

## The Hotel Cantábrico

They don't know what's wrong with me, the doctors. I come to them covered in sores, my picked skin piling up under my fingernails. They run their tests and tell me that much of the body is yet a mystery and this kind of difficulty happens all the time. Just as it comes, it goes, they reassure. They specialize in reassurance.

It doesn't help that I half speak Spanish. I nod and say yes. I am always going around nodding and saying yes, making sounds outside of language that reassure understanding. I take their prescriptions that don't work.

Itchiness is a special kind of hell. It's something like doubt. I scratch and scratch and it only gets worse. I want to ignore it but it won't go away. I don't sleep or dream. I'd rather be a leper—they don't feel anything.

I heard about a place near Sol where people help you. With anything, from the way María Dulce made it sound. They call themselves the Ungovernable and they've occupied the Hotel Cantábrico on Calle de la Cruz. "The squatting laws are in their favor," María Dulce said. "They know what they're doing. They're smart."

I take the Metro to the center of Madrid one afternoon after finishing class with Jimmy. Jimmy is a 9 year old from China who calls roller coasters "rolly coasters," as in "I want to go roly coasters at Disney." I work online teaching Chinese kids English three hours a day for \$18 an hour. The minute before class begins I mightily hope that they won't show. But they always do.

My body is covered although it is hot and my long sleeves feel like a hair shirt. I sweat as I walk up the stairs. The warm wind of machinery blows in the tunnels below.

On the street there is no relief. It is June and the heat is growing oppressive. The heat will make your difficulty worse, the doctors told me in the winter when it began. Really, it began well before, but like the doctors I had hoped that just as it came it would go. When it didn't, I began to visit them. And for months like a friendless child I have been dreading the coming of summer.

I've surfaced in Sol. It is windless and concrete, radiating heat. Today, the big half moon plaza that is always busy isn't. "It's the very center of Spain," María Dulce once told me, "so they named it for the sun. Everything moves around it."

Near the fountain, Mickey Mouse and two Minions mill about for a loose coin. A man in a yellow and green vest sells lottery tickets pinned to a board, calling out, "Joy! Joy! Winners here!" There is some movement—a hundred people crossing the square instead of a Saturday thousand, swaying slowly so not to sweat. Before I join the procession of life above ground, I look towards Calle Montera, where María Dulce works nights.

My only social appointment—other than her—is playing backgammon on Wednesdays next to the Almudena Cemetary with Tom, a 50-something bachelor from Yorkshire. He lives in a shared flat in Ventas where I also lived for six months before I found a mouse drowned in the toilet and had to scoop it out with half a beer can. We sit at a square metal table under a plane tree and play best of five games and share liters of Mahou poured into small plastic cups that I bring home and wash. He rolls his own cigarettes and I usually accept his offer of one halfway down the second liter.

When Sol came up in our conversation once, he told me it was called that way because it is the hottest place in Spain. Then he said the hottest place in Spain is actually a part of Andalucía that they call “*la sartén*,” the frying pan. After living here for more than two decades, his Spanish is little better than mine, but he knows how to get around. He first told me about Calle Montera. “It’s a different place at night.” He had winked and then rolled doubles.

I walk east on Carrera de San Jerónimo one block to the rotunda where it meets Calle de Sevilla, Calle del Príncipe, and Calle de la Cruz. The facades of the buildings curve with the roundabout. They are tall and elegant, overwhelmingly decorated in a way that only looks good in Europe.

On Calle de la Cruz I see running down the length of a building a sign: Hotel Cantábrico. The sign is old and plastic, in black and electric yellow, and the building is yellow too, but a different shade, mustard, and dirty, with white trim and black wrought iron balconies in the Madrid style. At the top of the sign are two small stars. It looks like the kind of place a tout tricks you into or a prostitute brings you.

Maybe that’s how María Dulce knew about the Ungoverable. But I think she knew about them before, for a long time, that they have helped her, by the way she talked. María Dulce is a prostitute, and María Dulce isn’t her real name. She is tall, dark-haired and sharp-eyed with slender shoulders and full breasts. Her skin is rich and soft and smells like violet candies. She speaks a robust English, sweet and slippery and she is from somewhere in the Mediterranean—which she calls “my vanity, my mirror, my sin and my sky that washes me”—though I could never guess exactly where.

“My country doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’m no pin on anybody’s fuck map.”

I met her one lonely night when instead of sitting in my little room in Mostoles I wandered around the streets of the center very late until after the Metro had closed. It was shortly after the itching began, and the long quiet of my bed seemed in my fevered thinking too much to bear. I’m surprised even to be telling you this. The itching destroys past and future, and I am left to live in the miserable, inescapable present.

She was the only one who spoke English on Calle Montera.

“Looking for a good time, baby?” She touched my arm. Later, once I had gotten to know her (still strictly as a client but with a gentle confidence), she admitted that she had overcharged me that first time.

After I gave her the cash, she brought me to the place with the whip. That’s how I came to call it. Now don’t think she was going to whip the itching out of me like some kind of blood drunk Christian, no.

It was an anonymous door off of Gran Via, and the man at the door, big with an even bigger jacket, foreign I supposed, as Spaniards rarely get so big, had a whip around his shoulders. At first I thought it was a snake. He didn’t say anything, only nodded to her.

We went up to the room, as small and dingy as you would expect, two single beds on cheap metal frames pushed together covered by rough white sheets. She told me to undress and when I wouldn’t she asked what was wrong.

“My skin,” I said delicately pulling up my sleeve. By then I had already scratched myself open.

"I've seen it all," she said. And again she touched my arm.

Up the whole of it came the miserable, unsettling creep and pick. I pulled it away. "No please."

"What are you doing here then?"

"I don't know."

She could have thrown me out right then and kept my money. The whip was downstairs waiting to be cracked. Instead she sat on the bed, took off her heels, and told me to lie down. She took my head into her lap and touched my hair, which didn't itch, and I asked her to talk, and she said she didn't sing and I said, "Just talk."

She said, "A story then." I didn't say anything and she told me about a Primark employee who was transformed into a pig by enchanting words and a sprinkle of milk. His master walked him next to the train tracks behind Príncipe Pío. His name before was Tomás but after he became a pig his master called him Thor. Tomás's master may have once been his boyfriend—no one was sure. Thor was well known in that part of the city and regularly given gifts of apples and flowers and handfuls of nuts on his nightly walks. One day or after a while, as it had to have happened one day but wasn't noticed for a while, Thor wasn't seen on the street again.

Before she could finish the story, her voice like lapping waves had put me to sleep. It was the first night of decent rest I'd had in weeks. At dawn she woke me up. She told me not to forget my things, and later to go to the *herbolario* on Calle San Leonardo for witch hazel.

I tried it, it and menthol and aloe and basil and thyme on top of everything the doctors had prescribed me. But nothing worked. I itched so much I would sweat and cry. The underside of my skin was full of bad light burning me up.

The only thing that gave me the slightest relief was listening to María Dulce's voice, my head in her lap.

She told me more fantastic tales of the night city transforming its citizens. One was about a firefighter who woke up from a dream in which he was John the Baptist. After that, he became a monk of his own order, wearing a robe and blessing people in Retiro next to the Fuente del Ángel Caído with water from the fountain and a shell bought in a souvenir shop near Plaza Mayor.

Another was about an out-of-work nightclub bouncer who meant well but had to turn merchant of his own flesh, selling his hair and fingernails and bodily fluids and even a toe (left pinky) to a perverse medical student who was well-to-do and bored and likely nefarious.

Always falling asleep, I never heard the end of the stories, and she began a new one each time. My visits became increasingly regular, until I was going just about every night of the week. I called my bank back home and took out a personal loan, and took out another with my bank here. It was easy enough. Everyone I spoke with was so willing to help. Low interest, though variable, they reassured. And your student debt will be no problem. I took as much as they offered. I preferred to pay María Dulce than the doctors, not that you have to pay doctors in this country, as everyone is so quick to remind me.

"Your country is barbaric," María Dulce told me once.

“And yours?” I asked.

“They all are,” she said, and turned away.

I ring the buzzer of the Hotel Cantábrico. No one answers. Sometimes I have thought that doubt is the cause, and that all my doubting about what it could be has been making it worse. But if that were so, I would know the source and, with my doubting done, I should be at peace. I scratch and wonder. It is a damned circle that I’m in.

A woman with black-framed glasses and loose, bright clothes opens the door.

“Good afternoon. Can I help you?” She says in bouncy, clear Spanish. She is wearing a mask from the pandemic, though it is a couple years behind us. I am surprised to see it, suddenly back in the uncertainty of that time. She sees my unease and points to it. “For cleaning. You’ll see.”

“Yes,” I say and nod. She motions for me to come in. Her dark hair is up in a bun with a pencil through it, and her thin fabric swishes as she walks.

We walk into the dim entryway. It seems freshly cleaned though tough grime clings to the corners. Looking into one of the halls to the left, it is easy to tell how far the cleaning has come. A door is blocked with caution tape, and inside among stacked and broken furniture, the light through the blinds catches motes of dust swirling, stars enough to fill galaxies.

She sees me looking and says, “Dirt has been the only guest here for much time.” I am surprised at myself for understanding, and I laugh and nod.

Yellow gloves and a cheap blue vase with red plastic flowers rest on the reception desk. She pops behind it and offers a glass of cool water with mint from a clay jug. I sip fresh wind and notice pieces of paper tacked to the walls.

Various ones read: *Overall, the worst accommodation I have ever stayed at but the location is excellent; If you like back street dirty grottos with rude service then this is the place for you! The food always arrived cold and in a puddle of moisture on your plate; We dreaded going back to our room at any time of the day.*

"Notes from its past life," she says. I laugh again. A young, long-haired guy in a Hawaiian shirt walks past on his way out.

*"Salud y cañas,"* she says after him.

*"Salud y cañas,"* he calls back.

"Health and beer?" I ask, mixed up. Her face is all eyes. Still in Spanish, she explains, "It's what we say here."

"Like hello?" I propose.

"And goodbye." She winks. A drop of sweat falls into my glass. She notices my restless hands. "Come," she takes my arm and leads me down an already cleaned hall. We go by a small room with lockers and a cubby for mail against the back wall. In the center of the room is a small table covered with keys. Sorting through them are two men, both thin and serious. One has shaggy grey hair and is wearing a robe and the other is bald and with sandals, the little toe of his left foot missing.

*"Salud y cañas,"* I try out and they nod gravely.

After we are past, my guide explains, "That's Jefferson DaSilva and Hieronymus. They're the most senior organizers."



“Are those their real names?” I ask, thinking of María Dulce. She shrugs. “And your name?”

“Maripaz.” She pulls down her mask for a half second and smiles. I am whirring in the heat like an overworked computer.

“How many people work here?” I ask instead of telling her my name is Simon.

“None. We are volunteers.”

“How many volunteers, then?”

“Hundreds.”

“From many countries?” I wonder where there is room for me in this world.

“We don’t recognize borders,” she says. “Look. It’s cooler down here.” We walk through a door and down a flight of stairs into a tiled patio. There are some empty pots, an overfull ashtray, and five chairs. She pulls two to face each other and we sit. All around me is color and light. The brightness of the blue tiles, patterns and lines swirling in harmony like a field of perfect flowers, distracts me for a moment.

“Tell me why you have come,” Maripaz says, pulling me back. I run through the explanation I’ve given to the doctors. I talk for a few minutes, scratching at my wrist and telling all I know about my difficulty.

“We aren’t doctors. We don’t know what to do,” she says, still behind her mask.

“The doctors don’t know what to do either.”

“Come then,” she says again. We stand and begin to rise in the building, up flights of stairs that turn back on each other indecisively. The heat rises with us, and though it is dim in the upper rooms, the light under my skin smolders. Life is

discomfort, for how long I cannot remember.

We come to a bedroom, small and shabby. The bed is made and covered in dust, untouched since that far-off morning when the hotel and its staff didn't yet know that they would be abandoned, the last morning. One morning has to be the last.

Maripaz leads me past the bed to the bathroom, where a bathtub is built into the far wall. She turns on a lamp in the corner. It is egg shaped, the top and the bottom decorative metal and the middle a mosaic of colored glass that puts a blue pattern onto the white tiles. "Much of the electricity is no good here," she explains.

She runs cold water and for some minutes the tub fills. I am thinking, does she want me to get naked? Neither of us says anything. When everything is ready, she motions for me to get in. She sits on the ledge of the bath and turns away. I almost keep my underwear on, but, after hesitating a moment, I take them off. She turns back towards me, and, not looking below my neck, runs her fingers through my hair.

All the light she cannot feel comes out of me and the dim lamp in the corner hums and brightens and then the bulb pops. Under the cool water, I don't itch. Though my mouth is empty, I have a sudden taste of violet candy. I feel she is going to tell me a story but she doesn't. We sit quietly for another minute and then she goes. I think she has simply gone to get something, but she does not come back. I close my eyes and almost cry, because of everything.

After another while, I notice a towel folded and placed on the toilet lid. I stand and pat myself dry, fearing the itch, which for now has gone. All I can think is that deep down, people stay at hotels because of the clean linens.

I dress and descend to the lobby. No one is around. I call out, "Hello," but nothing. I think to leave a note, an updated review: *Luxurious bath and wonderful attention. My stay though short has been a revelation.* But then I don't. I come out into the night city and walk to Calle Montera to look for María Dulce, but she isn't there. Only strange and desperate faces.