

Mystery Meat 2: El Corrido de Lara's



“There are a thousand climaxes on Tortilla Flat for every day the world wheels through.”
-John Steinbeck *Tortilla Flat*

I smuggled my Chihuahua, Gible, into the oldest Mexican cantina in Oshkosh, Lara's Tortilla Flats. He sat under the table lapping Tom & Otto's house salsa. The fiery blend of finely strained vegetables was so deliciously spicy it recalled the flavors of his Aztec homeland. I mainlined a potent drug with the street name of Mama Tere's Special Cornbread, a cream maize and white cheese loaf spiked with green chilies.

Despite the bright tiles, multicolored armadillos, Inca pottery, and vibrant Mexican sundials, the evening was made ominous by a flickering flame on my table and hollow-skulled Day of the Dead figures dancing in the shadows.

I was hired to hunt down the Fox Valley Butcher whose penchant for lady hocks and man chops had him slicing through Wisconsin supper clubs. For weeks I reviewed cop shop records of traceless murders and realized the only way local police would catch this culprit is if he was shooting holes in donuts and leaving fingerprints in powdered sugar. My first day on the job I was ditched by my client and watched a sink jockey die of something more substantial than dishpan hands.

Under the same ownership for two decades, Lara's was a good spot to contemplate catching a criminal. Great-grandmother Teresa Moran had honed her recipes at a

hardscrabble boardinghouse in a Salinas mining town while Great-grandfather “Papa Jesus” of the Gonzalez Garza clan helped capture the infamous Gregorio Cortez.

It all happened in 1901 when Cortez killed a couple of sheriffs in South Texas. To some, the fleeing bandit was a folk hero, to others, a cold-blooded killer. The ballad “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez” summarized the struggle, “They let loose the bloodhound dogs/They followed him from afar/But trying to catch Cortez/Was like following a star.” I knew the feeling.

All I needed was a foursome of mariachis to accompany my own traditional ode to investigative angst, “They let loose the private Jane/She followed from afar/But trying to catch the Butcher/Was like finding a smiling worm in a tequila bar.”

My client, Raymond Brawn, entered the restaurant with all the blustering bravado of a matador, including the bull. He wore a flashy grey suit that reflected a sooty rainbow of color like an oil spill or the ring around a pigeon’s neck.

I pulled up the hem of my red dress. Toro.

Before he had a chance to sit down, I pointed at an appetizer of marinated carrots, onions, and jalapeños called Escabeche Coins, “This is all the money I’ve got to continue the investigation. If you want to keep me on the trail of the Fox Valley Butcher, I’m gonna need some more dough.” The waitresses at Lara’s were some of the best in town and an observant server proffered a second fix of hot cornbread.

Brawn reached into his pocket and pulled out what I assumed was a pimp roll (a pair of twenties wrapped around a deck of cards) but he peeled off bill after bill, fondling Jacksons like a Boy Scout earning a merit badge at Neverland Ranch. Sitting before a stack of double-sawbucks, my mood improved.

“Where’s your greenhorn secretary?” he asked.

I dispatched Jimmy Brisket to finish photographing a parking lot where a dishwasher had been scrubbed. If the kid didn’t get tangled up in his bowtie, he might find something.

“He’s doing the Weegee with a wedgie routine at the latest crime scene.”

I drank straight from the cocktail shaker of my Blue Agave Ultimate Margarita as Brawn ordered a telling plate.

“Camarones al Diablos,” he said with a lusty grin. When a man orders a licentious dish of shrimp in spicy arbol pepper sauce with white garlic rice and black bean salpicon, he’s sending a message that there is no erotic act off his varied menu.

I heard a sound like two roosters battling a walrus with Tourette's syndrome in a cockfight pit but it was just Latin pop music piped into the restaurant from a pirate radio station in hell.

I suggestively bit into a perfectly prepared Chile Relleno and Brawn shifted in his seat. Everything about the man was hot as habanera. When he smiled, his pencil-thin Dirty Sanchez curled upwards in unison with his devilish brows.

"I find it curious that the very evening we're supposed to meet, I get stood up and spend the night with a dead body," I said.

Raymond Brawn rested his chin in his hands, "I assure you the lady I passed time with wouldn't have the same complaint. Alas, I was indisposed and apologize for the inconvenience."

This buffoon had more excuses than a couple of vicars at a Tijuana donkey show.

"It's your dime, chump. All I know is that a murderer is carving up Sheboygan short-order cooks and Wautoma waitresses and I've got a client ready to bankroll a three-county eating spree but conspicuously skips our first rendezvous."

The tart tequila and slow-simmered sauces heady with herbs dulled my senses. I wanted to stay sharp and grill him about his business associates and personal investment in the case, but a final thick slab of custard coated in sweet syrup distracted me and all my thoughts turned to flan.

Raymond Brawn was jiggling his foot and had the virile vacant look of a man possessed by passion, "I like playing footsy. I don't mind that you don't shave your legs. I enjoy an earthy woman."

Beneath the table, Giblet's paws were wrapped around Brawn's pant cuffs and his tongue hung lasciviously as he willfully humped my client's leg.