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No Tengo

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BRIAN PHILLIP WHALEN

NO TENGO

I flew to Paris with my girlfriend. We stayed at a cheap hotel at the edge of the Red Light District. Our concierge warned us not to walk too close to doorways, somebody might pull us in. On our last night in the city, we ate dinner at a café a few blocks from our hotel. The waitress was the owner and her husband the chef. The place was decked out in reds and greens, the tables made of solid oak. I'd never eaten escargot. It was delicious. My girlfriend ordered us a bottle of white wine, then a bottle of red. She drank most of it. When the bill came, I was almost drunk, but it was the waitress who fumbled with the credit card machine. "It will not operate," she said. Her husband emerged from the kitchen, his forearms decorated with miniature wheels of cut chive. He, too, fumbled with the machine. He shook it, he checked the batteries. My girlfriend found the whole thing funny. I felt her bare toes crawling up my pant leg. Her neck and chest were flush. "Can you bill our room?" I asked the waitress, my pulse quickening. I pointed to the door, intending the gesture to mean that our hotel was a block in that direction. The waitress clapped her hands. She seemed quite pleased. Addressing her husband in French, she retrieved for me my coat from the rack she'd hung it on when we'd arrived, then she disappeared into the kitchen. I had the coat on when the waitress came back with a bottle of Chianti. She filled my girlfriend's glass, and my girlfriend, who found all of this hilarious, flashed me thigh beneath her skirt and raised her glass to toast me out the door. It was raining. I followed the chef, who wore no coat. He spoke no English. The night was cold and I felt almost sober. I walked cautiously in the street while the chef sought cover from the rain under the sidewalk awnings. He eyed me queerly. I tried to explain about the doorways and the concierge and murder. He did not understand. It was only when

I uttered "puerto" on a whim that we discovered he and I spoke Spanish, enough to complete a handful of exchanges. I told him, more or less, what the concierge had said about the doorways, and the chef wrapped his hands around his throat and let his tongue roll out. I went ahead and joined him on the sidewalk. We awning-hopped for several blocks until we found an ATM. The chef stood next to me. I typed my passcode incorrectly and my card slid out. My hands were wet, the buttons were slick. The chef frowned and touched my shoulder, misunderstanding. He started to walk off. I forgot the word accidente, so I called out: "Por favor, tengo dinero!" Just then a tall man in a dark coat emerged from the shadows on the opposite side of the street. I typed my passcode correctly and a menu appeared on the screen. But the tall man in the dark coat was crossing the street, heading straight in our direction. I cancelled my transaction. Pocketing my wallet, I motioned for the man in the dark coat to go ahead. I stepped out from under the awning and approached the chef. The chef gestured for us to go, but I touched his arm and said, softly: "un momento." He waited, but I doubt he understood. I thought about wringing my neck or lolling my tongue, but I felt embarrassed. By now the rain had washed the herbs off the chef's arms. My coat was soaked through, but nevertheless I pulled the collar tight around my throat. The chef resumed our conversation. How long, he asked, had I had been married? "No esposa," I said, and in correcting him I tried to find the Spanish words to explain with some kind of merit how my girlfriend and I had just graduated college, how we planned to move together to Chicago, how we'd both find jobs and earn money and be happy and no matter what, we'd have each other. I think he understood. He smiled every time I said "amor." Then he asked how old we were, and I said "Twenty-two." He burst into laughter, and the tall man in the dark coat, having finished his transaction, joined us in the

street. He said something in French to the chef, and the chef said something back. The chef pointed at me. Both men burst into laughter. Speaking rapidly, as if they were old friends who shared a sacred bond, the two men conversed in French while I stood by and watched their mouths contort wildly in the dim-lit street. The rain did not let up. There were no red lights in this area. Everybody was a liar and a fraud. I stepped up to the ATM and slid my card into the slot. Behind me, the two men talked and laughed and made commotion. A menu appeared. ENGLISH, I selected. But I didn't use my passcode. Instead, I input random numbers. My card slid out, and I slid it in again. I punched another set of random numbers. My hands were cold from the rain and when I pushed my finger hard against the buttons no blood showed beneath the nail. I repeated my transaction six, maybe seven times. The laughing had stopped by now. I put my card back in my wallet, and when I turned around I saw the tall man walking off. He disappeared around a corner. The chef was waiting, sopping wet but smiling. He turned his palms face up. "No tengo," I answered. We headed back the way we'd come. The chef asked me questions but I acted like I did not understand. I had this feeling. I couldn't shake the image of my girlfriend, flush and drunk on stolen wine, waiting alone, and as I walked with the chef in the rain I knew for certain that she wasn't mine and that I'd take her anyway.