

The Brunette with the Pink Umbrella

Salomé released a puff of smoke in a circular shape that Bernardo's eyes eagerly followed until it vanished into the air. He could imagine the breath of the brunette, sitting elegantly, with one leg crossed slightly over the other, not hiding the allure of her thighs. The black dress with white veins accentuated her thick hair, inviting the curious gaze of men and eliciting envy from women.

"That's her, as free as her generous hair," Bernardo said, mesmerized, unable to contain his saliva.

It was still early, but the cigarette suited her well. Everyone in this small town in the Venezuelan Andes had grown accustomed to the public displays of the brunette. Even the Antillanos, Catholics of singular religiosity, who were seen every Sunday in the front pew of the Cathedral with their three children, Henry Federico, María del Rosario, and Andrés Ricardo. But they knew Salomé was harmless to their children's upbringing. They considered her a feminine adornment that graced the cafes of the small boulevard, three streets from the Cathedral.

As usual, the pink umbrella accompanied the brunette. Along with her purse, her inseparable pink accessory with a wooden handle occupied one of the chairs at the table. It made her more feminine, more interesting, more mysterious.

"Mysterious... very mysterious... What does she do after seven in the evening?" Bernardo wondered, sighing.

"Petra, the laundress from 8th Street, claims she has a very active nightlife," affirmed Joaquín, his best friend.

"Petra's a gossip. She should keep a closer eye on her daughters."

"More? Those young ladies don't leave their house for more than half an hour."

"Half an hour, you say! How long were we with them last time?" he asked indiscreetly.

"Shut up. Those things aren't spoken of among gentlemen," Joaquín grumbled.

At that moment, Salomé stood up, took her purse and her pink umbrella, which hung from her left forearm and swayed to the rhythm of her movements, and walked towards the exit. She took nine steps from the table she always occupied to the main door.

"One..." Bernardo counted, amazed. "Two... look at her knees," he said. "Three... four... five... Oh, my!... six... Joaquín, Joaquín... she stopped."

Joaquín glanced at the table where she had been sitting for an explanation and then back at Salomé, who stood three steps from the door.

"She's flirting with me, friend! Ah!" exclaimed Bernardo, annoying his companion.

"Are you dreaming? She has never shown interest in you. Well! Actually, she has never shown interest in anyone, but I swear you would be the last."

"You say that out of envy. Remember at my sister's graduation. She apologized for not being able to dance with me."

"She scorned you, Bernardo. She preferred to be bored."

"Don't be churlish. She's shy, and I was just a boy."

"You're also small and chubby. Can you imagine? She is as tall as a heron, and you, stocky."

"The essential thing is the soul."

"Excuses, excuses for the hopeless."

Bernardo always got the short end of the stick in love affairs. Joaquín, tall, standing at six foot one, with rare hazel eyes, short curly hair, and a European appearance, led in conquests. Behind him, the chubby one, a fair-haired man with a gift of gab and a jovial attitude. The most beautiful women were drawn to Joaquín's charm like a magnet. Bernardo, despite his silent protest, always ended up with the leftovers.

"Get used to it and make the most of it," Joaquín suggested in complicity, which Bernardo obeyed quickly, for he was a man without complexes.

Joaquín was a man of few words. The girls didn't seek him out for conversation. Instead, Bernardo struggled with his conquests, and after charming them, it was difficult to bid them farewell, which is why his girlfriends tended to overlap at times.

At the café, Salomé remained three steps from the exit. She was five feet seven inches tall, her dress hem not reaching her knees, and her back discreetly exposed. It wasn't suitable for the hour, but no one objected. She was not known to have a profession or a calling. She returned from the capital three months earlier. Apparently, she was studying there. Her father owned a pizzeria in the eastern part of the city. She was an only child, pampered, capricious in her loves—so they say—although she had never introduced a boyfriend. She had good manners and excellent speech. She walked with her head held high and her gaze straight ahead, like the women who walk down a runway on television. She was rarely seen in public, and when she did go out, she never had company except for María Teresa, her best friend, discreet as a vault. That's how it should be for a "virgin." Well! That's what Mrs. Leticia, her mother, asserted during the customary evening gatherings with her gossiping friends in the courtyard of their house, a claim that no one took seriously and dared not laugh at just in case it wasn't a joke, and it was indeed very serious.

"My daughter is a girl of the house and still no suitor has appeared," the mother would recount. "She studied at the Mary Help of Christians School, boarding to cultivate theological mysteries and practice sacramental life. Now she is studying music in the capital."

However, everyone knew she had been in the city for ninety days and had not been seen with any musical instrument.

"I'm sure she is at least a composer or a member of a grand symphony. She's a paragon of virtues. She will be the reward of the man who deserves her," Leticia would add amid the doubtful silence of her friends.

Salomé returned to the table, opened her tooled leather purse, and took out some bills that she gave to Mr. Tiberio, the café owner, who personally attended to her to enjoy the scent of her French perfume. He was a "dirty old man," according to Joaquín, but the truth was, he wasn't an exception among the men in the business. They all sought to exchange glances with her even by chance and feigned surprise. The women did the same to mark their territory with their eyes because it was not well seen for ladies to quarrel over men, not even over their husband. On the contrary, it was an honor for wives if their husbands ignored their lovers while they were with them.

But this wasn't Salomé's case, because everyone made an effort to be courteous, yet none dared to hint beyond what was appropriate. Not because they weren't willing to marry her. More than one had expressed his amorous fervor during their drunken escapades. But Salomé's elegance and finesse made her unattainable. No one knew if she would be won over by a bouquet of white roses in allusion to her purity or an arrangement of orchids that highlighted her unusual beauty.

Salomé crossed her legs again as she awaited her change and lit another cigarette. Bernardo could count the nine steps to the exit again. So, he ordered another fruit juice. The upper half of the café

walls, made of sliding glass, allowed a view of the 1960s Porsche parked in front of the establishment. There were only two convertible cars of that make in this small town, but Salomé's was white, unmistakable to her admirers. Business noticeably improved when the "classic" was parked there. Her white car and her pink umbrella made her stand out from a distance. Of course, first her legs stood out, then the accessories. With such an appealing sight, few were interested in delving into the intimacies of the brunette. For most, the singular shine of her presence, the allure of her mysteries, and the luck of not having a formal admirer known to anyone provided hope they could take her to the altar.

The brunette never responded to compliments or invitations. She attended her friends' and family's parties. She went to the drive-in theater for major premieres, almost always wearing a mesh hat and short leather gloves. The men scrambled to occupy a spot next to the white Porsche and then bragged to their friends.

"What does she have that's so special?" complained the unmarried women of society.

While Bernardo continued to gaze at her with stubborn fixation, María Teresa arrived at the café. She had thick, rather ordinary legs, which only served to highlight Salomé's well-defined ones even more. She sat at the table and whispered, leaning her face towards her friend. Salomé's eyes betrayed her. They widened in surprise, and almost instantly, all the ears in the café pointed in vain towards them. María Teresa noticed the indiscretion and withdrew her head, looking around from side to side. Everyone else did the same. Salomé has never been heard talking about herself or her family. Trying to find out what unsettled her was a suicidal act because it would bury any chance of reaching the privilege of being her suitor. She released another puff of smoke, and the figures in the air diverted attention from the matter. Salomé was very interesting, very delicate, very self-possessed, and, for men, very desirable, although distant.

It is remembered that in the summer of '73, a boy visited the city, one of those who were accustomed to winning kisses with audacity. Attracted by the charm of a small city with colonial urbanism, he stayed at the home of some friends of María Teresa. He coincided with Salomé at one of those rare parties she attended, and during a waltz, he improperly held the brunette's waist. His premeditated act was met with a cold attitude that extinguished his passionate attempt. "I had never felt such frigidity before," the visitor commented to María Teresa. Minutes later, Salomé unexpectedly left the party with her friend without giving any explanations.

"When I arrived home that night," Salomé recalls, "I went up to my room and in privacy, I got rid of the dress, because it was foreign to the true Salomé. I approached the mirror, and from the dungeon of my solitude, I observed the slender figure of a woman dead to desire, adorned with fine lace and expensive perfumes, powerful enough to stir the senses of men, but incapable of overcoming the bars of my prison. Memories of the awakening of my body flooded me. At twelve years old, games were left behind, and the gazes of my friends confirmed that I was changing. Like bees that hover around nectar, so the boys with deeper voices sniffed a new scent on me. But the honey of my blooming turned sour the day the pollen of my new self was stolen. The bud of the girl has closed, and even as a woman, it has never opened its petals, so that no one discovers that the stigma of the offended flower has withered."

"Who could dare so much without failing!" exclaimed Bernardo in a low voice as he sipped his juice. "How can we know her thoughts and, in a burst of gallantry, win her favor to taste the honey of her sexuality!"

"Resign yourself, lad," Joaquín mocked. "She chooses. She is not chosen. And I am sure she will not choose you."

"I will wait like the beggar who dreams on the balcony of time for my beloved to deign to remember the one who dreams before the sun and the moon of being her most faithful vassal," he declaimed with a sigh.

"Mind your jaw, Berna," Joaquín advised teasingly.

At that time, in the summer of '73, Salomé examined her conscience. She dreamed of a tall, fair man with celestial eyes, a kind attitude, and self-possession. A gentleman who could guess her whims and anticipate with his actions the words of her heart. And passion? She wondered. Yes, a man of tamed yet fervent passion. A lover more than a lover, a dreamer who could sail in the calm waters of her soul without disturbing them, although he might awaken the highest waves in the sea of her loneliness. One part Don Quixote, one part Romeo. "But who will notice me, withered flower... upon discovering that the chest of my body holds no treasure, because love refuses to germinate in me."

Salomé had become distrustful. "With what intentions does he come?" she wondered when a man courted her. And when they proposed to visit her at her house, she would reply, "That's very kind of you. Let me think about it." Then she never spoke to them again. Indeed, countless men sought a way to make her their wife, most with promises of abundant harvests, not only because, as the saying goes, every child is born with a loaf of bread under their arm, but because many were prosperous entrepreneurs—almost always good-natured old men, some with a pronounced bald spot from the passage of time—and others, true fashion magazine figures, good-for-nothings who lived off their parents' fortunes. Short and tall, with good and bad intentions, with plenty of money and too much money, foreigners and locals, of all kinds seen in these Andean lands, they felt the eyes of Leticia palpating them, which shone as she imagined visiting her daughter in a European club, in an English castle, or in a summer palace on the Mediterranean.

In contrast, Norberto, Salomé's father, immersed in his pizzeria, seemed rather gruff. Absent from the intrigue surrounding his daughter's life, he only spoke of business. He was up before dawn, with his ever-present cup of steaming Creole coffee in the living room. With the newspaper in one hand and the cup in the other, he listened to the first rooster crow. Then breakfast, always at 6:30 in the morning. At that hour, the maids were at their chores, but Norberto did not receive breakfast except from Leticia's hands. He was old-fashioned. Leticia remained the housewife, even though she had helpers. However, his daughter's education had slipped from his hands due to his business. Leticia, who took charge of preparing her for life, preferred her a princess rather than a damsel. Nevertheless, the sweet and perfumed hand of her daughter on his rough chin did not anger Norberto. He was of unbreakable discipline, very strict at times, but in his heart, his weak side was named Salomé.

In the little café, the two friends continued. They chatted animatedly without leaving room for others. Salomé held the cigarette with notable firmness, occasionally lifting her jaw to blow out smoke, and while María Teresa spoke to her, she pondered, with her head tilted, looking into the distance through the glass.

Tiberio interrupted her thoughts to give her change, which was generously declined by Salomé. Then she quickly got up, and for the first time, the brunette walked briskly the nine steps to the exit with her pink umbrella hanging from her arm. There was barely enough time for Bernardo to happily drool. The Porsche started up, and the gaze of the men in the café followed it until it disappeared.

"There goes the brunette with the pink umbrella," Bernardo whispered.

"Keep it down," Joaquín pleaded.

"In front of whom do I have to keep it down? Look around, you'll see everyone drooling. No one is paying attention to me right now," Bernardo retorted.

"Now what? She is gone, we don't have anything to do here," Joaquín insisted, but Bernardo remained in a state of stupor. He looked in the direction of the street where the Porsche had gone and didn't hear his friend. He sighed repeatedly like a child. Joaquín's patience was wearing thin.

When they were kids, barely 8 years old, Bernardo and Salomé played together often. Bernardo's mother used to tell him that someday that beautiful girl would become his girlfriend, and even his wife.

"Your mother did you a great disservice by making you believe that lie," Joaquín criticized.

"You know nothing," Bernardo defended himself. "You don't know how she and I were. We were more than friends."

"How can you be more than friends at 8 years old? You're delusional."

"We told each other everything, what we wanted to do when we grew up, what our lives would be like."

"And if it was so nice and fun, why does she ignore you now?"

"I don't know, the truth is that she ignores everyone."

Bernardo couldn't get Salomé out of his head. He enjoyed hearing people talk about her on the street. When someone boasted that they had seen her, or that she was here today, or that they saw her in a certain place. Sometimes he saw the Porsche pass by where he was. Those things gave him peace of mind; it was as if they were telling him that she was in the city, still single, and waiting for him to marry her one day.

However, that Tuesday was the last time anyone heard from her. There was no news of her for the rest of that day, nor the following one, nor Thursday, nor Friday. María Teresa was also nowhere to be seen.

"What could have happened?" her admirers wondered. "Where could she be?" She didn't return to the café, and the classic white car wasn't seen on the city streets. There were persistent rumors. Some said she had been recruited by a talent scout to travel to Hollywood, which Bernardo found unsurprising. "Such talent couldn't be wasted," he said. Besides, he would see her in the privacy of his room through the small screen of his television. Another version indicated that she had returned to the capital to continue her studies, but that rumor quickly lost credibility. It was also rumored that she had been seen in unsavory places, which led her parents to confine her in a family dungeon that had served as punishment for generations to those who tarnished the family honor.

"If necessary, I'll dig a tunnel to her confinement and free my beloved," Bernardo promised without being asked.

"Don't believe in rumors," Joaquín recommended, annoyed.

"What is your heart made of, that you are not moved even by the sadness of the sun crying inconsolably knowing that its warm light will no longer caress such a smooth face?"

"Stop with the corniness and get serious, your cheap poetry is making me nervous."

"My heart is nervous in the face of uncertainty. Let's go look for her. Let's visit her house."

"Are you friends with her parents, perhaps? What will we say when we're at the door? 'Step aside because I've come to rescue my captive beloved'?" Joaquín mocked.

"You still haven't shaken off your clumsiness, huh! First, we'll scour the city for clues. If we don't find Salomé, we will go to her house. Today is Friday, remember, the rich usually have parties every weekend. You have the demeanor of a rich person, so we will arrive as guests, but please, I beg you not to speak, don't give explanations, lest you mess up the plan. I'll handle the talking and you just limit yourself to smiling and bowing to whoever seems like a sir. Understand?"

Both set off to tour the city. Bernardo was willing to enter Salomé's house, if necessary, to find out what had happened. Joaquín would only transport him and wait for him on the corner. His admiration for Salomé wasn't as strong.

"I have a habit of only worrying about the low-hanging mangoes," he shamelessly repeated to Bernardo.

After fruitlessly scouring the city, Bernardo adjusted his silk blue shirt, spat on the tips of his black shoes, and rubbed them with the back of his pant leg. He also spat on his palms and smoothed his hair. "Let's go to her house," he decided.

Joaquín, dressed in an oriental linen shirt and a wide-lapel English jacket, looked disgusted at Bernardo's ritual.

"How could you possibly woo a girlfriend?" he exclaimed bitterly. Bernardo ignored him. He took a deep breath, as if preparing for a marathon. They headed east in Joaquín's LTD, and later arrived at Los Caobos neighborhood, one of the most exclusive. They passed the first corner at a slow speed and crossed two streets to Fifth Street of Christ the King. There they saw a line of cars parked in front of the house. There were many cars, as if families had gathered on purpose for a great event. They stopped for a few moments because poor Bernardo had butterflies in his stomach. Joaquín decided to accompany him to her house.

After several seconds, Joaquín asked, "Ready?" to which the other replied, "Ready." They drove around the block to park the car and continued on foot. Joaquín suspected they wouldn't be allowed in. However, out of solidarity, he continued. They approached a large black gate amidst a fence of bars guarding the house. On each side of the entrance were gardens. Some last-minute canopies sheltered a large number of well-dressed people in dark-colored clothes.

A stone pathway led them to the main entrance, and when they crossed the threshold, they confirmed that something strange was happening, seeing Petra, the laundress, whom they never invited to any party. As usual, they ignored her.

The main hall looked like a museum. Mrs. Leticia fell in love with every amorphous object she encountered on her trips abroad and decorated the house's hall, as she called it, to show her friends her passion for universal art.

All the artifacts in the hall contrasted with the natural harmony and beauty of the gardens, and for Bernardo, it didn't reflect Salomé's elegance. In the back, in an adjacent room, an unusual flower arrangement and many stunned people stood out.

They looked at each other and silently agreed to approach, while people watched them with special interest. Along the way, they didn't see Leticia or Norberto, not even María Teresa, only Cleo, a crazy aunt of Salomé's who wasn't right in the head, nicknamed Cleo because she would appear naked on the balcony facing the street, swearing she was Cleopatra and shouting, "Where are my Julius Caesar and my Marc Antony?"

She was of special beauty. Therefore, ignoring her delusions, she became a pleasant female spectacle for the neighbors. No one was bothered by her, except Leticia, because "what a disgrace, what will society say!" But society, as she called it, enjoyed the show. Aunt Cleo was a folkloric

treasure of the neighborhood, and most held her in high esteem. They didn't consider her crazy. They just thought that the lack of passionate love would occasionally snatch her heart away, which she expressed in these outbursts from the balcony. They say that in her youth, her fiancé traveled to the capital to continue his studies. He promised to return, but time overcame his word, and Cleo entered the chamber of loneliness forever.

"Do not pay attention to your aunt," Leticia would suggest to Salomé when referring to the examples she should follow.

But her aunt advised her otherwise.

"Do not disdain a promise of love for too long. Beauty is bad advice," she continued, "because, although radiant, it is perishable."

Cleo was allowed these warnings. Even at forty, she was of disproportionate beauty. Her uncommonly smooth brown skin aroused uncomfortable passions, which she involuntarily walled off with her nostalgic temperament.

Nothing was known about Salomé's feelings towards Cleo. She always listened to her aunt in silence.

Joaquín and Bernardo crossed the living room, and upon entering the next room, they saw a coffin. Bernardo gripped his friend, his legs giving out. Joaquín thought it was time to leave, but his companion didn't move forward or backward.

"Walk," Joaquín said through clenched teeth, amazed at Bernardo's shock.

To the left of the room, very close to the coffin, were some ladies with melancholy faces. To the right, three elderly men, without looking at each other, moved their lips as if speaking. Many flowers and some large candles hinted at an altar behind the coffin.

Bernardo remained silent until he finally reacted after a while and unexpectedly dragged his friend. Cleo had followed them stealthily into the room and watched them, but they, absorbed in uncertainty, were far from realizing it. Bernardo was getting closer to the coffin with Joaquín close behind, and finally, he found the courage to look.

"The umbrella!" Joaquín exclaimed as he pushed Bernardo aside to look in the casket.

"Shhh, rude, you don't respect the dead," Cleo criticized, feigning sanity.

"Shut up, boy, we'll get kicked out," Bernardo whispered through his teeth, not understanding what was happening.

"They're holding a wake for the umbrella! This family has gone crazy," Joaquín shouted, trying to lower his voice.

"We're not crazy," said the crazy aunt. "It's just that the devil took my girl to hell," then she burst into tears.

"Let's get out of here," Joaquín ordered, receiving no response from Bernardo, who wasn't willing to leave.

The neighborhood gossip! he thought.

"Petra, Joaquín," Bernardo said, "she can tell us what's going on here."

They started looking for her while Bernardo almost cried thinking of poor Salomé. "A coffin with her umbrella? Things aren't going well here at all," he contemplated.

It seemed that Aunt Cleo's malady had infected the minds of "society," one would say, because "how could they support such madness?" they continued to ponder.

Among so many ladies, it wasn't difficult to spot Petra due to her ordinariness. They crossed the halls, and there she was, sitting under one of the awnings. Seeing Joaquín and Bernardo, she brightened up and licked her lips as if preparing to speak.

"What happened was that some strange people came to the city these days," Petra began to relate without being asked. "It seems they came from far away, from outside the country, with new ideas about the enlightenment of the soul and eternal wisdom. They said that the secret of life was in sacrificing the body to save the spirit. These people brainwashed Salomé and convinced her to go out and see the world."

"They brainwashed her, you say" said Joaquín with a sarcastic tone.

"No one, absolutely no one knows where she went." Continued Petra without pausing to catch her breath. "Not even Aunt Cleo. And poor Norberto! All day at the pizzeria, blaming Leticia for the misfortune that has befallen them."

"Mrs. Petra, where's María Teresa?" Joaquín inquired.

"María Teresa! Ugh! Leticia says that crazy goat was the one who persuaded her to run away."

"Where is she?" he insisted. "Can we talk to her?"

"Where? and how? if she went with Salomé. And how to find them now if they changed their names. Some claim that Salomé says her name is Alpha Zeta and María Teresa's, who knows!"

"And how do you know all that?" Joaquín interrogated.

"Because María Teresa wrote a letter to her parents. Even that disordered girl left a letter, but Salomé... not even with all her studies did she deign to write a few words to comfort Leticia. The poor woman thought her dead and buried. I mean, buried is a figure of speech, because they are barely going to bury her tomorrow."

"You mean the umbrella," Joaquín retorted.

"Silence, if you don't want to be thrown out of here," Petra warned. "For Leticia and Norberto, Salomé died the day before yesterday, and the funeral will be tomorrow..."

After a few months, Bernardo moved to the capital hoping to find Salomé. He searched in all possible places: bars, clubs, hospitals. He returned to his hometown for the holidays and asked if she had returned.

Mrs. Leticia and Mr. Norberto resigned themselves to the idea that Salomé had died. Finding peace in the belief they had laid her umbrella to rest.

Ten years passed, and Bernardo still remembered her. When he visited on vacations, he went to Mr. Tiberio's café and sat in the same chair he used to occupy to look towards the table where Salomé used to sit. He stayed there for a long time until he started to perceive her perfume, and then he smiled as if he were seeing her. Mr. Tiberio never charged him for his coffee because he knew what it was about.

Back in his routine in the capital, Bernardo still toured the trendy bars hoping to find his beloved. One night he thought he saw her, she was sitting at the bar, it was her, as beautiful as ever, with her soft hair. His heart threatened to burst out of his chest, and his legs wouldn't respond to run to embrace her. The girl stood up, and Bernardo could tell it was her, her way of walking was

unmistakable, she was still the same angel as always. He had finally found her, but for a moment he was paralyzed by the thought that she might live another life in which he had no place.

While he struggled between fear and love, the presumed Salomé walked towards the door. Just as she was about to leave, Bernardo ran out, pushing through the people who were dancing wildly. When he crossed the dance floor, he didn't see her. He grabbed his hair in anguish and kept running towards the exit. When he stepped out, he had a vision, it was the white Porsche disappearing into the darkness of the night. It was the same as always or a different one, it didn't matter, "I've found her, I've found her," he repeated to himself with his heart about to burst. "She will come back here, I know her, she always returns, I will wait for her here," he promised.

When he got home, Bernardo went straight to the closet and there it was, the pink umbrella hanging among his silk shirts. He took it with both hands and laughed out loud at the thought of giving it to Salomé. Only Joaquín and Petra knew about this secret. They were the ones who helped save it from the grave that night.