Excerpts from *The Time of the Doves (La Plaça del Diamant)* by Mercè Rodoreda

Julieta came by the pastry shop just to tell me that, before they raffled off the basket of fruit and candy, they'd raffle some coffeepots. She'd already seen them: lovely white ones with oranges painted on them. The oranges were cut in half so you could see the seeds. I didn't feel like dancing or even going out because I'd spent the day selling pastries and my fingertips hurt from tying so many gold ribbons and making so many bows and handles. And because I knew Julieta. She felt fine after three hours' sleep and didn't care if she slept at all. But she made me come even though I didn't want to, because that's how I was. It was hard for me to say no if someone asked me to do something. I was dressed all in white, my dress and petticoats starched, my shoes like two drops of milk, my earrings white enamel, three hoop bracelets that matched the earrings, and a white purse Julieta said was made of vinyl and a snap shaped like a gold shellfish.

When we got to the square, the musicians were already playing. The roof was covered with colored flowers and paper chains: a chain of paper, a chain of flowers. There were flowers with lights inside them and the whole roof was like an umbrella turned inside out, because the ends of the chains were tied much higher up than the middle where they all came together. My petticoat had a rubber waistband I'd had a lot of trouble putting on with a crochet hook that could barely squeeze through. It was fastened with a little button and a loop of string and it dug into my skin. I probably already had a red mark around my waist, but as soon as I started breathing harder I began to feel like I was being martyred. There were asparagus plants around the bandstand to keep the crowd away, and the plants were decorated with flowers tied together with tiny wires. And the musicians with their jackets off, sweating. My mother had been dead for years and couldn't give me advice and my father had remarried. My father remarried and me without my mother whose only joy in life had been to fuss over me. And my father remarried and me a young woman all alone in the Plaça del Diamant waiting for the coffeepot rattle and Julieta shouting to be heard above the music "Stop! You'll get your clothes all wrinkled!" and before my eyes the flower-covered lights and the chains pasted on them and everybody happy and while I was gazing a voice said right by my ear, "Would you like to dance?"

Without hardly realizing, I answered that I didn't know how, and then I turned around to look. I bumped into a face so close to mine that I could hardly see what it looked like, but it was a young man's face. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm good at it. I'll show you how." I thought about poor Pere, who at that moment was shut up in the basement of the Hotel Colòn cooking in a white apron, and I was dumb enough to say:
"What if my fiancè finds out?"

He brought his face even closer and said, laughing, "So young and you're already engaged?" And when he laughed his lips stretched and I saw all his teeth. He had little eyes like a monkey and was wearing a white shirt with thin blue stripes, soaked with sweat around the armpits and open at the neck. And suddenly he turned his back to me and stood on tiptoe and leaned one way and then the other and turned back to me and said, "Excuse me," and started shouting, "Hey! Has anyone seen my jacket? It was next to the bandstand! On a chair! Hey . . ." And he told me they'd taken his jacket and he'd be right back and would I be good enough to wait for him. He began shouting, "Cintet . . . Cintet!"

Julieta, who was wearing a canary-yellow dress with green embroidery on it, came up from I don't know where and said, "Cover me. I've got to take off my shoes. . . . I can't stand it anymore." I told her I couldn't move because a boy who was looking for his jacket and was determined to dance with me had told me to wait for him. And Julieta said, "Then dance, dance. . . ." And it was hot. Kids were setting off firecrackers and rockets in the street. There were watermelon seeds on the ground and near the buildings watermelon rinds and empty beer bottles and they were setting off rockets on the rooftops too and from balconies. I saw faces shining with sweat and young men wiping their faces with handkerchiefs. The musicians happily playing away. Everything like a decoration. And the two-step. I found myself dancing back and forth and, like it was coming from far away though really it was up close, I heard his voice: "Well, so she does know how to dance!" And I smelled the strong sweat and faded cologne. And those gleaming monkey's eyes right next to mine and those ears like little medallions. That rubber waistband digging into my waist and my dead mother couldn't advise me, because I told him my fiancé was a cook at the Colòn and he laughed and said he felt sorry for him because by New Year's I'd be his wife and his queen and we'd be dancing in the Plaça del Diamant.

"My queen," he said.

And he said by the end of the year I'd be his wife and I hadn't even looked at him yet and I looked him over and then he said, "Don't look at me like that or they'll have to pick me up off the ground," and when I told him he had eyes like a monkey he started laughing. The waistband was like a knife in my skin and the musicians "TaaaarI taaaarI!" And I couldn't see Julieta anywhere. She'd disappeared. And me with those eyes in front of me that wouldn't go away, as if the whole world had become those eyes and there was no way to escape them. And the night moving forward with its chariot of stars and the festival going on and the fruitbasket and the girl with the fruitbasket, all in blue, whirling around. . . . My mother in Saint Gervasi Cemetery and me in the Plaça del Diamant. . . . "You sell sweet things? Honey and jam . . ." And the musicians, tired, putting things in their cases and taking them out again because someone had tipped them to play a waltz and everyone spinning around like tops. When the waltz ended people started to leave. I said I'd lost Julieta and he said he'd lost Cintet and that when we were alone and everyone shut up in their
houses and the streets empty we'd dance a waltz on tiptoe in the Plaça del Diamant . . . round and
round . . . He called me Colometa, his little dove. I looked at him very annoyed and said my name
was Natalia and when I said my name was Natalia he kept laughing and said I could have only one
name: Colometa. That was when I started running with him behind me: "Don't get scared . . . listen,
you can't walk through the streets all alone, you'll get robbed . . ." and he grabbed my arm and
stopped me. "Don't you see you'll get robbed, Colometa?" And my mother dead and me caught in
my tracks and that waistband pinching, pinching, like I was tied with a wire to a bunch of asparagus.

And I started running again. With him behind me. The stores shut with their blinds down and the
windows full of silent things like inkwells and blotters and postcards and dolls and clothing on
display and aluminum pots and needlepoint patterns. . . . And we came out on the Carrer Gran and
me running up the street and him behind me and both of us running and years later he'd still talk
about it sometimes: "The day I met Colometa in the Plaça del Diamant she suddenly started running
and right in front of the streetcar stop, blam! her petticoat fell down."

The loop broke and my petticoat ended up on the ground. I jumped over it, almost tripping, and
then I started running again like all the devils in hell were after me. I got home and threw myself on
the bed in the dark, my girl's brass bed, like I was throwing a stone onto it. I felt embarrassed. When
I got tired of feeling embarrassed, I kicked off my shoes and untied my hair. And Quimet, years
later, still talked about it as if it had just happened: "Her waistband broke and she ran like the
wind. . . ."

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Text 2:. [Fragment of La Plaça del Diamant]

I was getting tiered and tiered by the day. When I came home to the flat, I often found the
children asleep. I'd spread out a blanket on the dining-room floor, with two cushions, and I'd
find them fast asleep, sometimes curled up very close together, Antoni's arm around Rita.

Until one day I didn't find them sleeping any more and Rita, such a little thing she was, went
hi-i-i-i ? hi-i-i-i ? hi-i-i-i-i-i, and they looked at one another and he put his finger over his
lips and said, be quiet. And Rita came out with this sort of laugh again, hi-i-i-i-i ? hi-i-i-i-i ? hi ? a very strange-sounding laugh. And I wanted to know what was going on. One day I
hurried more, didn't stop anywhere and arrived home a little earlier than usual, and I opened
the door as if I was coming in to steal things, holding my breath as I turned the key in the
lock. The back balcony was full of doves and there were some in the passageway too but the
children weren't anywhere to be seen. Three doves, when they found me there, went off to
the balcony that overlooked the street, where the doors were wide open, and escaped, leaving behind a few feathers and the darkness inside. Four more scurried off quickly, quickly, to the back balcony, with a few little hops and opening their wings and, when they got to the balcony, they turned round to look at me, and I frightened them away by flapping my arm at them, and off they flew. I started to look for the children, even under the beds, and I found them in the dark room where we used to lock Antoni when he was very small so we could get some sleep. Rita was sitting on the ground with a dove in her lap and Antoni had three just in front of him, and was giving them beans to eat from his hand. When I asked, what are you doing? the doves took fright and flew up, crashing into the walls. And my son put his hands over his head and started to cry. What a job I had getting those doves out of there? What a great comedy it was! It seems that for some time, when I was out in the mornings, the doves had been taking over the flat. They came in through the back balcony, went down the passage and out through the front balcony on their way back to the dovecote. That was how my children had learned to be quiet so as not to frighten away the doves, and to have their company. Quimet thought it was really beautiful and said that the dovecote was the heart, and the blood comes out of there, travels through the body and then goes back to the heart, and that the doves came out of the dovecote, travelled through the flat, which was the body, and went back to the dovecote, which was the heart. And he said we should think about getting more doves because God looked after them and they didn’t make work. When the doves up on the terrace took flight, they went up like a wave of lightning flashes and wings and, before going to roost, they pecked at the balustrades and ate the plaster, and in lots of sections of the balustrades you could see big patches of bare brick. Antoni would walk through a mass of doves, with Rita behind him, and they didn't even move, just opened up the way and some even followed them. Quimet said that now the doves were used to the flat, he was going to put nesting boxes in the little room. And if the children sat down on the terrace they were soon surrounded by doves, which didn’t mind being touched. Quimet told Mateu that he wanted to put nesting boxes in the small room, which was right under the covered space on the terrace. He only had to make a hole in the ceiling, a trapdoor, he said, and put in a ladder with rungs leading from floor to ceiling and the doves would have a short cut for coming and going between the flat and the dovecote. Mateu said that maybe the owner wouldn’t like that, and Quimet said that the owner would never know, and if our doves were clean no one could complain, and what he wanted to do was to go ahead raising doves and eventually to have a dove farm, and the children and I would look after them. I told him that was madness, and he said that women always wanted to take the upper hand, and he knew what he was doing and why he was doing it, and that was that. Mateu, who was so blessedly patient, opened up the trapdoor and Quimet wanted to make the ladder but Mateu said he would bring one that was already made, a bit old, and he'd only have to saw off a rung or two because he thought it might be a little too long.

And he put the nesting boxes downstairs and locked in the nesting pairs at first so they’d get
the hang of going out directly by the ladder instead of right through the flat. The doves lived in darkness because he also closed them in with the trapdoor, which was made of strips of wood and could be raised from the top by pulling on an iron ring and, from the inside, from the top of the ladder, we had to push it up with our head and shoulders. I couldn’t kill as much as a single young one because the children’s crying and screaming brought the house down. When I went in to clean the little room, I turned on the light and the doves were blinded and frozen to the spot. Cintet, his mouth more twisted than ever, was really angry.

"These doves are prisoners!"

And the doves locked in the dark laid eggs, sat on them and hatched their young, and when the little ones had their feathers, Quimet raised the trapdoor and, through a small grille he had made in the door of their room, we could see how the doves went up the ladder, flapping their wings, only touching one or two rungs. Quimet was so happy? He said we could have up to eighty doves and, with the young ones that would make up the eighty sold at a good price, we could think about closing the shop, and maybe we could buy a plot of land soon and Mateu would build the house there out of the materials he could scrounge. When he came home from work, he ate his dinner without even knowing what it was and, as soon as he finished, he made me clear the table and, under the light with strawberry-coloured fringe, he started to do his sums on an old paper cornet to save paper; so many pairs, so many young, so many times, so much Lucerne? Good business.

(La Plaça del Diamant, 1962)

Translated from the Catalan by Julie Wark ©

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