

Awe Stuck

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January 2026 – Des Moines

Some women had an orgasm when they saw one for the first time. Ever since I learned that, I've had to tamp down my already-heightened expectations while making our plans. Things like that just don't happen to me, nope, not anymore. I keep pushing the trip forward anyway: book a hotel, map it out, and get excited—but not too excited.

As usual, Rafael researches the details. "Do you think it's a good idea? The news says the traffic is going to be bumper to bumper." With that, a vision of our toddler, Fiona, screaming while **Miss Rachel** plays on repeat in a traffic jam, kills my orgasm dreams.

"Why do you always have to find all the problems?"

He rubs his forehead. "We can still go..."

I know he's right, but these days I fight for fun on principle. After they go to bed, I cancel everything and immediately do an online search for the "next total solar eclipse." It's Jan. 26, 2027, this time next year. I click on the map and zoom in on the zone of totality—the part of the Earth where the moon will block the sun. Minutes of darkness incite behaviors and experiences in the natural world, which usually occur at night.

I gasp. Smack dab in the middle of the highlighted zone is the city where we fell in love and did our fair share of wild things in the night. I run to Fifi's bedroom where he fell asleep with her. At the foot of the bed, I whisper, "Honey, I need to show you something." Nothing. He's open-mouthed snoring. I go back to my laptop and shut it. Best not to fantasize about our past and future lives.

August 2015

To wait for the next eclipse, delaying satisfaction, is so not me. Single and childless, I spontaneously bought a one-way ticket to Spain after graduating with my teaching degree. I thought I was hot shit with my high ponytail and a new credit card when I showed up at the Madrid-Barajas airport, not knowing where I was going to stay on the first night.

I hopped on a train to Madrid, and some teenage boys whispered, "**china**" and "**guapa**," to each other. They weren't brave enough to hit on a grown-ass woman yet, but leered enough to get under my skin. Rolling my eyes, I sat a couple of rows behind them and looked across the aisle to where another "**chino**" was peering at me. **Oh,*

*what now?**

In perfect deadpan, he asked “Are you **china** or **japonesa**?” He couldn’t sustain it, and I saw a little smirk post-delivery.

“Ha!” I replied. “Why do they know only two types of Asians? It’s the same in every non-Asian country.”

“Must be the Hollywood movies, all blondies and boobies, **Karate Kid** and Jackie Chan.” He chuckled.

I liked him. “Yeah, not their fault. It’s all they’re fed, but I wish they knew something about Filipinos. The Spanish were all up in our business for 300 years.”

“Preach! I’m Filipino too—actually, half. My mum is Irish. Where you headed?”

“I don’t know yet.” I pointed to my guidebook.

“You should come to this rad hostel where I’m meeting my **compadres**.” Damn, that was quick—the gumption of a confident man.

My left leg started to bounce. I didn’t want to hang with English speakers. I came here to live my best foreign life, but this would make it easier tonight. I glimpsed the outline of a long dimple in his right cheek. He was holding the book **As the Bell Tolls** on top of his Scottish hiking kilt. I hope he’s not a douchebag.

He interrupted my not-so-hidden once-over. “Hey, player. Do you need to see my ID? I’m legit.” He pulled it out of his book. “I go by Rafa.”

Playing along, I looked at him and then back down at the ID: Rafael Villanueva, 5'11", black hair, blue eyes, California. “I’m Josie. I’ll think about it.”

He looked pleased and placed it back in his book. He would be just fine whether I came or not—this American conquistador. I pretend-read my guidebook, even though I knew for damn sure that I’d be following him that night. It was the first time that I had traveled alone.

At the hostel, he spoke fluent Spanish with the staff. Around Rafa, I learned that blue eyes and command of a language held great powers. I moved closer to him, so they’d know we came together.

The outdoor kitchen and patio could've been the setting of any rom-com: warm red walls, candle-lit lamps, magenta bougainvillea vines. I would've looked out of place if not for my sister's unsolicited pre-departure luggage check, taking everything practical out and trying to throw in tighter and trendier outfits. I allowed this shoulder-less top, which at least had some character and breathing room. Rafa had changed, too. The kilt was gone, replaced with linen pants and a black T-shirt revealing a mandarin-sized disco ball tattoo on the back of his forearm.

He looked at ease, weaving in and out of conversations and making dinner with his friends, who were not American but Mexican and Irish. When I was in his orbit, he'd hover noticeably close with his hand-rolled joint, submerging me in his haze of smoke and attention. "Ever tried hashish and tobacco?"

"No, but I'd like to." I needed an extra something to calm my nerves, so I put down my lit cigarette and took a long drag of his. Within minutes, we were high together, crying-laughing, and calling each other **chino**. I was toast. No chance against him. The rest of the night, I watched him in slow motion, licking the edge of rolling papers as he made his next cigarette. He smelled like lavender and vanilla. What man smells like this?

He eyeballed me back. "Want to take a walk, **guapa**?"

We sauntered away from the party, passed my room, and into his. Once the door was shut, we lunged at each other. Sex on a bunk bed seemed inevitable, our clothes coming off with emergency-level urgency, but I pushed him away at the last possible moment.

With concerned eyebrows, he begged, "What'd I do?"

The drugs must've been wearing off because I confessed, "I'm not ready."

His body stayed put, but he pulled my face in. He smashed my nose with his and whispered into my mouth, "I'll wait for you."

That's really all it took. I knew what kind of man he was. The suspense of one night lying next to him was enough. When we woke up the next day, I let him have all of me.

By the end of the month, we were a unit. We scored English teaching jobs and rented a room in an apartment owned by two Spanish brothers, Carlos and Alejandro, in the

Malasaña neighborhood. You'd think that sharing space with a couple of dudes would kill our romance, but it just made our urges to be together that much stronger. Our favorite spot was the American café next door, which had a booth in the back where we'd feel each other up whenever the server left the room.

We were in our 20s, but everything we did had a touch of juvenile delinquency. Without a car, I used to ride on his bike rack to the center of town with my feet dangling off the sides. In Retiro Park, we'd sing Smashing Pumpkins songs at the top of our lungs with Carlos on guitar while drinking Mahou beer from plastic cups. On another date, he dared me to run through a line of sprinklers without getting wet and videotaped me dodging the alternating sprays of water. Back in the day, fun was the biggest turn-on.

October 2026 – Des Moines

Every time Rafa asks me if something is a “good idea,” I want to punch a hole in the wall. What happened to the guy who used to draw tattoos of his favorite foods on my chest so that he could pretend to eat them off my body? It was a hamburger in the valley of my cleavage one day and French fries the next.

His good ideas now only concern wills and mortgages. Listening to him, I crave a stiff drink, but I gave that up years ago. Nowhere to go, nothing to drink, and no man to seduce. I don’t mind getting older physically, but losing my youthfulness is an unexpected surrender.

When the letter comes in the mail, it looks like a Halloween card. The envelope is black with a full moon and sun on the back. *Huh.* I open it and see his unmistakable handwriting, the largest words being “I,” “me,” and his signature at the bottom. “Jojo, I still love you. I’m sorry that I hurt you. Will you meet me under the shadow of the moon? I’ll be home for Thanksgiving and hope to see you there. Yours, Owen”

Shit. Why is he messing with my life again? My reply: “Owen, thanks for your apology. You hurt me, but I’ve moved on. Maybe I’ll see you at home. Best, Josie.” I don’t owe him anything.

I don’t tell Rafa about the letter because he doesn’t need the stress. He hates my ex, the closeted serial cheater. I need to keep him calm so he’ll ask for vacation time off work. I’d do anything to get to the eclipse at this point.

November 2026

We still haven't bought flights, and I'm drowning in grading and Thanksgiving preparations. I'll fucking lose it if my sister asks me what I'm bringing again. She gets ultra-competitive during the holidays.

Tonight, Owen planned a Friendsgiving at our local pub, which will give me the chance to tell him to back off to his face. Rafa's staying home with Fifi, still ignorant of Owen's visit. No need for a bar fight again.

On my way out, Rafa holds up my jacket so I can put my arms in. He does this for me, our daughter, our moms. The slight gesture reminds me he's still in there, my gentle, quirky boyfriend. Our daily lives entomb us, but we're here, breathing under the weight of parenthood and too much work.

The disappointment of adulthood seeps up into my eyelids. "Can we have an adventure soon, **chino**? It doesn't have to be Madrid. Just anywhere with you." My voice cracks.

He scans my face, reading wrinkled lines. "I'll buy the flights tonight."

I pull him in and press my nose to his. "I'll wait for you."

Jan. 26, 2027

I sit holding Fifi in my lap. I came all this way to be in awe of this head of hair that I see every day. We made it with our cells, yet they keep growing of their own volition. Part me, part him, mostly thousands of ancestors who came before us.

The sky darkens. People start cheering, hollering, smiling, and crying. Spanish birds are squawking. They're coming down to roost from the sky, tricked into night. Fifi and I are like them. It's time to settle in. Rafa grabs my hand.

And, just like that, total alignment happens. The sun and moon click into place, and the sun's crown is glowing at the edges. Stillness begets wonder.

Then it goes.

The sky lightens, and birds start singing. It's a new day.