

The Witch from Bilbao

by Jeremy Holland

I remember the first time I saw her. It was early for Barcelona, just past midnight, but Sugar was standing room only. The smoke trapped within its stone walls and low ceiling had thickened into a haze distorting the light, the bottles, the people ; everything except for her, that is. Sitting all alone against the far wall, she was a clear picture of an unclassifiable beauty as she sipped on a drink. She wasn't sultry like the Brazilian girls working, but mysterious like a dark haired faerie and when our eyes met, the loud music and the conversations of the bar blended into the quiet hush of a soft wind.

The stench of cologne brought the noise of the bar blasting back. A bronzed Spaniard pushed through the crowd, almost knocking me off my stool. He shouted his order and I glanced to see if the girl was watching, getting a good chuckle out of my predicament. She was gone; in her place sat a blond glowing from her summer tan. Stunned from the change in female scenery, I sat up and gently elbowed the Spaniard to give me some room.

He grumbled, "Perdona," and I looked down at my mojito. I took a sip. The sweetness had me licking my lips while my eyes fixed on the bathroom door because I was sure that was where the girl had disappeared. But by the time I'd finished my drink, there was still no sign of her. I couldn't help but wonder if my mind might be playing tricks on me, if she was a figment of my imagination. I slurped the last watery drops of my mojito, swiveled my stool and stood to leave. The sight of the girl approaching through the crowd made me sit back down.

"Do you have a light?" she asked, sticking a rolled up cigarette into her small mouth.

My tongue knotted and I mumbled, "Sure, hold on a sec," as I fiddled in my pocket before finally producing a lighter.

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She puffed her cigarette lit and said, "You have beautiful blue eyes. What's your name?"

"B... Be... Ben."

"I'm Arantxa."

I couldn't form a complete sentence so lost was I in her exotic beauty. Her name along with her rounded nose and deep set eyes revealed her to be from the Basque country in Northern Spain. They were the Scots of the Iberian peninsula, famous for their brute strength and games which consisted of heaving heavy objects as far as they could in the clearings of forests.

My mind unable to function, my mouth took over and I blurted out, "Do you like to lift rocks?"

She caught the reference to her homeland and laughed. "Only when I swim," she said quoting the punch line from a joke about her people. "Have you been to the Basque Country?"

"I went to Bilbao once," I told her, the words now coming out with ease. "Loved it. Getxo has a great beach."

Her eyes twinkled at the compliment. "Bilbao is where I'm from."
"What brings you to Barcelona?"

"The same thing that brings you."

"Oh, I see, the weather. How long have you been here?"

"A year this October, and yourself?"

"Six," I replied.

“That's a long time for a guiri. So you speak perfect Spanish?”

“Not fluently, but I can get by. Your English is impeccable by the way.”

“Thanks. I lived in Ireland for a few years.”

“Whereabouts?”

“A small village near the Wicklow mountains.” She ended the sentence with a smile. Her canines rested behind a row of otherwise straight teeth giving her grin a carnal quality that made me tingle with the nervous energy of the unexpected like being alone in the woods for the first time. I asked her if she wanted a drink and she suggested somewhere different, lightly brushing my arm to follow her as she turned to leave. Her back to me and her hair up in a pony tail, I saw the lines of a tattoo poking from above her collar and an electricity rushed from all my extremities colliding at my midsection. It had been ages since a girl had provoked such a potent, primordial reaction.

She took me to the Pipa Club located in Plaça Reial. I'd read once it was originally founded in 1980 by a group of smoking enthusiasts who met at the famed Quatre Gats restaurant which had been a historic haunt for artists including Picasso. That was the past, though. Nowadays, they gathered at a converted flat overlooking the old royal square in the heart of El Barrio Gotico; its door open to anyone who could find it amid the tourists who drank at the tables of the surrounding bars. Inside the Pipa Club was just as crowded as Sugar. People huddled along the walls of a long hall, drinking bottled beer, smoking cigarettes, talking. Our arrival at the main salon was met with uncomformable stares from a couple sitting at a round table in the corner. They focused on Arantxa, pocketed their packs of

tobacco and left. This girl definitely had something about her because I'd never been so lucky getting seats in bars.

She looked at me and asked, "What would you like to drink?"

"Um, what you having?" I replied. Her head barely reached my shoulder and it was only now did I realize how short she was.

"Have you ever tried pacharán?"

"Yeah, I love it."

"Okay, I'll get you a glass. It's not as good here as how we make it at home, but it's perfect for hot nights."

"Do you need help?"

"No, wait here," she said and I watched as she disappeared into the crowded hall and when she emerged from that exact same spot, our eyes met like at Sugar turning my clenched jaw into a smile.

She handed me a tube glass half filled with a rose liquor. "Thanks," I said, taking a sip. The familiar liquorice and berry flavor whet my mouth, but as it traveled down my throat, it left an unfamiliar bitter aftertaste.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's good," I lied.

"I didn't think they sold that brand outside of the Basque country. They say it has hallucinogenic qualities like real Absenta."

"Really?" It was increasingly getting harder not to simply stare into her black, marble-like eyes and agree with everything she said.

I took a bigger sip and sucked on an ice cube to cool my rising temperature. I crunched and said the first thing that popped into my head, "What do you like best about Barcelona?"

She laughed at the randomness of the question. "I love its beauty and the people it attracts," she replied finishing her sentence with a sip of red wine. "And what do you like about it?"

"The beach being close to the city." I was no longer looking longingly into her eyes, but at her nimble fingers adorned with silver rings holding a small glass. "And the chance to meet girls like you, who are as beautiful as the buildings," my mouth added without any permission from my brain.

"Ah, that's sweet." The cheese factor of my last sentence was luckily lost in translation and she said, "Do you know what else I love about Barcelona?"

"No, what?"

"It's witches."

She shared how she'd always been fascinated by the occult side of Spanish life. Tales of Iberian witches, sorcerers and magic were common throughout early medieval Europe thanks to the mathematical and scientific advances of the Moors who had ruled most of the peninsula. The arrival of the Catholic Inquisition, which equated mystical beliefs with heresy and punishable by death, ended this enlightened time. Still, not even the threat of torture could completely kill the deeply ingrained belief in the supernatural and it survived the centuries, practiced secretly both by kings in their palaces and every day folk in their homes.

This was especially true in the northern regions of the country where the Celts were said to have settled before the Romans. Today

in Galicia, good witches could still be found in small towns where they were known as meigas. Meanwhile, Basques who lived near the caverns forged from the aptly titled Hell river continued to perform the sorgin dantza, or witch dance, during Carnival in February. Here, in Catalunya, the bonfires lit during the famous summer festival of Sant Joan were originally meant to ward off the airborne Bruixas who had converted into flies.

“But, in general, the belief in magic isn't as strong here as in the Basque country or Galicia,” she said, pausing to see my reaction to her unusual interest.

“Except the Golden Witch of Sort,” I replied, bringing up the famous witch from outer space who was said to bless the Christmas lottery buyers who purchased their tickets in a small town called Sort, or luck in Catalan.

“That's just a marketing ploy.” The sharpness to her tone hinted at annoyance. “Here, witches are only for children stories. It's a shame really because there's such a rich tradition of magic in Catalunya, but Catalans today take life too seriously.”

“Yeah,” I said laughing at a statement I'd heard all too often living in Barcelona, “but you're right, I just finished a book by Mercè Rodoreda and she wrote quite a bit about witches. When I ask people about them now, they just shrug.”

The name drop brought a surprised smile to her face. “La dona de la literatura Catalana,” she said. “I'm surprised you know about her.”

“Yeah, well, you know,” I replied, my cheeks flushing with the irrational embarrassment that accompanied people realizing I wasn't a complete idiot.

“I'm impressed.” There were moments when a simple look could have profound physiological impact. Dopamine flooded your brain; the electricity from the firing synapses caused the hair on your arms to stand. It was magical and more powerful than any pill I'd ever tried and staring into Arantxa's eyes, we shared such moment until she said, “I see you liked the pacharán.”

“Huh?” I wasn't expecting that question and looked down at my empty glass. I hadn't even realized it was gone. Maybe it was all the talk about witches and magic, but its effects felt more like a potion than a cocktail. My head was cloudy but not with the the dense fog from too much booze; instead it was filled with a light smoke that had me imagining running around an empty Parc Güell naked during a summer shower.

The people around me and the bar morphed into extras at a fictitious location, part of a world to which neither Arantxa nor I belonged. We were talking. About what exactly, I do not know, so intoxicated was I from the single glass of pacharán and the company of a girl who grew paradoxically more familiar and mysterious with each lull in conversation. Following the last pause, she suggested we go to her flat and my mind flashed to BBC documentaries about insects to quell the rising eagerness making me giddy. She took my hand and I warmed with excitement as we pushed through the Pipa Club, ran down the stairs and into Plaça Reial.

We walked north along Carrer Ferran, passing the carnival atmosphere of inebriated tourists stumbling out of the closing Irish bars; drug peddlers hid in the shadows waiting to greet them. As we crossed Plaça Sant Jaume, an almost full moon shone down on the taxis lining up outside the majestic building of the Catalan government; a white statue of the patron saint of the region, Sant Jordi, embedded in its front wall. The night began to take on a life of its own. It was like in the part in the movie when the best song on the soundtrack came in marking the start of a montage. We stopped

and kissed. We laughed and bought cans of beer from a Pakistani. We didn't so much as weave through the world of visitors, themed bars and petty dealers as dance, the momentum of the moment fading around the metro station and the arrival of Via Laietana.

On the other side of the street was El Born, and like the more well-known Barrio Gotico, the neighborhood was full of tiny, medieval alleys that viewed from a satellite looked like a maze. Arantxa led me past the Santa Maria del Mar; a squat cathedral built during the Catalan Gothic period of the city when the square in front of its wooden doors hosted jousting competitions. She took me up one small street and down another until it ended at a door. I looked back down the alley from which we came; the buildings on either side made it seem like a crevice of a mountain it was so narrow and I felt so remote.

We walked into the stone entrance and a twinge of suspicion made me pause. I wondered if there wasn't a sinister side to this girl, something which should give me concern. I didn't really know her after all. Her tattoo peeking up from under her shirt, the subtle sway of her hips as she climbed the first flight of stairs, spun my worries into desire. The first step creaked as I followed her up and by the time we arrived at the third floor, my legs burned I was so out of shape now I had a place with an elevator. When we reached the attic, my knees wobbled as if I'd just climbed to the top of the Sagrada Familia. But unlike the one and only time I did that, her smile made sure I didn't complain. "Here we are," she said showing me into her flat.

A small studio with wooden beams along its white ceiling, the sweet smell of incense, hashish and tobacco hung in the air. She told me to take a seat and went to the kitchen. Sitting down on a couch, I relaxed for the first time that night and my eyes scanned the area to get a better idea of my mysterious host. On the side table were candles and a Celtic cross next to a framed picture of her dressed in

a charcoal coat. She stood in a green field near a stream with gray mountains and an overcast sky in the background; her black hair blowing from an unseen wind reminded me of those classic European models from the sixties.

Intrigued by the photo, I went to pick it up for a closer look. A loud hiss got my attention and stopped me from admiring the picture. Crouched at my outstretched feet was a scrawny, ginger cat; its green eyes slit and its ears pinned back. The fear running through my mind wasn't of an animal attack but that Arantxa would ask me to leave because her pet obviously didn't care for me. But she didn't kick me out. She barked some language which was neither Spanish nor English and stormed towards a flimsy door near the kitchen flinging it open. The cat hissed one last time and dashed to where she stood, paused and disappeared into the night.

"Sorry about that," she said. "He gets jealous."

"No problem," I replied. Standing up from the couch, I strolled over to the small kitchen where she handed me another glass of pacharán.

"I made this myself."

"Really?" I took a sip. The bitter aftertaste lingered in my mouth like garlic but I lied again, "It's great. By the way, what language was that?"

"Gaelic."

"Gaelic!"

"Yes. I like archaic languages like Gaelic and Basque."

“Wow. I barely speak English and Spanish correctly. So I take it you have a terrace.”

“Yes. Go take a look at the view if you like.”

“Your cat's not waiting outside to attack me, is it?”

“No,” she chuckled. “Seamus won't be back until the morning, probably with a dead bird or rat as a peace offering.”

“That must be a pleasant sight first thing in the morning.”

Her light laugh put me at ease and she led me to the door. “They say the best way to see Barcelona is from the roof of a building. Tell me if it's true while I wash my face.”

I willingly followed her advice and stepped onto the concrete roof littered with potted plants. The air was thick with the pent up humidity of summer and sticking my tongue out, I could taste the moisture ready to explode from the sky once the storms arrived in late August. In the not too far distance, rising above the squat skyline of the famed L'Eixample district were the four spindly spires of the Sagrada Familia illuminated in a white light. Surrounded by cranes, it's completion date inched closer and some said it'd be finished within my life time, nearly a hundred and twenty years after it started. I hoped so, because even from this distance, it was like something from the world of Tolkien and staring at it, I wondered what ghosts it housed, if there was some way of breaking in to see.

My attention moved from the impossible mission of scaling the church's stone walls as I looked beyond it and the dense city to the dark silhouette of the foot hills encircling Barcelona. On a rounded peak in the north west, a church stood atop Tibidabo mountain. A bright, shining beacon in an otherwise black sky, I recalled the story from the bible after which it was named, when Satan tempted Jesus

by offering him the world for his soul. It was a deal I didn't think I would've been able to resist.

My drink again gone without me realizing it, the light smoke in my head condensed into a thick mist like the one I remembered always hovered over Bilbao in the mornings. I heard the faint calls of my name and faced the flat. Feeling as if I'd downed an entire bottle and not a few drinks, I stumbled towards the flickering lights of the dark room on the other side of the open door. My vision wasn't double as much as blurred and after making sure to step over the raised frame, I promptly ran into the edge of the foldout bed. It was a hard bump which would've usually caused me to at least yelp, but I didn't. I stood there and rubbed my eyes to make sure the sight before me was real.

"Come here," Aratnxa said, laying across the bed, dressed in a black slip that gently hugged her curves. The light of the candles and the haze of the burning incense gave her the appearance of a mistress of the night waiting for her favorite john. She lay there propped up on an elbow, smoking a rolled cigarette; the plum coming from its smoldering cherry had the hint of citrus. Mesmerized by her looks, feeling high from the aroma, I could only stand and stare as my shin throbbed; she was so stunning.

She flashed her carnal smile, triggering my body into motion and I climbed onto the bed. "That's a good boy," she said handing me the cigarette.

Taking a deep drag, I let the smoke fill my lungs. The second I exhaled, I remembered why smoking something potent after drinking liquor was a mistake. The closest sensation I could equate to it was being on a small ship in the middle of a stormy ocean, wanting to hurl but not being able to as the waves tossed the boat up, down and sideways.

Artanxa looked at me and began to remove her rings. My unsteady stomach settled and the rocky moment passed. My eyes trailed her hand as she put each silver ring on the side table. I noticed one had a small compartment like in mystery films where the villain stored the poison. My stomach tightened at the thought she might have drugged me. I began to pull away.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I replied looking at a face whose statuesque beauty overrode any inhibitions I might have had. She stroked my cheek and leaned in for a kiss, her soft lips charging my body. The mist clouding my brain acted as a conductor and a cerebral storm erupted from the electricity as she took me to a world beyond the imagination of any Hollywood director or even those in the San Fernando Valley for that matter. It was one of those nights that made being single worth it. All those times I'd stagger home to a cold bed, cursing my friends who had found somebody and settled down, became easily overlooked complaints of a frustrated man. The only concept of time were the candles and the incense burning as we gave into the temporal lust that bonded us; the brightly colored panther tattooed crawling up her back again produced images of insects and an aristocratic English voice over discussing their anatomy to sooth my rising emotions.

The flames of the candles had died and the sticks of incense were but ash by the time the first faint rays of the morning sun sliced through the flat. Holding Arantxa tight in my arms, listening to her breathe, I finally fell into a deep sleep but it wasn't a peaceful rest like I'd been expecting following such an intense evening. I felt as if my body was being stretched on a rack, my organs forced to new places by pushing bone. My muscles and ligaments tightened and my mouth jutted out until it met my upturned nose. The agony had me crying and begging to wake up, but the murky rose liquid in which my body was suspended swallowed the words, making my

pleads as futile as trying to reason with a Spanish bureaucrat. My voice hoarse and scratched, I stopped shouting and closed my eyes, praying repeatedly until it grew into a chant for this nightmare to end.

* * *

It must have been night when I finally awoke, alone in the bed. The flat was dark but I could clearly see the shapes and outlines of my surroundings. I rolled from my side onto my belly, stretched out my arms and pushed my bottom in the sky. I felt different, like a new being. My mind was clear and free of existential questions. There was no pondering of life's great mysteries or what had happened to me. My thoughts were driven by instinct and need and I had the urge to pee.

Jumping off the bed, scampering down the hall, I followed the scent of ammonia and ran into a small bathroom. After I was done scratching around the litter box for a good place to leave my mark, my curiosity was piqued to see what I was exactly. I knew I had been born a cat, but not what kind. In fact, I had no memory of anything before the moment I woke up in the dark flat.

I stared up at the ledge of the sink and wondered if I could make it. From my perspective, it was as tall as a wall and like I said, I had no past recollection to know if I had the strength to reach such great heights. There was only one way to find out and the question was: how important was it to see what I what I looked like? I crouched, the muscles in my hind legs coiled and I jumped with outstretched arms ready to embrace my first feline leap.

My front claws furiously scratched at the marble counter top, desperate to get a grip as I dangled in the air, slipping towards the litter box below. The fear of falling had my hind legs kicking wildly. My rear claws caught on the wooden side of the fixture halting my backwards momentum. My tiny heart beating, I called on one last effort and pushed out my hind legs, propelling myself up and onto

the sink. I'd made it but the harrowing jump had sweat secreting from under my paws. I licked and wiped them against the side of my face to cool down. I was still hot. I did it again and again. I caught my reflection in the mirror and stopped for what stared back at me was a large Siamese.

My ears perked at the sound of a keys jingling. I turned and jumped off the sink, hitting the floor running, my paws sliding on the tiles as I sprinted out the bathroom and down the hall. The scrawny tabby lay in wait by the door and hissed. I stopped, crouched and unsheathed my claws, anxious to see what they could do. The door creaked open and Arantxa entered carrying the smell of food. The arrival of dinner calmed the situation and the both of us relaxed. The ginger cat let out a weak meow, hopped onto all fours and ran over to her, rubbing against her leg. I sat erect, my eyes narrowing in contempt.

"Hello, Seamus," she said, rubbing the back of his scruffy neck. "I see you've met Ben."

Seeing her again, hearing my name reminded me that twenty-four hours ago I'd been a man and not a cat. I'd been able to contemplate and waste time on unanswerable problems for no other reason than to challenge my mind. Now, I didn't even know what the questions were. The remnants of my soul were powerful, however, and not even this witch could destroy it. From deep within my new feline body, the smoldering ashes of my human past caught fire, the oxygen of my pumping blood giving it the force to open my mouth.

"Why did you do this to me?" I cried, the words a string of different pitched meows.

Arantxa stopped putting away tins of cat food and came around the counter. She bent down and gently stroked by back and under my chin. "A cat's life is much better than a human's," she said.

“You'll see. It's simpler to live and not think and I'll take good care of you; I promise.”

“But why me?”

She answered my question with a quick laugh and a smile before standing and adding, “Because like most Basque and Spanish women, I've always had a thing for blue eyes. Now relax and enjoy your new life. There's enough room for the both of you in my bed.”

