



House
of
Rosina

January 4,
2020



I saw Rosina on Calle Agua on a glorious afternoon under spotless skies. It was New Year's Eve and she looked just about as delightful as a budding peony:



pleasantly plump, doll-faced, rosy-cheeked, curly-haired, she was dressed *à l'Espagnole*, donning a tight, black velvet bodice with a large white lace collar, a long pink silk skirt which sort of bounced at every step she took, and dainty black shoes with heels that went click-a-click on the stone-and-brick *calle* pavement. The rose in her hair was a perfect match to the blush in her cheeks.

“*Bonjour*,” she said. “*Excusez-moi*,” she went on, “*mais je ne peux pas m'arrêter*.” Then she thought a bit about it and began again: “*Buongiorno. Scusa, però non posso fermarmi*.”

That meant she couldn't stop.

“*Je suis un peu pressée, j'ai un rendez-vous avec Carmen*.”

“Don't bother to do it in Italian, I understand French,” I said. “English, too, if you speak it.”

“Of course I do. I'd love to stop and have a chat with you, but Carmen is expecting me at Lilla Pastia's tavern, so I'm sort of in a hurry.”

All my life I'd assumed Rosina was a polyglot. That of course meant she spoke at least two, if not more languages—of French and Italian, at least, one could be sure. That she was also proficient in English was news to me, but she did speak it and I now had proof of it and—well, to make a long story short: she was a multi-lingual young person of quality and there you are.

“I just wanted to complement you on your outfit,” I said.

“Oh, that. Thank you. I wear it ever since Mr. Beaumarchais suggested it, you know, to please him; I am much indebted to him for various reasons: for instance, he was of great help in the matter of the love affair between Count Almaviva and myself. Anyway, nice talking to you. See you later. Bye now.”

“Bye,” I said.

She gave me a radiant smile, in the process showing two dimples and a set of gleaming, lily-white teeth, the kind of teeth you could die for. With a gracious movement of the hand she bade me adieu, sent a kiss from the tips of her fingers, and disappeared into a courtyard nearby, singing softly to herself:

“*Tout me dit que Lindor est charmant, Que je dois l'aimer constamment ...*” All of a sudden she gave a little laugh and switched to Italian: “*Io sono docile, son rispettosa, sono obbediente, dolce amorosa ...*”

The rest of it I couldn't hear, except for the part where she sang something about a snake of sorts; I believe it was a viper. The kiss she had just sent hovered around a little, presumably



unsure as to where to go next; in the end it landed on my right cheek and settled there in one of the deeper wrinkles, now and then emitting faint musical sounds.

I kept on walking on Calle Agua by the city ramparts towards Plaza Alfaro, when it occurred to me this was all very weird: I mean, the girl was out and about and walking alone in the street, and this was Seville where she was supposed to be kept in the house under lock and key all day long. All night long, too, for that matter.

For I had heard her say not once, not twice, but multiple times “*Che mi serve lo spirito, che giova la bellezza, se chiusa sempre sto fra quattro mura, che mi par d’esser proprio in sepoltura?*” That I always took to mean she felt her wit as well as her youth were useless since she was sentenced to spend her life in a house that was also her grave. Yeah, she did say that even to Figaro, who owned a barber shop nearby at number 15. Apparently they both spoke Italian as well as French, but no Spanish. As I said: weird.

I was thinking of all these things when I reached Rosina’s house. The front door was locked, so I knew Dr. Bartolo was out, too. Perhaps he was looking for Rosina, I thought—and how on Earth could she have escaped his constant surveillance was beyond me. But it was right there, under the balcony, that I met Carmen. She was running towards the plaza from the direction of the cigarette factory, and by now she was short of breath; her hair and clothes appeared to be in great disarray, and the woman herself looked distinctly distraught. The three Japanese men taking pictures of Rosina’s balcony stopped doing that and gave her inquisitive looks instead.

“*Bonjour,*” she said to me. “*Avez-vous vu mademoiselle Rosine?*”

“*Oui,*” I said, “*elle est passée par là il y a deux ou trois minutes.*” Because it HAD BEEN three minutes earlier that I had met Rosina, and I had no reason to lie to Carmen, although she could only speak French. Other than that, I did respect her; what I am saying is that although she was no polyglot herself, she nevertheless sang a Cuban song called *Habanera* (for Havana was the capital of Cuba) and she did that in French although she was a Spanish Gypsy girl who spoke no Spanish at all. You can’t beat that.

Well anyway Carmen looked at me long and hard with those deep-black, shiny, slanted eyes of hers, while she was trying to pull back on her shoulders the blouse that had slipped down; I suppose she didn’t want to appear negligent or something, for she was a sharp one and perhaps suspected she was in yet another story. Then she said:

“*J’ai un rendez-vous avec Rosine près des ramparts de Seville. Nous irons boir du manzanilla et danser la seguidilla, car toute seule on s’ennuie.*”

“*Et les vrais plaisirs sont à deux,*” I said, not bothering to tell her she had the words all mixed up: she was supposed to dance first, then drink; well, at least according to Mr. Meilhac and Mr. Halévy.





This was even weirder than everything else that had happened that afternoon. Rosina was a girl you'd have least expected to go dancing and drinking, let alone in the company of someone like Carmen (a young person of objectionable morals and dubious reputation), and on New Year's Eve, too. I mean, it was utterly unthinkable and I pinched myself in disbelief. Clearly there was a misunderstanding somewhere; either that, or I was short of hearing or downright hallucinating. But no: I looked at the sky and it was still blue, the palm tree by Rosina's balcony still standing, birds still chirping, and the Japanese men had gone back to their picture taking.

The next thing I saw was tears in Carmen's eyes. She tried to hold them back, but she couldn't, so they started pouring down her cheeks like rivulets of see-through little pearls. It was really moving.

"Oh, Madame!" she said. "Madame, je suis injustement accusée d'avoir corrompu Don José, et ça me fait vraiment mal. C'était pas moi, c'était Rosine qui l'a corrompu, et puis, voilà, je viens d'apprendre qu'elle l'a abandonné et est on train de s'enfuir avec Mr. Escamillo."

"Escamillo, le toréador?"

"Oui, Madame, c'est précisément ça."

What, I thought, if that were true, and Rosina had thrown herself at Don José then abandoned him for Escamillo the torero with whom she was about to elope, then Mr. Mérimée had gotten it all wrong (why he didn't even know about Escamillo, all the way thinking his name was Lucas!). And so did Mr. Meilhac and Mr. Halévy, the librettists (although they were aware of Escamillo's existence, they had no idea Carmen was a married woman); not to mention Mr. Bizet, who had composed the music to the opera.

Then I thought, surely Rosina couldn't do anything as bad as that, for I recalled her referring to herself as a docile, respectful, sweet, loving girl ... wait a minute: didn't she afterwards say something slightly different, like *"ma se mi toccano dove l mio debole saro una vipera, saro!"* That was Mr. Sterbini's doing: I mean he made her say so, not Mr. Beaumarchais, but both Mr. Sterbini and Mr. Rossini the composer must have known something about Rosina we common people didn't. A viper! A viper who'd play a hundred tricks on people to get what she wanted! And Carmen so unjustly blamed for someone else's wrongdoings. That hurt. So I turned to her and asked:

"Mais dites-moi, Carmen, si c'est vrai, comment le savez vous? Il n'y a pas mention de ça chez Monsieur Mérimée; ni chez Monsieur Bizet."

Oh my, this was getting hard, and surely if she'd be speaking English it'd be easier to carry on the conversation.





“Do you speak English?” I asked.

“Of course I do.”

Weird again.

“Thank God. Well then, if this is true, how do you know about it? Neither Mr. Mérimée nor Mr. Bizet mention it. Also please tell me how come just now you said you were meeting Rosina to have drinks and make merry?”

“Oh, that. It was a lie. I’ve been looking for her all over the place to pull her hair and spit in her face. Then I sent her word through Figaro to meet me at Lilla Pastia’s. Anyway,” she went on “I know my own life better than any of these messieurs could or would.”

“Console yourself ... *non foste, e non sarete né la prima né l’ultima* ...” I was about to say, but then I remembered that was from a different opera altogether, and Mr. da Ponte and Mr. Mozart surely didn’t know zilch about Carmen, although Don Juan had been born just a few short blocks from Plaza Alfaro. Besides, Carmen didn’t speak Italian so she wouldn’t understand a word. It was all very complicated, so I had to quickly think about something else to say.

But before I could open my mouth:

“*Ah figlia di pu ...*” Carmen said. “*Vo’ farne orrendo sempio, gli vo’ cavare il cor.*”

That more or less meant she was going to brutally slaughter Rosina and excavate her heart from her chest.

She said this with so much passion, the air around us became thicker by at least ten centimeters and heavier by several kilos (I suspect it was hatred that thickened it so). A cold wind started blowing from the direction of the ancient ramparts and old Moorish water pipes, and Rosina’s kiss vanished from the spot it had been resting on my face. I shivered.

It was all wrong: wrong opera, wrong characters, wrong relationships, wrong century—and now Carmen speaking Italian, AND this not her part; the whole situation was getting out of hand.

Then I remembered that when Don José was in prison, recounting his and Carmen’s adventures to Mr. Mérimée, he had called her the ultimate liar; well he must have known, for he knew her best.

At any rate it was really none of my business, and I just wanted her to leave me alone and go in peace, meet Rosina—and let the two of them do whatever they had to do. Besides, I wasn’t even sure where the blessed tavern was, for according to Mr. Mérimée it was across the Guadalquivir, in Triana; yet according to Carmen it appeared to be on Calle Agua by the city ramparts, close by where the two of us stood now.





But I didn't have time to think about it for long: suddenly there was great clamor and anguished shouts, the kind of thing you'd normally associate with crowds in distress crying out for mercy or help or both. This was accompanied by the sound of thudding on the old stone pavement of some heavy animals' hooves approaching from the direction of Juveria, the old Jewish neighborhood; it sounded like thunder before a huge storm, and I looked to Rosina's balcony to see whether I could seek shelter there in case of emergency. I knew Figaro and Count Almaviva had at one time climbed on a ladder all the way up to the first floor (well, second, if you're American), and thus entered Rosina's house by the balcony door; but there was no ladder in sight, nor did I know where to procure one from.

Carmen shouted:

"Quick, get out of the way! It's bulls, and they're gonna run straight through Calle Agua and the plaza. You're putting your life in danger if you stay here one more minute."

Oh.

"What about you? You're wearing a red skirt on top of this white petticoat."

"Yeah, Mr. Mérimée in his novella had me wear that so I have to, although truth be told I don't like it a bit that the petticoat is all thorn. I mean, it's disgraceful what these French authors would come up with! Then they're not dependable at all: why after all that fuss about the red skirt, in an 1845 watercolor he even painted me in a white dress! It's so hard to keep track of all of these outfits, I really don't know what to put on anymore. Mr. Mérimée, he drives me nuts. But don't worry about me, I'll just climb the old wall and hang on to it for dear life till the bulls are gone."

"You gotta be kidding me. You couldn't possibly do that: you're not equipped! Besides, this is not Pamplona. Bulls wouldn't run through here."


"*Mujer*," she said "for God's sake come back to your senses: this is a story and you're writing it, so you can have them run wherever you damn' please."

"Then I won't have you climb the wall."

"And there you're wrong: I'm a strong-willed character and master of my own life. I will. *Carmen sera toujours libre.*"

Meanwhile the crowd running ahead of the bull pack broke into the plaza shouting like mad; the bulls were closely following on their heels, like some infernal contraption straight from hell; or a thick, dumb, unending black oil spill, except that would be almost noiseless and here there was deafening commotion so you couldn't hear the thoughts in your own head. Not that there was too much time for thinking.





In a second Carmen jumped away from me and towards the base of the rampart; from there she somehow managed to climb to the crenelated top of it—and there she rested. You could see her skirt gently moving in the soft afternoon breeze, like a flapping red flag.

I flattened myself against Rosina's house's wall and the people and bulls passed me and were completely gone in a few minutes. Or almost. The last of the bulls turned around and galloped towards me; I cringed inside. The bull came very close, bent his head a little, and whispered in my ear:

“Be careful about these two. They're trouble.”

Then it galloped away.

Rosina herself was approaching the plaza from the other end of Calle Agua.

“Quick!” I cried from under her balcony. “Get into the house and lock the door. Carmen is about to scoop your heart out of your chest.”

“No kidding,” Rosina said. “That flimsy Gypsy girl with her ridiculous red skirt and thorn petticoat? I kept waiting for her at Lilla Pastia's and she never showed up.”

“She's right here atop that rampart, and when she comes down she's gonna make your life miserable—if she lets you go on living, that is.”

“What's the matter with her?” Rosina asked.

“Well you know she thinks you stole Escamillo from her and is seeking revenge.”

“Liar. Everybody knows she's a liar and a deceiver.”

She turned her head up towards where Carmen was still sitting on the crenelated top:


“*Vieni quà giù, maledetta creatura!*”

That meant “Come down here, you cursed creature!” but I didn't think there was any need to translate, now that I knew Carmen understood Italian: turns out she, too, was a polyglot. She even had a smattering of Basque, I recalled, from what Don José had said to Mr. Mérimée.

Besides, this was going to turn into an awful catfight and I didn't want any part of it, for I had seen one in my youth and that was one too many. These two *mujeres* would scream and call each other names and pull each other's hair and whatnot, regardless of the fact that they belonged in two separate literary works, operas, and centuries (well, that wasn't true as far as Rossini's opera was concerned). They would be dragged to the Royal Prison on Calle Sierpes, a respectable establishment to which Don José at one time had already tried with little success to take Carmen, in the process selling his soul to the Devil, I'd say.

From the rampart top Carmen shouted back:





“You should stick to your Count, you impudent little rascal! Don’t go around trying to entice other people’s lovers, you pretentious, spoiled brat, or by Jove I’ll see to it that you get what you deserve.”

By now I’d gotten used to the weirdness of the whole situation, so not a muscle twitched on my face when she invoked Jove, an ancient Greek god she couldn’t have known about and of whom it wouldn’t have been her business to know anything at all. Her line was so out of character I started laughing.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me,” she snapped. Then to Rosina: “I’ll send a bull to gnaw your entrails, so you languish in pain crying out for mercy. And let there be no surcease to your agony till you sing in dissolution; and may the flames of hell consume you forever and aye.”

By now Rosina had taken off her dainty black shoes and was close to the wall; apparently she was readying herself to climb it.

“Don’t involve me in this,” I thought. As I turned on my heels and left the plaza as quickly as I could, walking on Calle Agua towards the Cathedral, I met Berta, who was returning to Rosina’s house from some errand in town. I stopped her to let her know there was a conflict between her mistress and some Gypsy girl, and that it was about to become nasty. I opened my mouth and found myself uttering the following words:

“Ma che cosa è questo amore che fa tutti delirar? Egli è un male universal, una smania, un pizzicore, un solletico, un tormento.”

They were Berta’s lines. I was completely out of character.

