

## The Siren of Sosua

*Maestro: ¿Llevas el paraguas en la primavera?*

*Estudiante: \_\_\_\_\_*

Herman Gnutz wasn't stupid. He knew this like he knew his own name. Idiots abounded in this neighborhood.

The kid at the *Carl's Jr.* drive-thru?

Moron.

The pointy-eared knuckle-dragger running the DVD desk at the library?

Half-wit.

The Rhodes Scholar who would not stop wiping the windows of his classic '76 Pacer every morning at that intersection on Sepulveda even though Herman never gave him a freakin' nickel?

Put the 'muck' in *schmuck*.

Yeah, Herman knew from stupid.

The question was, then, how come he couldn't remember any of these words?

With the Spanish workbook open on his lap, Herman switched his pencil back to his right hand and pulled a chip from the bag. Crunching loudly, dusty orange crumbs cascading off his belly, Herman Gnutz once again contemplated the question.

What was the verb? If "llevas" was a verb, then what the hell was "paraguas" doing in there?

Maybe "paraguas" was the verb.

He squirmed amongst the tortilla bits. These freakin' Spanish had a different word for everything. And they didn't give a goddamn where they put the verb in a sentence. That much he'd learned.

Now, "primavera" meant "garden". Pretty sure about that. So, what was the *Maestro* asking? Did he plant something in the garden? Maybe "llevas" meant "lettuce" or "lettuces". Was "lettuce" singular or plural? Could you add an "-s" and make "lettuce" plural?

*Lettuces?* Odd. Maybe it worked in Spanish. It did have a familiar ring to it. He considered this possibility as he reached for more chips.

Really, what an ignorant question. And not the first he'd faced in this stupid book! He wasn't planning on doing any gardening whenever he got back down to the DR, that was for goddamn sure.

Herman checked the time and swore.

He was on page twenty-six of a faded exercise book that he'd used in seventh grade at John F. Kennedy Junior High, twenty-five years ago.

Well, "used" might be an exaggeration. Back then he couldn't give two jakes about Spanish. Still, he'd managed to squeak through the mind-numbing agony of the ancient, bemoled Señora Lemongello. In the back row, Herman hummed Rolling Stones tunes and doodled in the margins of his books, two letters, decorated with the flourish of a tattoo artist. In a variety of styles, he illustrated the name of a girl he had liked, Sabrina Leary, or rather her initials, "S.L." Apart from these absent-minded scrawlings, the pages inside were pristine.

Sabrina was his lab partner in science, a popular girl, and a much-discussed forerunner amongst the "early bloomers" in his grade. A considerable number of "S.L.'s" adorned his schoolbooks, his backpack, and even the pockets of his jeans. Months after she'd rejected him, some punks at the bus stop indiscreetly exposed the self-inflicted graffiti. It was pretty awful pretending to be a Saint Louis fan for the remainder of his junior high school career.

These Spanish books were carefully preserved by his mother, who had boxed them up, along with his other junk, and had them hauled all the way from freakin' Hoboken. Four boxes of crap. Thank God for his laziness, and the distractions of his ex-wife, the Medusa. A more motivated individual would have trashed those reminders of his tortured middle-school life a hell of a lot sooner. But not Herman. He should thank his mother for going to the trouble.

In fact, he should thank her for a lot of things.

Coming south and living with her in this retirement community was supposed to be temporary. He certainly hadn't planned on wasting away the rest of his youth amongst the old and the senile, these vacuous villagers.

He had a bunch of names for them: the wretched wrinkled, the golden oldies, the discarded denizens of the soon-to-be departed. Pretty clever, he thought, until someone turned the tables on him and came up with a nickname for guys who leech off their retired parents. It was at the *Hooters* out on the strip. A couple of waitresses were yukking it up with some good-old-boys at the end of the bar when one points in his direction and says, "Check it out. Preview of coming attractions."

Cold. Cold as a Mohel's grip.

But how true!

For one thing, he had to pretend he was fifty to even live in this complex – one of the ump-teen rules they have in these fossil forts. The fact that nobody even questioned his age was depressing in itself. As if he belonged here!

On paper it sounded like a legit plan. He should be able to save. Start paying down his debt. But in reality... The experience proved to be nothing like he had expected.

In life you depend on certain things to be solid, durable, constant. Predictable. That's the word. When you're little, these notions include what your parents are supposed to be like, like forever. What you don't expect is to discover that, at seventy-two, your Mom's a bit of a swinger. The same woman from whose loins you sprang, who dressed your skinned knees and helped prepare you in performing mitzvot, who faithfully cut your sandwich in quarters because she knew that's how you liked it, the woman who had once forbid you from watching "Saturday Night Fever" because it was rated 'R'... you'd like to think this lady wasn't a poster child for "*Granny Biker Chick Monthly*".

Not to mention the hours she spent preening for these guys, these, what? *Boyfriends?*

He shivered at the memory of that afternoon when, for no good reason, he had wandered onto the balcony to find his mother sunbathing nude. Seared permanently onto both retinas, the image had produced a wave of nausea that rippled in time to match each crease and weathered line of parchment stretching across her bony frame.

Pushing the bag of chips aside, he suppressed a twinge of acid reflux.

On his lap, the three-color illustrations of boys and girls skipping through gardens, building snowmen, and happily sunning themselves on the beach beckoned. This book, pulled out from under his old report cards and Archie comics, was a godsend. Maybe it was made for kids, but given his current financial straits, was there any other option?

Plus, he had to admit, the timing was, for once, spot on. Try as he might, Herman had never really developed a knack for "Timing", and was more often the victim of ill-timed happenstance rather than its beneficiary. So to have uncovered these resources now, these guides offering a well-spring of textbook Spanish, well, he couldn't have asked for a more timely delivery.

His lowest moment since moving in here was the day he went online and read how his Goddess had been so unceremoniously slurred by those disgusting pigs. Herman wasn't prone to violence, but that day he posted a string of insults, including a veiled threat or two, that shocked even him. Fun was fun, and everybody was entitled to their own opinions and all that, but there's a line. And those guys crossed it.

Within twenty-four hours his account had been closed, but it didn't matter. He'd made his point. Simple enough to create a new account under a different name. Just ignore the jerks. There would always be jerks.

Like dating a supermodel or famous actress. You had to take into consideration the kind of "tabloid attention" a girl like his attracted.

That's when inspiration hit. One shining ray of hope in an otherwise dark, dank sewer of misfortune.

He would learn Spanish.

Herman understood at an early age that Lady Luck was a particularly fickle mistress, and her sojourns into his world were about as rare as rocking horse shit. But last December, he caught a break. And it shocked the living hell out of him. He was damned if fortune hadn't managed to loiter in the vicinity long enough for him to meet a creature sent directly from the very Halls of Olympus itself. Luck had brought him his Dominican Goddess, and through her, the first signs hope.

So now, living in the Condo of the Living Dead, he would endure the stories of mall-walking and dollar-store bargains. He'd nurse his vintage Pacer along. And he was not so dense as to make any more unannounced visits onto the balcony.

Having avoided a lapse into despondency that too often peppered these self-tutoring sessions, he sat up in bed, straightened the pillows behind him, and slapped the page with a life-giving resilience that would impress even Heimlich.

"Now, *breathe*, you bastard!"

This wasn't that hard, he told himself. And he wasn't that dumb. Christ, how many freakin' people spoke Spanish anyway?

"*That* should tell you something."

OK. Be logical. Start by focusing on what you know.

He cracked his knuckles, took a deep breath, picked up his pencil and, using the eraser end, absently tended to an itch in his right ear.

Let's look at the question again. He needed to take a side. Did he in fact plant lettuce in the garden? It was '*garden*', right?

*Come on!*

He had told himself that stopping every two minutes to look up another goddamn word was what was slowing him down. Sighing, he looked up the meaning of "*primavera*".

Oh. Not "*garden*", but "*spring*". That changed things. Did he plant lettuce in the spring?

"Of course. Look at the freakin' pictures, *dumbass!*"

Wait -- what did they mean, "*spring*"? Something was still not right. He remembered from school that "*spring*" in the US was at a different time of year than in South America.

"Are they messing with me here? Or, hold on. Was the secret actually in the word *lettuce*?"

He chewed on the pencil end as he pondered this fresh angle. Was lettuce one of those things you planted in the fall so that you got something coming up the following year? He remembered that the neighbor, the Greenblatt woman, was out there planting her tulip bulbs in September. She had gotten him to schlep those massive bags of manure up to her shed, catching one corner of a bag on a rake and ruining his good shoes, which to this day smelled like ass warmed over.

But maybe that was it. Maybe it was a trick question.

Unbelievable. How much did his ability to communicate in Spanish depend on his successfully cultivating the makings of a salad?

Distant thunder rumbled a warning. Looking towards the window, he tried to avoid thinking about the fact that his view included a portion of the balcony, now as disconcerting a prospect as any roadside freak show. She may be out there, scantily dressed or in the raw. Perilous in any event.

He rubbed his eyes, picked up his Pepsi, and had a long drink.

OK. Break time over. If he didn't get something down on paper soon, she'd surely appear at his door and suggest they catch an early dinner. This meant eating a full meal at 3:00 PM and warding off stares from snowbirds who pegged him as some lousy goldbrick. If she would just go out, to the community center, shopping or some goddamn place, he could get online later and maybe practice his Spanish.

He might even meet someone who could help him unlock this gardening puzzler.

Noisily he drained his soda. A woven bracelet on the nightstand caught his eye, and he was immediately thrust back to when His Goddess had given him this small gift, two hours before his departure. He remembered her hands, large and muscular, working the tie strings of the *pulsera*, fastening it to his wrist. Digits as thick as Kielbasa, but she handled the two threads with the dexterity of a jeweler. He worshiped those hands, their precision, the confidence. These instruments of grace told him all he needed to know about love and devotion. The other guys at the pool had absolutely no appreciation for that kind of thing.

He had heard them. "Check out the meat hooks on the big girl." Or, "She got a license to operate heavy machinery?"

What do I care? he told himself. Their loss. Plus he'd have her all to himself.

But now he knew that this wasn't the case. Not by a long shot. Christ, he knew he was going to have to compete for her just like back in grade school. It was Sabrina Leary all over again.

Learning Spanish was the best way to rise above the rest of the pack and gain some kind of advantage. Most didn't bother, but the few that spoke the language, these guys did very well. It would take time, sure, but that was expected. Besides, he was broke, still paying off the credit cards from his last trip. The Pacer needed work, not exactly sure what...hopefully not another electrical problem. And then there were the lawyers, who needed to be paid if he was ever to be free of the Medusa. No promises, but there was a chance they could stop this last move on her part to garnish his wages. Freakin' high-priced shyster outfit, better it go to them than the Ex.

Turn those venomous barbs against her, for once.

And then? Dare he say it? A new life was practically just around the corner. Far and away from --

A knock at the door.

"Herman, I'm going out with Morty to play golf at his club, and then maybe, I don't know. You'll be OK getting your own dinner, won't you?"

His reaction was first relief, followed by suspicion. He spoke up so she could hear through the door without having to adjust her hearing aide.

"Yeah, sure. I'm fine, ah, I'll pick up something."

"Don't eat that fast food. It's no good for your weight."

"I know what's good for me, Ma, thanks."

"Don't get so defensive. Who else is looking out for you?"

He was not interested in an argument.

"You going to golf in the rain?"

"Why not?"

*Another* guy? He shouldn't ask. But he needed to. He tried a lighter, airier pitch.

"Wait, who's this Morty? New boyfriend?"

The question hung heavily in the air. Probably she hadn't heard him, which was better. A relief, actually.

The door suddenly opened a crack and a tiny head with purple-blue hair popped in.

"After tonight, who knows? I might get lucky! See ya!"

*What the --?*

"Go, for God's sakes. Just – *Jesus!*"

She sang all the way down the hall, jangling her keys. Herman called after her.

"When the lighting starts, make sure you stand directly under a nice big tree, OK? You *and* Morty!"

*That* she hadn't heard. An abrupt *Woosh!* sucked the air from the room as she pulled the front door closed.

He groaned. This was no act. She was really like this, living like a brainless schoolgirl!

She was getting more action than he was! God, *how depressing!*

The door to his room came slightly ajar as the pressure of the air in the house settled. He stared at the door and started to twitch.

"Ma! The freakin' door! You forgot -- "

Even as he said it, he knew it was pointless.

Herman didn't like a door that wasn't closed. Even a little. Even when no one else was home. It symbolized incompleteness, something unfinished. An opportunity for the unexpected to disturb his peace. *Just one more thing to do!*

This, combined with his mother's total disregard for his rules! How many times had he told her *not* to leave his bedroom door open?

"A simple thing, right? Pull a door closed behind you? How hard is that?"

Perhaps he could close it without getting up? An intriguing challenge. As he looked around for something to throw, the door, seemingly on its own, wafted open another eight inches. He stared suspiciously at it for a moment, his mind going instantly to the most improbable places... spirits? Restless souls wandering the periphery of his consciousness? He suspected they were always there, ever so slightly out of reach, teasing him with this kind of unexplained phenomenon.

His immersion into the paranormal was cut suddenly short.

"Jesus H. Christmas! *Don't*-- "

A round ball of white fuzz peremptorily leapt onto the bed.

"Just what I need. Casa. *Casa!* Get down."

The cat turned around twice and proceeded to ignore him.

Great. One more distraction!

This cat arrived not long after his step-father had died. A spontaneous purchase, she'd taken the advice of a friend to "fill the empty space".

"*Empty space?*" he'd asked himself. What did that make him, chopped herring?

It wasn't a bad cat, as cats go. Fluffy white longhaired show cat, it kept the old lady occupied and out of his hair.

Calling the cat "Casa", she told him, was after her favorite movie, "*Casablanca*".



"It means 'White house' in Spanish. You get it? 'Cause she's white?"

Yeah, he got it. Besides bagging more tail, she's probably got more Spanish under her belt than he does. Christ almighty!

Something! Lord, give me *something!*

Enough. He needed to stop thinking about his mother, and the Medusa, and the lawyers, and his money problems, and this freakin' cat, and get focused! Focus on Spanish. *He was doing fine up to now!*

He got up, closed the door, returned to the bed, adjusted his legs around the cat, fiddled with his backrest and pillows for a full minute, then expelled a lungful of air.

"Okay. Back to work."

The illustrated girl in the raincoat smiled up at him from the page, daring him to respond. Again, the question, "*¿Llevas el paraguas en la primavera?*"

Assuming "paraguas" was a verb, he proceeded to break down the conjugation. He was being addressed in the familiar "tú" form – recognizable by the letters *-as* on the end. So logically he would replace the *-as* with an *-o*. Ready to write the response out, he switched his pencil back to his left hand. Tapping his forehead with his pencil, then spinning it between his fingers, he smiled.

Being ambidextrous was one of the ways Herman knew he wasn't stupid.

"All right, whatever ... I guess I *do* plant lettuce in the spring."

Beginning with the word "*Sí*", he rewrote "*paraguas*", convinced it was the verb, into the first person singular. The answer seemed to make sense, at least grammatically. For good measure he inserted the Spanish snipe "*pendejo*" at the end, which to Herman expressed his considered view on the whole agrarian question.

*Yes, I plant lettuce in the spring, asshole.*

Satisfied, Herman flipped to the back of the workbook to where the answers were listed. In a twinkling, the despair bypassed earlier suddenly hit.

*Sí, yo llevo el paraguas en la primavera. (Yes, I carry an umbrella in the spring.)*

What? There was no lettuce in any of it! Was "*paraguas*" umbrella? "*Llevo*" meant *carry*, he guessed.

Disgusted, he threw the book aside. If this happened every time, how long would it take to master simple conversation? If he couldn't get beyond chapter two in this kiddie Spanish book, what chance did he have sitting around the bar or by the pool?

How many guys? He updated the list of guys who referenced his lady regularly, so he had a fairly good idea of the minimum number. Not a short list.

Initially, the discovery of this website had been mind-blowing. Fly someplace warm? South of the Border? Forget his troubles in a new and exotic culture?

*Hell, yes!*

In planning his break from this octogenarian enclave, he had done a random search for places to go, places he could afford, and places where he might meet women who didn't mind guys who were below average in height, carrying a few extra pounds, and sporting aggressively thinning hair.

He chose the island based on finances, primarily, but also because of its reputation among certain chat sites that specialized in travel for singles. Surfing those sites sounded tawdry, but the fact was these guys were usually pretty decent to one another, like some kind of fraternal organization, and provided a wealth of information. He had posted a question, and three guys, guys he'd never even met, gave him good advice on where he should stay, where to meet girls, and how much to budget. One guy even recommended a place that makes a halfway decent Reuben. Incredible!

Getting out of town was another story. Aggravation upon aggravation. The torment of the Medusa. His mother, who wouldn't stop asking questions. And the bills! He thought he'd lose it completely before he even left the country!

Even the day of the flight, the hits just kept on coming.

"I had specifically chosen an aisle seat, and it looks like you've given me a middle seat."

"I'm sorry, sir, but this flight is completely full."

"I know the flight is full. I heard the multitude of announcements. Look here: I have my printout, and it says that my seat is 5C. You've given me a different seat. Why can't I get the seat I paid for?"

"Sir, the computer can't make adjustments when there is a change in plane. That seat does not exist on this aircraft, or rather it does, but it is designated as first class. Please take a seat. I will call you if something opens up."

Sitting in a middle seat when you have a physique that could generously be described as "portly" gets you nothing but angry stares and a crimp in your neck, to boot. Why these asshats have you select your seat on their website and then go changing it to suit themselves is what Herman wanted to know.

*Mr. Nuts? Mr. Herman Nuts, please report to the desk at gate A3.*

"Hello, I'm Mr. Gnutz. You're pronouncing it wrong."

"How do you pronounce it?"

"Just like it's spelled, honey. Gnutz."

The glare you got when you call a girl "honey" these days.... Hilarious, until you realized these minimum wage earners held your sack in their vengeful little fists.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Guts, but -- "

"Gnutz."

"Yes, sir, I apologize, ah, it looks like there are no more seats available in coach. For \$125.00 I can upgrade you to First Class, if you'd like."

Apology *not* accepted. She wasn't sorry. And he let her know that. Returning to the waiting area, he could have sworn she called him "honey".

Why even bother? It was no different than anyplace else. Either side of the border. It didn't matter. Just bend over and spread your cheeks for the nice lady. It all amounted to the same thing in the end.

Baggage fees. Meals for purchase. Currency conversion charges. Tourist tax upon arrival.

*Everybody needs to take a bite!*

Cab rides. That's where they get you. Nobody tells you that when you plan these things. Regardless, he'd go back in a heartbeat, mortgage everything, if he had anything left to mortgage, just to be with her again.

Back in Florida now, he visited that one website daily. Guys wrote about their experiences, where they'd stayed and what girls they'd been with. When he first saw her name referenced, he jumped in his chair. She came across as a sort of filler or booby prize for this one guy who was forced to settle for "last call".

From the description, there was no doubt in Herman's mind that this was the same girl, *his* girl. It took some time to come to terms with the reality. Only an idiot would fall for a girl like that and imagine his new love had just arrived that day from Saint Teresa's Convent and Finishing School for Virgins.

Later on there was another entry, this time a sizeable one. The writer, an uncouth dirtbag who went by the obviously overcompensating screenname of *Überschlong*, seemed to get his puny rocks off by providing every graphic detail of his convergence with his beloved, right down to certain untoward comments surrounding the tattoo of a green rose in that singular, most private region; a rose whose stem wove the words: "Dios me bendice."

He recalled how taken he was by the intricate artwork on her inner thigh, and by the curious affirmation. It was one of the sweetest moments when she explained its meaning: "God blesses me."

Talk about your personal relationships with God, he thought.

How marvelous to be one of the lucky few who got to share her secret.

Then, to read these hurtful, even libelous remarks by scum like *Überschlong* .... It made him sick.

The bottom line was that there were other men who had known her and there'd probably be more to come. For once he'd have the upper hand. Some will laugh, thinking it ludicrous he could gain any advantage by showing her he could speak her language. But those were the stupid ones. They had no idea what Herman Gnutz was capable of.

Getting up, the cat lurched in surprise, giving Herman a severe look. He absently apologized to the cat while retrieving the Spanish workbook and getting back under the covers. Placing the pencil in his teeth, he located the page containing the next dialogue. The new question was accompanied by an illustration of two well-dressed men, one of them seated:

*Mesero: ¿ Desea Usted huevos revueltos con jamon?*

*Cliente: \_\_\_\_\_*

What now? A job interview? A discussion of pork belly prices? Perhaps the smaller fellow's charge card didn't go through? Are you serious? It could be anything! And what's a *Mesero*?

Wind rattled a loose gutter. The air-conditioning kicked on, blowing directly from a vent above, causing the bedroom door to groan softly on its hinges and the few remaining hairs on his head to dance.

Herman sneezed.

As the room became darker, he glanced up to the window. He wanted to go check out the sky, but he couldn't trust what he might find on the balcony.

She had more sense than to go golfing in a storm; a woman her age should know better. Surely, he didn't have to concern himself with that.

He reached for his dictionary, thumbing the pages as he brooded.

This Morty sounded like a real winner, taking a frail old lady golfing on a day like this. Big-time player, no doubt.

Did she meet him online? Maybe. She'd been on the computer a lot lately.

Herman flipped absently through the tattered book, his mind drifting to dark places.

This is bad.

She had no idea what kind of sickos trolled the internet.

Forgetting what he'd originally wanted to know, Herman became lost in the dictionary. Suddenly the word *pícaro* leapt off the page.

*Pícaro* noun, *rogue, rascal, reprobate*; adj., *naughty, sly, mischievous*

A loud clap of thunder struck nearby.

What was she doing out there, playing golf with some lunatic? *Ín a storm?!?!?*

He kicked off the covers, sending airborne books, tortilla chips and a spastic cat. Retrieving his keys and wallet from the pants balled up on the floor, he quickly slipped on a pair of galoshes, then paused to self-consciously sniff the shirt he was wearing. Finding nothing objectionable, he gave a firm tug to the string of his sweatpants, anchoring their position, and was out the door.

Not more than six golf courses in the immediate vicinity. Piece of cake.

Turning the ignition with his left hand, Herman pulled a napkin from the glove box with his right. The engine wheezed and sputtered in a series of impotent complaints. Wiping his forehead, he pumped the gas pedal wildly, clouted the wheel, and howled.

"Not now, you *mother* -- !"

It was at times like these Herman struggled to recall why it was he insisted on keeping this abomination, this affront to human engineering, this unreliable *shitcan* around.

He paused a moment and drew a deep breath. Mumbling a desperate plea, he promised a string of life-altering resolutions for one small spark of ignition, one residual glowing ember to rouse the beast.

Holding his breath, he turned the key. Now it was only a clicking sound.

Fat raindrops landed heavily on the glass surrounding him.

How quickly life can go from *suck* to *blow*.

He set his forehead on the steering wheel, released a prolonged sigh, and, once finished, tried to bring his mind to rest.

Six months. He'd be back in his lady's arms in six months, tops. He would feel the power, the authority of her hands all over his body as they reached deep inside to reclaim from the world what was rightly his.

END