

## *Teresa*

I found the first violin in a garbage dump. And it was an excellent violin, even though I obviously didn't know that yet. What I did know was that it was a magical violin. I saw that right away, just by looking at it, because it was shining in the dusk, and things that shine are usually magic. I'm not making that up. Mother and I would often rummage through the dump to see if we could find something that we could sell. If I told that to some of the people here with me now, they would be shocked.

In fact, until now I was alone here, in the theater I mean. And then, all of a sudden, I heard some soft footsteps approaching the stage entrance, announcing the appearance of the first musician. He's a drab trumpeter, with a face that suggests the only thing in the world he has of any value is his trumpet. He greets me with a wave and says something I don't catch. I think he's Romanian; I vaguely remember someone telling me that.

I had been looking out at the empty seats for some time, sitting with the violin in my hand, because I was tired of warming up

and missed the silence. The silence of the empty theater and the silence outside in this city, in the squares, on the streets. A silence of dead leaves. From the hotel window, before coming here, I saw leaves fall, leaves that carpet the colorful ground in autumn. Where I live—Catalonia—I'd have to go to the mountains to see colors like these. Mountains I didn't visit until I was a teenager, because as a girl I could never afford to leave Barcelona.

Everything changed after I found the violin. Look what I found, I said, triumphantly lifting the instrument in one hand and the bow in the other. And as I lifted it, I brushed my hand over the strings without meaning to, and they made a rending, high-pitched sound that wrenched at my soul. It was a strange sound and I wasn't sure I whether I liked it. Then I took a good look at the violin and I stared into one F-hole, which of course I didn't know was called that, because all I saw was a long opening—at the bottom of it there were some handwritten letters. I was able to read them, but I couldn't understand them. I made out a date: 1672. What are you looking at? complained my mother. Let's take it; that we can sell. Mother never paid attention to the shape of things we pulled from the dump; she only focused on what they were made of, to see if someone would pay any money for them. It wasn't that we lived on the street or in absolute poverty, or maybe we did; it depends on how you look at it. Yes, definitely, if you look at it with today's eyes—because now everyone's expected to have a balanced diet, with fruit, vegetables, carbohydrates, and I don't even know what else. Then, our balanced diet was whatever we had, and one day there might have only been bread and a bit of cheese, or some chickpeas or lentils. My father (according to my mother—I never

met him) was a foreigner who came to Barcelona, made love to her a few nights in a row, and then left again. And mother, who could more or less get by, found herself with a baby to feed. And back then getting by wasn't so simple.

That's why you're blonde and have blue eyes. Like him, she would say, stroking my cheek softly with the back of her fingers. She told me that from a very young age, and I saw how, sometimes, she would look at me and cry, perhaps because she still felt bound to that man who came with the north wind and left with the south, after depositing a magical seed that would grow and end up being me. When Mother told me that I was like him, that I had his eyes and his hair, I didn't know whether I should love him or miss him, or whether I should hate him for what he'd done. It was a tentative feeling, nothing seemed clear, I had no idea what was true and what was a lie. I had the same feeling when I found Karl many years later.

I remember that day at the dump, when we'd gone later than usual, because I remember that it got dark on us, and I thought, *What's this? It looks like a wooden box.* It was hidden among the garbage and hard to see. And then I rescued it from underneath all that, and when I realized it was a violin, I instinctively, eagerly, searched for the bow beside it. It wasn't that I had seen many violins in my life, but I'd seen one in a book my teacher had read to us at school. In it a girl played the violin with her eyes closed, and, without having ever heard the sound, I could imagine it playing inside my head, and the strangest thing is that it really sounded like a violin. By that I mean that when I actually heard one for the first time, I realized that it was the same sound I had imagined. And

the first time I played it, I closed my eyes, like the girl in the book. Later, I would open them ridiculously wide as I struggled to follow along with those Baroque composers who put even the most virtuoso players to the test, trying to draw out those dizzying melodies that were like a roller coaster.

But that would be much later. That day, at seven years old, having a violin of my own changed my life. Bring it over, come on, it's really late, my mother had insisted. And I had to put the violin in the little cart we used to transport what we gathered each afternoon. She would put down her sewing and pick me up at school, and then we'd go for a stroll through the dump. Afterwards, we would bring what we found to the rag-and-bone man, and he kept what he thought he could resell. He gave us a coin or two, and that coin would ensure that we'd be able to eat the next day. Sometimes mother got paid on delivery for the clothes she sewed, and other times, she only saw the money after much insisting. I never went hungry, because she somehow always managed to give me something to eat. But she had gone hungry before she thought up selling stuff to the rag-and-bone man.

Barcelona in those days was the flip side of today's Berlin, with its colorful leaves. Barcelona was a dark city, still too close to a war that had stripped its inhabitants of their will to live, and still too far from the student uprisings that would change the city's atmosphere. There wasn't even television yet.

I had a magic violin, though. We reached the ragman's shop, and I planted myself in front of the cart before we went in. Please, please, don't sell the violin, I said, bringing my hands together to plead my case. Mother looked at me with surprise: But Teresa, we could make a pretty penny with this. Yes, I've always wanted to be

a violinist, I made up on the spot. Mother softened her expression: Oh, really, I didn't know. You never told me that. Please, I insisted.

We took the violin home. I had never thought about being a violinist, obviously—but at school there was the book about the girl who played the violin with her eyes closed, and I had found this instrument that seemed magical. I felt music taking shape within me, music which would be a part of me from then on. It came up from deep inside, as if filling my mouth with melodies—and then I thought, *Yes, I had to be a violinist.*

## *Maria*

“Maria, don’t fall back to sleep!”

“No, I’m not sleeping, I’m coming . . .”

Now they want me to rush because they want to start the rehearsal, and I’m lagging behind. My stomach’s been hurting for days, and I’m too old to rush around. I’m old, Mr. Karl, I’m old.

Now I’ll have to hear that music again, that music I’ve heard so many times I know it by heart; music that tears me up inside and makes me want to cry—and I haven’t cried in some time. But they promised me I’ll hear it from a red theater seat, like a real lady—and it turns out that I, who never wanted to be a lady, will be one whether I like it or not. It was Mr. Mark who promised me this, obviously, since Mrs. Anna won’t even look at me and wants nothing to do with me.

Yesterday I took a plane. I’d never done that before, and it was terrible. I didn’t like not having my feet on the floor, not at all. You don’t know where you are; you don’t know what’s going on. And I still have to take another one to get home. It’s times like this when all I

can do is leave it in the hands of Our Lady of Hope, the Blessed Holy Virgin of the Macarena!

I don't know this city and I find it strange, but on the other hand it seems that everything here gives off the scent of Mr. Karl—a smell that bewilders me, that makes me keenly aware of everything happening around me. I told Mr. Mark that I don't want to leave the hotel alone, because I'm sure I'll get lost. Then stay here, Maria, he had replied, or go back to your sister's; weren't you with her yesterday? Oh, yes, but she has to work, I said, stalling, I'll stay here; I'll stay here until it's time for the rehearsal. And that is what I did. But tomorrow I'll have to go out again and I'll have to dress up for the concert, like some opera singer, like the one who used to come by the house. And tomorrow I'll have to do what I planned.

When Mr. Karl asked me if I wanted to learn to play the violin or the piano, I was shocked. What are you saying, sir? And I remembered the priest in my town in Andalusia, who made you sing at your First Communion whether you wanted to or not. Otherwise, he wouldn't let you take communion. A little bit, just a little, he would say. And then you'd sing, that song that goes *Qué alegría cuando me dijeron: vamos a la casa del Señor* . . . Well, now that nobody's around to hear, I can admit that I was really quite good at it. And then I really got into it, and I started singing in the shower, and then on the street. Later, when I came to Barcelona, I always sang as I cleaned the houses of those two gussied-up ladies, the homes I worked in before Mr. Karl's. And then, when I ended up at his house, and it turned out that he could pay me well and it was a good house, I started to sing there too. And he played the piano at the other end of the house, constantly. So, I sang louder, more

and more, because I couldn't hear myself singing those love songs that touched my soul and made me feel so good. There was one that went *Linda paloma miiiii, ven hacia miiii* . . . And that was the one I liked best and sang most often, and I would even cry with emotion when I did. And I sang it louder and louder until finally I could no longer hear the piano because I'd managed to lose myself in the song. Well, that was what I thought, but really it was that Mr. Karl had stopped playing. On that very first day he stuck his head through the door and put a finger to his lips and said shhhh. And it really stung, since I thought that he was coming over to compliment me on my voice. I closed my mouth at once, and I didn't open it again while Mr. Karl was around the house, because I didn't want to lose my job, but also because I was offended. And he was always there, with the violin or with the piano, always one thing or the other. I always sang when he was out, until one day he caught me singing and asked whether I wanted to learn to play the piano or the violin, I could choose. I felt my cheeks turn bright red and so hot that I couldn't stand it. When I tensely said, no thank you, he seemed disappointed.

Mr. Karl was the kind of man who turned heads. I found him immediately attractive when we met, and he told me that he'd just moved to Barcelona and needed a maid. He said if I wanted a job, I should go see him. I went and he opened the door and he said hello, and that was all, because he didn't know how to say anything more in any language I could understand. But I've always been very clever, and I quickly understood what he wanted when he explained it in gestures. Then he showed me a room with a bed and a bathroom, right near the kitchen. Ay, Holy Weeping Vir-

gin! I had never worked in a house like that one, and I had never spent the night. And that man wanted me to live there. I started to have doubts, but they only lasted a few minutes, until he put some numbers in front of my nose on a piece of paper, astronomical numbers I'd never seen before either, plus one full day off each week. That was more than I could ever have anywhere else. Agreed, I said without any further discussion. In my head, I was already thinking about what I could do with all that money. I could buy all the chocolate I wanted, and clothes, I could even buy myself some jewelry, a good ring or maybe even some earrings—and, what's more, I wouldn't have expenses because I'd be living in someone else's house. Mr. Karl held out a hand for me to shake and I was surprised, but I placed mine in his. That was new for me, too. He was so strong. I almost screamed from the pain of his grip. But I didn't scream, no. I tolerated it and I stayed.

That was the house of silence. Music played, but it played at a distance, Mr. Karl would close himself up in a room and do his thing, I mean he played the violin or the piano, or both, or he'd sing too, and he sang very loudly. One day I saw that afterwards he would write down notes on a piece of paper. I didn't understand what that was, but I didn't dare ask. He looked into my eyes and said, I'm composing, Maria. But that was when we started speaking to each other. Because at first we didn't speak at all, no. At first it seemed that Mr. Karl didn't want to tell me anything about what I should or shouldn't do. I would ask him, sir, what can I do for you? And he wouldn't hear me or pretended not to. Finally he said, I hired you to do what you think needs to be done; I don't have time to think. Okay, sir, I said, and I left and I thought, *Maria, make a list*

*of what needs to be done in this house, because from now on it's as if it were yours.* The same thing happened when I went to get my wages for the first time. I saw how the days passed and Mr. Karl didn't pay me, and, when I had been there for two months and hadn't seen a dime, I got the nerve up to say something. And he had me follow him to a desk, and he took a small key out of a jar and opened up a drawer. And I saw that there was money there, a lot of money. I didn't say a word, but my eyes were like saucers. Here, he said, take your pay every month; I never remember these things. And, if some month there isn't enough, let me know. Okay, sir, I said again. Then he left and there I was alone, grabbing my month's pay myself, and thinking, *I could take it all right now and never come back.* But after considering the temptation briefly, I decided that I was no thief, and I forgot about it. I closed the drawer, turned the key, and put it back in the jar. I looked at my money and realized I still didn't have enough to buy any jewelry, but I could buy some chocolate just for me.