



Adán is quite certain she's the one. It always happens like this. If someone were to ask him, he would say another person had taken control of his body and acted without his consent. But no one would ever believe him, that's for sure.

The girl bends forward, waving the piece of bread in her hand. She presses her leather Periquita shoes against the bottom of the railing. Her dress reveals thin legs covered with scratches and mosquito bites. Dark strips of dirt remain on the backs of her knees, and the reddish dust of the cobblestones varnishes her brown skin. A little higher up, her purple nylon panties, with a weak elastic band, don't cover what makes him clench his fist around the wooden stick holding the balloons. A trio of coffee-colored ducks waddles over to the girl. She gets excited, jumping and laughing and stamping her feet, and he has to swallow hard through his dry, sandy throat.

He adjusts the balloons one last time, keeping the most expensive ones high on the stick, and the least expensive ones at the bottom, within the children's reach. The girl's image flickers before his eyes, blocking out the bodies of the Sunday afternoon shoppers. It plays out frame by frame: a woman of indefinable age, who could be her mother or grandmother, seizes the girl by the arm and the piece of bread falls on the grass. The ducks have multiplied, and they fight over it like crazed hyenas. Another frame: the woman moves her arms, her mouth gaping open and shut in front of the girl's sweat-stained face. Now a rear shot of the two walking away down the path of red hexagons, the woman dragging the girl. Cut. They're gone, or at least out of his sight.

His desire rises, blows up, a balloon reaching its limits. But there's no doubt – she's the one.

An involuntary jerk of his right arm makes him look away. His eyes burn, as if he hadn't blinked for minutes. He looks down: a head of spiky hair, a hand pulling on the string of a green frog balloon. It's an overgrown boy. The boy whimpers as he pulls on the string, but says nothing, giving the impression he's retarded.

'How much is the frog?' an elderly woman asks in a witchlike voice. The leather shoes, the dark knees, the purple nylon panties, all disappear and before his eyes appears a yellowish face, a twisted mouth and sagging cheeks, all framed by faded hair. The man's eyes slide down, taking in the pair of slack breasts and the belly that stretches out beneath them. He can't tell if she's pregnant or if it's the result of having given birth many times over the years. Grown-ups are disgusting. He wants her to go, to leave him alone. The woman's ugliness disturbs him. He knows her type: she'll haggle tirelessly until she gets the price she wants and then she'll take hours to choose a balloon.

'I'm closed now' the balloon seller says and walks away, his dog in tow. He has a lot to do. First, he has to find her.

The girl's cry is high, clear, and sharp as a needle. It's louder than the joyful shriek of the magpies. It can be heard above the clamor of the fixed-route buses revving their engines at the bus stop, some fifty yards away; above the ringing of the church bells that announce the six-o'clock mass; above the horn of the ice-cream cart pushed by the skinny old man. All these city noises, and still her cry rises high above them, threatening to draw attention to this isolated part of the park. Here, where the eucalyptuses grow so thick that few plants can flourish; here, in a place where only koala bears could thrive. A place with no swings, no bike or running trails, no benches for high-school sweethearts. The pines and poplars grow only in the most visited areas. Even the wild

privets and cedars stand apart from the eucalyptuses, as if they were afraid of them. Around those white-barked trees stands an untamed row of shrubs covered with cobwebs: it's a place where only someone who likes bird shit on his head or the company of starving mosquitoes would dare to tread—or someone like him.

The girl can't be any older than seven, but malnutrition has kept her body small. Even so, she moves with unusual force—she kicks and cries, and tries to bite and scratch him. As if she weren't the one who tempted him, bending over in front of him to feed the ducks, showing him her dirty purple panties—which, he now discovers, have *Sunday* printed on them in a white cursive script. Surely she has the other six pairs at home, all in the same worn-out condition, each printed with a different day of the week. And it's actually Sunday. He imagines the girl doing her homework, writing meticulously in a small notebook. An orderly student. Poor, but hardworking. With a will to succeed, as people say.

Adán slaps her face a couple of times and sits on her, pinning her down. Beneath the worn-out dress, her ribs go up and down. He pants. His blows fail to shut her up. Adán places his palm over her mouth—her face is small enough to disappear inside his hand.

He bends to kiss her. She takes in the fetid air coming up from the man's stomach. He has to hold her thin neck, with its traces of filth, the small glands, the saliva struggling to reach her mouth, the air passages blocked. Her legs quiver out of desire to strike.

'Can't you see if you keep screaming somebody will find us?'

She moans, the lowing of a frightened beast. Sparks are reflected in the dark marbles of her staring eyes, and her arms flap against the ground. Her small hands drive her fingernails into the dirt as she fights to twist free from his grasp. The ghostly wail of an ambulance on its way to the hospital drowns out all other sounds.

'If you shut up, I'll let you go. But if you scream one more time, I'll kill you.'

The light brown bitch, now ailing, his faithful companion of ten years, looks up every so often, emerging from a daze to sniff the dirt near the wooden stick with the balloons. Her master leans over a small body which has stopped moving and is silent, no longer emitting a sound like the screeching of car tires.

The balloon seller kisses the girl's face, eyes, and mouth. She no longer tries to scream. It's been a long time since she started to defend herself, since she first realized she wasn't going to get a huge Hello Kitty balloon. She can't struggle anymore. Her strength slips away from her and she stares at the darkening sky. She sees the silhouette of a squirrel who is watching her from a low branch. She shuts her eyes tight and tries to send it a telepathic message: run, find a policeman, someone, it doesn't matter who, and ask for help. In the cartoons, everything seems so simple. The animals talk and think, and the superheroes have superpowers. But the squirrel scurries away. No one can see her. No one can hear her. She can't talk. Three helpless monkeys.

The girl remembers the pig they made in school with a small balloon, glue, and shredded newspaper. Now she feels as if her body were made from that same material. The man on top of her smells like rotten broccoli. He rips her clothes off. He moans, hits her, pants, splits her in two, moves frenetically, makes horrific sounds, and hits her again. She swallows saliva for the last time and faints. Time stops. It's as if she has been thrown into an abyss, where, instead of falling, she floats in the air.

It gets light and the sun warms her skin. She can feel branches beneath her. She feels tiny legs crawling over her skin. The girl opens her eyes. Not a single cloud. Her body is alive. Without clothes, but alive. Full of pain, but alive. And tight on her feet, her Periquita shoes are still with her.