

Denise

By Gregorio Tafoya

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** Stories about the trials of single motherhood are heavily charted territory when it comes to fiction—both short and long. In fact, we received four such submissions for this issue. But the one we took was ‘Denise’. A comfortably paced, smoothly written portrait of a woman of colour who is determined to make a life on her own terms—at least when it comes to men. As you might expect, things don’t always go as planned. Characters are vividly modeled, the easygoing prose is likable but sharp and the voice, sometimes funny, sometimes arch, strikes a perfect balance.*

Denise made up pasts while she cleaned teeth. Checkered herself with intrigue and worldliness, as she scraped tartar and water picked molars. It had started, when an attractive, but terribly obnoxious, twenty some year old male waltzed into Dr. Galbreath’s after three years of “funneling through Europe,” and proceeded to not so elegantly hit on her while she sucked saliva out of his mouth with her periodontal instruments.

She wasn’t completely turned off by his floppy gums, borderline gingivitis, and the slight, off-white discoloration on his upper lip, but more by how easy he thought she was gonna be. Like here is this local woman, for his intents and purposes sex-starved and scrubby, and here comes me: young, hip homecoming king who’s accustomed to bedding older, trysty European women.

So, when the young man proffered an unsolicited, “yeah, Madrid gets so rainy in the winter,” as she dabbed at his prominent chin, “but you wouldn’t know nothing about that huh, sunshine,” Denise couldn’t take it any longer and told him:

“Actually I don’t mind the rain, when I lived in Seattle, it was my favorite part. You know, how the city smells afterwards.”

That seemed to put a damper on his fantasy of her, but he did manage to ask, between her sucking more saliva out of him, “What part?” and later, “For how long?”

Where she came up with “Federal Way,” and then, “for six years,” Denise couldn’t say, but six sounded like a strong number—giving her age and stability— and “Federal Way” was maybe the name of a bank off of Eubank, a street Denise traveled on during her short commute to work.

Dr. Galbreath told the swaggering traveler that he might consider getting his wisdom teeth pulled, and that, at the very least, he should come back to get his cleaning finished, because “your tartar was too thick to take care of in one sitting.”

When Dr. Galbreath left, the kid—cause that’s really what he was, his birth year dangerously close to the year Denise started high school—acted like his three-years of built-up tartar was all just some desperate, libidinous façade Denise was using as an excuse to see him again.

“Well thanks for spending so much time on me,” he said sarcastically, and Denise asked if he worked and when would be a good time next week to schedule the rest of his cleaning.

“What’s a good time for you?” he said painstakingly flirtatious.

“Weee,” Denise said, “have an opening at the same time next week, if that works.”

“Okay Denise,” he said, make-cute reading her nameplate by her terminal, “I’ll see you next week.” His tone was all, you-crazy-lady-I-bet-you-can’t-wait.

“Yup,” Denise said, her eyes not leaving her computer monitor, like the root canal scheduled at two required her immediate attention.

When Ron—a strange name for a male in his generation, or strange to Denise because he struck her more as a Ronnie—came back to “fine tooth” his mouth, he asked her more questions about herself, like if he’d read somewhere that this was a better way to pick-up women than poorly humble-bragging about your travels.

“So did you go to hygienist school in Seattle?” he asked, shrugging on “hygienist school,” like he just coined the term.

“No,” Denise said out loud, “actually I went to Alberta for school. In Canada,” she finished smugly, while also not having any idea how her lie would hold up under any interested scrutiny.

“Wow,” he gaggled under her, “I’ve heard dope things about Canada. Do you like know how they’re one of two countries to completely legalize marijuana?” At least Denise thought that’s what he said, because she was scaling his disgusting mouth pretty aggressively.

“Yes, I always thought they’d be on the cutting edge of that,” Denise said matter-of-factly.

The rest of the short cleaning went like that, he gargled up questions from under her and she answered them to the best of her creative ability.

When it was through, and it was clear he was gonna ask for her phone number, Denise racked her brain to come up with a way of including her factual children into her fictional past. But he beat her to the next line, stepping a little bit closer to her and saying:

“So is there like a floppy gum hotline I could call?”

Which, if Denise was being objective, was not a bad line at all, in fact it made her smile for the first time, but also regretfully smile because that line was wasted on this guy. And Denise said, gently:

“No unfortunately, but it’s like I tell my kids, just concentrate on brushing away from the gums and, of course, floss.”

That pretty much put a bow on it. Ron got a cleaning scheduled again in six-months but didn’t make any other overt come-ons towards her. The wisdom teeth didn’t even get brought up.

Denise had never lived any where other than New Mexico. She was born on Indian land north of Santa Fe—Tesuque—and she wasn’t even considered Native American. She went to Pojoaque High School and lettered in volleyball and track and was too bright to fall for the reserved Native boys and bombastic Hispanic ones that chased her.

After high school she was practical: she went to community college for dental hygiene in Santa Fe, lived at home in Tesuque, and worked at CamelRock casino at the buffet. But now, instead of boys flirting with her, she got used to the vacant leers of grown drunk men—especially at the casino.

She'd never dated, not seriously, in high school—nobody at Pojoaque did she deem worthy of committing her feelings towards. In Santa Fe, she saw a string of loser boys who she never really committed to, but it was expected that she at least entertain their advances. One, Nicanor, was a waiter at a surprisingly affordable little restaurant inside a downtown hotel.

Denise didn't know he worked there until their first date, when he took her to Del Charro, his work, and proceeded to leave her stranded at their table for long stretches of time as he chatted up employees and disappeared into the kitchen. Maybe he thought that would impress her.

But really, Nicanor was the sweetest of the Santa Fe boys she met during her two plus years of school there. Once, when a drunken patron of the casino had cornered her in a secluded area of the dining hall and preceded to tell her vulgar things, she had called Nicanor and he was there before her shift was over.

The drunk Indian hadn't touched Denise, but it was demeaning all the same—made more humiliating by that fact that she had let his words get to her. Nicanor was a tiny comfort though. She hugged him in the lobby of the casino, and his tough guy act made her laugh—like he was really gonna track this Indian down and kick his ass. Oh brother.

Occasionally, she let Nicanor make love to her—always on her terms and with his complicity that it wasn't to be taken as a sign of their inseparability. His face killed her afterwards though. He'd look at her, his thick eyebrows craving her approval and needing to be trimmed, while his eyes urgently loved her. She was embarrassed for him—how hopelessly he was in love with her was mortifying.

When she graduated and moved to Albuquerque for her first dental job, he still called her and pretended like she was a big shot too good for him. Sometimes, she would give him the go ahead on driving the forty-five minutes to see her on the weekends.

Her first job was a far step from Dr. Galbreath's in the heights. She worked in a strip mall dental clinic—next door to a Mexican supermarket—off of Central and Atrisco in the Valley. Most of their clients didn't speak English. The ones who did, were South Valley parolees or older, retired white woman, who had lost their dental insurance.

Denise roomed with a local *buque* girl, Alicia, who owned her own house off Lead and was a reclusive, mature-aged student at UNM who had some vague connection to northern New Mexico. Maybe their *tias* had once been friends.

Alicia and Denise grated on each other's nerves for six months, but by that time Denise had saved enough for a proper security deposit and moved out of the crummy house off Lead and got a one-bedroom on the Southwest side, below Coors.

When Denise turned twenty-three, something changed inside of her. It was like she emerged from her hardened cocoon and was now a kowtowing, sentimental young woman. She looked at her new self from every angle, trying to determine what had happened, why all of sudden did she feel this repulsive compulsion to be loved. Maybe even to love.

It was in this state of softened shell that Denise met Tanner, a blonde Midwest transplant stationed at Kirkland Air Force base. Denise told herself he was a novelty—his name, first of all, was hysterically Caucasian that she couldn't imagine introducing him, by that name, to any of her northern New Mexico relatives.

Denise was drinking at a Nob Hill bar, and he'd been buying her drinks and disinterestedly making her laugh. Before closing, he said, with such evident disdain that she couldn't help but cracking up, also she was drunk:

“Wouldn't it be cool to fall in love tonight?”

They hooked up at his house in the heights, but just made out. In the morning, for some unknown reason to appear less prudish, Denise started to scratch an underside of him with two nails, and he woke up to her touch.

“You're going to scar me Denise,” he said. But she didn't—eventually employing her thumb. He just came and then went to brush his teeth.

At some point in their three years together they moved past scratching and Tanner impregnated her twice. After the first time—Denise three months pregnant—did he accompany her to Tesuque to meet her parents.

There was nothing funny about it. She wasn't sure who was more embarrassingly awkward, Tanner or her parents. Tanner didn't even make a pretense of trying the *posole* and tamales her mom had cooked, and her father kept saying Tanner's name like he'd tasted something bitter, “Tan-NUR.”

The idea of marriage was a land mine they all avoided, and Denise tried to assure her parents that *they* were living in antiquity and had no business advising on matters of modern heart.

It wasn't six months after the birth of their second child, their baby boy Daniel, did Denise learn he'd been researching leaving her. They were living together, but he'd been tele-interviewing out of the state and had put his house on the market.

When she confronted him, one night after dinner, about the real-estate agent calling when he was at work, he told her unforgivable things. Mainly unforgivable because they were things not composed in the heat of the moment, but things stewed on, sharpened and edited in dark, vicious places in the mind.

“You think cause you’re hot for Northern New Mexico that makes you beautiful. And you’re so damn self-consuming, you don’t even realize it.” In the course of their yelling, he accused her of, “never actually loving me Denise. You’re incapable of loving another adult.”

Denise mainly cursed at him during this entire episode, and cried, but not in front of him.

Feebly, he told her in the preceding weeks that he was sorry, “for that exchange of words,” and that she and the kids could come with him to Maryland where he had been clandestinely promoted.

But Denise ignored his apology and told him to, “fuck off,” and that if she was incapable of loving another adult than he was insufficiently equipped to be a father and that the kids were staying with her. He didn’t fight her.

He helped her get an apartment off Eubank, and moved their children’s stuff into it, and the only thing that prevented her from scratching his eyes out was the way her daughter asked him, “Daddy fly, but be back?”

Denise had been working irregularly around her pregnancies at the clinic, and though they would have taken her back with open arms, she wanted a clean, fresh beginning.

Dr. Galbreath's wasn't even hiring, but she walked into his carpeted waiting room, one week after Tanner left, and dropped her resume off with the receptionist at the faux marble front office.

Two weeks later she was working their part time and unsuccessfully muffling her cries at night. Amelie, her three-year old, asked her in the mornings "why mommy sad, daddy be back."

The sadness twisted to hate, and then the hate was just wrung out by time and Denise was comforted by that fact that she could recognize herself in the mirror again. She was back to just being Denise.

At thirty-four, Denise was continually mistaken for being in her twenties still—which was both complimentary and infuriating at the same time. She was petite, and supernaturally thin—though she exercised more than ever now—and her skin still smoldered with smooth youth, except around her fingers, where it was clear from her wrinkled webbing that Denise had been through all kinds of hell, and not just the periodontal kind. She'd taken to wearing gloves, even into late April.

The white mothers at Amelie's Montessori school looked at Denise with unconcealed pity, not only because of her single motherhood, but also, because of her appearance and Amelie's age, they assumed Denise had been an irresponsible and poor teen mom. Like she was the poster child they had in mind for their Planned Parenthood donations.

Their looks suggested to Denise a young-and-pretty-can-be-a-motherfucker attitude. At least that's how Denise interpreted their overwrought, passionate inquires into "how she was holding up."

Karen, the mother to Amelie's closest friend Hailey, was the absolute worst. Amelie had let blab to Hailey one time when she was eight that she was secretly not showering in the mornings because the hot water was out. Denise had been getting around to fixing the boiler, but didn't want just any old handyman to walk into their new home.

Karen had taken Denise aside, as they waited for the kids after school, and not gently at all offered her husband to fix "any of those annoying male things that need to get done around a home."

Denise didn't take her up on her offer, but politely said, "thank you Karen, but the hot water was fixed today," lying but also congratulating herself for not telling Karen to go to hell.

"Oh you just keep us in mind for the future sweetie, my Bill has gotten so lazy since he retired, it would do him some good to remember how to fix things."

And for the last two years, every conversation with Karen was a reminder that Bill was at her beck and call. And had she mentioned he was retired, at the ripe old age of 45.

Denise had moved from the apartment Tanner had helped her get after three years—an interval where she had budgeted diligently, once she had been hired full-time at Dr. Galbreath's. Denise was determined to give her children a true home, not a baby

mama's apartment, so she bought a three-bedroom single-story close to the same neighborhood where she had roomed with Alicia. Now that neighborhood had a bougie new title, University Heights, but Denise was still able to get an affordable mortgage before the property value truly shot up.

It had a back and front yard, and they planted a garden in the backyard, and when Daniel turned five he was insistent on installing a waterfall, having seen it somewhere and it sticking in his childhood fascination. Denise eventually acquiesced, but made sure the pool at the bottom could never exceed six inches.

They had a home, and Tanner called once a month, but Denise never talked to him for longer than it took to shuffle the phone from child to child. After a year in the new house, Tanner started to make up excuses to talk to Denise too, things about the kids he was worried about. Telling her to cash the occasional checks he was sending them. She corresponded coldly with him for two months, and one phone call ended with Tanner saying:

“Denise, I miss you.”

She pretended to mishear him and said:

“The kids miss you too,” hoping her tone said they had forgotten all about him.

“Stop it Denise, you heard me. I miss you.”

“No you stop it,” and Denise hung up. But it had been a small vindication for her.

When he called back sooner than usual, and had talked to the kids, Denise was on the verge of suggesting, that if he visited she wouldn't be completely opposed to it, when he said, “Denise I need to tell you something.”

Tanner confessed to having an affair with his hairdresser, basically the whole time they were together in Albuquerque. Denise didn't say anything, just hung up on him. He wasn't apologizing to her she figured, he was relieving this guilty burden for himself.

Denise called him the next day, and cut him off before he could get started:

“I'm getting Amelie a phone, not to use outside of the house, but you are going to pay for it and it is so you can call her directly. I never want to hear your stupid voice again.”

It was the most leveled, mature insult she felt comfortable wasting on him.

All his reckless, arrogant self said was, “I'm sorry for hurting you Denise.”

Even in apology, the prick was acknowledging the power he had wielded over her.

The kids still talked to Tanner, but lately he was calling less and less often.

Denise distracted them with whatever they wanted, and she didn't know how to feel about the fact that they seemed resigned to the fate of never seeing their father again. Not any time soon at least.

Friday's were Denise's off day. After dropping the kids off at school she did her grocery shopping, renewed any of Daniel's allergy medications that needed it, and occasionally bought him new, irregular t-shirts at Fallas, the discount retailer he was adamant about outfitting him. Daniel was always falling in love with places based on their name.

Once, Denise had driven them on a lazy Sunday to the clinic where she had first worked at in Albuquerque, and Daniel wasn't so much interested in her old place of employment, but in the Mexican supermarket next door that had been renamed "El Super."

They had to go inside, and Daniel spent a good thirty minutes squealing in delight over the raw tripe, beef tongue, and menudo at the *carneceria* window. Since then, Denise had to pretend like she got all their groceries at "El Super," and kept spare plastic "El Super" bags around to put her co-op and Wal-Mart purchases in for him to unpack on Friday afternoons.

Amelie was more difficult to please, but she never betrayed her mother's grocer's deception to Daniel. Instead, she dragged them from the Winrock to the Coronado mall on the weekends, and made Daniel and Denise follow her while she shopped, but at a safe distance in case she ran into anyone she knew.

Sometimes, Denise let her see a matinee with a group of white girls from Montessori, or her afterschool Spanish group, but Denise was always careful to inspect the group for XY chromosomes.

Once, Denise had made the mistake of waiting for her right in the lobby of the theater and Amelie had been crushed to find her kid brother and her mother waiting for her as her and her friends giggle emerged from something PG. She hadn't made a big deal about it in public, but pouted in the front seat on the way home.

Amelie cried in her room, and Denise had sat on her bed and tried to apologize but then turned mother on her when she couldn't believe she was bending under her own daughter's whim.

They argued and Denise went with the old stand by, “You aren’t like those other girls,” and truly she had meant it to mean Amelie was prettier, brighter, and overall just special, but Amelie yelled, “I know mom, I’m not white, you don’t trust me, and you think, you think, ughhhhh...I hate you.”

Denise rose and left Amelie’s room, not necessarily angry, and later she almost smiled, thinking about times she, as an almost teenager had had similar spats with her mother. There was a contentment to know Amelie was just a normal pre-pubescent girl.

She had already forgiven Amelie before her somber and beautiful daughter knocked on her bedroom door before bedtime and said, “I brushed and flossed mommy,” a word she hadn’t used since she was seven.

“Good, get to bed Amelie,” Denise said pretending to be stern.

“I’m sorry mommy, I don’t hate you.”

“I know you don’t, but it’s late,” it only being 9:30. Amelie walked into her room, lay on top of the comforter and hugged herself against her mother.

Denise brushed her daughter’s wild chestnut hair, and after a moment, Amelie said:

“He doesn’t love us like you love us.”

Denise didn’t say anything initially, composing herself, and then told her daughter that her father loved her very much, more than she knew, and not to compare her parent’s like that. But it bought Amelie thirty minutes more of screen time, as they watched some forgettable, original E! News programming.

Before ten, in trickled Daniel, wearing his one sleeve wider than the other Fallas special shirt and Avenger's boxers, and he said, "I love you too mommy," climbing into bed with them.

Around noon on Friday's, when Denise had all the week's errands ran, she texted Caleb. Caleb was the result of a drunk, ironic Thursday night perusal of Match.com about six months ago. Denise had filled in her profile with white-zin inspired platitudes, proffered from Pinterest and commandeered with steering sarcasm.

"Fate is made by the bold."

"Don't need the validation."

"Don't regret anything because at one time it was exactly what you wanted."

For the smoking section she wrote, "only fools," and for the children she put, "yes, two lil monsters."

In the morning, erasing the "only fools," part, she reluctantly checked her matches and saw that a square jaw and close crop had messaged her:

"You seem really selfless and grounded."

Caleb was a twenty-seven year old med student at UNM-H, and Denise had only entertained going on an initial date with him to Wild Avocado because truly she wanted to get a look at this guy in person and ask, what in the fuck was he doing on Match.com.

He was on Match.com because "Tinder has changed for the worst, and really it's too superficial," and also, Denise determined, because he was stupid.

“I really need someone who challenges me intellectually,” he said and Denise tried hard not to upchuck her avocado bagel. He wanted to “eradicate diabetes from the ground-up, that means starting with the children,” and the most intellectual thing he did, from what Denise could gather, was Sudoku. But she was pretty sure he pronounced it wrong. Tall, handsome and stupid.

When she determined Caleb maybe wasn't a psychopath, she texted him before their third lunch date, “Lunch my place,” and then her address.

He showed up with a tilted grin, and said, “What a cute neighborhood,” and she took him to her bathroom, the only place the kids didn't make regular appearances, and when it was over she told him he should leave.

“You mean there's no lunch?” he asked, and she thought he was kidding, but then she looked him in the eyes for the first time and saw he was sincere. She shuffled him out of there when he started to kiss her.

She considered putting a stop to it, after one Friday, when they weren't making eye-contact in her bathroom and she already knew she couldn't text him the next Friday because Daniel would be off from school. He decided to blurt out, mid-coitus, and with a pause between every third syllable, “You're such a freaky girl Denise,” like he was some rap star, and not a wanna be pediatrician. And he said it like she needed to hear it, more than he needed to say it.

But she just ignored his texts for two weeks, and then messaged him when she felt certain her hatred for him had been mistaken and was more indifference than anything else.

Denise's mother still kept her apprised of the life of Nicanor Torres—who her mother had always carried a flame for since he had dropped Denise off one night thirteen year's ago and spent an hour watching a *telenovela* with them in the living room.

Nicanor was divorced, still living in Santa Fe, but as a restaurant manager, and had a gorgeous little girl—around Daniel's age—whom Nicanor worshipped. From what Denise gathered, the mother was out of the picture, living in Texas somewhere. Nicanor had turned his beautiful daughter, Gabriela, into a Seahawks fan and a flamenco dancer.

Sometimes, when Denise closed her eyes, she imagined a world where her Daniel and Nicanor's Gabriela would meet and have a torrid, perfectly symmetrical romance. That they would be high school sweethearts and go to college together and then matrimony.

Maybe Denise's mother was the one to remind her of Nicanor, but also maybe Denise liked all the Facebook photos of him and his daughter at CenturyLink, and at flamenco performances, and of Gabriela sitting on the oak bar of the restaurant her daddy managed. Maybe Denise messaged Nicanor weekly, telling him how beautiful his daughter was and how great of a father he was. Maybe Denise did all this under the alias of Nicole Newman.

Nicole Newman lived in Federal Way, Washington, was a rabid Seahawks fan, and was a recent 34-year-old divorcee with two kids.

strikes a perfect balance.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I hate New Mexican authors. Or authors that write about New Mexico. I wanted to write something that I didn't hate. If you are reading this, correct me on my disdain for New Mexican authors. But yes, clearly I am the terrible plaque-stained character in the opening paragraphs. Please forgive me.*

My literary influences are embarrassingly numerous but the one I tried to channel for this piece was Ottessa Moshfegh. What a poor hack job this is. I hope she never gets wind that I dared to mention her as an influence.

BIO: Gregorio Tafoya is an aspiring novelist with an advanced degree in comparative literature from Project Gutenberg. Forever jealous of the creator of *storiesaboutprince.blogspot.com* and wishes to have been the first author to lament, in an author bio, about not writing the play 'Arcadia'. Currently reviews books for *Drizzle Review*.