

A refugee for dinner: It's not in the ministry manual

by [Mary Ann Cejka](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

Fernando did not look like what I thought a refugee should look like. He was fat, for one thing. The beige polyester suit he wore was tight on him, especially around the belly. He reeked of cologne. He had one gold front tooth and around his neck was a matching gold chain. The pendant dangling from the chain appeared to be a phallus.

When we stepped into my house, fragrant with the aroma of pumpkin pie and roasting turkey, he grinned broadly. My students, obediently gathered for the occasion, looked up from their happy chatter and returned his grin with nervous smiles. Their Spanish was better than mine, so I felt no remorse in leaving Fernando to converse with them while I retreated to the kitchen to mash potatoes.

When I'd read the ad explaining that some refugees from the war then raging in El Salvador had no place to go for Thanksgiving dinner, I had pictured a humble peasant in ragged clothes. So, no doubt, had my students. As their campus minister, I had urged them not to pass up an opportunity to reach out to the poor and oppressed. Our refugee would tell us heartrending stories and we would respond with compassion and cranberry sauce.

From the kitchen I heard the sound of a door slamming. Through the window I saw Melissa walk quickly to her car, get in and drive away. Her boyfriend suddenly appeared by my side.

"That guy pinched her in the butt," he said.

"Fernando?"

"Yeah," he said, shaking his head. "I guess I better leave too."

During dinner, Fernando pulled out a tattered black-and-white photo of a gaunt woman with dark, sad eyes, holding an infant.

“This is my sister. She is died,” he announced solemnly.

“I am so sorry,” I jumped in. “Did she die in the war?”

“No,” said Fernando matter-of-factly. “Drugs.”

Everyone stopped eating.

“And the baby?” someone whispered.

Fernando shrugged.

“I think . . . maybe he is with the husband of my sister. Her husband have drugs too though.”

The screech of a siren and blaring horns made everyone look out the front window toward the street. As a fire truck wove through traffic, its red lights cast an eerie glow on the dining room wall. After it passed, my guests continued to stare out to where the truck had appeared, their faces flat with gloom.

“Anyone want more turkey?” I asked, hoping to break the awkward silence. “There’s plenty more in the oven.”

“Sure. Why not?” replied Fernando.

Back in the kitchen, I hacked away at the turkey carcass, feeling guilty and naïve. Would my students learn from this experience that welcoming a stranger is a foolish risk, a pointless exercise in liberal do-gooding?

James, one of the now gloomy faces at the dining room table, had brought me a sketch of St. Vincent de Paul. Held now with a magnet to my refrigerator door, it was accompanied by a quote: “You must love the poor very much, else they will never forgive you the good you do for them.” Thinking of our repugnant and so far unlovable guest, I frowned back at the saint.

“You’d better show us how,” I grumbled.

Returning with a replenished turkey platter, I came upon a group of students heading out the front door.

“You’re not having dessert?” I called after them.

“That slimeball hit us up for money,” one of them yelled back over his shoulder. “Does he think we’re rich or something?”

A small remnant of students sat glumly at the table.

“Where’s Fernando?” I asked.

“Out there,” said James, pointing to the back porch with his fork.

We looked out the window to see Fernando smoking a cigarette, staring at the sun setting over a cold brown landscape.

Ever candid, James sighed. “This wasn’t in the *Refugee Entertainment Manual*, was it?”

We laughed halfheartedly, watching as an emaciated stray cat jumped onto the porch and rubbed himself against Fernando’s pants. That cat had for weeks spurned my offerings of milk and the oily spoils of tuna cans. But he leapt readily into Fernando’s outstretched arms. Fernando clutched the cat to his chest and began to cry. A surprised silence filled the room.

Someone asked, “Do you think we should give him some money?”

“Up to you,” I said.

They looked at each other uncomfortably and began to dig around in their pockets.

I went to the door and invited Fernando inside. Still holding the cat, Fernando stepped into the room.

“I think this cat he is hungry,” he announced. Fernando fingered a tidbit of turkey from the platter and offered it to the cat, who ate it quickly, then licked Fernando’s hands.

“That cat likes you, Fernando,” I observed.

Still red-eyed, Fernando stroked the purring bundle of fur on his lap.

“Yeah. He live here?”

“He’s a stray,” I said. “He lives nowhere.”

“Like me,” said Fernando. “I take him, then. I think I call him ‘Farabundo.’ This is a hero of my country, ‘Farabundo.’”

Fernando reached for a napkin to wipe his eyes, then noticed a crumpled wad of bills under his coffee cup. He began to cry again.

“You are nice *jóvenes*,” he said. “You have me for dinner. I do wrong things, and people leave. I am sorry. Please. I not take your money.”

Shy, diminutive Rudy, whose parents had come from Mexico, stood up and walked over to Fernando. Reaching over with his scrawny, tattooed arm, he patted Fernando’s back.

“Hey, it’s OK, man,” he said. “We don’t always get things right either. You can keep the money, man. You’re gonna need it to get cat food.”

Fernando smiled, still wiping his eyes.

“OK,” he laughed. “For Farabundo. *Sí*.”