

**George Rosen**  
**from *A Second Language***

AT THE CASA REYNALDO, the tall woman who had checked in during breakfast sat beside him at the table for luncheon. Reynaldo's granddaughter brought them plates of spaghetti with a thin red sauce.

"You're American?" he asked.

"Very," she said.

"And the woman you're traveling with is....?"

"My mother." She said it with some finality. "She knows all about Mexico."

The woman paused, the fork halfway to her mouth. "I mean, she wrote a book, *All About Mexico*. In 1938, for Americans who were interested in the Revolution. You know, Cárdenas. Land for the poor. Folk-dancing? But she hasn't been back since they shot the students." The woman saw Benson's ping of confusion, "In 1968, before the Olympics. But things are better now, she thinks. So she tells me. I've never been here before."

The tall woman stopped to chew. "This is very good," she said, still munching. "But there's hardly any sauce and it's not at all spicy. Isn't that" — she leaned forward and wiggled her fingers — "uncharacteristic? Non-Mexican?"

Benson was happy with a chance to be knowledgeable for a woman he thought beautiful. He studied her dark, soft hair, the green eyes with the creases of his own age at their corners when she smiled. "It's a *sopa seca*. They call a course like that a 'dry soup.' Rice, too."

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“Is that a joke?”

“No, it’s just a different view of soup.”

The green-eyed woman considered this, then continued on her own track. “Because sometimes their names for food are jokes. In Mexico City my mother and I had *manchamanteles*, ‘tablecloth stainer,’ all these drippy fruits and juicy meats in a stew? It was wonderful. You hardly knew where you ended and it started.” The woman rested her chin on her hands and gazed out in remembered contentment. “And then in English there’s ‘hot dog.’ If that’s not a joke, what is it?” Suddenly, it seemed to Benson almost angrily, she pushed her plate away from her and poured herself a cup of coffee from the covered enamel pitcher that stood on the table’s corner closest to the kitchen.

“My mother is forgetting things now. Pretty much everything, in fact. She wanted to come back here because she was forgetting” — the woman pursed her lips and outlined the words — “all about Mexico.”

“Does she eat?” Benson immediately felt a flush of embarrassment and floundered to recover. “I mean, in public?” he said, though this was worse yet. She had just told him about the dinner in Mexico City. He had come to Mexico, in part, for exactly this reason, that the sentences in his own language were finishing more badly as he got older, his words throwing out wildly inappropriate threads leading to unintended locations. He scanned the woman’s face for offense taken, but saw only her own understandably self-absorbed anxiety.

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In a flush, Benson felt an overwhelming wave of sympathy. His own parents had both died in the prime of life — if such a thing were possible — but Alzheimer's, the blank plague! He had a friend at home whose father was the only banker in a small Iowa farm town. He had all the records strewn about his office yet he remembered nothing. No one in the town knew who owed whom what. Principal, interest, mortgages, responsibility — all were torn to strips in the brain's shredder, a bank president's jubilee-year socialism of precisely located memory loss. The townspeople would call the child in Des Moines when the parent went missing, and the son would find his father miles from the bank, asleep in a cornfield, healthy as a horse, his mind vacant, barely remembering the laces on his shoes.