

Aquí viene la novia

Ian Scott

She was late. Sunset was approaching and she was still not here. Paulo checked his watch once more and scanned the few remaining people meandering on the paths alongside the lake. Sunday afternoon and it was mainly couples and families. No sign of Gaby. He sat back, heavily and resignedly. His head was still splitting and his perch on the boulder was numbing his seat. As another deafening jet rose from the Aeroparque and turned toward the beautiful October sunset, Paulo placed his head in his hands and fought down a wave of nausea. Where was she? He tried to recall the tone of her voice on the phone, earlier that day.

"Paulo?"

He hadn't even remembered picking up the phone.

"Yes."

A pause. "Can we meet? Today? I have to see you...."

He had not replied, the words choking in his parched throat.

"Paulo? Paulinho? Please, talk to me. Please. It's important."

"I'm not... well. Can't you just say... it... now?"

"No, no. I have to see you. I need to look in your eyes."

He had breathed deeply, several times, trying to stop his head spinning.

"Paulo?"

"OK. OK. If we have to meet then... our special place. In the Japanese Gardens".

"What time?"

He felt the tremble in his hand, tasted the staleness of his breath.

"Late. I need to sleep. Around 5."

Lying in the dark with a cool pillow across his head, he had been grateful for the unusual quiet of his mothers' apartment. She had left yesterday to be with Gaby's mother at her summerhouse, checking the arrangements for their wedding reception next weekend. His elder sisters were out with their friends somewhere. On the other side of the double glazing, Buenos Aires' relentless traffic was just a muted rumble. His cell phone had woken him again. It was Hugo this time.

"You looked terrible at the end of last night. Like you'd been told to fix the economy by Christmas."

"You know I don't normally drink, Hugo."

"You certainly made up for it yesterday. And how's Little Paulo today, heh? Surprised to shake someone else's hand for a change? Did he enjoy the kiss of life?"

Silence.

"Paulo, I'm sorry. Listen, I just wanted to say... to say... look, Gaby's a great girl, you know?"

Really innocent. I'm sorry that it ended like that."

"I know, Hugo. I'll see you tomorrow, at work."

He'd lain there for an hour or more, trying to clear his head, lying as still as possible. As he slipped in and out of an uneasy doze, images of the previous day flashed through his mind: the new Irish-themed bar on the quayside of Puerto Madero, where he'd met up with Hugo, Bernardo and Joaquin; the parilla in San Telmo where he'd eaten steak in pepper sauce and they'd all drunk bottles of thick Trapiche bonarda; the string of bars along Calle Rosario where they'd talked him into chasing weak Quilmes beer with shots of bourbon; and finally, the bar with the cellar and dance floor. He'd watched the others trying to move in on a pair of hot-looking student girls, before they'd realised why the girls had been dancing together. Almost drooling, they'd watched the blonde girl's fingers tunnelling through her lover's silken black hair as they

had exchanged a forceful, lingering kiss. Was that when Bernardo had mentioned the idea of visiting the brothel? No, it was before then...

Eventually he had risen, dressed and eaten a little, drinking bottled water. It was a thirty-minute walk to the Gardens, but he had left an hour beforehand. It was a beautiful spring day, another reason for walking slowly.

He saw an advert for the Irish bar on the side of a passing bus. He didn't like their heavy, dark beer but knew that Bernardo and his other friends, the rugby and polo set, did. It probably reminded them of their years travelling around Europe. Paulo hadn't yet been out of Argentina; his family were not wealthy and, besides, he couldn't afford to take that sort of time away from his studies. The competition to get onto the tax law course at the university had been too intense – unless you came from the right background, like Bernardo had. Paulo had studied hard to get in and harder to qualify, but he knew it was an investment in his future. People who needed tax lawyers had spare money and, in bankrupt Argentina, that was a rarity.

As he paid his two-peso entry fee for the Gardens, he tried to tell himself that he hadn't wanted to visit the brothel, but he knew that wasn't true. He had lost his virginity some years ago during a summer job working at a hotel in the Andes, but he did not think that he was as experienced as most men his age. Certainly not as experienced as his friends, based on the stories they had been telling last night. He had felt slightly isolated, distanced from them, a sense that a part of life had passed him by. As he mechanically traced the familiar route to the small island in the centre of the main lake, he remembered their conversation over dinner, when Hugo had been talking about the new Spanish secretary at their office.

"You should see this girl, Joaquin. Eyes like a jaguar, tango-dancer body, skirt the size of a handkerchief. She likes our Paulo, too. I don't know what it is about this boy, but the women just seem to fall over themselves for him. Perhaps it's the cool detachment, heh?"

"Our Paulo has always played hard to get," said Joaquin. "When the rest of us were hanging out around the Recoleta Girls' School, Paulo was locked up with his books or working in his mother's cafe. I remember when he was about 16 and waiting tables, there'd always be these girls at one table in the corner, smoking and admiring his ass. They couldn't take their eyes off of it, but bright boy here never knew, never did anything about it."

"That sounds like Paulo!" said Hugo. "You're going to enjoy Spain when you get there. Those Madrilena's are snooty bitches, they like men who play it dark and mysterious."

"Hey, he's going on his honeymoon, he'll have neither time nor opportunity nor desire for Spanish delicacies."

"Unless you don't keep Gabriela satisfied, of course." That had been Bernardo.

"No danger of that," replied Joaquin. "You've seen my man Paulo in the shower? He's got a big gun in the holster."

"That's as maybe", chortled Bernardo, "but you know what the women say: size isn't important. You could have a full-scale replica of the Obelisk but if you salsa when she wants to tango then you'll lose the girl, you hear?"

"That's true." Said Hugo. "So Paulo, is Gaby kept on her toes by your moves or is the big gun getting rusty?"

Paulo had hesitated before replying "I've had no complaints so far". He'd caught the look that had flashed between his friends, the sly smiles. After a year together, he and Gabriela had still not taken their relationship beyond passionate kissing and frenzied, frustrated fumbling. Privacy and time were the problems. They had no cars and both lived in small apartments, in earshot of their respective widowed mothers. Gaby also worked most evenings, in some bar that Paulo had never visited. Gaby didn't want him to go there, anyway - the owner didn't want her staff

distracted, she'd told him. That would change after the wedding, now Paulo could finally afford a small apartment of his own. This close to the wedding, his frustration had become irrelevant.

"Paulo", continued Bernardo distractedly, swirling his wine around the glass, "Your wedding is in one week. Don't you think you owe it to your bride to have a refresher? Get some practice in beforehand? I know this place, not far from here..."

Paulo paused on the vivid red-painted wooden arch of a bridge that led to the island. Leaning on the balustrade, he watched the bloated carp jockeying for position in the water beneath him, alert for any titbit. Paulo had remembered that there was something about Bernardo's tone of voice that had seemed odd at the time. Bernardo had known. Paulo swore and strode onto the island, seating himself on the boulder where he and Gaby had passed many an hour.

Gaby. He asked himself how much he truly knew about her. She had been a student when they met and was now training as a teacher. Perhaps their shared single-parent upbringing was one reason they got on so well; perhaps his unfulfilled lust one reason why he had sat here and asked her to marry him, so soon after meeting. The parilla he had eaten in last night was where their respective mothers had met for the first time to approve the union. Each was a successful businesswoman, in her own way. Paulo's mother had taken on his father's café when he died from a heart attack. Gaby's mother had started as a teacher in a tango school and gone on to buy it with her late husband's life insurance. She had other interests, Gaby had led him to believe. Perhaps that memory of the two proud and slightly fierce women in their finery had been why he had ignored Bernardo's hanging comment, then. But there had been no ignoring him, after the girls on the dance floor.

As he sat in the weak spring sunshine, Paulo put together the sequence of events. He hadn't objected to Bernardo's proposal, but at that stage he was probably unable to remember where he lived. He remembered them leaving the bar; piling into a taxi; Bernardo giving the driver an address. They'd pulled up outside what looked like a tourist hotel on a narrow street in San Telmo. A large man in a suit had opened the door to Bernardo's knock. Money had passed hands and they'd been shown to a table in a plush, dimly lit barroom where other men sat around, drinking and smoking. A well-dressed middle-aged woman brought drinks and a sort of menu that he'd looked at but not comprehended. Bernardo had said something to her and slapped him on the back, then handed over a credit card. He remembered the woman leading him to a door and into a small lounge. A number of women had been sitting on two sofas, dressed in colourful silken dressing gowns. They'd been reading magazines but all looked up, smiling. The middle-aged woman spoke clearly to him, "Please choose a hostess". At that point he could remember a feeling of vertigo, of distance overtaking him, like he was watching this from kilometres away. He remembered a youngish girl with dyed blonde hair coming up to him, the name "Samanta" being spoken, her leading him upstairs and along a corridor. There was a bed, a small cabinet beside it. Samanta bending over the cabinet, pulling something from it and then removing his clothes. He was on the bed, his head swimming, the pillows propping it up. Samanta was standing in red lingerie, removing her bra. He remembered watching her head bob rhythmically, but he was not connected, there was no response. Then Samanta was standing with her gown on again, a strange look on her face. Then he was alone. Then he heard a voice call his name, Gaby's voice. But was that this morning?

And now, his head in his hands, he heard her voice again. He looked up and saw her walking towards him, over the bridge. She was wearing a tan jacket over a black turtleneck sweater, black knee-length skirt and her favourite black calf-length suede boots. A silver crucifix bobbed around her neck, her cloak of long, dark, slightly curly hair falling freely behind her shoulders. Her face was impassive and looked pale. She stopped just in front of him. With a stabbing feeling in his stomach, Paulo realised that he had imagined nothing; the face in front of him now was

the same he had seen last night, standing framed in the doorway of his room in the brothel. She had then been wearing a low-cut cobalt blue dress, her hair pinned and spiralled up behind her head in classic tango-dancer style. She had worn blusher and eye shadow, her lips scarlet, speaking his name. She had looked ten years older than she was, older than Samanta, the other whore standing just behind her. She had stood for a second or two, staring at her fiance, lying helpless, naked except for a condom on his sad, deflated cock. She turned and left, and that was the last thing that Paulo remembered.

Now, she wore no makeup other than pale brown lipstick and a little liner around her dark, saucer-shaped eyes. Paulo thought she looked like a cat, fascinated by a movement in the long grass, waiting to spring. He held his breath, waiting for the execution bullet for their relationship. Instead, her face crumpled, her eyes filling with liquid. She seemed to stagger forward, into his arms. He couldn't believe it and just held her, crushed her to him as tightly as he could. His own eyes started to fill. He tried to raise her head, to kiss her forehead, her eyes. He wanted to kiss the tears away.

"I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry. I love you so much..."

Was that her speaking or him? They were both pouring out the same message. They clutched for a minute or more before Paulo spoke.

"Gaby, I'm so sorry. I was drunk, it was the first time that I have ever, ever.... "

"No, Paulinho, I should have told you. Please, you must believe me, I'm not a whore. Please. My mother runs the brothel. I just manage it when she is away. Please believe me, please."

"Gaby, Gaby, Gaby. My darling, my princess, my love, I never once thought you were a whore, never once."

"Never?"

"Never. You were wearing a dress, not a gown. I'm so, so sorry, I should not have been there. I was so drunk, I did not know what I was doing."

"It's OK. I know. I only came to look in on you because Samanta was worried. She said you didn't respond to her at all."

"That's true. I didn't want to be there."

"She's very good, or so I've heard. We don't want men complaining that they haven't got their money's worth. If the girl thinks that a man can't perform because of drink, the manager has to see what state he's in before we show him out. It happens a lot."

They cuddled until the sun vanished behind the high apartment blocks that overlooked the Gardens. A park attendant eventually came up to them, started to usher them out. They walked off hand in hand, Gabriela cleaning up her make-up. At the gate, Paulo asked her where they should go now. Gaby smiled at him.

"I have the keys to a place where there are rooms and we won't be disturbed....."