

El Gordo

(The Fat Man)

By Rob Gilmore

Gordo shoveled beans into the tortilla, splashed it with red picante sauce and devoured it in two bites. Time had pushed a thinning hairline out of view and his large Spanish brown eyes drooped sadly at the edges. Releasing a long sigh, Gordo wiped his mouth with a faded napkin, brushed his hands on his green trousers and leaned back to admire his Maria.

Maria worked to shape another tortilla and Gordo declined a silent offer for one more. He was smiling as he watched her work, but he noticed that Father Time, the clever thief, had stolen so much. Everyday Maria needed more help with cooking and chores, but he didn't mind. The pat-pat of tortilla making stopped briefly, and a wooden fork stabbed at the pot of simmering pork chunks and red chilis.

The morning's light flooded the kitchen. Gordo loved the sun. He marveled how its magic outlined Maria's soft curves. She was his delight, and his loving gaze devoured her like a holiday chicken. He glanced out the window and saw the sun edging the garden fence. It was time, and he drained the last of his coffee.

Gordo pushed away from the small table and made his way through the screen door. When he reached the worn pathway, he looked back to see Maria disappear in the morning glare. "Te quiero", he called after her. I love you.

Dust clouds puffed around his footsteps as he plodded the path and the sun's broad spears stabbed at him. The air was heavy and still spiced from the night's mesquite fires. A haze hung

over the village in wispy layers and the mingled aromas only rekindled Gordo's taste for plump chickens and beef morsels. He delighted as his hunger renewed.

By some miracle on this day, the children did not discover Gordo when he crossed the church square. They loved to surround him on his slow journey. He was always kind, sometimes he had treats, and they liked his loud laugh when they made fun of him.

"Buenos Dios Gordo," came a friendly greeting from across the street. The fat man tipped his hat returning the neighbor's salutation. Only Maria called him Pablo anymore.

At the store, Gordo turned a bronze key into the lock. The big red door swung open and broad shafts of light rammed the interior. The fresh smell of strap leather and oil hung in the warm air. Everywhere there were belts, wallets, purses and hats. They were piled on racks, pushed into shelves and stacked in heaps; the fat man had made them all. He crafted his goods with great patience, and they touched many lives. Throughout the village, people wore, carried, or in some way prized the fat man's wares. He loved his work; he loved his food and most of all, he loved his Maria. Gordo had not always been fat, but it seemed, he had always been in love.

Arturo the baker entered the store trailed by Claudia the youngest daughter and her endless chatter carried a frenzy of excitement. "I brought you some biscochitos", she yelled as she handed Gordo a greasy paper sack filled with sugar cookies. Claudia laughed at the fat man's genuine delight, and he ate a whole cookie in a single bite.

It was Claudia's birthday, and she mauled a dozen purses before selecting a deep-sided brown bag with a long strap and gold zipper. Maybe this one is slightly too big for such a skinny girl, thought Gordo, but Claudia was happy, and her father was approving. Gordo's

grinning eyes shared their excitement. Of course, the purse was heavily discounted for such an important event. Gordo and Arturo both watched Claudia as the girl stroked and petted her new purse.

“Adiós mi amigo,” said Arturo, goodbye my friend.

“Adios Gordo,” said Claudia as she raced in front of her father and out the door. Gordo could hear her shrills of delight as she hurried down the street. The church bell was pealing the noon hour when Gordo fitted the brass key in the lock and felt the tumblers fall in place. Slowly he retraced the path back to Maria. As he approached the garden gate, he was greeted by the swirling aroma of the noonday caldo. The soup’s savory smells filled his senses and his hunger rolled in anticipation. Gordo embraced his largeness; the more immense he was, the greater his capacity to love Maria.

As always, she was waiting in the cool shadows. He took his seat at the small table and ladled the spicy mixture from an earthen pot. He filled and emptied his bowl several times, and when only broth remained, he swabbed at the shrinking depths with a handful of bread.

Filled, and deeply satisfied, they moved to the verandah. Gordo lay close to Maria where he could drink in her essence. Together, in the shade, they lazed away the hours while sun slid down its arc. Two spirits sharing the same breaths; sharing the same space.

When Gordo woke, he left Maria resting in the long shadows and returned to the store. That afternoon there were more satisfied customers, he sold three hats, and two belts. Maria would be happy for him. At day's end, he added a few tired pesos to his wallet and once again fitted the bronze key to lock out the night.

Almost home, Gordo focused on the half-moon lifting in the eastern sky. In its gibbous light, the lunar crescent shined like a porcelain bowl, and he calculated the depth of the speckled heaven where nothingness blended into eternity. Few knew how Gordo hated the night. He was not immense enough, not large enough, not fat enough to take in its emptiness.

Across the alley, Freda Ortiz selected three lengths of mesquite wood and pitched them on the cook fire. The red coals blazed, and fat chicken pieces sizzled on the comal.

At her feet, a young pup whined in anticipation and then yelped for the scraps that would come. Freda watched the fire smoke twist and rise in a tight spiral, and she heard the man's muffled sobs drifting across the narrow alley.

Poor Gordo, she thought, he loved his Maria. She worried about him in the months since her passing. It wasn't healthy, she thought, he was getting fat, bigger now than two people. With a long fork she turned the sizzling chicken and watched the fire dance up the griddle's edge. Below her, the dog's tail slapped the ground with renewed vigor.

Across the alley, surrounded by loneliness and a great emptiness, Gordo's immense frame shook with grief as he fought to hold back the night. The arms that held him were his own. He must be larger he vowed, much larger if he was to engulf a love so great, and a despair so vast.

As a taunt rope, the restless smoke from Freda's fire ranged higher and higher into the night. Like spirits released, the gray wisps rose, melded, and disappeared into the black void. In the village below, life went on.