

**La Otra** Written by: Claudia Corletto

XYZ strutted around the office with the type of quiet confidence that made him stand out in comparison to the other ho-hum joe schmoes. Every time he'd stroll by my cubicle, I felt a magnetic pull towards him. My Latina instinct forewarned "tenga cuidado con el" but my American rationale and curiosity got the best of me. I reasoned with my instinct "This is silly. You're a grown woman, it's not like he can read your mind. Your thoughts are private and there is no need to censor them".

He was not going to magically pick up on any vibes from me as long as I treated him the same way I treated everyone else, right? So that's exactly what I tried to do. For months I tried to keep my wandering thoughts at bay. I just couldn't help notice how nice he looked in that certain shade of pale yellow. I couldn't help but pick up on the verbal 'indirectas' he would throw his counter-parts and smirk quietly to myself when the person on the receiving end didn't quite get it. I got it and I got him.



Then, one day, he shot me a knowing stare. It wasn't even a glance; he just cut straight through my invisible wall and stared at me knowingly. The secret was out. There was a shift in the office and everyone seemed to notice. Conversations would cease whenever he would approach me. It was like they were all waiting for us to rip our clothes off right there in the lunch room and go at it like maniacs!

Well, something had to be done. I mean, who could live like this? So I went on date after endless, boring date just trying to find a replacement for him. Anyone else to fill that spot in my fantasy world would have done the trick, but the pickings were slim to none.

There were the self-absorbed ego maniacs that somehow transformed our first dates into a job interview. I found myself shaking hands at the end of the evening in a very business-like manner and saying "Well, you sound great, I'll be in touch".

On the other end of the spectrum was the one-track mind kind of guy. You know him, we all do. He's the guy that always turns everything into a lead-in to sex. We could be chatting about the national deficit and he would remark on how a woman who knows her current events just gets him so...you can fill in the blanks.

I felt so doomed. I felt as if I were hanging on a cliff by one hand like Tom Cruise in the beginning of Mission Impossible. Every time he'd walk by I would have to stop myself from whistling that damn theme song. My desires totally crept up on me at the strangest of times. Something had to be done.

There were two words that kept buzzing by my guilty conscience. LA OTRA. The literal translation is the other. Doesn't seem so menacing or threatening, does it? That's the safety the English language affords you. However, when you hear LA OTRA in my Dominican mother's voice with that novella-like emphasis, I don't care who you are, you can't help but think of a home-wrecker, a tart, a slut, a whore, a loose woman, some bitch who gives it up for anyone who's willing to take it. A female with no sense of respect for the sanctity of marriage.

So I kept reminding myself-whatever you do, just don't become LA OTRA. Then my car broke down. So who do you know decides to offer me a ride to work? That's right, Mr. XYZ. I felt like all the spiritos malos from the underworld were ganging up on me with their cruelest intentions of breaking my spirit. So I did what anyone else would do. I lit a candle and prayed

long and hard to any freaking saint that would listen. I went to mass and made several plea-bargains with God. I promised that if my desires were washed away, I would feed the homeless on Thanksgiving. I tried to think about famine, war, poverty or anything else that would be distracting.

On our morning commutes, Mr. XYZ was at first distant. Then, I guess curiosity got the best of him. He started asking me open-ended questions. He really ate up my answers. I guess he had pigeon-holed me into some sort of stereotype that is somewhere between a pretty dumb chick and a hyper-sensitive feminist. So I played it off and pretended not to notice and was just myself. The more I opened up, the more he liked me. I began to look forward to our little chats to and from work.

I began to wonder about him long after he had dropped me off. I wondered what kind of husband he was. I wondered if he was an annoying neighbor that was too friendly. I wondered if he made mad, passionate love to his wife or if they were beyond that. I began to wonder why I was wondering about him so much. I started telling him about my life, my family and my horrible dates. He listened and offered advice and was very sweet about the whole thing; almost in a brotherly sort of way. So as time passed, I let my guard completely down assuming "He's married and he loves his wife, there's no way in hell he's gonna cross that imaginary line. He probably sees you as a silly, fickle thing that doesn't know which way is up. He's seen you all puffy eyed and sleepy in the morning before the make-up. He's even seen you fall asleep in the car with your mouth open. For goodness sake, everyone knows that shit just 'aint attractive. Relax. He's harmless".

How I ended up naked on the thirtieth floor in the handicapped bathroom one Saturday afternoon with Mr. XYZ still escapes me. I remember I had to work some over-time and so did he. We rode in together as usual. Around lunch time he asked if I wanted to split a lunch with him. I said sure. I couldn't concentrate on my food because he had a stupid smirk on his face that he couldn't hide. I asked him what was his problem but he didn't want to tell me what was so amusing. I prodded and poked and finally he relented and said "I just can't help but wonder what would happen between you and me if I weren't married".

Holy shit! What the hell was I going to do? I tried not to register any external emotion other than shock and disgust. I retorted in a very offended and indignant tone "What are you talking about? I am so not having this conversation with you". I stormed out of the lunch room, out of the office and into the hallway. How on earth did this man read my mind? I never uttered a word to anyone! I needed a few minutes to gather my thoughts and the next thing I know he's in the standing in the hallway facing me, still holding his burger in one hand and trying to grab my arm with the other. I yank away from him and run down the hallway like a crazy person. I jumped into the elevator and hit any button. I got off on the thirtieth floor and headed to the handicapped bathroom. I began to cry and couldn't stop myself and didn't even know why I was crying.

I heard a knock on the door. I yelled go away. He opened the door and was holding a cup of water and offered it to me. I pushed it away and told him to get out and to never speak to me again. He put the cup of water down on the counter and placed his hands on my shoulders and looks me square in the eyes and says "You know they're just thoughts and you're entitled to have them"; and with that I was dicknotized.

In vain I desperately tried to save myself and him from making a huge mistake, and say "Yeah, they are just thoughts, but my mother didn't raise me to be LA OTRA you sin verguenza. Your wife thinks you're putting in some over-time because you love her and here you are trying to get some office pussy. You should be ashamed of yourself."

He looked down and then looked up and just when I think he's going to mandarme pal carajo, he very cleverly snuck in one of the best kisses I've ever had. The rest of the encounter was, well, let's just say that I have been volunteering at my local homeless shelter once a month ever since then.