

Jane McLaughlin

## Trio For Four Voices

---

The child always wears modish nostalgia – almost, but not quite tipping over into fancy dress: blue cotton with an organdie overall, black patent bar shoes, Alice band<sup>1</sup> on her dark hair.

I can hear them speaking French, but I know they are not French. Americans, Bostonians probably.

5 From my balcony I can see the hotel gardens, terraced down in stages to the rim of the gorge. Each level lushly planted, meticulously mowed and trimmed. On the first level below me is the croquet lawn, surrounded by hibiscus in full flower and small palm trees.

10 The father and daughter are playing. Their voices rise and fall in the warm breeze wandering up the valley. In the daytime he always wears a pale linen suit, Visconti-style<sup>2</sup>. He has dark hair slicked back and gold-rimmed spectacles.

Laughter, an intertwining of a man's voice and a girl's. A rhythm of moving in physical harmony. Click of mallet<sup>3</sup> on ball.

He plays a terrible shot, hitching the ball into the air.

"Espèce de con<sup>4</sup>!" she shouts at him.

15 He walks over to her and wags his finger at her, roguishly. She flounces her skirt and makes a gesture of two hands brushing her face that says "So what?"

Later, in the lobby, I hear him call:

"Amelia! Come for dinner!"

She appears, wearing a red silk kaftan and trousers.

20 They walk past. She flashes a smile, he looks straight ahead.

They sit to the left of the tall windows overlooking the terrace. The mother is of a different period – Pre-Raphaelite<sup>5</sup> features and mane of dark hair. A robe of grape and night sky, trimmed with expensive embroidery. The parents sit formally, straight in their chairs, making occasional low conversation.

25 The child roams the tables between courses, greeting the diners, chatting.

Then it is my turn. She seats herself opposite me, her red silk arms on the table. She asks me questions politely, with the total confidence of the child who talks mainly to adults.

I tell her how I have driven up the road from Malaga and will be going on to Arcos to meet my friend.

30 "Oh I so love the *pueblos blancos*<sup>6</sup>. I've been coming here since I was three. Papa is writing a book about them."

She pronounces the syllables of "Papa" with even stress, not in the old-fashioned English way.

She is animated, charming, her dark eyes brilliant. I wonder at the privileges that have made her so accomplished.

35 Then she leans towards me.

"I'm going to tell you a really big secret!"

Again I am charmed, intrigued.

"It's so important, I want someone to know!"

I am silent during the pause.

40 "I hate my Mama. I am going to kill her."

---

<sup>1</sup> *Alice band*: hair accessory

<sup>2</sup> casual and expensive style

<sup>3</sup> a wooden hammer used in croquet

<sup>4</sup> *Espèce de con*: (French) you idiot

<sup>5</sup> (here) a woman with pale skin and long thick dark red hair

<sup>6</sup> *pueblos blancos*: a series of towns in Andalusia, Spain, including Malaga and Arcos

I lean back and stare at her.

“No. You can’t say that. You mustn’t make up such stories.”

“Oh it’s not a story. I am really going to do it. My Papa is going to help me. He hates her too. He wants to marry another lady, one who writes books like he does.”

45 “I have to speak to your parents.”

She gestures at their table. It is empty.

“It doesn’t matter what you say to them. She will think you made it up. You’ll see. Nobody will know. It will be suicide. She has tried to kill herself twice already.”

50 “You cannot say those things. It is not amusing. Maybe you don’t have enough to do here but there is no reason to make up tales that upset people.”

“Oh I don’t mean to upset you. But I am not making it up. My Mama is a wicked witch and she deserves to die.”

I will not listen any longer. She must not be encouraged. She needs help. Or if she doesn’t, I do. I get up and go to the window. Night has fallen over the mountains. I cannot see the road any longer. 55 The most beautiful road in Europe, they say. I drove it. How I wanted to do it. The hairpins, the precipitous drops, the steep ascents and descents; keeping my eyes on the road, trying not to be distracted by the soaring crests, the fantastic valleys.

Before I went, on the internet I read of fear. People who wanted to drive the road, but said they were afraid. Accidents, collisions, falling into the precipitous drop. But nothing blocked my dream of 60 the road. So beautiful, everything I had hoped. And where does it lead me? Here, into the mind of a demented child.

When I turn, she is standing in the doorway of the dining room. She waves and runs down the corridor.

I sit down for a moment on one of the velvet chairs. Trying to make sense of the conversation, 65 maybe even pretend it has not happened.

Ignore it? I cannot get it out of my head. Tell someone, and get involved? But who? Maybe the mother is indeed unstable and that is why the child is like this.

And what if it is true? Suppose the woman is found at the bottom of the gorge? Would I question the story that she had flung herself there?

70 I see the vertical walls of rock, the rippling waters of the swimming pool, failed brakes on one of the hairpins, the sound of the shotguns in the clay pigeon range at the end of the lower terrace.

These things are in my head now and I cannot get them out. Her words have taken control.

The next morning I open the shutters onto the balcony. Mist lies over the slopes of the mountains, the crests floating above it like islands.

75 After breakfast I sit reading there. The blue of the sky grows more intense as the mist dissolves and the sunlight grows strong.

I watch three people going down towards the gorge. First the woman, wearing a bright blue shirt and baggy linen trousers, striding out towards the crest of the hill. Behind her: father and daughter, 80 side by side on the path, holding hands, skipping sometimes over roots or loose rocks.

Then they wind slowly down a path that leads to the rim of the precipice. The woman in the blue shirt climbs up onto a rock that juts out over the chasm. The other two remain below.

Then she disappears, I cannot see where.

The two figures hover, moving uncertainly. Then they turn and wind their way up the path again.

The woman is not at dinner that night.

85 I ask at the reception desk. “The American lady – sorry, I don’t know her name – she lent me a book and I would like to return it. Do you know where she is?”

“She has gone to Gaucin<sup>7</sup> for two nights. She will be back on Thursday.”

I think of the hairpins on the road to Gaucin.

Amelia comes to my table again at dinner.

90 “I do not want to hear any more about that. What you told me the other night. You must stop

---

<sup>7</sup> a town in Spain

telling those stories.”

She sighs.

“I know you don’t believe me. But you will see. You will know when it happens.”

“Where is your mother right now?”

95 “She has gone to Gaucin for a painting workshop. She will be back on Thursday. Maybe.”

I do not reply. She pushes her chair back and walks away.

As she goes she says:

“Papa and I know what to do. She won’t come back. Maybe this time, maybe another time.”

Most of Thursday passes. I go walking along the gorge and return in the early evening.

100 As I go into dinner a taxi pulls up at the door and the woman gets out, carrying a holdall and a wooden paint box.

The child needs help.

I ask the woman if I can have a word with her. I walk into an alcove that is more private and she follows me.

105 She greets me pleasantly enough and listens.

I report the conversations.

Her reaction is extreme. I would say theatrical, except that she is clearly not acting.

She gasps, appears to be trying to catch her breath. Holding her hand over her mouth she makes a sound that sounds like a suppressed long sob.

110 She runs past me, up the stairs, still making the strange sound. If you heard it out of context you might not know whether it was laughter or sobbing.

There follows a scene of operatic extravagance.

Running feet, slamming doors, a woman shouting. The phlegmatic author comes charging down the stairs, roaring like a bull, his wife and child running after him.

115 I realise he is quite tall. He looms over me, his face lowered into mine, his eyes raging behind his gold-rimmed spectacles.

“How dare you! How dare you invent such terrible things about our daughter! Such disgusting, twisted, perverted ideas!”

His wife keeps up a kind of counterpoint: “Disgusting, warped, appalling!”

120 I literally have my back to the wall. I see Amelia standing on the stairs, watching the scene intently.

“You will withdraw everything you said to my wife. You will never repeat such things again. You will apologise to my daughter, who is likely to be permanently damaged by your accusations. Withdraw now, apologise now, or you will hear from my lawyers.”

125 He is breathing heavily, his shoulders shaking.

The man seems mad. I think more than ever: the child must be helped.

I look around for hotel staff for support, but none appear.

130 At home I would report threatening behaviour. There is not much point in calling the Spanish police, if only because my Spanish would not be good enough to explain, and he might turn the complaint against me if he speaks it better.

The child needs help. I am being threatened. But I have no choice.

“I apologise. I withdraw the statements.”

He exhales sharply and turns, shepherding the woman and child before him up the stairs.

That evening I get room service.

135 The next morning a clear day dawns, fresh flowery air blowing in from the balcony. But I have little pleasure in it now. I just want to get on the road to Arcos as soon as I can.

As I come down the stairs I see that they, the three of them, are standing in the entrance hall. They are talking in a close, intimate way, in a way that seems inexplicable to me having seen what went before: low voices, small laughter.

140 Amelia is wearing her blue dress again. She is holding a bouquet of pink roses. She comes forward and hands them to me.

Her mother steps up to me too.

“Thank you – thank you for being such a good sport.”

Her New England drawl is cool, soothing.

145 “Amelia gets bored to tears being hauled around Europe after us. She must have her little games.  
I hope you do not think us too extraordinary.”

I cannot say anything.

The mother has a cardboard folder in her hand; she puts it into mine.

“These are for you.”

150 They load their antique leather suitcases into a vintage dark green Bentley<sup>8</sup> and drive away,  
laughing and waving.

As I watch them go I feel anger, but to my surprise a sense of loss washes over that.

I look inside the cardboard folder. Inside are four watercolour sketches of the landscape around  
Gaucin – luminous, delicate, beautiful.

155 I walk down to the pool. It is empty, limpid blue with lights of the sun playing in it. On the way I  
throw the roses into a bush where they hang like foreign blossoms.

I take out the paintings one by one, tear each into tiny shreds, and drop them into the water.

(2018)

---

<sup>8</sup> very expensive brand of car