

# **At the Table**

A Short Story

By

C. I. Jerez

Contact:

C.I. Jerez

(915) 504-9285

[cijerezbooks@gmail.com](mailto:cijerezbooks@gmail.com)

Website: [www.cijerezbooks.com](http://www.cijerezbooks.com)

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I.

Karina Montoya's biggest advantage was her ability to slip seamlessly into the world of a white American woman. Her slate grey eyes and dirty-blond hair, highlighted in white-striped perfection, paired flawlessly with milky translucent skin. She had the features of a German-crafted Kestner doll, disguising the Wayuu sienna-skinned origins of her native Venezuela. As Karina grew up, salacious rumors permeated her small community in Ciudad Guayana, the largest city in Bolivar, creating a fallacy that she'd been kidnapped as a toddler by the man posing as her father. But El Cuco, the leader of the local, deadly *megabanda*, never needed to assuage *her* fears. She was five years old when he brought her home, old enough to remember the truth. El Cuco hadn't kidnapped Karina; he'd *saved* her from the grips of a monster and later trained her to survive in Venezuela's most lethal and corrupt environment.

His patience as the years passed and his vision for Karina's future all led to the moment when he finally let her go and sent her off to the new life he'd planned for her in the heartland of the United States.

Two weeks after inflating the air mattress in a rented basement and unpacking her olive-green duffle bag, Karina secured a job at a local house-cleaning company and made a promise to herself. From that day on, she would only listen to television and music in English and only read American books in the author's native tongue. She would listen closely to the local dialect and observe the mannerisms of the region, then immerse herself so deeply in the local culture they would never question whether she came from anywhere else.

And she did.

Two evenings a week, she took free language classes at the local library and refused to open her mouth to utter anything but the stark new syllables and rigid-tongued sounds of the English language.

After two years of focused immersion, every ounce of her former life was washed away, forgotten. Everything except the camera flashes of darkness surrounding her childhood abduction and the light that followed El Cuco's arrival. The memory of his muscular, sienna-tinged arms wrapped tightly around her, carrying her away to safety, was the only one she held on to all these years later.

But that was all in the past. She had entered a new world, accepted a new purpose, and moved ahead with what needed to be done.

And she had.

She proved to others and herself that her new identity, authentic Midwestern accent, and extensive vocabulary eliminated any trace of the once sought-after *Venezuelana* on the run.

## II.

Karina strode into the lobby of Minneapolis's newest two-story restaurant. She was late.

"Excuse me, sir. Mind if I squeeze right past ya," Karina said, shuffling behind an elderly couple.

"Of course, dear. You betcha," the husband replied, placing his hand on the center of his wife's curved spine and tucking her close to him.

Karina looked back at them and smiled gratefully. The lobby smelled of cedar and bellflower, a remnant of the man's cologne. "That's a great scent," she said. "Thank you for understanding."

With a wink she turned away and focused on the awaiting host behind the mahogany podium at the top of the stairwell that led down to the dining room.

The man's wife crinkled her nose, followed by a tip of her chin. "That girl seems like a strange one, dontcha know?"

Her husband chuckled. "Oh, for cryin' out loud. No need to be a busybody."

His eyes remained fixed on the long blonde ponytail and the equally long gold zipper running down the length of her back as Karina followed the host into the darkened restaurant.

### III.

I'd already been seated for nearly ten minutes when Karina walked in alone and approached the table beside mine. So little had changed about her, though so much time had passed between us. She didn't acknowledge me.

I couldn't help but stare as she took her seat. The man across from her appeared relieved she'd finally arrived. Just a few seconds before, I'd noticed the tension in his jaw, perhaps fear from being stood up.

Her blonde hair had once been my greatest envy. The ice-blue in her eyes had faded into a dark grey storm. Still, the curiosity I remembered from before remained present.

When she walked in looking the way women dreamed of looking in that little black dress, my eyes clung to her like honey. She'd always been destined to become the queen.

And suddenly, I felt like nothing more than a worker bee, infertile, destined for little more than creating wax cells and filling them with pollen.

I sat alone at my table. She sat beside me on the extra-long bench bracketed to the wall. It allowed me a direct view of her escort across the way. Chardonnay swirled in its glass while I waited for things to make sense and justice to right itself before my very eyes.

She leaned down, offering a polite kiss on each side of his face. He aimed his jaw in her direction, entitled. She obliged him, nodding softly, then took her seat.

The individual tables were designed for the patrons to sit across from one another, but he seemed too needy, the distance too far. I watched as he pulled his chair around the edge of their table, closer to her, then retake his seat.

Her shoulders tightened at his intrusion. I don't think he noticed. I did.

A soft smile proffered from the corner of her lips, although I saw as she pushed against the back of the bench, her body attempting to match his proximity with distance.

I reached down and lifted the glass to my chapped lips. It was time to go and reapply my lipstick, but my legs refused to move. My eyes remained steadfast on their table. She fascinated me.

He ran a hand through his hair, then brought it down and brushed the length of her arm as she gazed at the list of wines. His hand jerked back, catching me by surprise. His body trembled as though she were made of ice.

The tightening in his jaw battled with the hope in his blue irises as he leaned forward, closer.

"I'm glad you could make it. I wasn't sure you would," he said to her, reaching for an untouched glass of water.

She looked up, almost curious, in control. And remained silent.

He continued to speak.

"So, I think it's important we talk about what's been happening then. I need to be sure you understand where I'm comin' from."

His voice carried loud enough that I could hear him as if I were a guest at their table.

She smiled, pretending to understand, and relaying false support. When she looked away, the glaze in her eyes told me the truth. She didn't care.

He had to see it too, but he didn't care either.

Still, she did not speak.

His hand moved possessively to her thigh, before moving his face and chest even closer. She leaned back ever so slightly. The rise and fall in her belly offered the only sign of her growing anxiety. Everything else remained statuesque. Her gaze across their distance, steady and aware, told me she stood ready and prepared for battle.

*Damn, she's good.*

He continued talking as the waiter brought her a flute filled with liquid gold. "A complimentary gift from the manager," the waiter said.

She gave him a small smile—a gift. "Thank you," she said softly. Not a trace of surprise registered across her face.

The man stared hard at the glass while the waiter left them again.

The champagne bubbled in front of her, untouched. He raised the Old Fashioned at his fingertips up to his maw, draining more than half of it with one swift glug before slamming it back down.

The glass clanged against the resting silverware, sounding like a siren...warning her.

She blinked—one, two, three times—pretending to pay attention as he once again began speaking.

This time I stopped listening and possessively swirled my lemon and garlic linguini around the tip of my fork. I brought it to my lips as he reached across the distance, taking the hand resting on her lap and raising it atop the table.

Her fingers flinched beneath his. His palm pressed down, soothing her.

I watched her leave it in place, looking trapped. Compliant.

“I suppose last night was nothing more than a misunderstanding,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve come to understand that now, haven’t ya? I see it in your eyes. Besides, I keep telling everyone how amazing you are. They don’t believe me, and I’m like, ‘You gotta meet her. She’s like a dream.’ I talk about you so much they insist I must be crazy, ey.”

She nodded. The motion looked so subtle he missed it. She agreed—he was crazy. I thought so too.

This time I smiled as the waiter topped off my Pellegrino, then watched as he returned to their table to take their order.

“Good evening, my name is John,” he said to them. “I’ll be your server. May I start you off with an appetizer? We have an excellent grilled calamari.”

Waiter John’s eyes sunk into the storm clouds brewing in hers. I don’t blame him. It appears to be her superpower. She’s rendered all of the men dumb.

Her lips pursed with thought. “If only you sold *cachapas*.”

“Excuse me?” the waiter’s eyebrows furrowed, and I swallowed a chuckle.

I think she did that on purpose.

“So, it’s the newest thing in dining. Popping up on all the menus,” she said, recalibrating her false identity.

I saw the effort. So did they, but they were too lost in her beauty to know better. I could feel her fire. The flame didn’t come from here. If anyone was paying attention they could see she was an outsider, not a traditional Minnesota native—not anymore.

The man looked uncomfortable with Karina's performance. He cleared his throat.

"That's...different," he said. "I didn't know you—"

"The grilled calamari sounds nice," she interrupted. Her voice sounded confident, but her hands shuffled in her lap.

The waiter nodded and smiled before disappearing from sight.

The man turned to face her straight on.

His voice rose in perfect sync with a rounded chest full of air, describing how he knew what she was thinking and that he was the only one who could really understand how she felt. Then his voice dropped.

It was too low now. I couldn't hear him. I peeled a piece of my Italian loaf and dipped it into a small dish of olive oil. My muscles tensed in the silence, and I allowed myself to lean forward, watching her even closer.

Whatever he said must have been funny. Her empty laugh escaped from their table and traveled through the air, landing like a butterfly on my napkin. I imagined the delicate creature, then tilted my head in their direction again just as she glanced down at her diamond bezel watch.

"I think you must have misunderstood what I meant yesterday," she said. Each word carried the pointed tip of a pencil.

He scooted his chair closer...again.

This time his eyebrows lowered in tandem with the curl of his upper lip. I knew this face. It was a precursor, the tease before the full-blown snarl.

"Look, don't try to deny what you meant before," he said, and for a moment, I think he's spoken to me. "You and I both know you've made...." He trailed off and sighed, as though the



weight of his empty admonishment tired him. “I don’t want to call it a mistake, but I mean, if you really think about it—”

“So... I’m not trying to defend myself,” she said quietly, interrupting him again. Her eyes darted across the room. “I’ve already agreed, ya’ know. Like I said before, I recognize my pattern, the areas where I am culpable. It’s not a point of contention, then.”

“Right, right,” he replied, leaning back in his chair, satisfied. “You do have a way with words, don’t ya?”

She took a deep inhale but didn’t say another word.

I reached over and took a large drink of water, thirsty.

He returned his hand to hers, “I agree with that. Let’s not discuss this anymore. You’ve admitted your mistakes. That’s what I like about you. And that’s why I’ve chosen to be generous and understanding. You know, given your...” He paused to consider his words. “Patterns.”

They sat in silence for a full three seconds before the toe of her sleek black stiletto tapped on the floor, offering a flawless view of a bright red, lacquered sole.

“However, at the same time—,” she began.

I smiled. *She wasn’t one to give up.*

“Now, now,” he interrupted, his free hand squeezing her thigh. “Let’s not waste any more time and energy with excuses.”

He lifted the Old Fashioned and swallowed all that remained of the bourbon. The curl of his lip summarized everything she needed to know.

When he finally excused himself and rose to use the facilities, Karina relaxed. Her shoulders slackened as her gaze moved back to her watch. It would only be a few minutes before he returned. Then the show must go on.

The waiter returned with a platter and placed it in the center of their table. He looked around, then leaned low and whispered something in her ear.

The ocean's aroma of the squid dominated the table, overtaking my own designer perfume.

Karina swallowed her tension, then raised the crystal flute to her lips. I could almost see the whisper of hope in her eyes, wishing the champagne could help loosen her senses.

If she had made such a wish, it wasn't working. Her gaze remained affixed ahead in the direction where he'd disappeared.

She took a second sip, this time water.

Her dress rose higher on her legs when she reached for the water glass. She unrolled her cloth napkin and spread it across them, hiding the bruises imprinted on the white canvas of her thigh.

He returned on cue, glanced down at her new covering, and blinked.

"I hope you didn't get too lonely," he said with a shrug and a forced smile. His eyes moved back down to the napkin. Storm clouds gathered, matching hers.

She watched his chest rise and fall as he settled back into his seat.

"I really love this restaurant," she said. "The service. The food. It's excellent. I love it all."

Liar.

Grabbing the naked fork, she examined each of the tines. The tip of her finger tapped along the top of them individually.

"It's just great to see this more relaxed side of you," he said.

Relaxed. I wondered how he'd come to select that word. I didn't see any sign of relaxation.

"I think it's a natural transition as we grow closer," she lied—again.

He didn't care.

His hands remained in his lap this time, but they didn't remain there long. Raising one up, he snapped his fingers at the waiter, who swooped in like a drone and took his order for another drink.

I sucked in a gasp at the rudeness of his gesture. Then I understood it for what it was.

His hands were fighting against the energy to reach out and touch her again.

Silence swept by as they each ate a few bites of calamari in silence.

She stared out, lost in her thoughts. He stared at her.

*Time was up. I couldn't wait any longer.*

I slid down the bench closer to her. Our fingers nearly touched, and it was the first time she saw me. Noticed me. Together our eyes looked across her table at him. Something had to be done. Men like him were inevitable to the demise of our strength. I offered her a soft sigh. A gift. Then rose to use the facilities, but not before looking him over one last time, warning him with the pointed spear of my stare.

He ignored me, but his posture straightened. His fingertips joined together, creating a tent with his hands. Together those hands moved from the table to the tip of his nose, his confidence rising. Despite walking away, I still heard the next words leave his mouth.

"You look amazing in that dress. I don't think I can make it through an entire three-course meal when you're dressed like that. Did you really expect me to?"

I stopped, concerned, and looked over my shoulder. Her expression went blank. I pretended to look for something I might have dropped.

“Do you want to leave?” she asked, resting her fork beside the small plate.

He didn’t answer right away.

“Let’s stay a little longer,” he said, resigned. “But I’ll make a deal with you. How about we jump straight to dessert?”

She nodded, but it was obvious to anyone watching she didn’t believe an actual deal had been struck.

When I returned from the powder room with a fresh application of pearl pink lipstick, a glass of champagne similar to hers rested alone on my table.

I looked around for the waiter before retaking my seat and spotted him watching me from across the room.

He ignored the man’s second attempt to snap his fingers and summon assistance and instead walked over to me and refilled my water glass.

“Thank you for the champagne,” I said, wondering how he knew what I craved.

“Can I get you anything else?” he asked before glancing back over his shoulder.

His eyes followed mine to their table.

I hadn’t meant to be so obvious, but subtlety had never been my strength.

When he returned to look at me and grinned, I shook my head.

“Just the check,” I said quietly.

“She sure is beautiful, isn’t she,” he said. A statement, not a question.

My eyes widened.

“It’s okay to stare,” he said. “Everyone back in the kitchen’s been sneaking glances and marveling at her since she walked in.”

I smiled. I liked being within his trust.

“So how do you two do it?” he asked.

I held my breath and swallowed. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The snapping turtle sitting with her may be a fool, miss. But I, surely, am not.”

I grinned at his reference. “No, sir,” I agreed. You definitely are not. But some secrets are never meant to be shared.”

#### IV.

El Cuco required patience to infiltrate the inner workings of the Minneapolis crime family. Patience had never come easy for him, but bloodthirst had never beckoned with such delectability.

Edward J. Lewis thought he’d been so smart when he traveled as far as Venezuela on his private jet to conduct his extracurricular activities. El Cuco thought otherwise. The American man had tainted his motherland.

In other circumstances, Edward, a hellhound, might not have risen to the top of his priority list, but Karina, an innocent child, did.

Mistakenly entering a hotel room in a building his cartel controlled, he stumbled firsthand on the nightmare the five-year-old girl endured at the hands of her American kidnapper. His instinct was to kill the man. Venezuela didn’t offer an American businessman any protections. The two countries were deeply at odds, and another missing American in the Venezuelan jungle wouldn’t even make the newspapers. But he’d always believed in justice, and justice belonged to the child.

Once El Cuco grabbed the girl—saved her—he had no way of returning her to America. He feared trusting her safety in the hands of the government. Hers or his. The Venezuelan government had already shown him what happened to those who put their fate in its hands. By the time the child was safe, Lewis had managed to escape, and he didn't trust that the predator wouldn't stalk his prey and silence her in America. The girl was only a child, and those who were supposed to protect her had already proven they couldn't honor their responsibilities.

It was then, in the middle of the night, while she slept curled up against him like a kitten, he made his choice. It would require patience, but he would keep the little girl for himself and offer her an opportunity for revenge once she was old enough to claim it.

And he did.

Some tried to claim he maliciously kidnapped the white-haired child, envious of the snow her pallor brought to the jungle. Still, his reputation for brutality and the capabilities he used to keep things under his control kept the local's surmising at bay.

Only the girl saw a gentle side to him. A father. He named her, giving her his last name. Karina Montoya. And she grew up strong and determined.

Year after year, Karina grew older, stronger, and she and El Cuco formulated their plan as more and more information about Edward J. Lewis and his dubious activities in America, in Minnesota, rolled in from associated groups.

Lewis never returned to Venezuela following Karina's capture. El Cuco's reach spread wide within the country, and the man didn't dare risk the crime lord's wrath. It left Karina and her mentor with the time and space to plan their revenge accordingly.

And so, they did.

Karina hadn't told me about the waiter's involvement. She always liked keeping a trick up her sleeve. I'd already come to expect them from her, but still, somehow, she continued to surprise me. As a trickster, she maintained a semblance of control.

Even though the waiter seemed to know the details of the operation, he remained surprised at how easily we could blend in. We came across like complete strangers, even as I studied her and her target. I knew a restaurant full of patrons would think it was basic admiration. Just one plain, tired older woman admiring a bright, shiny star. But Karina and I wanted them to think that. Especially as we enacted our plan. She'd spent eighteen years planning her revenge. I spent those years mourning a baby sister, stolen from a park, and disappeared from her family forever.

Except it wasn't forever. Three months ago, Karina found me and told me her story. Her accent and mannerisms were almost perfect, as though she'd never really left Minneapolis. But she had. And now we would make the man responsible pay, beginning with the loss of his own precious and pompous son.

For weeks Karina endured the violent temper and raging insecurities of Edward's firstborn, ensuring she could get close enough and circumvent a natural paranoia that came with growing up in the home of a sadist with many secrets to protect. I knew she could do it. An innocent little girl disappeared from our home when she was only five years old. A strong, proud Wayuu warrior returned home eighteen years later. She'd told me all about the origin of the Venezuelan natives. Despite my heartbreak, I was grateful she'd survived and been protected.

With our parents now gone, dead from despair, I was glad she had a semblance of identity and belonging, even if she borrowed it from somewhere else.

Now the time had come to put our plan in place. And it all began with Edward's son.

When I rose from my table earlier, our fingers nearly touching, it only took a slip of the hand. It was all she needed. Her resolve slipped around her like lingerie. Ready. We both were.

“It’s not your secrets I’m interested in,” the waiter said in response to my statement, “but your strategy. I must ensure you and I are far away from the moment of impact.”

I sipped the celebratory champagne and signed the check before rising to my feet. “It’s time. We are in motion,” I said under my breath as the pompous and familiar voice filled the small space.

“Excuse me, waiter? So, what does it take to get a little service then?”

The waiter and I both looked over at the man’s reddening face. I was glad to know him only as Edward’s son. I didn’t want to give his existence any validity with an actual name.

“Another Old Fashioned, sir?” The waiter asked, entirely unphased, nodding at my departure.

“Showtime,” I muttered and moved ahead to take my leave.

“Yeah, that would be nice, sometime today, I suppose,” he said. “And a crème brûlée for the lady.”

“Of course, sir,” the waiter said generously, reaching for Karina’s champagne flute as she raised the empty glass in his direction.

Another sleight of hand, one that allowed her to deliver the tiny deadly vial of flavorless liquid potassium into the waiter’s ready palm.

The revenge had to be hers, from her hand. Bearing witness had been my way of protecting her in case things went south and somehow she was searched or frisked. The son could be paranoid about these things. Karina had thought of everything.



By delivering the dose to the table, she and I were in this together. Sisterhood existed to deliver the softest landings after a great fall but could also act as the necessary force when it was time to heave forward and push. I wanted her to feel my commitment from its deepest depths. We would exact our revenge—together.

“I’ll be right back with both,” the waiter said curtly. My insides warmed, knowing he wouldn’t fail to do his part with the next Old Fashioned.

Karina and I exchanged one last brief look as I reached the exit.

I smiled at her with my eyes, and she returned the gesture with a slight nod. We both relished the justice that would happen next.

The bourbon would be his last. The potassium would mimic a heart attack.

The war on Edward J. Lewis launched into effect beginning with the death of his son.

El Cuco had prepared Karina well. He delivered her home and taught her the art of patience. We might have lost eighteen years, but thanks to the kindness and bravery of strangers, she and I had a lifetime ahead of us. And we would make them pay for what they had done.

Karina finished her champagne, liquid gold, we called it and answered the first call to arms to exact her revenge.

Stepping out of the darkened space, I nearly laughed at the bite of her trailing words.

“Like I said,” her voice sang, “I really love this restaurant, this place, everything. And tonight, I will show you just how much it all means to me.”