



FRESH FRUIT

Conjugal Hyperglycemia

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I CAN'T RECALL HOW THE ARGUMENT BEGAN. IT WAS ONE OF THOSE MARITAL spats that started as nothing and became something it never should've been. Sweet grapes unexpectedly crushed, boiled, and barreled until they were so acidic they could cut tongues.

We were in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the weekend. My husband had just returned from Army deployment in Afghanistan. Our work schedules had kept us from being able to take a romantic vacation to celebrate his homecoming, so this was meant to be just that. We nearly botched it up with a squabble that started on one of the four corners of Santa Fe Plaza. Understand, it wasn't a simple *you say tomay-to, I say tomah-to* disagreement. It'd been simmering for months.

We'd been separated while he was serving. Yes, geographically, but it was more than that. When the military satellite was working well enough to Skype, we kept the conversations light. Funny stories from our respective lives; video feeds of our dog Gilly chasing his tail; "missing you" gush-fests and the like. Every minute was legit, mind you. No fabrications. Merely selective exclusion of the harder stuff: my swollen knee that made it nearly impossible for me to walk without sobbing; working 9-hour days at my desk to finish my third novel; the leak in the roof over the flat-screen TV; the flooded backyard threatening to invade our living room; the creepy new neighbor who liked to come out on the porch and watch me pull weeds in my rose garden...I didn't want him worrying about me. These things were trivial in comparison to his job performing surgeries in 110°F heat on IED-wounded soldiers. No, no, I wanted his head in *his* game. So I did what any good wife would do. I put on lipstick and grinned for the laptop camera. In his own way, he did the same, cracking jokes about his Spartan tent and freeze-dried mystery meat MREs.

Since his return, we'd both continued in our best, benevolent behavior. I was thankful he'd been kept safe in a combat zone. He was thankful that I'd been safe living alone in Texas. We were thankful for friends who buoyed us, sent care packages, loving cards, notes of encouragement, prayers, and so much more; to family who let me come home to Virginia when I felt homesick and left me alone to write when I wasn't. All wanted to help eliminate every ounce of stress. Smile-smile-smile, cheer-cheer-cheer. And don't get us wrong, we were and are entirely, eternally *grateful* to everyone and each other. The generous support was immense and never to be taken for granted.

But here's the thing: When you've been with your spouse 18 years, it ain't all sugar. In fact, I'd argue it *can't* all be sugar. That'd put a person in a diabetic marriage coma. Looking back at us standing on the idyllic streets of Santa Fe while couples strolled by with cinnamon churros and wooden flutists played serene melodies, our reality was all too clear: conjugal hyperglycemia.

Consequently, what started as a no-big-thing disagreement, escalated to Pompeii ferocity. So we did what you do when ready to erupt but unwilling to cause a public scene. Shop. Preferably at a high volume establishment like a department store. This allowed for the under-the-breath-I'm-gonna-tell-you-what's-what parlay while patrons milled around unaware. Unfortunately for us, there were no department stores in downtown Santa Fe. We took what we could get: a one-room independent business where we could ignore each other on the premise of not wanting to disturb the fine proprietors with a display of white trash domestic dispute.

It was called Oleaceae. A name I couldn't pronounce if I tried but through the shop window, the interior looked classy, bright, and boasted free samples. People slowly ambled around the room, turning silver spigots and sipping from thimble-sized paper cups. They beamed with satisfaction after each swallow. I hadn't a clue what was within the dispensers. Truth be told, I thought it might be a posh liquor store, and oh joy, what timing!

I'm a woman who loves epicurean delights and all things in mini. Seeking selfish self-soothing, I tromped, with husband following, into Oleaceae, which turned out to be an Italian balsamic vinegar boutique.

The irony was not lost when the kind salesman approached and asked, "Would you like to try the Ancho chili vinegar, it's got a bite."

He laughed—my husband—audibly and not at all in a holly-jolly way.

I took the cup and downed it. One gulp. No facial response, even as it stung my throat and pin-wheeled through my gut like a firecracker. My message: *Don't mess with me, love of my life. I may have been a sweet grape, but I've been soured.*

Despite my initial reasons for chugging the stuff, the Ancho Balsamic was surprisingly good. Probably better when consumed in a more moderate manner, but undeniably delicious even when taken in shot form. My interest was piqued and so was my husband's. We wound through the aisles of vinegars—dark to white, Vermont maple and cocoa to champagne mimosa. Each so unique and pungent in flavor that I forgot my ire. Lips tingling on the taste of lavender balsamic, I called to my husband, "Taste this—it's amazzzzing."

I poured his paper thimble cup and when he drank, his eyes lit up. "Lavender? That's good." He pointed across the room, "You have to try the café espresso."

"There's café espresso *vinegar*?"

He nodded and smiled. The first genuine smile in the last hour. "Georgia peach and lemonade, too."

"No—where? Show me."

He took my hand in his, neither one trembling with anger anymore. I let him lead me to the tasting. Our lips shone tart with balsamic, and I smiled at him through the bite. It was the first time it hadn't taken effort or prudence or thought. It was instinctual. But not a reflex of what we all assume a smile to be—overt joy, rousing pleasure, giddy anticipation. None of those. It was a far quieter a thing: a contentedness in creating a new memory with my husband and finally getting on with our real lives together.

Seeing our change of demeanor (stern curmudgeons now cheerful), the manager approached and explained the revered tradition of balsamic making. The production process was told with near fairytale enthusiasm.

White Trebbiano grapes were harvested from the Italian vineyards, squashed through a sieve, and simmered for 24 hours. The resulting liquid was the *mosto*, the “must” syrup, which must be left to ferment in the open before being barreled in quality mulberry, chestnut, oak, or cherry wood. Like fine wines, balsamics acquire characteristics from the aging containers. A connoisseur wouldn't barrel a white balsamic in chestnut or it would be tinted brownish red. Similarly, a savory chili vinegar wouldn't be barreled in cherry, which lends a lingering sweetness. No matter the infusion of flavor, all balsamics were aged for a minimum of 12 to 18 years.

“The recipes are not to be trifled with,” the manager warned us.

Like a magic spell, I thought. A love potion.

BY THIS POINT, ALL THE SALESPeOPLE HAD COME ROUND TO LISTEN.

“I buy all our products in Modena, Italy,” he said.

“We honeymooned in Italy,” I chirped and was submerged in memories.

My husband and I had been younger then, less forgiving of each other's peccadillos and more apt to wild bursts of impassioned rage. Truthfully, I don't long for those days. I cherish how we've mellowed over the years; been crushed by some circumstances, boiled by struggle, fermented together, and barreled. We've taken on similar tasting notes, similar features of mind and spirit. We pair well like the vinegar offerings we sampled: lemongrass and mint, honey and ginger, blackberry roasted pepper, wild blueberry and basil.

“Next vacation, we go to Modena?” My husband winked.

I raised my paper cup to him. “Next vacation.”

And just like that, the contentious sparks were doused—not by sweet smothering or watery ignorance but by vinegar. We bought a bottle to take home. I use it at least once a week to keep things balanced just right. ✨

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