

## WHATEVER WORKS

A Short Story by Richard Balthazar

Dance, I sincerely believe, is the best way for folks to express their true and full selves and jubilate over their lives. In the dance, I watch folks move in their idiosyncratic fashions and ecstasies, occasionally acknowledging each other with a brightened eye or open smile. But except to greet a few old-time acquaintances, I rarely hung around to speak with anyone in the slow exodus of dancers and so didn't often meet kindred folks. At 80, I didn't worry anymore about meeting any 'close associates'—merely sociable acquaintances were much appreciated.

I enjoyed encountering someone friendly of whatever gender, and by "friendly" I'm not referring to anything sexual, mind you. While I still function physically, many years ago I simply lost interest in corporeal matters. When I got possessed by artistic endeavors, that topic lost its relevance to my life. Not that I didn't greatly appreciate attractive bodies, but they were merely minor distractions from my dance raptures. Nowadays I dance to embody the Aztec god of dance, Five Flower (my own private esoteric ecstasy). In my youth I'd danced bacchanals for Dionysus, but so long ago I knew nothing about embodying a deity.

In a Wednesday dance on Fox Road, I encountered a young fellow, a bit shorter than I, with well-kempt short brown hair, conspicuous among the shaggy- or shaved-headed guys. He danced in an almost awkward way, rather stiff... Then he sat down to a drum and pounded out rhythms weaving tightly into the track playing. Nearby, I danced to his beats and afterwards told him I'd loved his drumming. His smile glowed, a splendid gift for the evening.

At the next Sunday evening's dance at Body, we passed on my way in and smiled. He stopped as though surprised and marveled that I danced at both places. Larry and I exchanged names and shook hands—and then he left! The crowd was mostly familiar and lacking persons of particular interest, and so I moved as my body willed and achieved occasional apotheosis. In the frenzy I found myself dancing beside the little Hispanic girl I'd encountered amiably at a number of dance events. Her long black locks, subtle mascara, and long silk scarf flourished like a boa were most attractive—for a female. We coordinated our movements easily and joyfully, both building on the hip motions of Latin dance, the idiom of my ancient New Orleans years.

On the way out the door, I discovered that she, also not lingering to socialize, bore the charming name of Corazón and was a student at the Community College. I platonically admired her slender hips and lithe legs in her leopard-leotard and was gratified that her bust wasn't much larger than my own after all my gym exercises and age-induced sag. I never cared much for mammary appendages of more than minimal size. Heading off to her car, Corazón hoped to see me next Sunday, apparently already considering me an *abuelo* (grandfather) figure.

That Wednesday evening I decided to wear a blue- and pink-flowered shirt I inherited from my college grandson—to look as tastefully youthful as possible for being the oldest dancer in the joint. I tied my still-dark mane back into a pony tail and slipped on a white headband. That style was becoming my trademark, and people said I looked like (a young) Willie Nelson. Now that it was warm early summer, I danced in my running shorts.

I followed a beige van much like my old Farmers Market vehicle down Rufina, turning down Fox Road, and we pulled into adjacent parking places. Grabbing up my stuff, I got out and saw across the top of my red Toyota that it was Larry over there in the van. He waved and called: Hey, Rich—see you inside. I waved back: Hi, Larry—nice to see you. Passing behind his van, I registered that it bore California plates.

He was a while coming in when I was done with stretches, and the music had picked up energy. In our dance, while Larry and I shared frequent smiles and occasional dance repartees, I unobtrusively admired his sparse mustache and the short fringe along his chin that made him look like an adolescent—or a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French poet like Rimbaud. I heartily approved of the *derrière* shaping out his blue jeans and his shoulders almost as broad as my own.

Well into the rhythmic progression, I went out into the lobby for a drink, and Larry followed me to the water fountain. His smile was somehow shy, perhaps wary. While he drank, I waited: Too bad you left on Sunday because they had a super band. Larry stepped back, wiping his lips: I can't afford to dance both nights and only do Wednesdays. I didn't let our chance conversation lag: Are you from California? : Just got to town last week from LA. With that we rejoined the dance, our whistles well wetted.

As the music subsided to contemplative tones, for the first time I awkwardly sat down on the floor with everybody else to contemplate—mainly because Larry did the same nearby. After our meditative silence, he offered this old man a strong hand to get up, and we sat together in the lobby putting on our shoes. I worked with what I had: Why on earth did you come to Santa Fe? He laughed: Because folks say it's a cool town—especially now they've legalized weed—just got out of college and hope I can find a teaching job here.

Out in the parking lot, Larry stopped by his van: I don't know anybody here yet—I'm living in my van trying not to spend much money. Instead of the hug I wanted, we shared a quick, friendly fist-bump, and I spoke on impulse: Come out dancing on Sunday—I'll pay your way. Grateful, he hugged me after all: Thanks, Rich, old man! I corrected him: Make that 'old man Rich'—actually some friends at the gym call me 'Uncle Rich.' Driving home, I felt pretty great finding a kindred fellow and was glad to be Larry's first friend in town. Camping out in his van was of course a concern, but another friend of mine had lived in his vehicle for years and done a good job of a civilized life. It wasn't quite like being homeless.

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Come Sunday evening, after my days of gardening and gym and evenings of drawing Aztec deities, Larry was waiting in the lot at Body. After giving me a brief hug, he reported: I applied at two schools and feel real hopeful. A bit early for the dance, we sat on the front steps, and he lit up a tiny joint, offering me a hit. I declined: I don't smoke anymore—just do edibles. Larry giggled: Whatever works... He gave me an appreciative once-over: You know, Uncle Rich, that yellow tank-top sure shows off your tanned shoulders.

Catching a flirty vibe from him, I hastened to clarify matters: Thanks, Larry, but I'm a non-sexual now—I haven't even kissed anybody for 25 years. His eyes got big with surprise: That's okay—because I'm straight. I tweaked his chin-hairs and laughed: I wondered—so now sex isn't an issue. : Unless I kiss you... : Don't you dare! : Twenty-five years—longer than I've been alive!—Don't you miss it? Understanding how he'd find celibacy strange, I waffled: Not really—but sometimes I do dream about kissing—not about sex, just about kissing.

No band that night, there was a DJ, a black girl with long dreads and a great sense of rhythm. There were several old buddies in the crowd, bearded young Geno who hugged me warmly, and the Hispanic kid Victor who danced with almost spastic grace. Several familiar middle-aged women gave me gracious smiles, and the older guy (though younger than I) Rafael waved a greeting. Just as the frenzy got going, cute little Corazón showed up in lacey black stockings with another scarf and got tangled up with a bunch of touchy-feely young girls, which made me wonder if she was maybe a lesbian. In his dance, Larry drifted around through the crowd, and we kept friendly eyes on each other. I watched him scoping out the girls.

When I eventually stopped for a drink, he followed me out into the hall: Boy, you just keep going—I've got to take a break. While Larry rested, I sat by him: How are you managing in your van?—you know with 'personal hygiene' and all that? He threw a comradely arm over my shoulder: I stay one night a week in a cheap motel to shower and watch TV. Envyng him his smooth cheeks, I again tweaked his thin goatee: At least you don't have to shave. Larry stroked my white mustache and chin whiskers: Someday I hope I'll have to... On impulse, I offered: You can save more money by coming over to my place—I never use my shower what with going to the gym every day. He kissed my cheek: That would be super! I ignored his embarrassment for kissing me: Let's get back out there and dance up a sweat!

After our quiet time stretched out on the floor, Larry helped me up again for us to put on my sandals and his fancy running shoes. I was still "dance-drunk:" Did you have a good dance? : Loved it!—I took a trip up in the clouds. : Not bad...—I became a god! Larry had the good sense not to open that can of worms. I took a drink from my canteen: Let's just say I'm 'eccentric,' the polite way of saying 'weird.' Shod, Larry stood up: Well, I did dance up a sweat—I could really use a shower—Is tonight okay?

My cozy apartment is a very large room that sections off nicely between living, dining and kitchen areas with my bedroom off to the left, a small guest room beside the spacious bathroom, and my eclectic art collection hanging round about. Taking a good look around, Larry was puzzled: You don't have a TV? : Nope—I've never owned one. : What do you watch? : I don't really—but there's a video player out on the back porch, and I watch a movie maybe once a month. : I better go take a shower. : You do that—lots of clean towels in there. I showed him the guest bedroom: And you're welcome to stay over if you want. : I think I will.

While Larry showered, I gave but a passing thought to him naked in my bathroom and turned to the computer to work on my current Aztec drawing, a huge project with millions of pixels. I was also passingly disappointed when he came out of the bathroom in full pajamas (plaid): You can check out my video collection if you want to watch a movie—or we could have a late supper—all I've got to drink is water and fruit juice. : I'd love like a banana... : How about some grapes or tangerines? : Sounds good. I got him to go for a bowl of granola with me too. Over our snacks, I got down to business: So, dude, who you are anyway?

Larry gave me a skeptical look and then relaxed: I just got my BA from UCLA in physical education. : What sport are you into? : Mostly track and field, but I'm best with gymnastics. : I used to run a lot—till my knees gave out—so, I guess you had a wild time in college? : Not so much—I lived with my folks the whole time and missed out on wildness. : Too bad, coach—my undergrad years were pretty debauched—your family? : No siblings, but Mom and Dad are great—real supportive—I miss them already—being here on my own is way different. : I guess so—camping out in your van. : I didn't have much social life at home, but I did a lot of camping out in the mountains—I love the peace of nature. : I'm with you there.

For breakfast, I made Larry scrambled eggs with green chile, English muffin, and my Komodo Dragon coffee. I decided to unpack his personality a bit more: So, what did you think of all those girls at the dance? : It was hard to make eye-contact with any of them—a few of them were really hot—but most were way too old. : How'd you like that tiny Hispanic girl in the black lace stockings? : Real pretty, but she's probably a lesbian. : Her name's Corazón—if I were sixty years younger... Larry laughed: And a woman—but I'm looking for a really special kind of girl. : All girls are special—guys not so much...—perversely I find some lesbians attractive, that androgynous vibe. : How about femme guys? : Not so much...—And I'm not turned on by

super-butth types either—this new non-binary thing is intriguing. : I think it's been around a long time—under cover—just like trans folks. : Probably so...

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Larry went his merry way on Monday, promising to try and get to Wednesday's dance and would call me. My day was another chance to accomplish something: My rule of thumb or whatever appendage you care to utilize, is always, every day, to do one thing creative, of my own choice. By Wednesday afternoon, I'd drafted a blog post, and around one o'clock after a frugal lunch, enjoyed another perfect sunbathing session on my balcony/porch. No complaints to speak of, except the high cumulus of smoke rising up behind the mountains from the Pecos on fire, probably sparked by the catastrophic Calf Canyon fire farther east.

Putting the current apocalypse out of my mind, I drove over to the dance in full mood to move, though slightly disappointed that I hadn't heard from Larry, and further disappointed that my new young friend didn't show up. Lots of terpsichorean comrades cavorted with me, and I felt quite attractive, suntanned in my violet tank top. Victor and I welcomed each other with smiles and then whirled away in our trances. I can't get over how his dance is like a marionette with a mad puppeteer, various parts of his body moving independently—and randomly.

About midway along, I took a brief breather out in the lobby, and as I drank from my Ukrainian (blue and yellow) canteen, I spied Corazón arriving at the far end, struggling to take off her cowboy boots, a fashion accessory I didn't quite appreciate. She was excited to see me, her quick hug in the entry warm: Tio Rico, lo siento mucho—I had a late class today. I was pleased with the spontaneous endearing title. In the opportune moment, I complimented the winsome lass on her comeliness, as we old fogeys say.

Flourishing her long green scarf, Corazón strutted: Do you mean you think I'm pretty? She shook her glistening black locks and showed off the sequin-studded pockets of her jean shorts—which might as well have been painted on her neatly rounded, comely posterior. I was unanimous: —Especially those sequined pockets! To detain her a moment from the dance floor, I got reasonably curious: What are you studying at the Community College? : Art... While I looked for an appropriate response to that loaded subject, she danced off into the ecstatic hall.

Newly hydrated, I too bounded out onto the dance floor, hoping that the bearded DJ would inject a little more energy into his music. The relaxed beat allowed me to wonder where other dance comrades were tonight, like the young engineer Geno and that muscular, athletic guy I'd seen last week. But tonight there were other prancing familiars to move with as occasion arose, as well as an energetic, extraordinarily tall young woman. My long-time dancing comrade Juan in the bandana bounded and soared around through the crowd with fancy moves and neat flourishes. Making up for lost time, Corazón bounced around and flashed me smiles. During the really slow rhythms, I got a little catch in my old side and went to sit comfortably on a bench in the lobby to meditate, leaving the younger others to loll around on the floor.

Eventually, as the dancers began leaving, I slipped on my sandals to go too, and Corazón sat down beside me to pull on her cowboy boots: Did you have fun, Tio Rico? : It was relaxing—I like a wilder beat though. : I just got going when it slowed down. Risking the loaded subject, I indulged my curiosity again: What kind of art do you study? : Acrylics... : I'm an artist too—you should come by and see my work sometime. : Hey, are you hitting on me? : Oh, no, no... —I'm gay—or at least I was before I swore off sex—I do digital drawings. : I'd love to see them, but I've got to go get something to eat—I'm starving. : I'll feed you some tamales. : Green chile-chicken? : And I make a good salad.

I felt a tad odd chastely ushering an attractive young woman into my apartment. Corazón stepped in and was immediately struck by the ancient Tibetan Thangka of 1,000 Buddhas hung by the door as a welcome sign. All I could offer her to drink was water... My comely guest appreciated the various paintings and sculptures and made over my many Kwan Yin figurines. I explained the coloring book format of my Aztec work and the big banners for my pre-pandemic shows and showed her printouts of the icons with caption pages. With her green scarf beautifully slung around her throat and over her shoulder, she sat daintily on my spring-flowered sofa with her glass of water and reviewed the 20 line-drawings, fascinated by the detail, like anyone who looks at my masterworks. Meanwhile I whipped up the promised tamales and salad for her.

I sat Corazón down in the guest chair for her late supper. Tying her black hair back out of the way, she ate con gusto and raved about my fantastic images. I went out on a limb and described my current color work on the calendar. She looked at me with genuine admiration, a pleasantly rare experience for an old man. I deflected further effusions by wanting to see her work sometime and hoping that the dance trance had been fun for her, if a little low-energy.

She'd enjoyed it: But what did you mean before about swearing off sex? I evaded that question: It's not something a youngster like you would understand—I find sex an anachronism. She didn't know what I meant by the word, and I didn't try to explain: By the way, Corazón querida, do you have a boyfriend? : No way, Jose!—no time for a guy—I gotta concentrate on my art! : You do that, muchacha—take it from me—guys can be terribly distracting!

A silly old man playing Cupid, I mentioned a charming young fellow who'd just this past Sunday thought she was “really pretty,” but he felt shy about meeting her. Corazón laughed coyly: What's he got to be shy about? She adjusted her scarf: By the way, I work hard at being really pretty—think maybe I could meet him at this Sunday's dance?

I was impressed by her quick about-face on the boyfriend issue: Let's try—Larry's just a shy kind of guy, nice looking with a thin mustache and tiny beard. : I think I know who—a real cute guy... : But he's afraid you're a lesbian. Corazón clutched her scarf to her breast and laughed, a great guffaw: Why in the world?—Oh, all those cows I roll around with?—a girl thing. She burst out laughing again: You've got no idea how funny that is! Stretching her scarf dramatically out like a cape, she threw her head back in a belly laugh.

That was when I saw it. Not in any way obtrusive, barely noticeable actually, on her slender, tender throat was an Adam's apple. I pretended not to notice: I hear there's a lot of 'gender fluidity' with you young folks nowadays—preferred pronouns and all that—it's hard to think of one person as plural. : Yeah, one of my friends is a 'they'—I keep messing up calling them her. : I think I'd opt for 'it'—but they'd probably consider that insulting. We laughed some more, and I brought us out some Trader Joe's crunchy chocolate chip cookies.

Though Corazón was shy about me seeing her artwork, she invited me out to the college on Friday afternoon for their end-of-term show. Though I'd already overwhelmed her with my own, I told her about my several books, signing her a copy of the old one on Indian mounds and forcing on her a brochure about my gay memoirs. When she left, duly impressed by this old man's life in art, I contemplated little Corazón's gender identity and was duly impressed by her artful transition. It helped explain the boyfriend situation—probably not easy to find a guy who could deal with fluidity. I wondered if Larry...

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Thursday morning I called Larry to regret missing him at dancing. He'd struck out on those first two school possibilities and had applied now at two more, hoping to hear next week. In the meantime, he'd been looking for a summer job. Last night he'd gone camping over in the

Jemez to exorcise the frustration and had just gotten back, feeling reinvigorated. He wasn't very enthusiastic about working in a restaurant or store, so I suggested the Chavez Center with its many athletic facilities, noting that they'd been having a hard time finding workers and were offering hiring bonuses. When I reminded him of my unused shower and spare bedroom, he said he'd come over Saturday evening. I offered a simple dinner and the laundry room downstairs. His remark about needing clean clothes for church gave me pause, but I accepted that some folks still needed the organized religion routine—for some reason. Maybe Larry could get over it.

I hadn't been out to the community college for a few years since hanging my icon show in the hallways of the admin building. The student show up now in the gallery was as nicely displayed and as unpromising as I recalled. Corazón's piece was a confusing colorful abstract... Looking attractive in high lace-up boots, frilly pink blouse, and now dark blue scarf, she frustrated my plans to check out how she was managing the matter of boobs. She modestly regretted that her chosen work wasn't indicative of the sort of thing she usually did.

In the studio she showed me three more indicative pieces she was working on, self-portraits reminiscent of Frida Kahlo infected with Picasso and manga. I saw her deep need to present herself as a unique woman. Her teacher apparently didn't worry much about subject, just technique. I agreed—subject, like self, was a very subjective thing, by definition. She also took classes in ceramics for a very different approach to creativity. We looked forward to seeing each other on Sunday for dance—and a chance for her to meet Larry.

On my usual visit to the Farmers Market on Saturday morning, at one of the growers' booths I found Larry peddling greens, kale, onions, and assorted herbs. He'd met old hippie Al, a grower from Pojoaque whom I'd known for years, at the Tumbleroot pub and offered to help him out. I was pleased by his initiative: I used to be a vendor at the Market—selling recycled plants! Larry had been to the Chavez Center the afternoon before: I'm supposed to see a Mr. Roybal on Monday. After yesterday's harvesting and the morning's trucking and vending work, he certainly needed a shower and would come over mid-afternoon after the Market.

After lunch, I hit the gym briefly and got home in time for Larry's arrival. Before his ablutions, he took me with him on a short hike up the Dale Ball trail. I hadn't done much outdooring since the pandemic hit, so it was a welcome change. My trudging pace slowed the athletic fellow down rather, but he didn't seem to mind, chatting freely about whatever as hikers are wont to do. I inquired about his amorous history and learned that he'd had no real girlfriend since a futile crush in the tenth grade.

Sounding like Corazón, Larry had been too busy with classes to waste time on romance: I've never felt driven sexually—not a very horny guy—a permanent bachelor type. : Maybe you need some testosterone, coach—it might help your beard too. : Think so?—it is pretty scraggly. : Shaving will make a beard get thick. : I don't want to shave and look like a kid. Appalled and titillated that Larry was obviously a virgin, I refrained from sordid tales about the French Quarter and reported on my talks with Corazón, omitting my surprising discovery.

At home, while my guest made himself at home in the bathroom, I napped, drifting off wondering how Cupid might get these two kids together. Regarding Corazón's gender secret, I hoped it might be a growth experience for the boy. The thought of virgin Larry bathing caused a reflexive surge of lust. Virginity still had a powerful allure for a reformed gay Don Juan.

When I woke from my standard 30-minute snooze, we took Larry's laundry downstairs to the washer. While I pulled together some linguine and clam sauce with the usual salad, he sat on the sofa with my first novel—about my boyhood in Arkansas. By the time dinner was ready, he'd read the first two chapters: Sounds like rural 19<sup>th</sup> century. : I call it the 'Gay Stone Age'—

when no one knew from being gay. : The poor kid didn't even know anything about sex! : He soon learns... Larry attacked his linguine: I guess I should read the whole thing. : Only if you want to—for a totally different kind of adolescence than you had.

After dinner, Larry invited me out to the Tumbleroot Brewery where a famous blues guy was playing, but I begged off, not being into beer—or blues. While he was out, I sat down to my eternal drawing (and classical music). He came back relatively early: It was pretty boring...— and I'm getting up early for church. The latter subject I left hanging: Did you see any pretty girls, coach?—I hear it's a hot pick-up place. Larry actually blushed: No—at least none that would look at me. He took my novel off to read some more in bed, and I returned to drawing, musing on his innocence in urban LA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and repressing involuntary lust.

On waking, I had one of those half-awake morning thoughts—that something about this Larry situation just didn't feel right, not his going to church, but something else... It “dawned” on me that I hadn't seen him checking his phone the way “normal” people do, but that wasn't it. In fact, I didn't feel right about meddling in his love-life. Like my grandson, Larry should manage his own life, and who was this geriatric Cupid to mix him up with a trans woman?

Over breakfast of scrambled eggs with green chile, while I reflexively admired his virgin charms, Larry explained having set the alarm on his phone, which clarified that issue: I don't believe in social media. Wisely, I didn't comment on my misgivings on the other score. Last night he'd read more chapters in my novel and wondered about Annette and the Mickey Mouse Club, both cultural phenomena from long before his time. Larry sympathized with Ben's sexual repression by the Catholic Church, though he'd also been raised such, and was going soon to nearby St. Anne's. I also repressed my jaundiced opinions on organized religion.

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While Larry was off enjoying his cult activities, I watered the garden and scolded my flowers for not blooming properly. On his return, properly sanctified, he was disturbed that the priest had sounded very reactionary in his sermon, which I already knew from neighborhood gossip. Larry asked about some scenic place out in the country to go for a hike, and I suggested Devil's Canyon off northwest of town, a big arroyo running through it down to the Rio Grande just below White Rock. He agreed to get back well before six for supper and our evening dance.

It was a light repast so as not to burden our dancing stomachs. Larry's afternoon in Devil's Canyon was most scenic for him: I saw lots of cliff swallows darting around the walls of the canyon!—and that huge dry river bed was amazing. : It can run quite a flood if it ever rains— and there are great caves back in those cliffs. For dessert, I served him a cannabis capsule to liberate our blithe spirits during the dance and then drove us to Body for the ecstasy. On the way, he hoped to meet that pretty little Hispanic girl. I kept my mouth shut.

We got there in time for floor-stretches, always an awkward affair for my aged joints, and I was relieved to note that Corazón wasn't there yet. When the tempo picked up, I managed to get up by myself and soon was my usual graceful self. Along with the DJ's program, a big guy named Bear improvised nicely on his saxophone. It was a good crowd of familiars, including many young women with aggressive pelvises which I observed Larry observing with interest. Loose-limbed Victor twitched enthusiastically, fortunately growing a bit more coordinated now. A hirsute new fellow in a sarong danced in almost my style but with wider swings, frenzied arms, and wildly rolling head, his long hair flying. I was proud of my dignified ponytail.

Shortly, Corazón appeared, a petite vision in flowered leotard, baggy tie-dye tunic, and light blue scarf, her long black hair free but well-behaved. When she danced up with a warm hug, her small bust certainly felt real—estrogen? We shared a moment's merengue and whirled

off. When I checked on Larry, he was fixing to drum along with saxophone Bear, his bright eye fixed on the *senorita*. In a little while, Corazón stepped out the back door for a breather, a convenient back yard for breathing and smoking weed. Larry followed close behind.

My dance was obviously timeless until I noticed Larry dancing toward me, not terribly enthusiastically, clearly unsuccessful in his direct approach. He signaled me out into the hall for a conversation, something I rarely do, that is take breaks in my dance. Poor Larry was blown away by Corazón's quick rejection, coming right out that she was a lesbian. I was confounded. We danced off into the euphoric crowd. After another oblivious moment or two, she danced up nearby with a bright smile, and I signaled finger to lip, pointed to her, and then to the door. We went into the side room off the lobby and sat on a sofa.

To my surprise that she'd told Larry she was a lesbian, she laughed lightly: It was an easy way to get rid of him. She didn't want to get mixed up with some guy right now. Pragmatically, I suggested that a night's whoopee wasn't really getting mixed up with a guy if one was careful. Corazón acted insulted: Tio Rico!—What kind of girl do you think I am? Another finger signal sufficed, tapping my own modest Adam's apple. She cringed: You know?

I hugged her: You're doing a great job of it, *chica*! She shrugged: Not really—I'm all afraid to let guys even get near me! My sympathy evoked a graphic explanation: Not many boys want a chick with a dick! I fully understood that drawback: But some do...—plus you've got all a man needs otherwise—and you look like a pretty girl. Corazón advised that estrogen was helping her little breasts grow and bemoaned her narrow hips and boyish behind, my favorite part of her anatomy. I told her to forget about Larry—he'd get over it soon enough. Men do.

The wild-eyed DJ took us frenetically through the fourth rhythm and then seamlessly into the fifth for the wind-down. At the end, while Corazón relaxed in a girl-thing pile of females, Larry and I lay back side by side on the floor and wound down. When we'd returned to sobriety, he helped me up: So I want to go out with the guys for a few beers—they'll bring me back to your place—if that's okay, Uncle Rich. Naturally, it was fine by me: Sure—male bonding's a good thing. Larry left with Bear and a fuzzy-headed boy named Lucca.

I caught Corazón rebooting in the lobby and proposed we go out for a little bite: I'd love to hear your story, *chica*—if that's okay. : Thanks, Tio, I'd like that. We wound up at the Pantry, thinly occupied at the late hour, and shared a plate of tacos. Corazón was born in the little village of Villa Nueva, and when she was four, they sold their house and farm to rich gringos for a pretty penny, moving to Santa Fe, where her father got on with the city. Starting kindergarten, she learned about boys and girls and knew right away she was supposed to be a girl.

Oddly, her parents let their only child become a girl at home and at school, and she was still living with them now. Ecstatic dancing was the only "running around" she ever did, and a couple girlfriends were cool about her situation. In her senior year, she'd fallen for a cute guy named Leo, but kept him at arm's length with cautious kisses and mild necking. After a movie one night in his car he groped her, and what he found drove him crazy. He beat her up, and it took weeks to get over the bruises. So since then she'd avoided getting close to guys.

My sympathy probably didn't do much to comfort my young friend's trauma: Don't give up on guys, *querida*! : Maybe I should be a lesbian after all—that would be a hoot! : You'd be a real hot property—a dyke with a dick! We had a good laugh at that. Corazón sighed profoundly: Or maybe I should go back to being a boy—at least I could stop shaving all the time.: And be a boy with boobs? : Or have the surgery...—but I really don't want that. : Yeah, we get very attached to our dicks, don't we? Our conversation gave Corazón the small consolation of a Tio who understood her thorny problem.



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At home I'd just checked my empty email and latest MSNBC news feed, happily without finding any more mass shootings, when Larry got back. Only slightly lubricated, he announced that he'd drunk only two drafts and had a good guy-talk with Bear. Lucca ran off with a girl he knew... Larry seemed pleased with his adventure in male bonding. I decided to hit the sack, and he did the same in the guest room with the novel, planning to see Mr. Roybal at the Chavez Center first thing in the morning. Before sleep, I mused briefly on Corazón's unusual, innocent life, amused to find the truly femme male so attractive—that insidious allure of virginity.

I was philanthropically proud to have steered Larry to the Chavez Center. He phoned me Monday mid-morning: They hired me, starting today!—public safety assistant, advising folks on stuff and helping whenever...— And I'll be teaching a summer class for kids in gymnastics. : A perfect summer job for you, coach!—Now go get that school job for the winter! : Maybe I'll hear from them today or tomorrow, and I'll let you know right away. Well, he called Tuesday afternoon: I've got a job as assistant track coach at St. Michael's High School! : Way to go, amigo!—I'll make us dinner tomorrow, and we can hit Fox Road to jubilate!—I hear Elizabeth from Albuquerque is playing, and she really knows how to put it together.

Coming straight from work, Larry arrived about 5:30, so we had under an hour to dine, but I'd already hotted up my classic chicken stew for my now gainfully employed guest. A most happy fellow, he gave me a celebratory hug, and making himself to home, filled a glass from my spring-water jug. He tilted his head back, his fringe of beard lifting, and drank thirstily. Suddenly I noticed... I touched his long, sensuous throat: What's this, coach? : What?—Have I got something there? : No, nothing—not even an Adam's apple!

It took a confused moment for Larry's macho composure to collapse on my old shoulder, and I hugged him right there by the sink. This weird coincidence, running into two trannies in a row...: So tell me, my boy, am I a Sherlock Holmes or what?—How do you keep such a big secret? Larry told me his trans history, much like Corazón's, though he turned male only at puberty, again with the aid and care of his mom and dad—the assistance of testosterone—and a minimal social life. He kept physical evidence hidden in public by dressing in toilet stalls and keeping his (luckily small) boobs strapped flat.

I considered he made a wonderfully handsome young dude: You remember me once saying androgynous lesbians were attractive?—don't worry, coach—I'm not suggesting... Recognizing my half-joke and easy acceptance of his secret, Larry pulled his male persona back together: Thanks, Uncle Rich—it feels good that you know. : My amateur advice is to keep your chin down, set your voice comfortably low, keep taking testosterone—and try not to swagger.

Meanwhile, the naughty cherub in me whispered, let's stir this soup, and I couldn't resist: You know, Larry, you really should work on Corazón some more—the two of you've got all the ingredients for a real romance. : What do you mean?—Oh, because she's a lesbian? : No—to be crude—because she's a chick with a dick—and you're a guy with a gash—go for it! Larry laughed in spite of himself as I sat him down to his chicken stew: I bet you kids can work something out—say I called her a hot property—and if she tries the lesbian dodge on you again, tell her you are too.

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