

Susanne Gannon

## LA RUBIA

La Rubia marches down my street like she owns the place, like she does every afternoon. Her blue eyes stare straight ahead, her little white hand grips her bag as if someone will snatch it, someone like me. The men drinking at the corner whistle like they do at all the *estranjeras* from that hostel. They like them young. "Hola, chica!" "Guapa!" "Querida!" "Bruja!" She tosses her head, steps out, onto the road, away from the gobs of shiny spit on the concrete, away from the noisy kisses they make behind her back. They turn again to their beers, laughing. She doesn't see me, doesn't know that I've been waiting for her.

Something changes in her manner as she crosses. Her body relaxes, her stride is looser, longer. As if she thinks the danger has passed. I look up the crowded street to where she is heading. The old *cafetero* shuffles along at the end of the block, with his trays of thermoses, cylinders of tiny plastic cups reaching higher than his crumpled shoulders. I follow her as she hurries along towards him, close enough to see the pink triangle of skin where her hair parts, the thin silver chain around her throat. Close enough, almost, to unclasp it; to smell her soapy skin. Almost close enough to smell the apples in her hair.

"Espera!" she calls out to the old man and he turns towards her, his great craggy face cracking open.

"Ah, la kangúru," he says.

"Si," she smiles as I brush by them. I lean on the yellow stone wall of the *panadería* just up a way and watch her as the people pass. She chats to him as he pours the coffee, and he nods his head and speaks back. Her Spanish must be good for a *gringa*. She takes the hot cup and draws the smells of the thick sweet coffee up into her nostrils, then tips her head back, and drinks it down. All at once, like we do. "Ahhhh." The coffee hits her taste buds, strong and black and Colombian, like me.

Her hair is different today. Parted into two plaits that fall over her shoulders like rope. Fat ropes, shiny and strong enough for a lasso or a harness. I used to ride before I came here, when I was just a child. I had a horse, for a little while, the colour of her hair. La Rubia, I called her. Here, now, I like to watch this woman move through my city, through my streets, into my life. But she doesn't know this yet. She has another *cafecito* straight away and heads down towards the waterfront in the darkening light. She wants to stay awake tonight.

"Eh, Diego," my friends call me from the other side of the street. The markets are closing up and they have begged fish and potato for our supper. Alirio has a soccerball. I kick his ball back across the road, and the boys run after it, not for nothing was Maradona my namesake. El Burro stands there, giggling, his eyes spinning, dribbling from the corner of his mouth. Under his big Tshirt, I know his armpit is clamped over the jar of glue he is hiding there. I smack him hard on the side of his head, "I told you not to do that." He whimpers, even though it's for his own good, and when I turn around, the girl is gone. No matter. I know where to find her, later.

Quiebra-Canto. Long after midnight. La Rubia comes to this bar often, with her friends, different ones each time. She's been here longer than most. She must be rich, or maybe she's out of money. But they stop coming here when they run out of money, the tourists who stay, when cocaine reaches her bony fingers right into their flesh and all they can do is crave her and send home for money and, maybe, a chance to get out and have another life. I sit on the bench by the park and look up at them, leaning on the wooden balcony and the flowers, laughing and smoking. A man brings her a drink, another gringo, and they disappear inside. It's dead outside tonight. Estella sits down beside me, sniffing and wiping at her nose with the back of her hand. Her belly swells under her tight black dress, and she plucks at my arm. "Por favor, Diego, mi amor." She always tries to get me to give her cigarettes, or gum. Lazy bitch. But I give her one anyway. She shouldn't be smoking, but I don't think she should be fucking either. Not with that little baby in there. I get her some milk. "Go home," I tell her, "Take care of yourself." I've lost track of where she's living now. She's only sixteen, younger than me, but you'd never know. She's on her own, like me. Just trying to stay alive. I watch her wander through the gates into the old city, where the big hotels are, looking for a trick, looking for some cash or some cocaine in this city of addictions.

They come out all in a rush, down the narrow stairs. I stand behind my little table chanting: "Chiclets, cigarettes, chiclets, cigarettes," keeping myself awake. La Rubia and the gringo — he's so old and ugly — come straight towards me. Ask for cigarettes. La Rubia has bouganvillea flowers in her hair, broken off from the pots on the balcony. He bares his big shiny teeth at her and reaches over to touch her hair, adjusts the flowers, then he brings his hand down onto her shoulders. She doesn't do anything, doesn't push him off. Just giggles, like a girl. Then she glances at me. I catch her eyes with mine and stare into their blue clear depths. "This isn't you," I try to tell her with my eyes. I don't know how I know this or what I mean but I do know, and I see there, in that moment, that she recognizes me as well. I thought she hadn't seen me: just another cigarette

boy, another pickpocket, another dark youth with hooded eyes leaning on an old stone wall. But she sees my secret too, knows me then. She turns her eyes, looks down, away, at him again. His fat wallet in his fat little fingers spills out American dollars, more than I've seen at one time before. We both stare. Her eyes flick up onto mine, dark and sharp, for just a second as he passes me an American fifty dollar bill. I give him the wrong change but he's too drunk to see, and she says nothing. They turn away and walk, holding hands, into the labyrinth of the old city. Her hair is out tonight, a shiny sheet of red-gold rippling down her back under the moonlight.

I pack my things and head for home. The littlest boys lie together like puppies in a nest of clothes and old blankets in the corner of the container. I can see the soccerball in the middle of the tangle. Burro's not here, nor Freddy or Juan. I hope they are looking after each other, that they are keeping out of trouble. I fall on to my own bed, made from shipping pallets, with a mattress dragged in from the street. I tuck away my new dollars and my pesos from the day. Tomorrow I will take them to the bank. The moon is too bright to sleep, and I have to get up again soon. I put my hand on myself and dream about La Rubia — or some girl like her — here beside me. How clean and lovely she would be. Then the missing boys come in, whispering, safe. They bring me over what they have: a ring, a watch, CDs and a Walkman. Burro has brought a couple of passports that I shove down under the mattress with the others. He lifts his arms up and I pat him down to make sure he has come home clean. "Good boy," I tell him, ruffling his hair with my rough hands, and his face beams. I write in my little notebook, give them each a receipt, even though none of them can read. Then we sleep.

I keep some of the pesos from the pawn shop for myself and give the rest to the boys who brought home the goods. I get another handful of pesos for carrying bricks all morning. I've done worse work for less pay, before I came here. We have a big lunch and I buy my boys extra fruit and milk so their bones will grow strong and their brains will stay sharp. I would send them home if they wanted to go, if they knew where their homes were, and if they were safe there. But the streets are safer than some homes. As long as someone will look after them. I take my passbook and most of my dollars to the bank just before closing time.

La Rubia almost knocks me over at the door. She doesn't see me now, not in the daylight. She looks tired but steps back and forth awkwardly as she waits her turn in the other line, fiddling with a purse that's tied around her waist. When she reaches the counter she pulls out a fat bundle of greenbacks from under her shirt and her passport. "Inglaterra" she says to the teller, in a loud clear

voice, and her name, "Jane Elizabeth Wilson." I say it to myself silently, so I can remember it, rolling the strange sounds around my mouth, tasting the cold syllables. She buys traveller's cheques and pesos with her dollars, I can't see how much, then packs them back into her pouch and steps outside. I want to follow her but she's got that long stride back that says she's in charge now, that she knows what she's doing.

Estella's looking chirpy in the street that night. She wears a new dress. Her eyes sparkle. She got lucky, she said, but not as lucky as some. At the hotel where she spent the night before, with a cuddly and generous dentist, another American was robbed. Their chartered flight left this afternoon, with him still bleating about the wad of cash he said he'd lost. For an emerald for his wife, he said. So why leave it 'til the last morning, says Estella. "Que estúpido." And what was he doing with a whore anyway, says Estella, if he has a wife? If I had a wife, she says, I'd treat her right! If I was a wife, she says, I'd make my man be-have! She's standing up with her hand on her hip and wagging her finger at me now, and rolling her eyes and the other vendors around us are laughing as if I am her husband, or might be. No one knows who the father of this baby is, but it's not me, and probably no one that any of us knows, not even Estella. God knows, we're all up for a laugh. The police are out tonight and we've already been asked to show our ID. When they take out their little notebooks, we know that's the signal to pass over the extra dollars that will keep us safe from them for another few nights.

La Rubia, too, has a new dress tonight. A slinky, silky dress that matches her blue eyes. I want to see her dance in that dress, but I can't get into this bar or any of the others, not the tourist ones. Estella, in her red dress, would get in, but won't pay the bribes to the owners. Anyway, she likes to catch her clients on the way out, when they stumble down the stairs and into her arms. Estella and me, we're both planning a different sort of life for ourselves.

La Rubia — Jane Elizabeth Wilson — is early tonight. She's with a man I know, El Tiburon, we call him, the shark. He's old enough to be her grandfather. He has a habit of picking up with pretty young tourists looking for adventure. Sometimes their adventure finishes here. She walks straight past me, his filthy paw on her arm. Her eyes have that glazed look I know, that look I hate. El Tiburon recognizes me and gives me the evil eye. He knows I'm overdue for a visit. He buys and sells that look. I watch for a while but they don't come out on to the balcony. I don't want to think of her ever again.

The omens are bad tonight so I go home to check that my boys are all safe. I bring milk and we make a little fire on the concrete outside the container and make hot chocolate for our supper. I remember the passports when they've

gone to sleep and I sort them by the firelight. There's a couple of English ones, an Australian one, some EU ones, three Israeli ones, a Dominican one that's completely worthless. The ones from Los Estados Unidos are worth the most and there are four of them here. El Tiburon will pay me two hundred American dollars cash for each of these. The faces inside them look so young, but they've been to many places. There are pages and pages of stamps and stickers and signatures from places I haven't even heard of. Me and Estella, all we know is this place, and where we came from to here. The Australian passport falls opens at the face of La Rubia, here her name is Michelle — Michelle Anne Williamson. There's a little note stuffed into the plastic cover at the back of it, in English — "Dear Shelley," I recognize that, then some more words I don't know with "love" in the middle and "mother" at the end. It's folded around a little photograph of the girl and a woman, both with that big wide blue-eyed smile, looking like they belong to each other. And there's an address in Sydney, Australia. I like the taste of Shelley in my mouth. Shelley tastes fresh and innocent like apples, like milk. How did you get here, Shelley Williamson, 19 years old and all on your own, on the other side of the ocean, on the far side of the world?

In the morning I take out the little traveller's dictionary of English/Spanish that Freddy brought home one day, and I write a message from it for the mother of Shelley Williamson. I take my little notebook to the post office and spend an hour copying down my message and her address onto a postcard. "Come," the message says, "Shelley needs you." All I can say is "Trouble." If I had the language I'd say more. I'd tell her what cocaine does to a place when drug barons run the whole country, when justice can only be bought by the highest bidder. I'd tell her how it is when violence and murder break up families and leave children without homes, without parents. I'd tell her how there are factories hidden in the jungle where the fine fingers of children peel and crush the coca leaves in chemicals that burn the skin from their flesh. I'd tell her about addiction and desire and how the craving for the white powder surpasses all others and makes people go crazy — men and women, locals and visitors. My message to the mother of Shelley Williamson does not say these things but my fear sweats through my skin on to the card and I hope that she can smell it at the other end. The card has a picture of the entrance to the old city, just near Quiebra-Canto. The message costs me more than my weekly bribe to the police but I will carry bricks again tomorrow morning. Maybe I will take El Burro with me this time. He's big enough to do a man's work now, and he can't move bricks with a jar of glue hidden in his clothes.

In the afternoon, by the panadería where I'm picking up the day-old bread for the kids, I see La Rubia, Shelley Williamson, on the other side of the street. She carries a backpack almost as big as herself and hails a cab that pulls over

to the bar on the corner. The men there call out and whistle at her, but there's something dead about her eyes and she doesn't toss her head or step aside. A gob of spit hits the back of her pack as she swings it down and bends to climb into the back seat. She doesn't seem to notice. I can't tell what she says but the cab turns away from the airport, and up the street towards me, to the old city. She doesn't see me through the window. She doesn't see the old cafetero waving at her, limping as fast as he can alongside the taxi, just trying to bring her a little cafecito to sweeten her afternoon.

