

## Extracts from *Brutal Magic: Fragments of a Journey*

### **The Pelican Larry, Cali: Passing Place for Lost Souls**

The French owner, Jean-Pierre, is broad and balding, with a lumpy face that speaks of many beatings and even more victories. Glinting eyes and a small hoop earring. He wears a loose striped vest like Popeye and cracks jokes in the same unintelligible manner. He invites me to drink rum on the front porch as soon as it gets dark.

My Belgian room-mate has curly fair hair and lets his belly hang proud over his board shorts. He is thuggish and speaks with a bravado which could be put-on or natural, it's hard to tell. His tone is hungry and entitled – years of claiming what's his. He speaks about his ex-girlfriend from Ecuador, how he lived in the jungle for three years catching fish. Now he has a Colombian girlfriend younger than me. 'I don't mix with Water or Earth – I am Fire.' Makes sense. You find his baggy of coke in the shower.

A girl from Medellin has her own room by the backyard. With her bony Bambi limbs, her head looks giant on her body, a face swollen with lips and a jutting jaw, big glassy eyes that seem deadened, or perhaps just tired of seeing. She wears pink Crocs studded with crude decorations – Hello Kitty and sparkly butterflies. She's a prostitute according to Jean-Pierre, and sure enough you see a wiry man leaving her room with downcast eyes. You share a joint and nod along to her Spanish, slowly losing track but she doesn't seem to notice, or mind. It kills you for the day. You're paralysed in bed watching YouTube videos and inhaling crisps.

A French guest, as skinny and wily as a fox. He gets a motorbike delivered to the front door, steers it out the back of a lorry. There are gaps between his yellow-grey teeth. He speaks fluent Spanish with a gloopy smooth tone, spread confidently like butter.

## **Medellin: A Devil's Playground**

Arcadia Hostel – an ex-mafia house, cursed with bedbugs, leaks, rot, shut down by the authorities on a recent bureaucratic rampage, flexing their limited muscles, proving that there may in fact be rules in Medellin, and this is one of the unfortunate recipients.

The owner, Loukas, is a middling Greek man - neurotic, distrustful, a control freak yet hopelessly disorganized. He wears glasses, perched on his hawk nose, his hair in shy wisps, his posture apologetic and lurking. His girlfriend Selena is an illegal immigrant from Bolivia who started off as a volunteer. She's young, pretty, and erupts into frilly fits of giggles whenever she's in male company. They are bound together in a calculated exchange of sex and circumstance.

Each bedroom has its special mythological name – Pegasus, Zeus, Archimedes...

It turns out to be a Greek tragedy, an endless farce of mishaps and backtracking and maddening bad luck. A new reality show – 'The Hostel that Never Opens', complete with sex scandals, betrayals, drug abuse, and a knife-wielding carpenter.

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Pueblito Paisa: a reconstruction of a traditional Colombian village, built right at the top of the city.

The church, with its stained glass windows, each one depicting scenes of rural abundance, with keepsake phrases: *En el vino, la verdad; Trigo alimento de vida; La tierra en paz; El unico rebano camina a lo largo de la historia.*

Religious mannequins, faces dumb and open with earnest suffering. White lace shawl fidgeting in the breeze. Distant sound of a flute, nearby hammering. Birdsong like frosting. Blue beams with nautical gauze. Green velvet and cheap wood.

The square is traditional and quaint, concentrated, with lines of food stalls jumping for your custom – '*Nina! Nina!*'

White-green *guanaba* juice. *Obuelas*, thin wafer discs made out of rice, perfectly smooth like a record, filled with *mora* jam and grated cheese. Overly sweet iced coffee, melting into sleet.

All around, the guardian hills and their cushioned spines. At the viewpoint there's a black angular structure which frames the skyline, represents the scenery in motion. The buildings rolled out and scattered by some celestial hand.

A guy dressed in flashy sportswear and shades is filming his music video, he mouths the words and does slow rapping gestures.

I walk down a steep woodland path. '*Amor y Paz*' says a sign on a tree.

## **Buenos Aires: Back to Winter**

Spirals of smoke, sunlit plastic, flaneur in the sunshine, in the cold, in the greenhouse world where people pass wrapped up in coats. High walls and wide avenues, three apparitions in Plaza de Mayo – a palm tree, a gold pillar, a statue – the Argentinian flag waving lustroously, silky and luxurious, pale blue and white with the sun at its heart.

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A romantic city even with the stark white sky – especially so. Music in Feria San Pedro – Latin strings and people lined up in puffer jackets – Bombas La Paz – wrapped in those silky flags – gold lamp posts – the fluttering of pigeons, perching on moss-covered balconies – little girls bouncing feet ahead of their parents, faces dark and similar – caps and scarves – pot-bellied men smoking, old world nobility, historic pride. Market stalls – leather bags and macrame – 'Have pride in your nobility!' - *Se puede! Se puede! Se puede!*

It darkens in that grey way. Plaza Dorrego Bar – a toothless grin tells a world of hard graft – carpenters, opportunists (*papaya*, they'd say in Medellin). Hanging copper pots, shining rose-gold.

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Death in beauty – beauty in death. Selfie in a cemetery – clinging to immortality like a tombstone, a need to be seen, a need to *share life*. Down the path of a thousand years, a hallway of mirrors, echo chamber, wails fall into whispers. Turquoise stains on ancient stone. Torn lace in mausoleums. Polished marble, geometric tiles, angels freeze-framed and contorted with agony – their wings weighed down and sticky with prayers.

The perfect day to visit Recoleta Cemetery. The cherubs and turrets flaunted against the grey sky so that they speak – *death* – the death of this stage.

## Poems from Can Serrat

### I Make Myself Clear

Banana peel held in a half-open palm  
the birds alight and

wasps in their pristine costumes,  
glossy yellow, petrol black  
they would be skinny and cold if they were human.

We sit together at the watch-tower  
up the steep stone steps  
in warm shadow  
the sun not yet come.

Yes I was chosen  
Yes there is space

I wonder, were we all meant to meet in this way?

I forget,  
I was not born in a pond  
there was a jet-stream at my birth.

We all take up space  
and this is my open enclosure  
this is the invisible parameter  
between fiction and truth.

We are ghosts reborn  
skeletons on loan  
funerals at home.

Creation beats us bloody  
tears off our skin  
so we feel the day's every detail.

Begin with an image  
begin at the mountain-top  
on hollow ground  
the tree-bark snaps.

## **Referendum**

Grapes hang beside cobwebs and lightbulbs  
Dying sun shines peach against mutating clouds  
The town sleeps, in the wake of sirens.

## **Communal Living**

Rat-a-tat groaning of a waking house  
the clang and chink of dishes  
footsteps, bare skin on tiles  
creaking stairs,  
thin plasterboard.

Outside  
the garden fluctuates and blooms.  
Elderly crows recall bluebells in June.  
Bugs in their circus flights.

We look through cardboard telescopes  
only to see grooves of a palm  
skin soft, colour mute and reddish,  
glowing with trapped light.

Though these minutes are empty  
people switch positions -  
chess pieces unsupervised,  
in flux.

## **Statement**

I arrived in Can Serrat on a hot afternoon last October. I remember my suitcase was so heavy that I tripped many times down the steep dusty path, scraping my knee and ripping open my jeans. I was flustered, sweaty, weighed-down with too many things, unsure where to start, where to settle.

I began with a similar heavy approach to my writing – strict schedules and long, intimidating lists which inevitably made me stumble.

Slowly as the days passed an ease settled in. Long luxurious dinners outside, eating over candle-light. Walks in the forest, under the old railway bridge, cutting through jungly paths.

Mornings sitting cross-legged on the viewpoint. Stillness in my room, with its original murals faint

like ghosts on the walls, the shutter windows, sunbathing on the balcony. The fluctuating dynamic of our group of residents – co-living closeness, moments of simple inspiration, excited, wide-awake conversations. The constant hum of creative whirring.

Through all this sunny, slow and nourishing rhythm I realised that I needed to relax, breathe, do less, and let the gaps do the talking. I was able to work on writing projects that I had already started but was yet to develop. Primarily, I adapted my travel journals from South America to form a piece entitled 'Brutal Magic: Fragments of a Journey', a mixture of place description and personal encounters. During my residency I realised I wanted to present it as a series of vignettes (or postcards) rather than a traditional narrative structure. I also worked on a fictional piece which re-imagines my group of friends as characters on a pirate ship, and wrote a collection of poems which were very much inspired by life at Can Serrat.

My time there was invaluable – the experience surmounting the work itself. It was a month to dream and let things brew, take things easy and let space dictate my work.