping at her ears, flooding her mouth, and thought, *No one. There is no one.*

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Three days later she decided to cook herself a special dinner. She was a wonderful cook, but since Martha died six months ago, she'd had no one to cook *for* (and Martha had barely eaten for six months before that). Cooking was something Linda did for other people: Stewart until his drinking forced their divorce after twenty years of marriage, the girls when they still lived at home. To cook for herself was self-indulgent, unseemly, even. And she always comported herself carefully, whereas Martha, her best friend since eighth grade, had been less rule-bound, more exuberantly improper.

Inside Deluxe Grocery, wearing her blue knit cap to ward off the store's arctic chill, she wandered the produce aisle, mesmerized but not seduced by dewy strawberries and carrots lashed like timber. She strolled past the refrigerated butter and thought about baking a pie, but all she had a taste for was pecan, and that seemed wrong on a sunny June afternoon. Pasta was out—carbs—and she was sick to death of chicken.

By now, she stood in front of the fish counter, staring helplessly at the prawns, the halibut filets, the flamingo-colored salmon steaks. When the fishmonger— “Ernie,” his nametag read—approached the other side of the display, she met his gaze. “I don't know what I want!” she cried.

Ernie smiled. "What is going to make you happy?" He leaned toward the glass, over the ice. His smile, under his graying mustache, was broad. He was missing a front tooth. She couldn't place his accent. "Whatcha feel like?"

"Like an idiot." Immediately, she was sorry: She didn't want to sound self-pitying. "I was thinking seafood, but I'm not really a seafood person."

"Why you thinking seafood then?"

"I used to make it for my friend."

Ernie nodded, still smiling. And now she thought he understood her to mean a boyfriend, someone who'd dumped her. Humiliating.

Ernie said, "I think you could use a hamburger. Sound good?"

The minute he said it, her mouth watered. "Yes, it does. Thank you." She began to walk toward the ground beef.

Behind her, she heard him say something, but it was swallowed in the din of post-work shoppers.

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She made the hamburger with egg, mustard, Worcester, some minced onion and garlic, the requisite salt and pepper, and half a chopped jalapeno she'd bought on a whim. When she had grilled it to her liking, she set a place at the table and ate it slowly, without a bun, savoring every mouthful, wondering at the discomfort she felt, as though she were taking part in an iniquitous ritual.

That night, when she finally turned off the light, darkness settled around her like an animal in a burrow, lengthening, thickening, swelling to fill every corner of space. Her eyes felt heavy. Just before she drifted off, she imagined Ernie saying, "How about some halibut?" and noticed with surprise that it sounded like something she'd been longing for without realizing it.

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On Monday she loitered in the cereal aisle, gathering her nerve, then made her way to the fish counter. Ernie was helping another patron: a younger woman in tight-fitting yoga pants. Linda watched him: He was cordial, helpful, nothing more.

The younger woman reached for her neatly bundled prawns, and Linda moved to the counter. When Ernie saw her, he beamed. "Like that hamburger?"

She didn't mind the missing tooth at all. "Wonderful. I added jalapeno."

"Oh, that's good, that's good." He put his hands on his hips, outside his red apron. They were thick, veined, used to the work of handling animal flesh. Callused. Expert.

Then she saw the thin gold band.

"So today you a fish person?" he asked, still beaming.

She'd only wanted to tell him about the jalapeno, to see what he'd say. Now she felt foolish. "A half-pound of the roughy, please."

"What's your name? I'm Ernie."

She was startled: Did he ask this of all his customers? "Linda."

"Linda, you don't want roughy." Still beaming. "You want *pupusas*."

"I'm sorry?"

He looked over each shoulder, then leaned partway over the ice. “*Pupusas*. With tilapia. And *curtido*. Like in my village.”

“But I don't know how—”

He shook his head. “No. I make for you. You come?” Without waiting, he reached in the pocket of his apron and wrote something on a card. He handed it to her. “Friday? Seven?”

He had written a Salinas address on the back of a business card (“Ernie Flores—Fishmonger”). She nodded yes. Did he own a restaurant or one of those trucks?

Then he whispered, “Because you not hear me when I say I take you out for hamburger.” Still beaming.

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She tried on clothes she hadn't worn in years. Nothing disguised her thickness or the pallor of thirty-seven years spent in a cubicle under the steady hum of florescent lighting. *Don't be an idiot*, she thought, disgusted with herself, even more certain she had misunderstood social cues obvious to everyone else.

On Friday she wore jeans and a white blouse as she climbed the outdoor stairs to Ernie's second-floor apartment. She heard children crying, and emanations from various TVs. She wondered if his wife would be there, and if she weren't, what that might mean.

He opened the door wearing jeans and a tucked-in blue T-shirt. He looked different without his apron. “Welcome!” he said, as though she had arrived on foreign soil.

His apartment was nearly empty: a plaid couch, a frameless picture of Jesus above it. The counter between the living room and the kitchen was cluttered with spice bottles, cooking utensils in a ceramic mug, herbs growing in small pots.

“What is that heavenly smell?” she asked as he uncorked a bottle of wine and poured it into two glasses.

“Making *pupusas*,” he said, handing her a glass. “Soon you see!”

She sat at the counter (where he'd cleared a space for her glass) and listened as he explained that fish *pupusas* were a specialty in his village. “Los Cobanos. Not far from San Salvador. Beautiful beach.”

“Do you miss it?”

He shrugged. “In some ways.” He expertly flipped the tilapia. “Very poor but very beautiful. Not like here. In California, the beach is where the rich people live.”

She lived near the beach in Santa Cruz, in a small, rundown condo she'd struggled to buy with her savings, but she did not correct him.

While he cooked, he told her about his daughter, who was studying at the University of Melbourne. “Very smart. Studying to be—” He paused, fumbled. “*La mujer farmaceutica?*”

“A pharmacist?”

He nodded. “I am full of pride.”

“She sounds like a wonderful girl. Is she your only child?”

He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a glass jar full of something she didn't recognize. Then he stood at the sink, jar in hand, not answering.

“I didn't mean—” she began.

“My son is in jail. In San Salvador. Drugs. A terrible thing.” He met her gaze. “*Una terrible decepcion.*”

“I'm so sorry, Ernie.”

“He was a good boy once. *Mi orgullo y alegria*. Now it's the drugs, the gangs.”

“It is very hard to be disappointed in the people we love.” She remembered Stewart's empty gin bottles behind the sink in the guest bathroom.

He turned toward her and smiled. “Tell me about yourself while I finish.”

The wine and his own confession loosened her tongue. She told him about her daughters, how the distance on which they kindly insisted felt like abandonment. About Martha, her slow decline, the way food became something dreadful, another enemy.

“Ay, *cancer*. Very bad.” Ernie brought two plates to the counter and sat on the stool next to her. “Tell me, did she have grief? Hardship?”

“Well, divorce. Two, actually. And her mother died. She was very close to her mother.”

“Some people think the body holds onto bad things and it's a wound, a sickness there. You understand?”

“I don't know,” she said, bristling a little. “There is a lot of sadness. Not everyone dies of it.”

“Yes, of course. You are right.” He smiled in apology. “How you like the *pupusas*?”

“They are delicious, Ernie.” Pause. “They may be the most delicious thing I've ever eaten.”

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“The cake,” he said, setting two plates on the counter, a slice on each, “is not good. From the store.”

“I don't mind.”

“I make better,” he said.

They ate in silence until she couldn't hold her tongue any longer. “And your wife?”

“No wife for ten years. You mean this?” He held up his left hand. “It is my mother's. I wear to...fit in? Be like everyone else?”

She knew what he meant. “Be inconspicuous.”

He beamed and nodded. “This way, no one pays attention, is what I want.”

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At the door, saying goodnight, they hugged. He kissed her cheek. “I need a friend,” he whispered. “Just friends is all.”

“Of course,” she said, disappointed.

But the next day, over the fish counter, he passed her another card: *Come back* scrawled across his name.

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Months later, he still cooked for her: *pupusas, sopa de pata, pan con chumpe*. And *empanadas de leche* in the mornings, before he left for work. She ate fast, greedily. “Delicious!” she always said, but it wasn't why she came. He ate fast too.

Once, in the middle of the night, darkness lying softly over them, he whispered, “This is good.” They had been seeing each other for nearly a year.

She thought he was asleep. “Yes.” She reached for his hand.

“Did you ever think you would find it again?”

“No.”

As he rolled toward her, she whispered, “Next time I want to cook for you.”

After all this time.

Kissing her, he nodded yes, and that seemed like something, another step forward.

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She decided to marinate lamb chops in a paste of olive oil, garlic, and *herbes de Provence*, then sear them in more oil over high heat. Green beans with shallots, walnuts, and goat cheese. She imagined him talking as she mashed potatoes, telling her what he missed about his country: the rhythms of *cumbia*, tropical nights, the easy friendliness of people used to living in chaos. She had heard many of his stories before and never tired of them.

Would Martha, who had come to distrust romantic love, have liked him? Linda could hear her whisper, *Be careful*, and her own retort: *But I know this is real*. She felt anger surge in her chest, having to defend herself to a meddling ghost who had opinions.

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On Thursday night he texted her: *Why you not in store today?*

She answered: *I shopped at Safeway. So you would be surprised.*

It took him fifteen minutes to write back: *Te amo.*

She breathed in, as though the words on the screen had a scent. With trembling fingers, she texted: *Me too. I love you.*

*See?* she said to Martha, and then the sweetness dimmed a little, because the silence in her head was Martha's way of glaring at her, unconvinced.

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“Look what I bought,” she said as the chops sizzled in the pan, pointing to a CD on the counter: La Sonora Dinamite's *Juntos por la Sonora*.

But he surprised her. “Not tonight.”

“I know it's Colombian, but it was all I could find—”

“Please, Linda.” He was not smiling. “I don't want to listen now.”

“But—”

“Please!” he said sharply. “Is too painful!”

As they ate, they spoke of other things: the unsettled weather, construction of a new coffee kiosk in the Deluxe parking lot, his daughter's recent phone call. The food she'd made. “These lamb chops,” he said. “*Perfeccion!*” He smiled brightly, trying to reassure her.

In bed, he clung to her. She stroked his back, looking up into the dark, not knowing how to fix whatever was wrong.

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He did not answer her texts the next day, or the next. On the third day, she knew. She drove out of town, through the patchwork of strawberry fields blanketing rolling hills, over rutted dirt roads. She sobbed so loudly that some of the workers straightened and watched her pass. Through the clouds of dust, she saw them peering at the back of her car from beneath their visored hats, neck drapes fluttering behind them like the wings of wounded birds.

After a week, numb, she finally went to Deluxe, needing something besides cheese and stale crackers. She was surprised when she felt a hand on her back as she pushed her cart past the oils and condiments.

A man in a red apron asked, "Linda?"

She nodded.

"Ernesto told me you wore a blue cap," he said. He pointed to his nametag. "I'm Dan. Store manager."

He told her what she had already felt in her bones: a "sweep" in Salinas in the middle of the night, over a five-block area. No warning.

"Really bad for him. They got gangs down there. And I don't know if you know—"

"His son." She was still picturing the people, rounded up like cattle.

Dan nodded. "We're all pretty bummed out about it. We all liked Ernie. He knew his fish. But what can you do, you know?"

She wondered how long he would talk, how quickly she could get to her car.

"Anyway. He called me. He had a feeling. Knew something was wrong. Or maybe he heard something. He didn't really say. But he wanted me to give you a message."

It meant he was gone, never coming back. Dead, maybe. Another voice from the other side.

"He said to get whatever makes you happy," Dan said. "And something about really good cake."

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She thought about it for a week before booking a flight, but she had known there in Deluxe, Dan blabbing on.

Her girls were distraught. On the phone, Melanie sounded almost angry. "You're leaving us for some godforsaken place? What about all the violence?"

"I'll be fine," Linda had answered. "Lots of Americans live there."

"We'll never see you. You know," she said, "you *are* our mother." As though that fact precluded certain choices. "What about when Abby and I have kids? How will you even *know* them?"

"I'm sure there will be plenty of visits."

They had been fine with distance when they were the ones doing the leaving. She had long been expected to love them from afar. Perhaps they did not know that love kept at a distance became something else: a heavy sadness, a looking-back. Nothing to stick around for.

She told Melanie how inexpensive it was to live there, how the rent from her condo would allow her to live like a queen. How beautiful the beaches were.

"Don't even, Mom. You're doing it for a *man*. Some *guy*. It's gross. You should be okay on your own."

Neither of her girls had met Ernie or approved of the idea of him.

"I am entitled to an adventure," she said, her voice shaking with rage, with the truth of it.

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Landing in San Salvador, she collected her suitcases and made her way out to the curb. Around her, people jostled for space, impatient with her slowness, the difficulty of maneuvering with her purse and bags. Everyone was with someone else, speaking rapidly in unknown tongues. But she did not feel alone. They were all yoked together as they braved the crowd, the blast of sticky, exhaust-scented outside air, the din of hurried talk.

Once at the hotel (where the concierge spoke perfect English), she splashed water on her face, texted the girls, and ordered room service. No *pupusas*, the woman at the front desk informed her apologetically. She asked for fish and was brought a plate of sushi from the Japanese restaurant downstairs, which made her laugh out loud. “I’m sorry,” she said more than once to the busboy who delivered it and appeared crestfallen at her outburst.

But later, lying in bed, she realized there’d been no need to apologize. Traveling by herself allowed her the luxury of her own delights, of not having to explain.

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“May I arrange a guide?” the concierge asked the next morning, but Linda shook her head and ventured into the city. At a bakery several blocks away, she sat outside with her coffee and *quesito*, eating quickly to free up her table for the couple waiting for seats. After, she strolled up one street and down another, marveling at the mix of American fast-food joints and rickety stalls in which vendors hawked bananas and oranges and enormous heads of cabbage, cheap bathing suits, jewelry, carved wooden skulls, colorful baskets. Stray dogs roamed the streets, dodging buses and garbage trucks and people, who walked without hurry, unafraid to take up space or slow traffic.

She stood before the cathedral and gazed up at its gleaming whiteness, stepping aside to allow tiny nuns in white habits to enter. She followed them inside and sat in a wooden pew. Three men in uniforms—workers on their lunch hour perhaps—sat in front of her. They gazed at the altar, not speaking. Linda wondered whether they came to church together every day, what their uniforms signified, what their lives looked like after work. She imagined their wives buying cabbage and carrots at the stalls, then returning home to start the *curtido*.

The street was hot in the afternoon sun. She found a bench in the Plaza Libertad, beneath a tree immaculately groomed in the shape of a pyramid. She watched tourists photograph the grand statue—a monument to heroes—in the center of the plaza. Above, the angel of freedom held laurels in both hands: a triumphant offering.

Finally, exhausted, she hailed a cab and returned to the hotel. She showered and lay between the cool sheets. It wasn’t even five o’clock, but she fell into a blissful sleep, knowing, if only for a day, what it felt like to be completely disengaged, in a place where she was a stranger.

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She rose early and repacked her bags with fluttering, faltering hands. She had coffee and an ordinary danish in the hotel lobby as she waited for her taxi, a luxury to which she treated herself, having been assured by the concierge that it would be faster than the bus.

Her driver introduced himself as Luis. His English was uncertain and after a few moments of difficult talk, he seemed content to listen to his radio. She studied the land through which they passed: farm fields outside the city limits that gave way to towns and small cities scattered amid deeply green stands of trees. She expected to feel relief at leaving San Salvador behind, but she hadn't felt threatened or afraid there and had enjoyed its hurried pace, the crush of bodies, the urban stink. Still, she couldn't help but be glad Ernie lived far away. Would she be able to find him? Would he be angry that she'd come, worried for her safety? Afraid that his simple home would strike her as shabby, too primitive to suit her? As they drove through Sonsonate, past cattle farms and fields of tobacco, she finally smelled the sea: a comfort, something known.

Los Cobanos was small: under one hundred residents, a handful of simple dwellings arrayed near a beach of white sand. A dozen or so skiffs anchored just offshore bobbed gently in the calm water. Linda told Luis to wait as she got out of the taxi, then approached the first person she saw: a young man in shorts and a T-shirt smoking a cigarette, leaning against the low seawall. "*Conoci a un hombre que se llama Ernesto Flores?*" she asked. The man—really a boy: The cigarette had thrown her off—nodded yes and pointed toward a street of humble homes. "*El azul,*" he said. The blue one.

She got back in the taxi and directed Luis to the house: square, with small, barred front windows and a metal awning over the barred front door. No walkway, no front stoop: She made her way across a patch of rutted, sandy dirt, noticing a stack of sheet metal against the wooden fence at the side of the house. Somewhere, she heard a chicken squawk.

She was surprised when a woman wearing a knee-length denim skirt and a green T-shirt answered the door. Perhaps, she thought fleetingly, there are several Ernesto Floreses living in town, and she had been sent to the wrong house. Or maybe this was Laura, Ernie's cousin and favorite relative, keeping house and cooking for him until he got his bearings, after so many years away.

"*Por favor,*" she began, and then she saw him, emerging from another room into the hallway, the kitchen, probably, because he was wiping his hands on a dishtowel. He looked somber, bewildered, a little frightened. He said something in a low voice to the woman, too quickly for her to catch. The woman smiled uncertainly at Linda before taking the towel and retreating. Linda watched the towel pass between them and saw, then, the glimmer on his left hand.

"Why are you here?" he asked loudly, and without waiting for an answer: "You have to go."

"I don't understand..."

"Please. Go." He leaned close and whispered, "To the hotel, on the *playa*. I will meet you. We figure out something."

She tried to feel anger, sorrow, shock. But it was something else—amorphous, hard to put a name to—that came to her.

"She mean nothing to me. Not since you," he whispered. "I love only you."

She heard the taxi's engine sputtering behind her, and the thump of the calling drum from Luis's radio.

"But the whole time," she said, "you were lying."

"Not about everything. Just one thing."

"I am glad you are safe," she said.

Relief. That's what it was. Because he was safe. And something else.

He flinched. She turned and headed toward the taxi. “*Not about everything!*” she heard him call. She knew from the anguish in his voice that he meant it. *Don't turn around*, Martha whispered, but Linda didn't need her unearthly counsel any longer.

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In the taxi on the way back to the city, she opened the window and gulped in the warm air. She knew that tonight, she would cry, but only for a little while: She would not allow the sadness to overtake her. Now, she would return to the hotel, book another room without explanation, have someone take her bags. And then she would push open the heavy door to the street, hot in the afternoon sun, teeming with strangers. She would walk slowly, deciding where to go next: Costa Rica, Mexico, maybe Brazil. Maybe the Galapagos after all. And when she arrived at the bakery, she would order two *quesitos* for lunch and eat them slowly, refusing to be hurried.