

I

Julie came to the cake-shop just to tell me they would be raffling coffeepots before they got to the lucky posy; she'd seen them and they were lovely, an orange split in two, showing its pips, painted on a white background. I didn't feel like going to the dance or even going out, after I'd spent the whole day selling cakes and my fingertips ached from tying all those gilded raffia knots and handles. And because I knew Julie could manage on as little as three hours' sleep and didn't mind whether she slept or not. But she insisted I went all the same, and that was me all over, it upset me when I was asked to do something and had to say no. I went in white from head to toe: starched dress and petticoat, shoes like splashes of milk, white paste earrings, three matching bangles and a white handbag Julie said was oilskin, with a clasp like a golden seashell.

The musicians had started playing by the time we reached the square. The roof was decorated with flowers and brightly coloured streamers made from paper and flowers. Some of the flowers were wrapped round light bulbs and the whole roof was

like an inside out umbrella, with the streamers attached right at the top, not halfway down. The elastic holding my petticoat up felt too tight. I'd struggled to thread it through with a crochet hook that kept snagging, and now a little button and loop of cotton were holding it in place. I pictured the red weal round my waist, but the moment I started rushing and getting out of breath, the elastic sliced into me again. The platform where the musicians had struck up was surrounded by banks of asparagus fern that, bedecked with artificial flowers, served as a barrier. The musicians, in their shirtsleeves, were sweating. My mother died years ago and wasn't there to give me advice, and my father had remarried. He found a second wife and I'd lost a mother who only lived to look after me. My father remarried and here I was, a young girl, alone in Diamond Square, waiting for them to start raffling coffeepots, with Julie shouting trying to make herself heard above the music, stop or you'll get in a right state! and me gawping at the flower-bedecked light bulbs, the streamers glued down with water and flour and everybody enjoying themselves, and me all eyes, when a voice in my ear whispered, want to dance?

And not really thinking I replied I didn't know how and turned round to take a look. I found a face so close to mine I couldn't really see what it was like, that it was a young man's. Don't worry, he said, I do and I'll soon teach you. I thought of poor Pete in his white apron shut up in the basement cooking at the Columbus Hotel, and blurted out: 'And what if my fiancé finds out?'

The young man moved even closer and laughed, 'Aren't you too young to have a fiancé?' And when he laughed, his lips parted and I could see all his teeth. He had little monkey eyes and wore a blue-striped white shirt, open at the collar, and his

armpits were soaked with sweat. And he suddenly turned his back on me, stood on tiptoe, swung round again, swayed this way and that, and said, sorry, and shouted: 'Hey? Anyone seen my jacket? It was on a chair next to the musicians! Hey!' And he said someone had stolen his jacket and he'd be back straight away and he hoped I'd wait. He started shouting: 'Ernie! Ernie!'

All green-embroidered canary yellow, Julie appeared from nowhere and said, hide me, I've just got to take these shoes off . . . I can't dance another step . . . I told her I couldn't budge because a young man who was looking for his jacket wanted to dance with me and had begged me to wait. And Julie said, you dance, you dance . . . And it was so hot. Kids were letting off rockets and bangers on street corners. The ground was strewn with watermelon seeds, and peel and empty beer bottles were stacked in the corners of the square and they were letting off rockets from roof terraces and balconies. I could see sweaty faces and the boys wiping their faces with their handkerchiefs. The musicians were swinging gleefully. All like a stage set. And then the *paso doble*. I danced up and down and he seemed a long way away, even though he was really very close, whispering, look how well she dances! And a strong whiff of sweat and stale eau de cologne hit me and I was eyeball to eyeball with his sparkling monkey eyes and little medal-like ears. And that elastic cutting into my waist and my mother dead and gone and not around to give me advice, because I told him my boyfriend was a cook at the Columbus and he laughed and said he was very sorry for his sake because I'd be his wife and darling within a year. And we'd dance the lucky posy dance in Diamond Square.

He said, my darling.

And said I'd be his wife within a year and I'd not even taken a good look at him, and now I did and he said, don't stare at me like that, or they'll have to pick me up off the floor, and that was when I told him he'd got monkey eyes and he laughed till he cried. The elastic round my waist cut into me like a knife and the musicians, tra-la-la, tra-lee-lee. And Julie was nowhere to be seen. She'd vanished. And his eyes looked deep into mine as if the whole world was in them and there was no escape. And the night sped on under the Great Bear in the sky, and the party sped on and the girl in blue with the posy whirled round and round . . . My mother six feet under in Sant Gervasi and me here in Diamond Square . . . Are they selling anything sweet? Honey and glazed fruit? And the exhausted musicians putting their things away in their cases, then taking them out again because a neighbour had just paid for one more waltz and everybody spinning like tops. When the waltz ended people began to leave. I said I'd lost Julie and he said he'd lost Ernie and, when we were all alone, and everyone was in bed and the streets empty, he said, you and I will dance a dawn waltz in Diamond Square . . . round and round . . . Pidgey. I looked at him taken aback and told him my name was Natalia and when I said my name was Natalia he laughed again and said there could be only one name for me: Pidgey. That was when I broke into a run and he chased me, don't be scared . . . don't you see you can't walk down these streets by yourself, somebody will steal you from me? And he grabbed my arm and stopped me in my tracks, don't you see somebody will steal you away, Pidgey? And my mother dead and me stuck there with the elastic cutting deep into my waist like a piece of wire tying me to a frond of asparagus fern.

And I started running again. With him in hot pursuit. The

shops had pulled their shutters down over windows full of things that stood stock-still, inkpots, blotting paper and postcards and displays of dolls and clothes, aluminium pans and knitted goods . . . And we came out on to the High Street, me in front, him chasing, and both running at top speed, and, years later, Pidgey, he'd still tell the story, the day I met her in Diamond Square, she ran away at full tilt and right by the tram stop, her petticoat dropped to the ground!

The cotton broke and my petticoat dropped. I jumped over it, almost tripped and ran as if all the devils in hell were at my heels. I got home and threw myself on my bed in the dark, on my little girl's brass bed, as if I was hurling a stone at it. I was so ashamed. When I got over my shame, I kicked my shoes off and let my hair down. And, years later, Joe still told the story as if it had happened yesterday, her elastic snapped and she ran like the wind . . .

II

It was all very mysterious. I was wearing my dress the colour of rosewood which was on the skimpy side for the weather and getting goose pimples waiting for Joe on the street corner. After I'd been loafing around for a bit, I felt somebody was staring at me from behind a trellis shutter because I saw it move on one side. Joe and I had agreed to meet by Parc Güell. A small kid came out of one entrance, a revolver tucked in his belt, firing his rifle, and he brushed past my skirt shouting, bang . . . bang.

The trellis parted, the shutter opened wide and a young man in pyjamas went psst . . . psst with his lips and beckoned to me to come over, hooking a finger at me. Just to be sure I pointed my finger at my chest, looked at him and whispered, me? He couldn't hear but he understood and nodded, and his face was so handsome, and I crossed to his side of the road. As soon as I was under his balcony the young man said, come in, we can have a little snooze together.

I flushed a thousand shades of red and moved away in a temper, especially at myself, and upset because I could feel that

young man staring at my back and through my clothes at my skin. I stood so the young fellow couldn't see me, but I was afraid if I stayed half hidden like that, Joe wouldn't see me either. I was wondering what was in store, because it was the first time we'd met by a park and I'd done all sorts of silly things in the morning thinking about the afternoon because I was worried stiff. Joe'd said we should meet at half past three and didn't come until half past four, but I didn't say anything because I thought that maybe I'd misheard him and I was the one who'd got it wrong, and as he didn't offer a single word of apology . . . I didn't dare tell him my feet were killing me because I'd been standing up so long in those leather shoes that got so hot, or that a young man had taken liberties with me. We started to walk up the hill, didn't exchange one miserable word and when we were right at the top I didn't feel cold any more and my skin was as smooth as ever. I wanted to tell him I'd split up with Pete, so we were all set. We sat on a stone bench in a far corner, between two leafy, spindly trees, and a blackbird kept flying low, from one tree to another, cheep-cheeping softly, rather hoarsely, and then we lost sight of it for a few minutes until it flew back out from under a tree, but we had our minds on other things while it kept dipping like that. I looked at Joe out of the corner of my eye and he was staring at the small houses in the distance. In the end, he asked, don't you find that bird a bit scary?

I said I really liked it and he said his mother had always told him birds that were black, even if they were blackbirds, brought bad luck. Whenever we met, after that first day in Diamond Square, Joe always pressed close to me and asked if I'd split up with Pete. And now he didn't and I couldn't think how to begin to tell him I'd told Pete it was all over between us. And it made me miserable when I did, because Pete acted like a lit match

that had been snuffed out. And when I thought how I'd broken with Pete, I felt sad and it made me think I'd done something wrong. You know, I'd always acted naturally, and when I remembered the look on Pete's face, I felt wretched as if a little door from a nest of scorpions had opened and released the beasts into my previous peace of mind, and they were cavorting in my misery, stinging painfully, and the sting was spreading through my veins and turning my blood black. Because Pete's voice choked, his eyes glazed over and flickered, and he said I'd ruined his life. I'd turned him into a piece of dirt. And when Joe stared at the blackbird, he began to talk about Mr Gaudí, whom his father had met the day he was knocked over by a tram, and how his father was one of the people who'd taken him to hospital, poor old Mr Gaudí, such a nice man, and he'd died so horribly . . . And nothing in the world could beat the Parc Güell and the Sagrada Familia and the wavy balconies of the Pedrera. I said they were very nice but far too many waves and sharp spikes as far I was concerned. He tapped my knee with the side of his hand and he hit me so sharply my leg shot into the air and he said if I wanted to be his wife I'd have to start liking every single thing he liked. He gave me a long sermon about men and women and their respective rights and when I managed to get a word in I asked, 'And what if I don't like something one *little* bit?'

'You've just got to, you don't have a clue.'

And again, sermon: a very long one. He talked about all kinds of people in his family: his parents, an uncle who owned a small chapel and a prayer stool, his grandparents and the mothers of Ferdinand and Isabel, the Catholic King and Queen who, according to him, were the ones who'd put us on the right road.

And then, although I didn't get him at first, because he kept mixing it up with everything else he was saying, he said, poor Mary . . . And he mentioned the mothers of Ferdinand and Isabel yet again and that perhaps we could get married soon because two friends of his were looking for a place for us. And he'd make furniture for me that would blow me sideways as soon as I saw it because it wasn't for nothing he was a carpenter like St Joseph and I was like the Mother of God.

And he said all this very cheerfully and I was still wondering what he'd meant when he'd said, poor Mary . . . and I was fading as quickly as the light of day and the blackbird kept dipping low from under one tree to the next and out again as if lots of blackbirds were busy flying around.

'I'll make a wardrobe that will do for both of us, from bottlewood, with a side for you and a side for me. And when I've furnished the flat, I'll make a cot for the baby.'

He told me he couldn't make his mind up about children. He liked to flit from one thing to another. The sun was setting and the shadows became blue and mysterious without the sun. And Joe talked about wood, about this wood and that, and what you could do with jacaranda, mahogany, oak, holm-oak . . . Right then, I've just remembered and will always remember, he kissed me, and the moment he kissed me I saw Our Lord hovering over his house, deep inside a billowing cloud, swathed in a mandarin orange fabric that had faded down one side, and Our Lord opened wide his arms, which were very long, grabbed the edges of the cloud and shut himself inside as if he was shutting himself inside a wardrobe.

'We shouldn't have come today.'

And he ran one kiss into another and the whole sky misted over. I could see the big cloud drifting away and other smaller

clouds appeared and started to chase that billowing cloud, and Joe tasted of milky coffee. And he shouted, they're locking the park!

'How do you know?'

'Didn't you hear the whistle?'

We got up, the blackbird took fright and flew off, the breeze blew my skirt up ... and we walked down one path after another. A girl sitting on a tile-covered bench was picking her nose and wiping a finger over an eight-pronged star on the back of the seat. I told Joe her dress was the same colour as mine. He didn't reply. When we were out in the street I told him, look, people are still going in ... and he said don't worry, they'll soon get them out. We walked down nearby streets and just when I was about to tell him, you know, Pete and I have split up, he stopped suddenly, stood in front of me, grabbed my arms and looked at me as if I'd done something wicked, poor Mary ...

I almost said don't worry, tell me what's wrong with Mary ... But I didn't dare. He let go of my arms, walked downhill by my side, until we reached the crossroads of Diagonal and the Passeig de Gràcia. We started walking round another block, and my feet couldn't stagger another step. When we'd been walking for half an hour, he stopped, grabbed me by the arms again, under a street lamp, and when I thought he was going to say poor Mary again, and I was holding my breath in anticipation, he growled: 'If we hadn't walked down so quickly, from up the top there, with the blackbird and all that, who knows what might have happened! But don't you worry, one day I'll catch you and you won't know what's hit you!'

We went round the houses until eight o'clock, not saying a word, as if we'd been born dumb. When I was by myself, I looked up at the pitch-black sky. And you know ... it was all very mysterious ...

III

There he was on the corner of the street, what a surprise, on a day when I wasn't expecting him.

'I want you to stop working for that pastry-cook! I've heard all about how he chases after his shop girls.'

I started shaking and told him to stop shouting, that I couldn't leave my job just like that, so rudely, without a decent excuse, that the poor fellow never had an ill word to say about me, that I liked selling cakes and if he forced me give it up, what would I do . . . He said that one dark, wintry afternoon, he'd come to see me at work. And he said that, when I was helping a customer to choose a box of chocolates from the right-hand window, the pastry-cook's eyes had trailed not after me, but after my behind. I told him not to be silly and that we might as well forget it if he couldn't trust me.

'I do trust you, but I don't want that pastry-cook having a good time at your expense.'

'You're mad,' I told him, 'he only ever thinks about his business! Get it?'

I was so angry my cheeks flushed a bright red. He grabbed me by the throat and shook my head. I told him to clear off and, if he didn't, I'd go to the police. We didn't see one another for three weeks and just when I was beginning to regret telling Pete it was all over between us, because at the end of the day Pete was a good lad who'd never been nasty to me, and was only a good worker who was crazy about his job, Joe turned up, cool as a cucumber, and the first thing he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets, was, poor Mary, sent packing because of you . . .

We went along Prater to the High Street. He stopped by the entrance to a grocery store that was full of sacks, put his hand in a sack of birdseed and said, what lovely seed . . . and we walked off again. He was holding some seed in his hand and when I wasn't looking he put it down the back of my blouse. He stopped me in front of a window full of clothes, see them? when we're married, I'll buy you some of those aprons and I said they looked straight out of the workhouse and he said they were what his mother used to wear and I said I couldn't care less, I wasn't going to wear them because they looked as shabby as you could get.

He said he'd introduce me to his mother, that he'd already told her about me and that his mother wanted to see for herself the girl her son had chosen. We went on a Sunday. She lived by herself. Joe lived in a lodging-house so as not to give her work and he said that made them more friends because they didn't get on at all well together. And his mother lived in a small house on the street with the flats for journalists and you could see the sea from her balcony and the mist that sometimes covered it. She was a very particular lady, proud of her elaborate permanent waves. Her house was full of ribbons and bows. Joe had told me all about them. There was a bow over the Holy Christ above her

bed-head. It was a black mahogany bed with two mattresses covered by a cream eiderdown patterned with red roses and a frilly red border. On the key to her night table, a ribbon. On every drawer in the chest of drawers, another ribbon. And every key to every door had a ribbon.

'I can see you're very fond of ribbons and bows,' I said.

'A home without ribbons isn't a proper home.'

And she asked me if I liked selling cakes and I said I really did, yes, madam, especially curling the end of the string with the tip of the scissors and I couldn't wait for the holidays to come when I'd wrap up lots of parcels and hear the cash register and doorbell ringing all the time.

'I don't believe you,' she said.

Late in the afternoon Joe dug his elbow into me and said, 'Let's be off.'

And when we were in the doorway his mother asked me, 'And do you like housework as well?'

'Yes, madam, I really do.'

'That's just as well.'

Then she told us to wait, went back into the house and came out with some black rosary beads she gave me as a present. When we were some way away, Joe said I'd completely won her over.

'What did she say when you were alone with her in the kitchen?'

'That you were a very good lad.'

'Just what I thought she said.'

When he said that, he stared at the ground and kicked a pebble. I told him I didn't know what I'd do with the rosary beads. He told me to put them in a drawer, that they might come in useful some day. You should never throw anything away.

And he pinched me under my arm. While I was rubbing it, because he'd really hurt me, he asked me whether I could remember something or other, and then said he'd soon buy a motorbike, and that would suit us down to the ground, because when we were married, we'd ride round the whole country and I'd ride pillion. He asked me if I'd ever ridden pillion behind a boy and I said I never had, that I thought it looked very dangerous, and he looked as happy as a lark, and said, ah, love . . . it's a piece of cake . . .

We went to the Monumental to have a drink and eat baby octopus. He met Ernie there, and Ernie, with his big cow-like eyes and slightly twisted mouth, said he'd found a flat on Montseny, quite cheap but in a bad state because the landlord couldn't be bothered with it, and the new tenants would have to do any refurbishing. It was an attic flat and we liked the sound of it, even more so when he said the roof terrace would be all ours. It would be all ours because the ground-floor neighbours had a yard and those on the first floor had a long, steep staircase down to a small garden with a chicken coop and wash-house. Joe got very enthusiastic and told Ernie he mustn't let it out of his hands and Ernie said he'd go with Matthew the day after and we should come as well. All together. Joe asked him if he knew of any second-hand motorbikes because Ernie worked in his uncle's garage and he said he'd watch out for one. They chatted away as if I didn't exist. My mother had never told me about men. She and my father spent years and years together arguing and a good few more not saying a word. They'd spend Sunday afternoons sitting in the dining room not saying a word to each other. When my mother died, this life without words extended. And when my father remarried several years later, I had nothing at home to latch on to. I lived a cat's life, running

all over, tail up, tail down, time to eat, time to sleep, except a cat doesn't have to work to survive. We lived in a house without words and I found the things that came to me frightening because I never knew what sparked them off . . .

When we all said goodbye at the tram stop, I heard Ernie say, I don't know where you got her from, she's a real find . . . And I heard Joe laugh, ha, ha, ha . . .

I put the rosary beads on the night table and went to take a look at the garden down below. Our neighbours' son, on leave from his military service, was enjoying the cool air. I screwed up a ball of paper, threw it at him and hid.

IV

‘I think it’s a good idea to marry young. You need a husband and a roof over your head.’

Mrs Enriqueta, who lived by selling roast chestnuts and sweet potatoes on the corner by the Smart cinema in winter and peanuts and almonds during the long summer holidays, always gave me good advice. She’d sit opposite me, when we were under the glass-fronted balcony, and she’d roll her sleeves up and down, said nothing when rolling them up, then once they were up she started talking and never stopped. She was tall, with an angler-fish mouth and an ice-cream cornet of a nose. Summer and winter, she always wore white stockings and black shoes. She was clean and tidy and very fond of her coffee. She had a painting, hanging on a piece of red and yellow string, that was full of locusts wearing gold coronets, with men’s faces and women’s hair, crawling out of a pit on to scorched grass, and the sea in the distance and the sky above were the colour of ox-blood and the locusts, clad in iron armour, were killing each other with swipes of their tails. It was raining outside. Drizzling

on terraces, streets and gardens, and on the sea, as if the sea needed more water, and maybe on the mountains. We could hardly see them and it was early afternoon. Drops of rain played chase on the washing lines and, sometimes, one dripped down and, before it fell, it stretched and stretched because it seemed it was a huge effort to let go. It had been raining for a week, drizzle, not too heavy or too light, and the low clouds were so full of drizzle they dragged their swollen bellies along the roofs. We watched the rain.

‘I think Joe will be much better for you than Pete. He’s got a small business. Pete is always at someone else’s beck and call. Joe’s smarter and more of a go-getter.’

‘But sometimes he gives a deep sigh and says, poor Mary . . .’

‘But you’re the one he’s marrying, aren’t you?’

My feet were frozen because my shoes were soaked and the top of my head felt red-hot. I told her Joe wanted to buy a motorbike and she said that showed how up-to-date he was. And Mrs Enriqueta went with me to buy the material for my bridal outfit and was very pleased when I said we might be renting a flat near hers.

It was in a terrible state. The kitchen stank of cockroaches and I found a nest of long, toffee-coloured eggs, and Joe said take a good look round because you’ll find a lot more where they came from. The dining-room wallpaper was lined with little hoops. Joe said he wanted apple green, and cream in the baby’s bedroom, with a frieze of clowns. And a new kitchen. He told Ernie to tell Matthew he wanted to see him. We all went to the flat on Sunday afternoon. Matthew started stripping the kitchen straight away, and a labourer, with bits all over his trousers, took the rubble out and tipped it into a barrow they’d parked in the street. But the labourer made a mess on the stairs

and a first-floor neighbour came out and said we should sweep up before we left because she didn't want to slip and break a leg ... and Joe kept saying people might be stealing our barrow ... We helped Ernie wet the walls of the dining-room and scrape the paper off. After we'd been hard at it for a while we realised Joe had disappeared. Ernie said Joe wriggled away like an eel whenever he didn't want to do something. I went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The back of Matthew's shirt was sopping wet and his face shone with sweat as he hammered on the chisel. I started scraping again. And Ernie said that Joe would just laugh his absence off when he came back and he was sure it would be very late. It was hard work scraping the paper off, first one layer, then another, five altogether. It was dark and we were washing our hands when Joe finally turned up and said he'd been helping the labourer to load the rubble into the barrow when one of his customers had walked by ... Ernie said, and time just flew by, I expect ... And Joe ignored him completely and said it would be more work than he'd expected but we'd manage. When we went to go downstairs, Matthew said they'd make me a kitchen fit for a queen. And then Joe decided he wanted to go up to the roof terrace. It was breezy and you could see lots of terraces, though the first-floor flat's bay window blocked our view of the street. Then we left. The wall between our landing and the first floor was covered in chalk drawings: names and little stick men. And among the names and the stick men there was a set of scales, really well drawn, the lines scored deep into the wall as if they'd used a chisel. One of the scales was set slightly below the other. I ran my finger over the edge of one of the pans. We went to get a drink and eat baby octopus. We had another row in the middle of the week because of Joe's obsession with the pastry-cook.

'If I see him staring at your behind again, I'll go in and he'll be the worse for wear,' he shouted. He disappeared for a couple of days and when he re-emerged, I asked him if he'd got over it and he strutted like a rooster and said I'd some explaining to do because he'd seen me out with Pete. I said he must have mistaken me for another girl. He said it *was* me. I swore it wasn't and he said it was. At first I spoke quietly but as he didn't believe me I started screaming and, when he heard me, he said all girls were crazy and rubbish and I asked him where he'd seen me with Pete.

'In the street.'

'But which street?'

'In the street.'

'But which street? Which street?'

He marched off. I didn't sleep that night. He came back in the morning and said I must promise never to go out with Pete again, end all that business and he'd never lose his temper with me again, I said all right and I'd never go out with Pete again. Instead of being pleased he flew into a rage, and said he was sick of me lying, that he'd set a trap for me and caught me like a mouse, and he said I should beg for forgiveness for going for a walk with Pete and I told him I hadn't but in the end he made me believe I had and that was when he told me to get down on my knees.

'In the middle of the street?'

'Kneel down inside your head.'

And he made me beg for forgiveness down on my knees inside my head, because I'd gone for a walk with Pete who, poor soul, I hadn't seen since we'd split up. On Sunday I went to scrape wallpaper. Joe didn't come until we'd finished because he'd had to work on a piece of furniture that was on order.

Matthew had almost finished the kitchen. One more afternoon and it would be ready. White tiles to about waist height. And shiny tiles above the stove. Matthew said he'd brought all the tiles from his workplace. He said it was his wedding present. He hugged Joe, and Ernie, with those dreamy cow eyes of his, was washing his hands. We all went off for a drink and baby octopus. Ernie said if we needed a ring he knew a jeweller who'd sell us one at a good price. And Matthew said he knew one who'd sell us one for half-price.

'I don't know how you do it,' Joe replied.

And all blond and blue-eyed, Matthew laughed cheerfully and glanced from Joe to me, 'I got the skills.'