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The Whispering City

Written by Sara Moline

Translated from Spanish by Mara Faye Lethem

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THE WHISPERING CITY



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THE WHISPERING CITY

Sara Moliner

Translated from Spanish
by Mara Faye Lethem

ABACUS

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To you, Celia, forever in my memory

There she lay. Mariona. Pale, blonde, voluptuous, and . . . dead.

Abel Mendoza paced from one side of the massive desk to the other like a caged ferret, raising small clouds of dust as he shuffled piles of papers that hadn't been touched in months. He turned towards shelves filled with medical reference works. His hands seemed to have taken on a life of their own and moved wildly, pulling out books and picking up others that had fallen to the floor, closing open drawers and opening closed ones.

Finally he found what he was looking for. Just at that moment, with the back of his left hand, he inadvertently knocked a plastic skull to the floor. Half of it was covered in muscles and had an eye; the other half was bare bones. Skulls wear a permanent smile, even when they've fallen to the floor. The impact sent an eyeball flying, bouncing like a ping-pong ball towards the recumbent body.

He picked up the skull and, despite his nervousness, or perhaps because of it, couldn't resist returning its smile. Then the rolling plastic eye hit the heel of the dead woman's single shoe. The hollow thud it made sent him over the edge into real panic.

Abel Mendoza fled the room, running out through the door he had opened just minutes earlier with a picklock.

1

'Mariona Sobrerroca's been murdered.'

As always, Goyanes sounded neutral, professional. Joaquín Grau switched the heavy black receiver into his other hand so that he could rub his right temple. The headache he'd had since getting out of bed that morning flared up when the Commissioner gave him the news. Yet the voice at the other end of the line kept talking, oblivious to the effect it was having.

'Her maid found the body this morning, when she came back from a weekend with relatives in Manresa. The house was turned upside down; must have been a break-in.'

His headache intensified still further. Grau reached out for the glass of water his secretary had left for him on the table, grabbed a little packet of powdered painkiller, stuck it between his teeth and ripped it open. He poured its contents into the water and stirred it silently with a teaspoon. He drank it down in a single gulp before interrupting the Commissioner.

'Who's assigned to the case?'

'I gave it to Burguillos.'

'No. I'm not so sure about him.'

A snort was heard at the other end of the line. Grau ignored it. 'I want Castro on this case,' he ordered.

'Castro?'

'Yes, Castro. He's the best you have.'

Goyanes could only nod.

'OK,' he conceded, but he sounded displeased.

The public prosecutor responded irritably. 'And I expect results soon. The Eucharistic Congress is going to be held here in a month, and I want the city clean. Is that clear?'

'Crystal clear.'

After hanging up, Grau analysed the conversation. He had made the right choice. Castro was one of the most capable inspectors in the Criminal Investigation Brigade, if not the most capable. And he knew him to be absolutely loyal. He wasn't as convinced about Goyanes, despite the fact that the CIB's Commissioner had, once again, just shown him the necessary degree of deference. For some time now, Grau hadn't been sure he could trust Goyanes and his closest men, including Inspector Burguillos.

For the moment, his position in the public prosecutor's office was secure. For the moment. But he was aware that he had many enemies, and their number was growing. He knew too that they were clever, and capable of hiding in the shadows until the opportune moment arrived. He had to stay sharp. Goyanes had followed orders, but Grau had noticed that he was even more distant than usual. Or was it just his imagination? He had to stay focused, on guard, as always. The lion who takes the first swipe is usually victorious.

Relentless, that was how he liked to think of himself. Just like during the war, when he had been a military judge known for his ability to pass death sentences without wavering. That was why, after the war, when the Regime appointed trusted people for the new Justice Administration, they'd named him public prosecutor of Barcelona. The work they'd begun during the war wasn't over, there was still a lot to do. And he was still relentless.

He leaned back in his seat and looked at the pile of letters on his desk. He had never allowed his secretary to open them, just as he hadn't invited any familiarity between them. He always made sure to check out his staff thoroughly, but his secretary didn't know a single thing about her boss that wasn't strictly necessary. Not his secretary, not anyone. He would never understand some people's need to tell others

their personal stories, to open flanks of attack to the enemy gratuitously.

His gaze remained fixed on the unopened envelopes. It still made him feel slightly uneasy to see the day's correspondence on his desk. For several weeks after the commuters' strike last spring, he had opened the post with some trepidation. The popular public transportation boycott over the increase in fares and the ensuing general strike had caused many heads to roll. The first to go was Barcelona's prefect, followed immediately by the mayor. Two Falange officers ended up in jail because they didn't show sufficient enthusiasm for sending their units to fill the tramcars and break the strike. Other old-guard Falangists had also lost their posts. No one could be sure of holding onto their position.

He grabbed one of the letters at random, an envelope of fine paper that he tore with a sharp thrust of his steel-handled letter opener. It was an invitation to an official reception. Of course he would go, if only to avoid giving them the opportunity to whisper and plot behind his back. Yes, he was on his guard.

And now the Sobrerroca murder. Mariona Sobrerroca, dead. He had known her; he'd had social dealings with both her and her husband, the late Jerónimo Garmendia. Life takes so many twists and turns! Their magnificent mansion on Tibidabo had emptied over the course of just two years. In that brief stretch of time, the Grim Reaper had caught up with them both. 'I'm becoming morose,' he thought. 'And that's no good; that and this headache are a bad combination.' There was only one solution for both things, and that was to keep a cool head. Mariona Sobrerroca's death was just work – it was a case, a police investigation. One that involved sniffing around among the Barcelona bourgeoisie. On the one hand, that could be complicated. Who knew what they were going to turn up? Every investigation, no matter where, aired dirty laundry. It was like digging for wells: go deep enough and you always find shit. And those people didn't want you looking into their sewers any more than anyone else did. The difference was that they were well connected, so he had to treat

them with kid gloves. They were quick to complain, and they knew exactly whom to address their complaints to. Later, he'd have to hope that the results of the investigation were satisfactory. Perhaps, as on other occasions, he'd have to hide some things. And he wasn't sure whether this case would distinguish him in the public eye.

And then again maybe it would.

He picked up the phone and dialled Goyanes's number.

He got straight to the point. 'I want this case to get priority treatment in the press.'

'Why?'

'Because it's important to show the world that this country pursues its criminals and punishes them efficiently.'

He didn't care whether Goyanes believed those words, lifted from official speeches, or not. Grau knew they were incontestable.

'What does "priority" mean?' the Commissioner wanted to know.

'That we're going to give one newspaper the exclusive: *La Vanguardia*.'

'*La Vanguardia*? Why them? Remember what they did with the information in the Broto case . . .'

'That's exactly why. This time, as the only official source, they won't be able to start speculating.'

That conversation was even briefer than the first one.

Afterwards, he tipped his head back and closed his eyes, in the hope of mitigating the pain, which was now making itself felt as a throbbing in his ears.

On the other hand, he told himself, returning to the train of thought he'd interrupted in order to call the Commissioner, it was very likely that these enquiries would yield some interesting information, which he'd make sure to file away for future use. Maybe he'd even get some material that could help him solve a few of his own little problems.

He began to notice his headache easing slightly.

2

At nine that morning, as she contemplated her half-empty cup of coffee with sleepy eyes, Ana Martí heard the telephone in the stairway. It was kept in a nook beneath the first set of stairs, inside a box with a shutter door that closed with a lock. Only Teresina Sauret, the doorkeeper and the Serrahimas, the building's owners, who lived on the main floor, had the key. When the telephone rang, the doorkeeper picked it up and told whomever it was for that they had a call. If she felt like it; sometimes she wasn't in the mood. Tips or Christmas bonuses, either the expectation of receiving them or the generosity of their presentation, spurred her on to climb the stairs.

That day, it was the possibility of claiming the two months of back rent Ana owed that made her legs swifter, and soon after the shrill ringing had got her out of her flat, the doorkeeper had already reached the third floor – which was really the fourth, when you counted the unnumbered main floor – and was banging on the door.

'Señorita Martí, telephone.'

Ana opened the door. Teresina Sauret, planted in the middle of the doorway, blocked her exit. Cold, damp air came in through the spaces not filled by her plump body, which was squeezed into a plush robe. Ana grabbed her coat, in case the call was long, and the keys to lock up against the doorkeeper's prying eyes. Teresina must have thought she was looking for the money, and she moved aside. Ana slipped through the gap to exit her flat and closed the door, leaving Teresina's face a few

centimetres from the wood, at the height of the bronze peephole, round like a porthole. The peepholes on the other three doors shone in the light of the bare bulb that hung from the landing ceiling. There were no lamps in the hallways of the floors for let, only in the entryway and the main floor, for the Serrahimas' visitors. The owners seemed completely unconcerned by this fact, or what the tenants might think about it.

The doorkeeper muttered something; it was unlikely to have been anything nice or pleasant, but Teresina Sauret took the precaution of not saying it too loudly. That way, Ana, the layabout, would get the message just from her tone, yet anyone overhearing it would fail to understand.

Meanwhile, Ana ran down the stairs, reached the nook and picked up the heavy Bakelite receiver Teresina had left resting on the box.

'Hello?'

'Aneta?'

It was Mateo Sanvisens, editor-in-chief at *La Vanguardia*.

'Do you know Mariona Sobrerroca?'

How could she not? She had been writing for the society pages for almost two years; there was no way she could have escaped knowing who she was. The widow of a posh doctor and heiress to an old Catalan lineage, she was part of the fixed cast at all the city's important parties.

'Of course,' she replied.

Moving away from the door to Ana's flat, Teresina Sauret had begun her descent, slackening her pace to be able to catch part of the phone conversation. Her feet drew closer with exasperating slowness.

'Well, now you don't know her, you *knew* her.'

'What does that mean?'

'She's dead.'

'And you need the obituary for tomorrow . . . ' she started to say.

The lines of text were already writing themselves in her head: 'Illustrious Mariona Sobrerroca i Salvat is no longer with us. Garmendia's widow, generous benefactor of . . . ' Sanvisens's

next remark snatched the mental typewriter right out of her head.

'Aneta, dear, are you daft, or has watching too much opera made you feeble-minded? You think I would call you for an obituary?'

She had been ghostwriting for the newspaper long enough to know when she should leave Sanvisens's questions unanswered. She took advantage of the silence to nod goodbye to the doorkeeper, who had finally reached the last stair. Teresina Sauret went into her flat. The sound of her slippers against the floor stopped, as was to be expected, just behind the door.

'She's been murdered.'

She must have startled the doorkeeper with the exclamation that slipped out when she heard those words, because there was a bang against the door. *I hope she hit her head good and hard*, thought Ana.

'I'd like you to follow up on the matter. Will you do it?'

She had a lot of questions. Why me? Why isn't Carlos Belda doing it? What are the police saying? What do you want me to do? Why me? She had so many questions that she simply said, 'Yes.'

Mateo Sanvisens asked her to come into the office immediately.

She hung up, then raced up to her flat with long strides, put on some shoes, grabbed her bag and headed down the stairs. Teresina Sauret was closing the little door to the telephone.

'Such manners! What's the rush?' Ana heard as she went running out onto the street and headed towards the Ronda.

She passed, without a glance, the graffiti of José Antonio's face over block letters that read 'HERE WITH US!' Stencilling the founder of the fascist Falange party – the martyr, as many called him – was considered less an act of vandalism than one of patriotism. Which was why no one had dared to complain about it. They were too afraid of drawing attention to themselves. Since there were no trams heading towards the Plaza de la Universidad, she chose to walk rather than wait. She walked so briskly to Pelayo Street that soon her

legs didn't feel the cold. At the newspaper office she waited for Sanvisens to answer her questions. Maybe he'd even tell her why he'd called her instead of Carlos Belda, who always handled the crime news.

'Carlos is off sick. He'll be out for at least a week, if not two,' Sanvisens said after greeting her and looking at his watch, as if he had timed her progress since the call.

Out of courtesy, she asked, 'What does he have?'

'The clap. They treated it with penicillin and he had a reaction.'

'Maybe the penicillin was bad.'

It wouldn't have been surprising. There had been more than one case of adulterated medication that had left a trail of the dead and chronically ill. Adulterating penicillin was a crime punishable by death. So was tampering with bread or milk. But it was still done.

'Maybe,' said the editor-in-chief.

Mateo Sanvisens wasn't particularly fond of small talk. He was a man of few words; curt, some said, like his gaunt build, the sinewy body of a veteran mountain climber, with hands covered in ridges as if they'd been carved with a chisel. In his youth he had scaled several high peaks in the Alps and he knew the Pyrenees, where he was from, better than the smugglers did. In his office he had pictures of some of the highest peaks in the world, including Everest.

'The tallest mountain, though not necessarily the most difficult. That's something you often find out when you're already on your way up. I'll get there soon,' he would say frequently.

Beside it was the marked page of *La Vanguardia* that had announced, two years earlier, in 1950, that the French expedition had reached the summit of Annapurna.

As soon as Ana had settled in front of his desk, Sanvisens immediately started in on the details of the case.

'Mariona Sobrerroca's maid found her dead at her home yesterday.'

'How was she killed?'

'She was beaten and then strangled.'

'With what?'

She was embarrassed by the thin little voice that asked the question, but a growing excitement had seized her throat.

'By hand.' Sanvisens mimed strangulation.

The how, where and part of the when had been resolved in few words.

'Is this news really going to be covered?' she asked.

News of murders wasn't well received by the censors. In a country where peace and order supposedly reigned, local crimes weren't supposed to bring that image into question. There were clear orders on the matter, but also, as with everything, exceptions. It seemed this case was going to be one of the latter.

'It can't be swept under the carpet. Mariona Sobrerroca is too well known, and her family, particularly her brother, is very well connected, both here and in Madrid; so the authorities have decided it is better to report on the investigation and use it to demonstrate the effectiveness of the forces of order.'

The last few words sounded as if they were in quotation marks. Ana caught the sarcasm.

'What if it turns out she was killed by someone close to her, a top society person?'

A series of photos of Mariona Sobrerroca in the society pages paraded through Ana's mind, as if she were turning the pages of an album: in evening wear at the Liceo Opera House beside the wives of the city's high-ranking politicians; delivering armfuls of Christmas presents to the children of the Welfare Service, along with several leaders of the Women's Section of the Falange; at a debutante ball; with a group of ladies at a fundraiser for the Red Cross; at dances, concerts, High Mass . . .

'Well, it would serve as an example of how we are all equal under the law.' The sarcastic tone was still there. 'But I don't think so. It seems to have been a break-in. Whatever it was, we are going to report on it. In an exclusive.'

He paused as his eyes searched for something on his desk.

'The case is in the hands of a specialist, Inspector Isidro Castro of the Criminal Investigation Brigade.'

Isidro Castro. She didn't know him personally, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd written about him, although it would be the first time she did so under her own name. Castro had solved some important cases in recent years.

She remembered one in particular: the disappearance and murder of a nurse at the San Pablo Hospital, because she had written the copy that had appeared under Carlos Belda's byline.

Castro had hunted one killer after another. The first was ratted out by an accomplice, who in turn accused a third man. Not a terribly long chain of betrayals, but even if it had had ten links in it, Castro would have managed to connect them all. The police used brutally effective methods, and Inspector Castro, over the years he'd been working in Barcelona, had earned a reputation as the best. Soon she would meet him. What would he look like? What would the person behind 'the magnificent investigative work carried out by the Criminal Investigation Brigade' – as she had written in the article – be like? It was impossible to report on crimes in Spain without using those kinds of formulas. Crimes were to be solved, and order – the country's natural state – restored. She had done a good job. You had to do things right, even if someone else was going to get the credit for them. Perhaps Sanvisens appreciated her work, even though he had never said it, and this opportunity was her reward.

The editor-in-chief had given up his attempt to find whatever it was with just a glance and was now rummaging through the mess of documents, newspapers and notebooks that covered his desk. Ana knew that he was searching for something for her.

She owed a lot to Sanvisens and his friendship with her father, despite the political differences that had irrevocably distanced them. He hadn't spoken to her father since he had been released from jail and dismissed from his post, and Sanvisens

never even uttered his former colleague's name. In fact, he grew angry if Ana even mentioned him. As for Ana, she struggled to banish the suspicion that her job at the newspaper was some sort of compensation because Sanvisens had the position that should have been her father's. When he offered Ana her first article, she'd asked her father for 'permission' to accept it. He gave it to her tacitly, with the phrase, 'We are a family of journalists.' The name Mateo Sanvisens was still taboo.

And now, finally, she was getting to do some serious journalism, writing about a murder case. Her surprise, and the question 'why me?', must have been written all over her face, because Sanvisens, as he pulled a small piece of paper out of a pile of letters, looked at her and said, 'Isn't this what you've always wanted? Well, here's your chance. Make the most of it.'

At the theatre or the opera, every understudy dreams of the lead losing his voice. That's their moment, having mastered their role while watching in the wings: to step onto the stage and dazzle the audience.

And she had got a lot of answers, but she still had one final question. 'Will it be my own byline . . .?'

Sanvisens seemed to have been expecting it.

'Yes. What you write will appear under your byline.'

He read her the note he held in his hand.

'Now get moving. You have to be at police headquarters at eleven. Don't forget your ID. Olga is doing an accreditation for you.'

Suddenly Ana realised exactly where she had to go.

'On Vía Layetana?'

'Yes, that's what I said. Is there a problem?'

'No, no. I just wanted to make sure.'

There was no way she was going to admit to him that she, like so many others, was frightened by the mere mention of that building. Sanvisens looked at her somewhat suspiciously. Ana averted her eyes to avoid giving him any cause to doubt her suitability for the job. She had to step into the spotlight and shine, even if the setting was one of the most threatening in the

entire city. This was her chance. '*Ritorna vincitor*,' ran the aria from *Aida* that struck up in her head.

'Eleven o'clock, Vía Layetana,' she repeated, as if making a mental note.

'Inspector Isidro Castro will be expecting you,' added Sanvisens.

She tried to thank him, but Sanvisens wouldn't hear of it.

'Do me a favour, Aneta: when you leave, find the errand boy and tell him to go to the pharmacy and get me some of those little sachets of magnesium.'

Bringing a hand to his stomach by way of explanation, Sanvisens then abruptly turned round and started banging away at his typewriter. So she didn't get a chance to ask him if Isidro Castro knew that the person covering the story was a woman.

A woman who, after giving the errand boy the message, was so euphoric that she didn't realise she was speaking aloud: 'This time, the dead woman does have a name.' Unlike the macabre joke Carlos Belda had played on her when she first started working at the paper.

She remembered the rat. A dead rat lying swollen on the steps, its pink tail hanging almost all the way down to the stair below. No one had bothered to move it aside: not the police, not the undertakers, nor any of the curious bystanders who came to take a look. Someone would eventually end up stepping on it.

The dead woman she supposedly had to write about was on the first floor of an abandoned building on Arco del Teatro, a street that led into the lower Paralelo and the filthiest part of the Barrio Chino, Barcelona's red light district. Some children had discovered the body wrapped in an old blanket.

She didn't get to see it, but she didn't need to. She had seen the space where the woman had tried to take shelter from the cold, a wooden box, part of what had once been a wardrobe. It was as if she'd been buried alive.

'Was she elderly?' Ana had asked one of the officers she'd met in the building.

'About forty, but she'd packed a lot of living into those years.'

The case turned out to be a dirty trick. Belda knew this type of news wasn't usually published, that a piece about one of the corpses the police removed each week from abandoned buildings and the shelters where the hundreds of indigents swarming the city took refuge for the night wouldn't pass the censors. It had all been for nothing. The stench of piss and putrefaction on the street, in the building, in the flat. The impoverished faces of some, the bloated features of others, the dogs that ran terrified along the pavements, fleeing grubby, feral children.

The mere fact that Belda had been the one who'd offered her the chance to go to the scene had put her on her guard. Her humiliation over having fallen so naively into his trap hurt more than her frustration when she realised she wasn't going to be able to write a word about it.

Belda was waiting for her in the offices of *La Vanguardia* like a boy on All Fools' Day who can barely stifle his laughter when he sees the paper figure stuck to his victim's back. No one on the staff had opposed her joining the newspaper as vehemently. That was more than a year ago, but he still hadn't accepted her.

To get to her desk, Ana had to pass Belda's. That day, when she returned to the office, he waited until she was close enough, looked up, took the cigarette from between his lips and, with feigned disappointment, said, 'Oh, so you missed the stiff? Well, maybe you can write a feature on the latest fashions the whores in the Barrio Chino are wearing.'

He let out a laugh and looked around him, seeking the applause of his colleagues, who were following the scene more or less willingly.

He raised a few chuckles, which turned into cackles when they heard Ana's retort.

'I'm sure you're much better informed on their underwear.'

She turned on her heel and left him first with his mouth agape and then spewing a torrent of insults that only stopped when Mateo Sanvisens came within earshot.

So her first case had been a death with no body, the only record of it some court archives filed away along with those of the other nameless souls found dead that week.

But this time, the corpse waiting for her was a dead woman with a name – a very prominent name.