

THE GYPSY BRIDE

CARMEN MOLA

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Part 1

THE SKY IN A ROOM

When you are with me, this room has no walls, but trees, infinite trees.

It seems like a game to begin with. Someone has shut the child in a dark room and he has to try to get out of it by himself. The first thing would be to find the light switch, but the child doesn't search for it because he thinks that the door is going to open any moment now.

The door doesn't open.

It could also be a competition to see how long he can last; the winner is the one who spends most time in silence, who doesn't ask for help. The child puts his ear against the chipped wooden door. He hears a deafening sound, a motorbike that starts up and moves away. That's when he realises that he is alone. If he shouted, he would hear the echo of his voice in the darkness of the space, full of dust and dampness; but he is so frightened that not even a sob escapes him.

He has to find the light switch now. He feels his way along the wall. He avoids the obstacles, carefully, so as not to fall. There is a light bulb in the ceiling, there has to be one. The room has a long, narrow window at the top of the wall but the sun came up an hour ago and now only the early shadows of the night still remain.

He doesn't know why they have locked him up.

Resembling a sleepwalker in the darkness, he bumps into something which seems like a washing machine. He could try to see if it works, at least the noise of the water going around in the tub would keep him company; but he doesn't do it. He continues to explore the space, feeling the wall with his hand like a blind person. He wants to find the light switch, but his fingers hit the handle of a tool. It's a spade which falls on the floor with a clash.

The child bursts into tears and it takes him a little while to hear a muffled growl that is coming from the corner. He isn't alone. There is an animal hidden there; it's not the first time that he has heard it, he knows that it wanders around the area at night: its whining, its howling is so loud that he began to think it was a wolf. But it is only a dog that has sneaked into the storeroom on the farm, the one he can see from the window in his room and which they have never let him go into. That's where they have locked him up, in the forbidden storeroom, which is why he doesn't recognise the space and can't move around in the darkness.

He can almost see two points of light in the darkness at the far end. He steps back from pure instinct. He has the impression that the two points of light are coming towards him, but he doesn't know if it is fear creating the image. It isn't possible to see just two glimmers of light. Then, suddenly, he can't see them. Now he feels an intense, sharp pain in his leg. The animal is biting him.

The boy uses both hands to push it off his body. He feels a second attack and pushes the animal's face away with his foot. The kicks and slaps make it recoil. The boy hears panting, then nothing more. There is no sound and the silence seems much more terrifying to him.

Stealthily, he moves back toward the door, prepared to hold off the attack if the dog tries to launch itself at him again and, as he does so, his hand finds the light switch. It surprises him that he hasn't been able to find it before but, for some reason, he missed this part of the wall.

A twisted light bulb hangs from the ceiling. It provides enough light for him to see that the warehouse is a storeroom for boxes with old blankets, cassette tapes, books, farm tools, a washing machine, a rusty bike with just one wheel and other junk.

The dog is under a bowl with a tap, a small sink. It's a street dog, missing one leg.

Without taking his eyes off the dog, the boy picks up the spade he found before, the one that fell to the floor. The dog growls. The boy lifts the spade. He is surprised that he can manage the weight of it with so much ease. It must be the survival instinct; something tells him that they can't live together in this prison.

The animal gets up and limps pitifully toward the boy. He does it in such a lethargic way that doesn't seem threatening. But then, he begins to bite his ankle as if it were a bone from which that he needs to suck the last bit of marrow. The boy hits it with the spade and the animal falls back with a small yelp. He hits the dog's head several times until he can't bear the weight of the tool any more. He sits on the floor and begins to cry.

His ankle hurts, he can see the animal's teeth marks. His shoe is stained with blood as well. He takes it off and sees the wound that the dog made in its first attack. In his fear, he hasn't noticed it.

Then the light goes out.

The echo reproduces the boy's sobs and he has to hold them back to see if it is the dog breathing; but it isn't. The dog is dead.

Chapter 1

“Su-sa-na! Su-sa-na! Su-sa-na!”

Susana’s friends shout, clap and dance enthusiastically, just like the other fifteen or twenty brides who have also happened to meet this Friday in the *Very Bad Boys* club in *calle Orense*. There isn’t a single man among the crowd, only women, celebrating hen nights or reunions for friends; some are wearing ridiculous crowns with penises on their forehead; others have sashes crossing their chests with the name of the girl of honour; one group is wearing t-shirts with a photo of the future bride... Susana’s friends have been discrete, all things considered: they are only wearing pink tutus around their waists.

“Su-sa-na! Su-sa-na! Su-sa-na!”

Susana has worried about the moment when it would be her turn to be the centre of attention and it has come now. Two dancers are to match up with her, one blond, Swedish-looking, a Viking, the other a mulatto who looks Brazilian. The two started off dressed as policemen, although now they are almost naked; both are very attractive with broad chests and strong legs, muscular, their hair shaved on the sides of their heads and left longer on top, waxed all over and with shiny skin from the oil they must have applied before beginning their act... The only thing they are still wearing is a small thong, red for the mulatto dancer and white for the Viking. Susana is frightened that they will ask her to remove them with her teeth, as several of the other brides have done when they have gone on stage before her. If her father could see her... He gets so mad at her over things like this.

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to do anything to you,” whispers the mulatto dancer calmly, in good Spanish.

Susana was wrong, he isn’t Brazilian, he’s Cuban.

She is on the small stage now. The music is deafening and they have made her sit on a chair. The two dancers go around her, brushing their genitals against her, dancing around her, passing their hands all over her body. When they came to the club, all the invited girls made the same promise: “what happens in the *Very Bad Boys* stays in the *Very, Bad Boys*”; none of her friends would say anything about what happened there to anyone, let alone to Raúl, the man who is going to be her husband in a couple of weeks. She is sure that she isn’t going to end up like one of the other brides before her, the one called Rocio, the one from the group with the penises on their foreheads: everyone could see how one of the dancers who brought her to the stage – one dressed as a fireman - put whipped cream on his penis and she ran her tongue all over to remove it until she left it completely clean, to the delight of her companions. She isn’t going to do that, even though no-one would say anything. Even if her friends called her repressed, as they always have. They think she is a nun, and her father thinks she is a slut, but she is neither one thing nor the other.

She can’t see her friends, but she can imagine them shouting and laughing, all of them except one – Cynthia. She will talk with her later, remind her that this means nothing, that she is only doing what everyone expects a bride to do on her hen night.

The mulatto dancer is as good as his word and neither he nor the Swede put her in the position of doing something she doesn’t want to do or refusing and cutting the fun short for everyone else. She imagines that the Viking and the Cuban see dozens of brides every week and they know how far they can go with each one of them as soon as they look at

them. They dance, finish up naked, rub themselves against her a bit more and help her off the stage, polite and respectful despite the atmosphere.

Marta, the most daring of her friends, the one who organised everything and insisted that Susana couldn't get married without having a hen night, whispers in her ear:

"Haven't they asked you to go to their dressing room?"

"No."

"You're so boring; when I got married, after the show, I went to the dressing room with the blond one who has danced with you."

"What did you do?"

"What do you think... Exactly what you're thinking. I'm sure that what he has is twice as big as Raúl's, although I haven't seen Raúl's. The one before you, that Rocio, is screwing her two firemen and your two policemen, I'm sure of it.

Susana isn't like that, she is not going to shag a striptease dancer, no matter what the other brides do or her friend, Marta, did; it doesn't surprise her that her marriage only lasted five months. She looks around her anxiously; she doesn't see the one person in the group that is of any real concern to her.

"Where's Cynthia?"

"She left when you were up there. Where did you find such a boring friend?"

Cynthia is the only one among her guests who wasn't at college with her, the odd one out. She should have known that she wouldn't get on with the others. But she couldn't have not invited her to the party, not her; or she could have been the only person invited.

What she should have done was to have two hen nights – one for Cynthia and another one for the rest of them.

“Why did you leave?”

In the taxi, on the way to El Amante, off calle Mayor where they were going to have a drink because, according to Marta, it was the trendiest place in Madrid, she has sent a whatsapp to her friend, but two hours later Cynthia still hasn't read it, the sign still hasn't turned blue. Coming out of El Amante, she checks it again, worried, wishing for a reply.

In those two hours, several groups of guys have arrived; they've invited them to have a drink with them; they've pushed her toward the bathroom to have a fix of coke and she has refused the invitation; they've noticed someone who was a footballer, now retired, and have had some photographs taken with him. The friends on one side, in a group, the bride on the other, his arm round her waist... The footballer has, of course, suggested that they leave together; perhaps he liked her perhaps it was just the curiosity about sleeping with a bride on her hen night. Susana has not had the slightest problem separating herself from him - she is very pretty – at one point, she fantasized about being a model and has been used to dealing with annoying bores for a long time.

“Now we are going to a secret place which is near Alonso Martínez,” Marta proposes. “It doesn't close till the early hours of the morning and I've got the password to get in.”

“It’s time to go home now,” replies Susana. And she says it with such conviction that the intention of the others to extend the night is more like an effort to show that the night has been fun rather than a real suggestion.

On getting out of the taxi, where her friends leave her to continue partying, a stone’s throw from home because the streets in this area are a holy mess and one has to go round several times before the car can take her to the door, she realises that she is still wearing her pink tutu. She’ll take it off upstairs. She holds up her phone and notes again that Cynthia hasn’t read the message she sent her when they left the *Boys* bar. She sends her another one.

“I’m back home, tired. You aren’t annoyed, are you? I have missed you.”

Everyone thinks it ridiculous that Susanna sends whatsapps, conscientiously following the instructions of the Royal Academy, without any mistakes or abbreviations, obeying the rules of punctuation. When Cynthia replies to her, it will be with emoticons, without any vowels, in a gibberish that, at times, she finds impossible to decipher. Susana realises that she has hardly thought of Raúl all night, but it doesn’t surprise her or change her opinion: She will marry him, even if her father stops speaking to her, even if Cynthia is annoyed. It isn’t love; it has nothing to do with love.

In calle Ministriles, where Susana has a little flat, there isn’t a soul to be seen. Some would be afraid to walk around here at night, along a dark street where the town council has forgotten to put street lights. She’s used to it and isn’t frightened, she doesn’t want to live in fear as her mother has wanted. She isn’t going to pay attention to her instructions and good advice - nothing is going to happen to her; her family have used up their measure

of bad luck for hundreds of years. She heard it said in a film: two bombs never fall in the same place, there is no safer place than a bomb crater.

When she feels the blow to her head and the handkerchief covering her mouth, she doesn't have time to react, she is two metres from her door, already taking the key out of her bag, dreaming of sleeping in her own bed and checking if Cynthia has read her messages... She is only aware that she is losing her strength, that they are dragging her along and lifting her into the back of a vehicle, maybe a van. Nothing else.

Chapter 2

La Quinta de Vista Alegre in *Carabanchel* is a spectacular country estate which was at its most splendid in the nineteenth century, when it was converted into the summer residence of Queen Maria Cristina de Borbón and, later, as the residence of the Marquis of Salamanca, the man who instigated the construction of the *Salamanca* district in Madrid.

“I didn’t go over there so as not to mess it up. As soon as I saw her, I called you.”

The security guard at the *Quinta de Vista Alegre* is nervous, wanting the police to take charge of the body that has appeared there. “It’s the first time I’ve found a dead body, but it had to happen; it’s very neglected here.”

Deputy Inspector Ángel Zárate hasn’t worked long for the local police station; he still hasn’t had time to visit the *Quinta* and now he looks curiously around. They have walked together past a palace and across some gardens where time seemed to have stopped, where it would be less surprising to find a lady dressed in clothes from the nineteenth century than a dead body from the twenty first century.

“It’s like the Retiro,” he says, casting an admiring look around.

“Better than the Retiro, the problem is that it’s not cared for. You know what the politicians are like – there’s no money for things that don’t benefit them. They surely haven’t cut any expenses for their banquets or travelling around in flashy cars. There are two mansions here – the old one of the Queen and the new one of the Marquis, as well as the old people’s home, and once it was even an orphanage. They said they were going to let

it all to New York University so that they could set up here and repair it, but nothing happened and you can see what it's like."

People who criticise politicians irritate Zárte, even if they are right. It's easier to blame someone rather than do something to improve things. And the gardens aren't badly cared for, even much better maintained than any other park in the district. There are no gangs there, no drug dealers, no broken swings.

"What did you say your name was...?"

"Ramón, at your service," he says quickly to the officer. He doesn't give his surname.

"When did you find the body, Ramón?"

"No more than half an hour ago. Just as well I came to this area where the old orphanage used to be. I grew up here, you know. The truth is that I have been worried for a while. There are usually homeless people who sneak in at night and in the last few days they haven't come."

"I don't understand the connection."

"Everything is always connected, Inspector. Nothing happens just because; in the end, one thing leads to another. Haven't you heard what they say about how the flutter of a butterfly's wings in Australia can cause an earthquake here?"

The last thing Zárte expected was a park security guard giving his own version of the butterfly effect. And he wasn't interested so he continued walking toward the body.

“Look, here comes your colleague. And sorry if I talk too much – it’s the lack of company. I spend my days alone and, since my wife died, my nights as well. We are all here – the homeless people and me. And now the dead body, of course.”

He sees Alfredo Costa coming toward him. If his colleague had to pass the entrance exams to join the police all over again, he would find it very difficult. He always says to Zárate that at his age he had lots of stamina but now, closer to fifty than forty, he could neither pursue a career nor chase his grandmother.

“Have you seen the body?” Zárate is anxious, young police officers don’t have much opportunity to investigate a murder. As Salvador Santos, his mentor since he was young, the man who encouraged him and helped him to join the force, said: There are few murders in Madrid.

“Yes, I’ve seen it but I haven’t had a close look.” Costa has seen it all before and doesn’t share Salvador’s opinion; for him there are too many murders and, above all, too many at the times when he’s on duty. “and you shouldn’t either because later, when the forensics arrive, they’ll be pissed off about the destruction of evidence. CSI has done a lot of damage to the police, I can tell you.”

“Have you called them?”

“At the same time that I called you – they should have arrived by now.” The two of them approach the place that the security guard showed them. They stop a few metres from the girl. She has something around her waist – something pink.

“What is it?”

“A tutu. When you have daughters, you’ll gorge yourself on buying bloody stupid things like that.” Costa has two girls of fourteen and ten; if you heard him, you would be put you off having children for ever.

“I’d like to look at her from close up.”

“Don’t ask for trouble. When are you going to learn that the best thing is to stay away from problems? Promotions come from seniority, not from getting involved in trouble.”

The forensics appear before Zárate takes a step toward the body. Or rather, it is Fuentes who arrives, one of the veterans. He doesn’t believe he’s in a television series, like the others.

“Do you know who it is?”

“No, we haven’t had a close look.”

“Fuck,” he protests. “How do you know that she’s dead?”

The three of them approach the girl, Zárate is looking at everything as he gets closer: dark-haired – if he were to make a bet, he would say she was a gypsy, pretty, but her face shows distress, as if she has suffered a lot. The tutu is dirty and stained with blood, like the rest of her torn clothes.

The forensic scientist is the first to touch her, his eyes open wide when he sees her pupils, giving him a huge surprise. Fuentes shouts, but it isn’t because of the maggot crawling out of the eye socket.

“She’s alive! Quick, the case.”

One of his assistants runs toward him but the girl goes into convulsions, her last. Who knows, perhaps if they had arrived earlier, they could have saved her life. He sighs heavily and shakes his head.

“Don’t worry, she’s dead – she didn’t have much left in her. We’ll put in the report that we found her dead, saving you the paperwork.

“What happened to her? Where did the maggot come from?” Zárata is upset, in spite of himself.

“Don’t touch anything; I’m sorry but this isn’t a case for you. I’m going to call Superintendent Rentero,” Fuentes advises.

Zárata looks around. The park has ceased to be a wonderful place and has become inferno, a place where maggots come out of the eyes of the dead.

Chapter 3

“Bread with tomato, Inspector?”

Elena Blanco doesn't like Juanito, the Romanian waiter who serves her every day – efficient, a bit of a lad and a Barcelona supporter. He calls her 'inspector' in public but she has stopped asking him not to.

“Do I look like I want bread with tomato?”

She doesn't need to say anything more for Juanito to take a bottle of a young grappa friulana out of the fridge below the bar, a Nonino, the one she likes in the mornings, transparent and crystal clear with a dry, clean taste. They say that a grappa shouldn't be drunk on an empty stomach but Elena Blanco has spent years, many years, ending nights when sleep didn't seem a priority with this drink.

“Didí, the security guard from the car park below the square, was here first thing this morning. He asked me to get him a glass of your grappa.”

“I hope you didn't give it to him.”

“No, I gave him some orujo and he drank it without complaining. He told me that a couple were having a shag on the third floor of the car park last night.”

“In a red Land Rover?”

The Rumanian smiles, he finds lots of things about Elena funny and, because of that, he tells her about every rumour that he thinks involves her. Sometimes, he tries to get off with her, although he knows it's a wasted effort, time thrown away.

“It wouldn’t be you, Inspector?”

“No, it’s just that I’ve always thought that if I had to have a shag on the third floor of the car park below my house, I would do it with a guy that has a red Land Rover. So, you see, there are some people who are lucky enough to live my fantasies. Has Didi left something for me?”

Juanito looks to both sides before giving her a packet, alert and worried, as if he were delivering the largest consignment of drugs for the Colombian drug barons.

“Don’t be afraid, Juanito, I’m the police and I’m not going to arrest you.”

“You ought to be careful.”

“With red Land Rovers or with drugs?”

“With everything.”

In the bag was just a few grams of marihuana; Didí grows it in the garden at his house in Camarma de Esteruelas. He doesn’t produce enough to supply his two or three clients, not even in the first half of the year. It’s enough for Elena; she only smokes a joint on some mornings, like today, the mornings that follow a whole night drinking in bars, on which she visits car parks with the owners of large cars. It’s rare for her to take someone home.

“Get me the bill, Juanito, I’m going to bed.”

To live in the Plaza Mayor is a luxury and a pain in the neck. A luxury because when you go out on the balcony, you can easily imagine that the city has been there for hundreds of years; it took four hundred years to finish the square. They say that bullfights, processions, masses, mystery plays, trials of the Holy Inquisition and even the burning of the condemned to the stake were held there. From Elena's balcony, you can recognize the foreshortened view of the surprising and colourful frescoes of the Casa de la Panadería and watch the shows the government includes in its festival programme. Because of that, it's a nuisance: from the *chotis* dance competitions during San Isidro to the Christmas market everything happens down below her house. She has even seen a dressage competition with horses from Jerez from her balcony without paying for the ticket. Noise, awful noise is guaranteed all year round.

Tourists gather in the square, those who take photos with the fat Spiderman or of themselves with their faces in carved out panels of flamenco dancers, those who give coins to the living statues or to the goat with the wooden snout. They probably would never imagine that there may be an apartment like hers behind the old façade: modern, minimalist, elegant, over two hundred square metres. When she inherited it from her grandmother, it was nothing more than an apartment stuffed with the belongings of an old lady, now it could appear in any interior design magazine.

It has an added value for Elena: in a hidden corner on one of the balconies is a camera that can't be seen from the square, hidden from view. The camera, sitting on a tripod and protected by a small porch, always focuses on the same place, the arch which leads to *calle de Felipe III*. It is programmed to take a photo every ten seconds and has been there for years, connected to a computer. Elena checks that it is functioning correctly.

There are hundreds of photographs since yesterday morning, the last time she analysed it; it has taken millions since she installed the system, although she has kept very few, more out of curiosity than because they are of any use.

Before sitting down in front of the computer, she puts some music on from her iPad. The same as always, a song by Mina Mazzini: *Vorrei che fosse amore*. She listens and sings along quietly while she smokes the joint that she has rolled with Didi's marihuana. She takes her clothes off slowly; the owner of the red Land Rover has scratched her on the shoulder. She looks at herself in the mirror – close to fifty, she still has practically the same body as she had in her 30s, she doesn't need long hours in the gym to maintain her weight and keep the flab at bay. She gets in the shower.

As she feels the water flow over her, she thinks that perhaps today she'll be lucky, perhaps in those thousands of photos the face marked by smallpox that she has been looking for over so many years will appear. The phone rings. She doesn't mute it but leaves it ringing. Only when it rings a second time after a first failed attempt does she suspect that it might be something urgent. Wrapped in a towel, leaving a trail of water in her wake, she answers it.

"Rentero? Today is my day off... Quinta de Vista Alegre? No, I don't know where it is, but I'm sure the satnav will... Carabanchel? Perfect, I need twenty minutes, or better make it thirty. My team should wait for me there."