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El complot de los Románticos (Conspiracy of the Romantics) by Carmen Boullosa is one of the novels featured in the winter 2011-12 Spanish-language reading group run by And Other Stories.

'Dante Hits the Road' from *Conspiracy of the Romantics*

By Carmen Boullosa

Translated by Samantha Schnee

"Look!"

The Florentine was standing next to me, in new threads from head to toe, his face half-obscured by a blue baseball cap that said 'I Love Britney' in gold letters. He was barefoot, the slogan 'Don't Fuck With Me' in thick orange letters across his chest. How old was he? That's when I finally realized how young he was. Skinny, with his elegant walk, he really did look like he was *made of metal, finely wrought...*

"Dantecito, why don't you choose another T-shirt, one that says something else?"

"What does this one say?"

"'Let's not copulate,' or 'Don't mess with me.'"

"I am in perfect agreement, with both sentiments! Let's go!"

"And what about your lid?"

"What's a lid?"

"Lid. Cap. Hat." None of these words rang a bell. "That thing you're wearing on your head."

"What about it?"

"It says 'I Love Britney'. Do you know who Britney is?"

"No idea!"

"Your Beatrice won't like her. Neither will you."

"You mean Britney is a woman?"

"Sort of. In one song she says she's not a girl or a woman. She's a nymphet who's past her prime, but a nymphet nonetheless."

"Is she a human, some heavenly or infernal being, or a god of the ancients? Tell me more, because I don't understand. She (he pointed to the poetess) told me that these words don't mean anything, they're simply decorative."

I took him to the video section at Borders. Britney was on two screens, not because she was on top of the charts, but because of her most recent scandal.

"That's her."

“Who?”

“The one whose name is on your hat.”

“Her? What is this we’re looking at?”

How was I to know? I asked the salesman: “Which video is this?”

“Boys? Stronger? Which do you like better?”

The damn sales kid was answering my question with a question, expecting an answer on something I knew next to nothing about. He was clearly enjoying my confusion. He had a bar-code scanner in one hand. He held it in front of his chest and launched into a dissertation on the life and sorrows of Britney Spears, shifting his weight back and forth from one foot to the other. He talked about her as if she were a goddess or a saint, with admiration that wasn’t quite justified by her deeds and sorrows.

Dante was glued to the spot. The video, a mere frivolity to me, a chain of half-baked clichés, was shocking for him. First, and I should have realized this from the beginning, the simple existence of the monitor and the video had left him stunned (that was what he had meant by his question), because he had never seen images on a screen. The rat had told him about it, but he’d never laid eyes on such a thing. If you can call it a thing. When I turned back to him at the end of the sales kid’s dissertation and it dawned on me what the bard was experiencing, I didn’t even try to explain. I let him watch. He furrowed his brow, he compressed his lips, he raised and lowered his hands. Once he had overcome his astonishment, he began to focus on the content, because he said, “Chairs! They’re chairs! What is she doing? Who’s singing? What’s happening? Why is she standing on the chair? Is she bumping into it on purpose? What is she doing?” He spouted questions, interjections, and exclamations, without giving me a chance to get a word in edgeways.

“That’s a car, Dante.”

“Car?”

“She’s driving it. She’s on a highway. It’s night, you see the streetlamps? And now it’s raining.”

“And why did she get under the chair? What’s in her hand? A sword? A rod? What do you call what she’s doing?”

It’s a good thing I had asked what the title of the video was, it explained a lot.

“It’s a video called *Stronger*.”

“Strong! Strong! What kind of strength is this? What is the importance of that chair? Those moves? That hair? What is she saying?”

“She’s not saying anything and it doesn’t mean anything, either. It’s a pastiche of a famous scene featuring Liza Minnelli, copying moves that were choreographed decades ago for the stage and later for a movie, etcetera.”

“Famous?” Pause. “Movie? Minnelli? Did you say video? What’s a video?”

“Yes, Dante, extremely famous.” I had only enough patience to answer one of his questions.

“Where is she walking? Why is the light changing? I don’t understand a thing. *Io capishconiente, capishconiente!*”

The screens switched to another song, the one I had mentioned to Dante: *I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman*. “Look, it’s the one I told you about, the lyrics of the song are ‘I’m not a girl, not yet a woman’.”

The shots of the Grand Canyon impressed him less than the movement of the camera, the close-ups and long shots from helicopters, and the speed with which they changed. "What's that? What's that?" He wasn't asking, he was exclaiming.

Up till this point the two screens had been showing the same video. Suddenly, on the screen on the left, Mariah Carey appeared, dyed-blond tresses and a long red dress, descending a staircase. In the next image she was wearing a white dress. Same scene. Illuminated staircase.

"Another one!" Dante said, looking at her, not knowing who to watch.

"Another one! There's another?"

"Many. Hundreds. Thousands."

On her screen, Britney sang "I'm a Slave for You," and Dante didn't make a peep. He wore an expression of horror mixed with fascination. Next came the 2001 Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas, the stage floating in a fountain next to the Eiffel Tower and a Roman temple, Britney wearing a microphone around her head, a young dancer at her side, a hat covering half her face. Dante, paralyzed.

"That's the real Britney, not what you seen on MTV nowadays," said the sales kid behind us. Who knows what else he said, because I couldn't engage in conversation or pay him any attention at all. I didn't want to lose Dante. Not because he was about to leave, but because now he looked truly crazed. Then the sales kid, clearly a Spears fan, showed us a video which "had a little of everything." Dante's jaw dropped.

"A demon! She's a demon!"

Her face in close-up. Pretty. Then hideous. Funny. Humourless. Hideous again. Far away, up close, dressed this way or that. A man dances. Sinuous, frenetic, hard, malleable, still, Britney dances. A parody of a caricature, a heroine, a victim, a killer, the whole Spears Shtick.

Dante was still exclaiming, "A demon! A real demon!" I couldn't have agreed more. Dressed as a bride with a short veil and white boots, her kiss with Madonna, her tight, wet T-shirt, her unintentional vulgarity, her cave-girl costume, the scene with the chair again in fast-forward. And Dante frozen there, watching Britney.

The poetess approached us with a pair of tennis shoes in her right hand and – I don't mean to be repetitive, just to describe her accurately – her blackberry in her left.

She grabbed him by the arm and literally tore him away from the screen, sitting him on the bench where I was reading until he interrupted me to put his shoes on. He managed, with difficulty—the tongues got stuck, the laces got tangled—the gringa was busy with her blackberry again. The Florentine got his feet into the shoes and looked at the laces, not knowing what to do: "So incredibly complicated!" I crouched down and tied his laces without a word. Once his shoes were on he stood and took a few steps, trying them out.

I watched him carefully. He seemed more alive, more physical, with each step. Had he stopped thinking about Britney? Had he thought about her at all? What had he made of the screens? Were they like dreams to him? How does somebody who has never encountered a screen experience one for the first time? But I wasn't going to ask him these things. To get through to him I asked, "Are they comfortable? How do they feel?"

“I don’t know.”

His answer was valid for all my questions, the ones I had asked and the ones I didn’t. I don’t know. At least we had that in common.

Dante: “Let’s go.”

We descended the escalators, the gringa following us with some kind of radar, or else she would have lost us because she never took her eyes off the Berry-thing. We picked up our trail again, surrounded by masses of fatties. We found the back door that looked like the one we had entered. We passed through it. I thought to myself, “Goodbye toothbrush that I forgot to buy;” I had remembered too late. The sun shone with a shocking brightness, reflected over and over again in the mirrors, windshields, and metal trim of all the cars.

The three rats were waiting for us, sitting on some planters, chatting away quite happily. I gave them the rolls and they wolfed them down. They flatly refused the water.

“They must have rabies,” I thought to myself. I felt like a simpleton, ready to laugh at anything. I felt unsettled, something like a leaf that’s about to fall from a tree. But that image doesn’t really work here, in the parking lot of the mall, all asphalt, cement, cars, not a speck of shade anywhere now that the landscaped area was behind us. It didn’t occur to me that if the sun is shining brightly, the cars become ovens. What a lack of common sense. Although, of course, in this country everyone has air-conditioning. They don’t trust the wind, how easy it is to leave trees where they are, park in their shade, and roll down the windows when you’re driving. But no, simple doesn’t work here. On the other hand stupidity, does; I thought of the videos I hadn’t seen before, all stupid, if you can call Britney stupid. Her homage to stupidity, via the road to idiocy.

We mounted our rats. In one leap we were on the banks of a river, and the moment we touched the earth something happened. I don’t know how to describe it exactly. There was a cracking sound, one that we felt as well as heard. We had crossed a frontier that wasn’t only physical. To get to the point: travelling alongside Dante, who was from the other side, time was not (at least not *all* time) inflexible. The cracking sound was accompanied by a peculiar feeling. I wasn’t sure what to think. My senses heightened, and a little nervous, I read a strange sign up ahead: *Mississippi River*.

Me: “Where are we?”

Another leap, but a shorter one, because we didn’t lose sight of the landscape, the river on one side, a small, pretty city on the other.

The gringa: “We’re in Dubuque.”

Slowly, slowly, the rats cut their speed, we were crossing water, as if we were boats, we came alongside an enormous floating casino, “a floating city,” Dante called it, and my rat, “it’s not so great;” we entered the port, climbed up onto a pier, walked along the river among regular people, stopping in front of a building that made a huge impression on Dante; past the graveyard we saw the Mesquakie burying Dubuque himself with tribal honors—songs, smoke, feathers, drums—and continued on to the town square, where Potosa, the daughter of Peosta, the chief of the Pesquakie, was getting married to the selfsame Dubuque, “But I thought he was dead?” I said; we passed the façade of the courthouse, the cathedral, and in one leap we had left the town behind. The sign *Mississippi River* appeared again, we continued bearing south, past Prairie du Chien—it sounds

much better in French than in English—and another huge leap, during which my rat yelled:

“This here is the real Mississippi, bitches! This was the border of the country for many years, before they seized the territory of the French and the Spanish and the Mexicans with their filthy little hands!”

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