

*For ever in love*

# Carolina Trujillo

## The Return of Lupe García



**G**ONO, THE NARRATOR, fell in love with Lupe García at school the day he met her. She had returned from exile in The Netherlands, where she and her mother had fled the military dictatorship that, for years, had imprisoned her father in the Penal, a notorious jail. Later, Lupe goes back to The Netherlands to study journalism but visits her country of birth every year. After finishing her studies, she returns to South America, planning to make a documentary about the jail. She hires Gono, now an unemployed,

alcoholic barman, as production assistant. Partly due to his heavy drug use, the entire project is derailed and is transformed into violent revenge against the former executioners of the military regime. At least, Gono manages to realize the original aim of the documentary to film inside the notorious Penal – by ending up there himself.

*De terugkeer van Lupe García* (*De terugkeer van Lupe García*) tells the story of a lost generation that does not know what to do with itself. But Trujillo's story is humorous and told at cinematic speed, with a quick succession of scenes full of absurd, colourful detail, bizarre characters and both comic and dramatic events. It is also a beautiful love story, about a man who manages to make his adolescent love his own by making a great sacrifice and, in doing so, is separated from her. In that sense, the story can be compared with *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez, in which both lovers keep missing each other throughout their lives. In Trujillo's novel, it is the military dictatorship which separates married couples from each other and their children, causing the pain to be passed on to a second generation. It is a formidable theme, but treated by Trujillo with stylistic bravura, humour and a beautifully constructed plot, which makes the story all the more exciting.



photo Brenda van Leeuwen

At eighteen, Carolina Trujillo (b. Montevideo, 1970) wrote her first novella, in Spanish. After graduating from the Film Academy in Amsterdam, she published her first novel, *De bastaard van Mal Abrigo* (*The Bastard of Mal Abrigo*), in Dutch, in 2002. It was awarded the Marten Toonder/Geertjan Lubberhuizen Prize for literary talent. *De terugkeer van Lupe García* is her second, much praised novel. It received the BGN Literature Prize and was nominated for the AKO Literature Prize.

Trujillo has written a poignant novel that lingers in your mind for a long time. *TROUW*

The seemingly light tone of the novel makes even the craziest situations seem credible. It's true that the revolution eats its children, as *De terugkeer van Lupe García* proves with Latin American verve. *KNACK*

A novel in which great passion is kept in check by great skill – a novel about putting one's past behind one, leaving the reader helpless and torn.

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Sample Translation

*The Return of Lupe García*

(De terugkeer van Lupe García)

by Carolina Trujillo

(Amsterdam: J.M. Meulenhoff, 2009)

Translated by Joni Zwart

*Para todos nosotros*

*For all of us*

## Dramatis Personae

Lupe	Guadalupe García
Magdalena ‘Terapia’ La Noche	Lupe’s mother
Carlos ‘Einstein’ García	Lupe’s father
Doña Claris	Lupe’s grandmother
Gono	Felipe Machado
Giulietta Bertoli	Gono’s mother
‘The Swede’ Machado	Gono’s father
‘The Neapolitan’ Bertoli	Gono’s grandfather
Sophia	Sofi’s mother
Sofi	Gono and Sophia’s daughter
Toco	Gono’s friend from school
The Belgian	Anatole Ramas
Anastasia Batuque	The Belgian’s mother
Cuba	Greta Dos Lados
Alegre	Owner of the supermarket
Manuel ‘The Rabbit’ Viera Viera	A General
Kaxu	The Rabbit’s dog

## #01 Buying milk for beginners

Lupe's right eye is only half open. I noticed yesterday when I laid her down outside. In the daytime it gets too hot indoors, so I take her into the shade of the eucalyptus tree on the dune opposite us. At least there is a bit of a breeze there.

As I roll out her camping mat, I notice the smell of a forest burning. Lupe has a headache, and I can smell headaches; they smell of wood on fire. It's a gift, they say, the only one I have, and it has only one advantage: knowing when someone is faking a headache.

That mat, by the way, is one of the last things she has left from Holland. Don't let me fall asleep, she keeps saying. It sounds as if she's asking me not to let her die, but even I know that sleeping helps you get better.

She fell ill three days ago, vomiting non-stop. Just like that. We were fine: Cuba, the Belgian, the Rabbit and I. It couldn't have been the food and it certainly wasn't the booze; we hadn't been drinking as much as usual, precisely because she was feeling sick. Hugging that bucket all night long.

I was too late yesterday. I was watching footage we'd shot at the start of the summer and lost track of time. When I looked out of the window her legs were exposed to the sun up to her thighs. I hadn't put sun cream on her. Not that I would have dared if I'd thought of it, but I would have asked Cuba if she could do it (and then I would have watched them). In any case, Lupe's calves are covered with little blisters now. Her thighs are merely coloured scarlet red.

It was midday, so you get toasted in no time, particularly at the Costa del Diablo. There is so much salt in the air here that you don't need to sprinkle any on your food. It used to take an hour to get sunburnt; now it only takes ten minutes. It's because of the hole in the ozone layer. It's at its largest here. We have solar rays with a microwave effect. When it comes to skin cancer we've made it to the top ten in the world. Lupe says the southern hemisphere always gets the short end of the stick. She's probably right. I've never been to the northern hemisphere.

Lupe's calves would start to peel, but that wasn't what worried me most. The problem was her right eye; each time she woke up it opened a little less than before.

When I worry about something, I hear my mother's voice in my mind: worrying is not the same as caring. My mother's voice in my mind, now *that's* something to worry about.

Lupe doesn't know yet that something is wrong with her eye. The house only had one mirror anyway. It ended up as lots of little mirrors shortly after we moved in.

'Open your eyes,' I said.

'What is there to see?'

'Look at me.'

She sighed and did as I asked.

She probably looked awful, but looking at her, I saw a younger Lupe. She said that if you've known each other since childhood, you'd always see the child in the other person. She said that in itself is a reason to stay with your childhood friends. When I asked her if that was the reason she'd come back, she smiled but said nothing.

I should have asked what the real reason was, so at least I'd have had the chance to make myself scarce.

'Well?' she asked and Cuba's voice answered: 'She looks just like the Surgeon.' I was shocked, not because I hadn't heard her coming, but because she was right.

The Surgeon was our new president. A freethinker for the first time in thirty years. Like all other presidents, he promised a lot of changes. Unlike most of them, he had one eye that was only half open. In his case it had always been that way, in Lupe's case it had not.

I didn't want to turn around to look at Cuba. I could see her shadow, and that was enough. One hand rested on her hip, a cigarette dangled loosely from the other. 'I'm going to the beach,' she said and her shadow slid away from us.

Lupe looked at me. Her face was so close to mine that I could feel her breath brushing my skin.

‘I can still see fine...’ she said, but she sounded unsure.

I moved my hand towards her eye, slowly, because Lupe often flinched when someone tried to move closer. Not because she was afraid to be beaten - quite the opposite.

‘I’m going to take a look,’ I said. I placed my thumb on her eyelid and lifted it carefully. ‘No pain?’ The eye looked normal.

‘Headache,’ she said. When I let go of her eyelid, it closed more than the other one.

Further on, Cuba walked across the top of the dune towards the beach. She was wearing a bikini and a minuscule skirt. Her legs were tanned and her buttocks as round as balls. Part of me hated her for walking by so indifferently while Lupe was sick as a dog, but we all knew this was the best thing Cuba could do. Every sick person she had nursed in her life had died within days. She’s still happy to look after people, but only if she doesn’t like them much.

‘I’m going to the shop,’ I said to Lupe. She had lain down, with both eyes shut. ‘Can I get you anything?’ I asked. No need for her to mention aspirin.

‘Milk,’ she said.

Bread and cheese, I wrote. Lupe lives on milk, bread and cheese - she says it’s her inner Dutchman.

‘Writing paper, if you still want it,’ she said.

I had threatened to write to her boss in Holland to tell him how things were going here. That they should come and get her or something. I was going to tell him to stop sending her so much money because she was only using it to kill herself. Writing paper. It was as if she was giving me permission to start writing.

I collected the empty bottles. They were in the upstairs rooms, in the kitchen, in the garden. If we wanted to buy soft drinks at Supermercado Alegre we had to return empty bottles, or else Alegre would get into trouble with his supplier. I filled my rucksack and was about to put the rest in a shopping bag when I

remembered the shop might well still be shut. Cuba saying that it had reopened was no guarantee; now that she remembered how to smile, she'd happily send me on a wild goose chase for laughs. I put on my rucksack and took some money and a few phone cards from the jar. We never knew which cards had credit left and which were empty. The Belgian came down the stairs. He had a freckled baby face and was built like a carthorse. The only Belgian things about him were his nickname and his memories of the ten years he had spent in exile in Antwerp.

'Where's Cuba?' he asked. Since she'd got her new teeth, he'd been chasing her like a guided missile.

I told him that he had to turn on the pump, as there was hardly any water in the tank. He showed me his arms and asked: 'How?' As if it was my fault he had burnt his paws. From the fingers up to the elbow, second and third degree. That's what

happens if you're trying to be a hero.

'She's gone to the beach,' I said.

The pump was an electric contraption that lay at the bottom of the well in the back yard. If you pressed a switch in the kitchen it immediately started to pump what little water there was into a tank on the roof. If you didn't switch it off after two minutes, the motor would overheat. If you kept it running for longer, smoke would rise up from the well and you could throw away the pump because it would have become a lump of melted plastic and twisted metal. The water would be of no use then either, unless you liked the taste of burning.

I once said to Lupe that of all the things I knew, the pump was most like her. She asked me what the water was. I said: 'me.' That summer we had seen smoke coming from the well twice. Speaking of bad omens.

I let Lupe read the pages I have written so far. She says I've digressed quite a bit. That'll occur more often, as well as other inaccuracies. She has promised she'll help me. I'm a bartender, not a storyteller. My specialities are cocktails and whiskey. I have a diploma in the first: COCKTAILS I. The second I drink myself

and that's the reason I often get fired. When they say goodbye they always tell me it's not the drinking that's the problem; it's me not knowing my limits.

The only thing I didn't seem to get rid off when I was working behind the bar was haemorrhoids. The ailment of people who eat badly, drink lots and work standing up.

Lupe is a storyteller, filmmaker actually. A graduate, talented and internationally recognized, but she is no use to anyone. Not now, anyway.

## #02 Supermercado Alegre

I could tell from a distance that underneath the peeling letters of Supermercado Alegre, the blinds were up again. The boxes of vegetables and fruit were not covered with jute sacks like the previous days. Alegre's knobby feet stuck out into the sunlight from the shade, but they were accompanied by crutches. The magazine rack stood next to him. He greeted me enthusiastically for someone who'd been beaten black and

blue. He was probably happy just to have survived public healthcare.

'Did the doctor let you go back to work?' I asked.

His doctor was a fairy he said, and he had to keep the business running. Not even the fan was running in that place of his. It was one of those supermarkets where you couldn't eat anything they sold without first checking the best before date - but you had to know the current date in order to do so, and that kind of knowledge escaped me when Lupe was around.

I wanted to give Alegre a slap on the shoulder, but he stopped me. He pushed his shirt aside so I could see what was underneath: he was wearing a corset, it seemed, made of plaster.

'They've turned you into a little princess,' I said.

'Wait until you see my balls,' he grumbled with his jaw half shut. He said he couldn't walk, that he could hardly get up from his chair without someone helping him.

'If I fall over,' he said, 'I'll die like a tortoise.' He had to repeat most things, because I could barely understand what he said.

For most of his life Alegre had been a soldier, and that is what he remained after the coup. He never rose above the rank of blind obedience, so when they asked him to dig a hole two metres long and one metre deep, he dug it. When the body was thrown in, he closed the hole and when the holes had to be twice as deep towards the end of the dictatorship, he dug deeper.

Shortly after the elections he went to the press. Like most of us, he thought we now had a government who could be trusted and who would at least make sure the criminals of the junta would not go unpunished.

‘I buried Elena Q.,’ he had said, ‘I can show you exactly where she is.’

Elena Q. was a schoolteacher who had been missing for twenty years. Her name was still chalked on walls. She had earned international fame because she had outrun the commando who came to get her. She was the first to arrive at the Venezuelan embassy. She jumped over the fence and shouted: ‘Asylum! I beg this country to grant me asylum!’

Our soldiers were not allowed to set foot in the embassy’s garden, but in those days they just did as they pleased when it came to our people. Troublesome cases were taken for a flight over the sea and only the pilots returned. Later they would call them death flights. As far as international borders were concerned, they’d shot a socialist in Paris and a doctor in Santiago, so when they came to the garden of the Venezuelan embassy, they walked in as if to fetch their ball.

Elena Q. was dragged back into our territory by her arms and legs. The Venezuelan ambassador was hanging out of a second storey window screaming blue murder - but that could not save her. Venezuela broke its diplomatic relations with us and nothing was heard of Elena Q. again. Until Alegre, his hair slicked back, looked into the camera and said: ‘She was already dead when they dropped her off. We had to shovel quicklime over her. Those were the orders.’

The authorities wanted him to make a statement in court. Even the Spanish press had come to his shop and he had said, very bravely and filled with pride, that the time was ripe to do so. He’d been wrong and the only thing that looked ripe now was his own face. A few days after the broadcast, just after closing the shop, he got a beating that almost killed him.

The police spokesman said on television that the police did not know (yet) why civilian B. Alegre had been attacked, and that they did not want to rule out the possibility that it had been a hold-up. ‘Civilian’ is what the spokesman had

called him. When they call you a civilian in this country, it usually means they're planning to take something away from you.

Alegre couldn't make his statement in court because he wasn't allowed to leave his bed. The judge sent a few officers to the hospital to take his statement, but it was so hard to hear what he said, that they decided to use the television recordings instead.

I could understand, because speaking to him in front of his shop, I was struggling to make out words through the hissing.

He said there'd been two men. Perhaps three. He was locking up the shop and they'd beaten him so long and hard that he had become one with the asphalt. He had a broken arm, two broken and two bruised ribs and a head that looked as if it was used as a football. He'd lost a few teeth, he said, but it was hard to see that because of the swelling.

Tupamaro<sup>1</sup> hijo de puta he had heard them say before his eardrum was shattered too.

'Heroes can only exist when there are cowards,' were the last things he'd said in front of the camera.

It wasn't true, in fact, that he could point out the place where Elena Q. was buried because that spot was on a military base (the thirteenth) and, despite freedom of the press and democracy, no civilian could enter it. And certainly not to show where unexpected skeletons might be lying.

'Everything hursh,' he said. Everything hurt. 'Bush I am shaying push.' They shouldn't think that they'd intimidated him, he told anyone who wanted to hear it. One of the newspapers had used the quote as a headline: they mustn't think they can intimidate Alegre. To see him sitting there, more like a heap of rubbish than a man, made you wonder if this were true.

'I have to make a phone call,' I said and when he seemed to smile, I walked towards the booth.

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<sup>1</sup> Tupamaros: an urban guerrilla organization in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s

My mother had attended nursing classes once, and I was hoping she'd be able to give me advice on Lupe. Lame shit that I was. I could've come up myself with the only good advice there was.

'Where are you?' she asked after I'd barely pronounced a syllable.

'With Lupe,' I said.

'You should be here, not with her. Sophia has been here. On July first everything will be put up for auction. They've set a date. You must do something, Gono, you can't keep on mashing flies.'

Lupe has read as far as here now. She says I have to explain that mashing flies is an expression in this part of the world, but neither of us knows what it means.

'She's been round?' I asked. 'Really?' Even before our divorce, Sophia had stayed clear of my mother and since then she's avoided the entire street.

'She had a letter delivered. From her lawyer.'

'So she didn't come herself?'

'I got the letter didn't I?'

Sophia and I had been together long enough to have a daughter: Sofi. Whenever I was behind with alimony Sophia would set the lawyer on me, and if he got really vicious, I borrowed from my mother. And then when I got a new job, I'd repay my mother and get behind on the alimony again. A downward spiral. I wish I knew more or less what was at the bottom of it. Maybe it would make sense to take the straight road down.

I heard my mother take a drag, probably from a spliff.

'When are you coming back?' she asked and swore that she'd lynch me when I did.

'Lupe's eye is half open,' I said, 'why could that be?'

'Which eye?' she said but she didn't wait for a response. 'Then she should go and see a doctor. She's a grown woman, Felipe. You have a daughter to look after and a mother. Does she have a headache?'

'Yes,' I said.

‘The police have been here,’ said my mother. ‘Is Lupe in trouble? They were looking for someone from Holland.’

They had only called at the front of the house. My mother hadn’t spoken to them herself, so she didn’t know what it was about. Whenever the police entered our street my mother fastened all the locks. If they came into the courtyard, we had to flush the stash of marihuana down the toilet. It had happened twice before.

The first time my mother got caught, I was only a baby. She didn’t smoke then, but she was a leftist and wouldn’t keep her mouth shut. Her father got her out. The Neapolitan they called him, my grandfather. He wouldn’t recognize me if he ran into me on the street. My mother had distributed leftist leaflets at the university. It took one phone call from him to get her out of the cell.

The second time they took her, she was walking through the neighbourhood with a pram full of illegally printed newspapers, on top of which I sat, filling my nappies. This time it was after the coup and the Neapolitan had to go to the police station in person to get her free.

The third time he only showed up after a few days, by which time they’d taken her to the barracks outside town. When she asked what had taken him so long he said that she needed to be taught a lesson: either this leftist pissing about was over and done with, or she could go to hell next time. My mother often tells this story when she’s had too much to drink.

‘It’s her own fault,’ my mother said of Lupe and asked what time she could expect me to be home. Perhaps she didn’t know how far away I was, but she could guess I was broke and out of fuel.

My mother had always said that Lupe was the only one of us who was worth something. By ‘us’ she meant Cuba, the Belgian and me, but it applied to any friend I’ve had, really. All good-for-nothings she said, who only got under her feet and brought nothing but trouble. And now Lupe was one of us.

I looked at the position of the sun. Alegre was sitting in the shade listening, with a grin on his face. He always did when people were using the phone booth.

My mother kept making demands and threatening to commit suicide or murder or both.

‘What could be wrong with her?’ I asked when she stopped to take another drag.

‘Who?’

‘Lupe, ma. Her eye is half shut. It really is. I’m worried.’

‘I don’t know,’ she sighed. ‘Did someone slap her?’

‘No,’ I said and I wanted to describe what it looked like, but couldn’t get any further than ‘her eye’.

‘Anastasia has been here. She was looking for the Belgian. Is he with you guys? She’s worried.’

‘He’s here, yes.’

‘Did you say her eye was shut?’

I nodded and said ‘half’.

‘Perhaps she has an infection.’

‘It doesn’t look red.’

My mother sighed. ‘Can she see with it? She has to go to the doctor. She was asking for it, really. You have to come home. Where are you anyway?’

‘Have you seen Sofi?’ I asked.

When I said Sofi’s name I somehow expected her to appear. That never happened, so I only missed her more. Sofi is my daughter. She’s eight, almost nine years old and I very rarely see her. My mother never sees her and has more than once said I only ask after her to keep up the pretence of fatherhood. Still, I keep doing it.

‘If that bag of shit is with her, you can leave them and come home, right?’ she cried, and then she went on about my responsibilities and lack of spine again. I was leaning against the booth. I should never have called.

‘I have to go,’ I said. ‘She really is ill, Ma.’ My finger was already on the hook.

‘I’m ill too,’ my mother shouted. ‘From sadness! You are coming today. Do you hear me?’

My mother isn’t an angry person, but on the phone she can be like a monkey with a machine gun.

Alegre was reading the newspaper, or pretending to, when I walked into the shop.

I ordered slices of cheese from one of the sisters and while she was cutting it in slow motion, I saw that they’d started selling straws. Our noses had become irritated, perhaps even infected. She must have taken my joyful expression for surprise.

‘It’s the only way for him to get some food down,’ the sister explained. I grabbed a bundle of a hundred straws in five different colours and walked on through the shop in search of milk, bread and writing paper.

‘What day is it?’ I asked as I poked my head outside.

‘Come here,’ Alegre said and looked at me. It was impossible to tell from his face whether he was smiling or annoyed - in fact he looked as if he was undergoing an internal examination non-stop.

‘How are the girls?’ he asked. I shrugged my shoulders as nonchalantly as I could and answered that girls like them could only be fine.

‘It’s Friday,’ he said and handed me the newspaper. ‘Time for action.’

I thought he meant it was the weekend: dancing, drinking, those kinds of things. But that wasn’t the action that Alegre had in mind.

‘Keep it,’ he said, with an almost piercing look, when I handed him back the newspaper.

I said I wasn’t much of a reader and gave him a hundred. He answered I should take up reading. He opened his pouch and started looking for change.

‘Will you read it?’ he asked and I nodded as if to say we had a deal.

‘Those girls will be worth gold soon,’ he whispered. ‘Page eight.’

I leafed through the paper. When I reached page eight, I froze. There was a headshot of Lupe in the newspaper. Front on, both eyes wide open. It was the photo she had used for her Dutch passport.

There were some details alongside it: her name, her age, and that she was often seen with two men and a woman. That this civilian was a journalist and would please contact the local authorities if they saw her.

Lupe's mother always says that children try to repeat what their parents did. She has many such truisms that she's never verified herself: that you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped, that what goes up must come down, and that we're all on our own in the end. In that respect, Lupe's mother and mine are very similar. Sometimes I don't know which mother's voice it is that echoes through my head. I couldn't say much about fathers. Nor could Lupe for that matter.

Lupe's mother is named Magdalena, but we call her Terapia.

Terapia doesn't give you an answer when you ask her a question but an analyses why you're asking what you're asking the moment you do so and why you're asking her and not anyone else.

Terapia sent Lupe to see the psychologist as soon as she could walk, which was just after Lupe's father went into prison. At the time they were still here. Later she went into therapy in both Argentina and Holland. Everywhere really. Not long after they got back here, Lupe threw her psychologist into the ocean. That's what we say here when we're done with something. In Holland, Lupe says, they hang it up on the willow tree.

Her mother was an idiot, Lupe thought, but the idiot might have been right when she said that children always repeat their parent's acts. In any case, Lupe had her mugshot in the newspaper. She was thirty-three, I think. A year younger than I am.

Almost all our parents had been in the newspaper. During the dictatorship you didn't have to do much to end up in the 'Wanted' section, side view and front on.

They were described as subversive elements who intended to disrupt the country; all civilians, some armed and dangerous.

Alegre made a fist and went to raise it assertively, but a stab of pain stopped him. I folded the newspaper, picked up my rucksack and started to walk. The Avenida Bolívar was deserted. The Costa del Diablo in the middle of the day; not even the flies were moving. I stumbled over my own foot and fell to my knees in the gravel. Alegre laughed and coughed. ‘Corre, marica, corre!’ he shouted. Run, you fairy, run. I scrambled up to my feet and ran.

The civilian Guadalupe García is the woman I love. She says I shouldn’t talk nonsense, that I am incapable of loving. When I ask her how she knows, she says: I know you.

### # 03 My penis

Last time Lupe returned, it was a presidential election year. Posters for political parties filled the town. Whatever you were doing, there was always a candidate grinning at you from a billboard. There were three of them: a leftist surgeon, a right-wing lawyer and another right-wing lawyer.

I had moved in with my mother temporarily. The girlfriend I'd been living with briefly had caught me with a girl I sometimes spent my siestas with and who was much too young for me. It didn't take long before they ran into each other. This country is like a handkerchief sometimes. They met up, for an appraisal you could say, and I was promoted to my mother's loft.

There, too, I tried to stay in bed as long as possible. Lying horizontally is perhaps the other thing I have a talent for. Whenever I came downstairs, I had to listen to variations on a single theme: that I was useless, a piece of shit and a good-for-nothing.

My mother had front-door and back-door customers. The quiet hippies came to the back door, usually in the evening, to get some dope. Through the front door came the women, from eight o'clock each morning, to have their bodies waxed. Every thirty minutes the doorbell would ring, and one client was let out while the other was welcomed in, all of them cackling away. When the hair removal started, you would hear a soft groaning, except in Lupe's case. She shouted as if she was being hung, drawn and quartered. My mother said that Lupe was a baby.

Lupe has read till here and says I have to explain how this hair removal is carried out. A sugary paste is spread on the skin (Lupe wants me to say that the paste is boiling hot), you press a strip of fabric or rubber onto the coated spot and peel it off in one go, against the direction of the hair. The hairs pull out, roots and all. I learned how to do it when my mother decided I had to help in 'the business', but no woman would let me treat her and I objected to doing the men. So washing the strips it was.

Which went like this: you'd throw the rubber strips with the paste and the hairs stuck on them into barrels of hot water. You'd let them soak and stir them with a bamboo stick until most of the hairs were floating around in the sugar water. Then you'd fish the strips out of the ooze and sling them in the washer.

What you attempted above all was to avoid this job.

I listened to the customers come and go and generally tried to stay or fall asleep. The front door opened. Someone with keys came in. It was probably my sister. She was younger than I, but she had a job and a boyfriend. She even had her own room and a computer she knew how to use. I never saw her. She did see me. Out on the street. Usually when I was dealing marihuana. I'd rather she didn't see me then. The phone rang and my mother answered. She said hello and cooed and I realized pretty quickly that it was Lupe and that she had come back. I jumped out of bed and searched for underpants in the pile of clean laundry.

Lupe had returned many times, but she had left even more often. You grew accustomed to the conversations that accompanied it. My mother was fine, my sister was fine, Lupe was fine and me, I was 'same as usual'.

Lupe used to announce her return. Her grandmother would organize a welcome party and a large delegation would collect her from the airport. But the more often she left and came back, the smaller the welcome party became. When exactly she stopped announcing it, I don't know. She said it was too much of a fuss and that she knew the way home. I think she was worried the day would arrive when no one would come to collect her. Lupe preferred to be in charge of her defeats.

Doña Claris only knew her granddaughter had returned when she saw one of those cream-coloured Mercedes taxis from the airport pull up in front of her house. Then she'd run outside, followed by a housekeeper, nurses and whoever was visiting. Terapia was informed by phone, usually at her office. There was never any chance of her getting away from work, so she would welcome Lupe over the phone with a sermon on freedom, telling her that it ended where the other person's freedom started, and that there were people who had engagements

and who kept their promises. Lupe always rang me too and usually I'd go to her grandmother's house straight away, because her freedom was my freedom, or at least that was what it felt like.

That's another thing our mothers have in common: when they talk about people they really mean themselves and there's always something to complain about. Like when Lupe said she wanted to become a journalist. 'The fact that she has learned to speak a bit of Spanish doesn't mean she can write,' they both said without the other knowing. Lupe was a disaster when it came to spelling. 'García doesn't place accents,' a teacher once said, 'she throws them out.'

Her first journalistic piece was something she called 'a background story'. She got me and her grandmother to correct it. After typing it all up again, she put the manuscript in a special new folder and took it to the office of one of the largest national newspapers. The article was about Holland and the time she'd spent there in exile. She got to see the editor but he wasn't interested in the contents of the folder. He did ask if she cared to unbutton her shirt and when she declined he referred her to a newspaper that had a woman's section.

I had seen Lupe's breasts when they were still little pointy mounds. Our first summer together had only just begun and I've never been able to get those mounds out of my head. In Holland going topless was nothing unusual, she said. Toco, my best friend, started screaming when he heard that, especially when he found out that Lupe sometimes changed her clothes with me present and occasionally sat in the garden in just her underpants. Girls didn't do things like that, not when there were boys around. The only knickers we ever saw were hanging in the market stalls. It took a long time before I saw the bit between her legs, but then I understood that she was the love of my life.

We were at the beach in front of my house. I can still point out the rock I sat on. She was sitting in the sand a bit further down. She was wearing shorts and had her legs pulled up. I could see everything, just like that; the entire fleshy little rose, and she was just chatting away. I felt the blood drain from my face; I don't think I've ever had such a hard-on.

‘Shall we go for a swim?’ she asked, but if I’d tried to get up, my cock would have driven me into the sand. That’s what it felt like at that age. I watched her as she ran into the water.

In Holland they teach children to swim at primary school because there are so many canals. Chances were eight out of ten that you’d cycle into one some day. There’d been studies into the matter. I believed her and said that we often fell in the water here too, but we simply drowned. She didn’t believe me.

As long as she was with me, I thought, if only for talking, reading, sleeping, she wouldn’t be out with anyone else. When she kissed a guy for the first time, one who wasn’t me, I just about saw it coming. That softened the blow. The guy she really did it with for the first time came as a surprise. I was always the first one she told.

I steeled myself, but that guy remains one of the few people from those days whose first and last names I remember. For years I went on selling him the mouldiest dope I could find at home. It was different with him, Lupe tried to comfort me, but I’d already understood that.

‘What do you talk about?’ I asked. Rarely have I regretted a question as I did then.

‘We don’t talk,’ she said. I let her set me up with her girlfriends. I resisted and kicked, like a donkey that’s tied to a wagon. I even got beaten up.

My mother called me and I hurtled down the stairs in my underpants, which, I began to suspect, were not mine at all. The dogs looked at me suspiciously. I don’t know why my mother had to have half a dozen of those animals. They were only vigilant when it came to me.

I knocked on the closed door.

The door was opened and my mother said into the telephone: ‘The genie has come out of the bottle.’ Lupe’s voice came from the receiver. She called my name.

‘He’s standing here in front of me wearing his sister’s tanga,’ my mother said as I grabbed the phone from her hands. She told me to be brief, someone else

might try to call, plus I had to get dressed before the next customer came. She shut the door, trapping the wire, so I had to bend over to reach the receiver.

‘Lupe?’ I said. It was nice to be able to speak her name again. Perhaps I should do it more often.

‘Gonorrhoea,’ she answered. ‘Will I see you on the way?’

On the way meant she would walk towards my house and I would walk towards hers and we would meet each other somewhere down the road.

‘Have you come on your own?’ I asked.

‘I’m staying longer than usual,’ she said, ‘I’m going to make a film.’

‘How long?’

‘A few months.’

‘Film?’ I asked. ‘Are you at your grandmother’s?’

‘A documentary,’ she said.

Once I had found my clothes and put them on, I got myself out of there, leaving the full washing barrels behind. I crept out to the courtyard via the staircase that had been made when my mother had the annex built. By living there and letting out the house, she had managed to raise my sister and me on at least one hot meal a day. She hadn’t received a single penny of alimony from either father. She’s proud to have done it that way, but those fathers had better not come through the gates, for she’d probably set them on fire. I got my scooter off the stand and pushed it through the gate. It’s a black Bajaj from ’85. There are people who say it’s dark green, but it is definitely black. Once on the street I kick-started it and before my mother knew what was happening, I was driving away at full speed.

## #45 AIAIAIAIAI

I don't know what had come over the Belgian when he decided to attack the Rabbit: I can't look into his head and wouldn't want to either. My mother always says that if you look into the abyss long enough the abyss will look into you. Perhaps the return of Cuba's beauty had driven him to despair. Perhaps it was because the general had made him look like a dick with the Storm<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps it was the Sicotica. That's what Lupe called the new coke we had. It was cut with something that made you hallucinate like a mouse in a lab. Perhaps it was all those things together. In any case, the Belgian couldn't take it.

As he was trying to fix the Storm, he'd found all sorts of bottles with flammable liquids. He had emptied them into a bucket and after giving it a good stir had poured the concoction into glass bottles. We had plenty of those. Then he made fuses, or rather: soaked pieces of fabric in the mixture and crammed them through the bottlenecks. Fuses - they were just my socks. I couldn't understand how something inside his empty head had begun to brew like that.

He walked out of the garden one night with three bottles under his arm. He probably would've done the same if it had been broad daylight, so in that respect we were lucky. He crept through the gardens across the street towards the hydrangeas that grew against the general's fence like an enormous piece of liquorice allsorts. He paused for a second to check that the coast was clear and planted the bottles in front of him - and then set fire to my socks one by one.

The first bottle exploded in the air. There was a cloud of fire above the kennel. Kaxu immediately began to howl. The Belgian quickly threw the second and third bottle into the garden and ran for it, back to La Moza with a detour that wasn't worthy of the name. He ran round the house and smacked against the back door.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: the Storm is their pick-up truck

In the run up to his operation, he had failed to check if the door was unlocked. He knocked, but couldn't risk making too much noise. Lupe and I, alarmed by Kaxu, were standing at the window. We were peering outside, petrified, when Cuba entered the room sleepily.

'Someone's knocking,' she said and disappeared into the kitchen before we could speak a word. She let the Belgian in.

'Look across the road! Look across the road!' he shouted as he stormed in. We could smell the fire.

Kaxu barked like a maniac while his kennel went up in flames. His chain was not so short that he was in danger himself, but the Rabbit would have to be quick.

The lights came on behind a window on the second floor. The other windows followed like a string of Christmas lights. The outside light came on last.

The general appeared in his pyjamas, a gun in each hand. He shot into the air. Once, twice, three times. At the third shot the dog caught fire, as if one thing had led to the other. Kaxu ran through the garden, howling, and smacked into the grass, burning, as his chain pulled tight. He got up screaming, and ran the other way till the chain floored him again.

The general tried to catch Kaxu but when he finally managed to do so, the animal turned against him: he bit his master first in one arm and then in the other. When he understood the fire on his back was a worse enemy, he started biting himself until he realized this wasn't helping. Then he ran through the garden again and smacked against the gate. There he rediscovered his behind and sank his teeth into it once more.

The bang was so loud that the night seemed to break in two.

Kaxu collapsed. The general kept pointing his gun at him, while the dog made one more attempt to reach the dancing flames on his back. Viera V. fired another shot and the large dog head dropped down on the grass.

That's what happens when you attack a general.

He walked into his house and a little while later the lawn sprinklers started. When he came out again he was carrying a bucket of water, which he emptied

over his dog. He bent forward, ruffled the fur with his hand and smelled his fingers.

When he looked up, his gaze was directed at our window. My heart stopped. Cuba whispered that he couldn't see us. All our lights were off, but had they been on, we'd probably still have stood there transfixed. Fortunately he also looked into the street, left and right, and at his neighbour's hydrangeas.

The smell of burning intensified and just as I began to realize that something wasn't right, the Belgian started singing softly.

'Aiaiaiaiai,' it went. 'Aiaiaiaiai.' He shook his hands. 'Aiaiaiaiai.' He tried to beat his own hands. His shirt was smoking, that wretched black thing. Cuba started to hit his arms and shoulders. She beat and beat but the black muck stuck to her hands. Instead of trying to extinguish him, she was trying to extinguish herself. It was as if they were dancing.

'We're burning, we're burning,' Cuba wailed.

'Sssh,' said Lupe and the Belgian was ushered to the bathroom. I couldn't exactly tell by whom, but I did see him smack into the doorframe before he got through it. I looked outside. In the rain of the sprinklers Viera V. kneeled beside his dog.

In the bathroom Cuba and Lupe were bent over the Belgian. They tried to extinguish him with the showerhead, but so little water came out that she just put his arms in the toilet.

Lupe pressed a towel in his mouth.

We heard a muffled 'Aiaiaiaiai'.

There were parts of his shirt smouldering on the floor. I stamped them out. What I could see of the Belgian's arm looked like a red ham. Lupe tried to aim the lousy trickle of water on the worst parts.

'Can you manage this alone?' Lupe asked Cuba and when she nodded, Lupe took my hand and pulled me out of the bathroom. We went outside.

'How do I look?' she asked. Her cheeks were red.

'Great,' I said.

‘Is there any ash on me?’ she asked as she checked my arms and hands.

She whacked on the outdoor light, and we ran through the garden. The general was ushering his family inside. When Lupe folded her hands around the bars of his gate, he turned round. His gun was pointing at her. I felt like I was made out of ice and shouted: ‘Neighbour?’

He dropped the gun. My heart tried to pick up the rhythm again.

‘Go inside!’ he ordered. We obeyed immediately.

It seemed to take hours for the police to arrive. Cuba and Lupe and I walked outside again.

We already knew what we were going to say. We’d heard gunshots and when we got out of bed, we saw the fire across the road. We didn’t know anything else. If anyone asked after the Belgian, we’d say he’d gone to see his mother. While we stood there, Kaxu’s fur continued to burn. It smelled a bit like the Belgian smelled.

No one needed to go to the police station because the General didn’t press charges. He wouldn’t grant the Tupamaros the pleasure, he said. He was sure it had been them.