

A photograph of a building facade at night. On the left, a vertical neon sign reads "RESTAURANT" in red, glowing letters. To the right, a window with a dark frame contains a smaller neon sign that also reads "RESTAURANT". The building's exterior is made of dark, textured panels. The overall scene is illuminated by the warm glow of the neon lights.

ATTRACTION

A Short Story

Kelly Irvin

Attraction

By Kelly Irvin

Leonardo Gonzalez swept the Saltillo tile between the patio tables outside Casa Jalisco Restaurant. His brisk strokes matched his early morning disposition. The sun shone through the light mist that hung over the San Antonio River as it meandered through the heart of the city. In a few hours the quiet would dissipate, fleeing from the hordes of visitors who would flood the River Walk, seeking *enchiladas verdes*, margaritas, Mexican beer, and a chance to say they'd visited a San Antonio tourist attraction second only to the Alamo.

But for now, Leonardo had the jewel to himself and he patiently polished his small piece.

He leaned the broom against the round table closest to the water and stuck his hand in the pocket of his crisp white apron in search of a pack of gum. His girl wanted him to quit smoking. The curve of her cheek and the smell of her hair were enough to make him give it a shot.

As he savored the sweet spearmint flavor, his gaze wandered over the towering bald cypresses flanked by pink flowering bougainvillea and came to rest on the river. Only two and a half feet deep, murky, yet the sound of it lapping against the edge always lulled him into a sense of well-being.

Leonardo bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. "Ouch." He slapped his hand against his face as he tasted warm salty blood. Something floated in the river. Gauzy material turned gray by the turgid water danced on the surface, surrounding a figure with long blonde hair suspended like algae in the ocean. His mind rejected, then absorbed the image.

His body reacted. "Hold on! I'm coming." He leaped through the air. His feet hit the water first and then the muddy bottom. He slipped, went down, and came up sputtering, the taste of dirt and fish thick in his mouth. Fighting to maintain his balance, he slogged toward her.

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe she just needed resuscitation. Maybe he could save her.

He gripped her arms and pulled her up. "Come on, come on, you're OK, come on!" Her head lolled to the side, eyes closed, features slack. His throat closed against bitter bile. "Help, someone, help, I need help!"

He dragged her to the edge and pushed her limp body up onto the ledge as Judy Castaneda, Casa Jalisco's chef, rushed onto the patio, a huge skillet in one hand and a towel in the other. "*Por Dios*, Leo, what are you yelling about?" Her gaze fell on the prone woman. "Ah."

The next few minutes passed in a series of elongated spaces that seemed like days. Sounds were muffled, images blurry. People talked to Leonardo, but he couldn't make sense of their words. Their mouths moved, but no cogent responses formed. Despite the warm midday sun on his face, Leonardo shivered under the towel Judy had wrapped around his shaking shoulders. Shock made his insides quiver and his stomach seemed to be surfing on wave after wave of nausea. The face of the woman who had introduced herself earlier as Detective Campbell wavered in front of him. She had a nice face—what he could see. Not what Leonardo expected. She looked up from her notebook. "Are you sure you've never seen the victim before? She didn't come into the restaurant last night?"

Leonardo squeezed his eyes shut. The bright lights in the restaurant's kitchen flashed against his eyelids, as *Tejano* music pounded in his ears. He'd worked a double shift and they'd been busy. A lot of Spring Break kids stopping in the Alamo city for a night before roaring on down to South Padre beaches.

Loud, obnoxious, big tippers. Just the way he liked them. Lots of blondes. San Antonio was mostly Hispanic so the blondes always stood out to him. Bleached blonde. Strawberry blonde. Platinum blonde. "I don't know. A lot of college kids."

“Think. Does she look familiar?”

Leonardo didn't want to remember the face. The Medical Examiner's Office had already taken the body away, but his gaze automatically went to the spot where she'd sprawled. He swallowed, letting the image flood his mind. High cheek bones, wide lips. A long neck. White peasant blouse. Flowing white skirt. Leather sandals. The realization that she did look familiar made his muscles cramp. He clasped his arms across his middle, doubled over, and gasped.

“You OK?” Judy, her brown face dark and her thin lips pulled down in a frown, put her hand on his shoulder and patted as she fixed the detective with a frigid look. Leonardo and Judy had worked together for almost five years. She'd never touched him before. “Beto's here. He'll handle this.”

Only Judy could call Señor Hinojosa by his nickname. She'd worked with him for at least fifteen years—since the restaurant opened. He even let her win arguments over changes in the menu. The restaurant owner marched across the rust-colored tile, one hand tugging at the handlebar mustache that dwarfed his narrow face. “Don't say a word, Leo. I'll take care of this.” He turned to the detective. “You can't be questioning my employee in my restaurant. Not without a lawyer.”

A lawyer. Leonardo didn't need a lawyer. “I just found the—”

Señor Hinojosa gave him a look that said *shut up*. “The body was in the river. It has nothing to do with my restaurant. It coulda floated down from one of the hotels or one of the bars—what about that new chain restaurant where they have happy hour until midnight? She probably got drunk, fell in, and drowned. You know how these kids are.”

“She wasn't a kid and she didn't drown.” Detective Campbell's pleasant tone didn't waver. “The ME investigator says it looks like blunt force trauma to the head.”



“Angie, we’ve got something.” A second detective—guy named Joe Santos—strode up to the table and deposited a sodden billfold on the table with a gloved hand. “Guys trolled it out of the water down by the bridge. Got stuck in some pipes.”

Santos held the billfold open with gloved fingertips. “Elisa Cervantes. Thirty-two. Southside address.”

Detective Campbell held out the billfold so the driver’s license photo could be seen by señor Hinojosa. The woman had been beautiful. “So. Not a tourist. You know her? Seen her in your establishment, maybe?”

Leo studied his boss. His lips were pursed, his expression blank. Judy stood so close to the man, their hands almost touched. Señor Hinojosa shook his head. “No. No, don’t know her.” He took a step or two back. “Now if you’re done, I’ve got a restaurant to open.”

“When we’re finished questioning all the employees who worked last night.” The detective’s voice held a hint of challenge under the polite veneer.

Leo got to his feet. He felt a hundred years old and his clothes had dried stiff with crud from the river. He’d have to change before he went to work. He trudged toward the back room. Detective Santos had Tommy, the busboy, in the back booth questioning him. Tommy glanced at Leo, his forehead wrinkled over his pierced nose and lip, before answering the question. “Yeah, yeah, I remember the blonde chick—an old lady—thirties maybe, but she left without eating. Said she wasn’t hungry no more.”

“That’s a gang tat on your arm, isn’t it?” The detective pointed his pen at one of half a dozen tattoos visible under the short sleeves of Tommy’s T-shirt. “You done time, Tommy?”

Poor Tommy. Leo kept going. He doubted he’d ever be hungry again.

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The dank late-night air oppressed Leo as he cleared the dirty dishes and emptied beer bottles from the last table. He'd refused to go home despite Judy and Señor Hinojosa's best efforts. It was just as well. Judy said Tommy had left without giving notice. Right after the cops. Somebody had to bus the tables. It had been a busy night. Lots of college kids asking for Coronas, chips, and *salsa*. He'd had to run them out a closing time.

He carted the heavy tub toward the kitchen, his muscles straining with fatigue as he passed the half-open door to señor Hinojosa's office. A raised voice made him pause. Judy sounded furious. "How could you?"

"Don't yell at me." Señor Hinojosa's voice sounded like the soft hiss of snake. "She was a one-night stand. She was nothing to me, you idiot."

The air stirred by the ceiling fan felt icy against Leo's sweaty skin. He tiptoed toward the door, straining to hear.

"Your wife might think differently." Judy's voice dropped to an angry whisper. "I know I do. I thought we had something. That's why I did it—for you—"

"For me? You're an idiot. Enough money and she would've walked away."

"Pregnant mistresses don't walk away."

Surprise loosened Leo's grip. The tub crashed to the floor, plates tumbling out, water glasses and beer bottles shattering.

Trying to suck in air, he sank to his knees and threw out his arms, frantically shoving the pieces of broken ceramics and glass back into the tub. His hands shook and his fingers felt like ten thumbs. A shard pierced his palm. He gasped.

The door opened wide, banging against the back wall. Judy rushed out, Señor Hinojosa right behind her.

Leo froze, his fingers pressed against the wound. Judy's gaze ate him up. Then she smiled. "Leo, you poor thing, are you all right?"

"Yeah, you okay, *vato*?" Señor Hinojosa pushed her forward. "Look *compa*, why don't we go outside and have a smoke and a drink."

"I gave up smoking." Leo scrambled to his feet, the blood forgotten. "I . . . I need to get these dishes to the kitchen."

"I told the kitchen staff to go home. Me and Judy are going to finish the cleanup." Señor Hinojosa smiled like it was the most normal thing in the world. Him letting staff go before the work was done. "We—I figured you'd already left. Have a beer with me. Nobody quits smoking on a day like today."

Judy touched Leo's arm. He forced himself not to jerk away. "You hurt your hand." She grabbed it and inspected the small, jagged cut. She smiled and brushed her fingertips through the blood. "I'll bring you a bandage and *una cerveza*. You deserve one after the day you've had."

Señor Hinojosa threw an arm around Leo's shoulder and tugged him to the door. "Come on, *vato*, no worries."

They stood on the edge of the river, watching the lights shimmer on the water. Leo bit at his thumbnail as he looked up and down the River Walk. The doors of the other establishments along the winding sidewalk were shut, windows dark. No one took a late-night stroll. No lovers giggled as they walked hand in hand along the river.

Señor Hinojosa lit Leo's cigarette, then his own. The tips glowed in the dark like little red stop lights. Leo's jitters subsided. He'd heard wrong. That was all. He sucked on the cigarette trying to get the woman's face out of his head. All that blonde hair floating in the water. "I gotta go, señor, my girl is waiting for me at home."



He turned in time to see Judy's determined face as she swung the mammoth cast iron skillet clutched in both hands like a tennis racket. It sailed through the air aimed at his forehead. Then he was flying backwards and it was dark and the air around him was wet. So wet he couldn't breathe.

Detective Campbell studied the body floating face up in the river. "Two bodies in twenty-four hours and no one saw a thing?" She sighed and turned to Judy Casteneda. The chef continued to polish an enormous skillet with a towel. Tears streaming down his face, Hinojosa stood next to her. Detective Campbell studied the way their hands entwined, knuckles white. "I'm beginning to wonder what the attraction is to the River Walk."

A tiny smile flitted across the other woman's face. "My cooking?"