

Carlos Gamarro
Excerpt from *The Islands*

From Chapter 8.

What a shame, such soft skin, I thought. A wave of dope came and went, blowing through my body like a hot wind, emptying me without warning. Such soft skin, I repeated, but the repetition was less in the words in my mind than in the suction of her pores and the static of little tiny hairs between her and me. I took my shirt off to hear better. Immobilised, Gloria squirmed to reach the edge of my jeans and slide a hand inside. 'Hey, kiddo, I'm not Rubber Woman you know,' she giggled softly into the pillow; but rapt in my new discovery I couldn't let go of her or stop rubbing my newly awakened skin against hers. Something's happening here, I felt rather than thought, with some alarm; something's coming through this wrapping of mine, suddenly so thin and porous: it isn't the dope, it isn't the childhood memories, it isn't just feeling horny. I had to find out what it was, this crackling of bubble wrap on my skin when it came into contact with hers, my armadillo carapace suddenly as soft and yielding as a cat to its caresses, and, seeking the answer, I lost myself with no chance of return in the succession of plains and hollows from her nape to her waist. This skin, this beautiful skin, a voice inside me kept repeating as I rubbed my nose, my eyes, my mouth on it the way you do on a sun-dried towel when stepping out of the sea. There were small pockets of energy that alternated with the softness of the skin, points so intense that my fingertips felt almost like reliefs, and I pursued their tracery across every corner of her body, flipping her over to snuffle about in her breasts and armpits and beyond her belly, following the elusive waist of her skirt, which she herself saw to unfastening and tugging off, twisting and turning to free hips and thighs of the trap, and make it vanish beyond her ankles. Her body became vast in the darkness, extending in all directions at once, lost in time as well, and I lost myself and roamed over it with my broken compass, my nameless map and handless clock.

[...]

For some time Gloria went on biting and sucking my ear, neck, shoulder, anything she could reach without leaving the axis on which she turned, while I renewed the exploration of the mystery which I now felt further than ever from solving: what was it that my fingers kept detecting on the inexhaustible surface of her back, the sweet fruit of her buttocks, the slide of her thighs (climbing up, sliding happily down, running back up, the way we did on the slide in the square in Malihuel); I desperately wanted to be blind to feel her more intensely and, lifting my fingers to break the spell, I made another discovery: the air felt rough after touching her. Some part of my body, probably the one that most snugly fitted her recesses and projections, whispered a corollary: after touching this, it told me, you won't want to touch anything else. Learn that now, even if you forget it when you get up: you'll forever be comparing; any other skin will feel like sackcloth; it's going to be hard to live without.

Gloria asked me if I'd enjoyed it and I nodded enthusiastically.

'Wasn't it great? The first time,' she said. 'And we came together.'

'I thought you came afterwards,' I contradicted her.

‘What? Oh, right. I meant together, not at the same time. God, what a day. Just when you think the only thing you’ve got to look forward to is having dinner and watching the telly till you nod off, a stranger rings your doorbell, barges into your house and fucks you like a god. And there are people who complain about life.’

We chatted again afterwards, less anxiously, the stiff cock and the open cunt that lay in wait behind every phrase before, now sleepy and content, leaving us to play with words like two little kids in a sandpit, all wrapped up in themselves and serious with concentration, lending each other toys without knowing whose is which: post-fucking words, another dictionary that preserved the purity of life’s first words. They made it easier to find each other at last, at one of those crossroads in our common past where, until now, our paths hadn’t crossed.

‘Wait, wait. Felix the Cat! Was that you? You once beat the shit out of my cousin Diego!’

‘Your cousin? But then you must be . . .’

‘We did, we did meet: you ran after me with a squeezey bottle at the lagoon at Carnival! I grabbed you by the hand to stop you!’ she shouted, doing so again twenty years later. ‘You were just this little kid! My, how you’ve grown,’ she said, shaking my prick, which was awakening from its slumber. ‘That’s a big one, eh?’

‘I was floating on my back naked once in Bariloche and the newspaper published a photo of me with the caption “NESSIE SPOTTED IN LAKE NAHUEL HUAPI”.’

‘In that icy water too! Just imagine if it had been warmer!’

‘Yours was famous too. Guido told me.’

‘What?’

‘That you let the boys touch it.’

‘The liar!’ she shouted, bursting with laughter. ‘I only let him look once! The bastard had promised me he wouldn’t tell! The whole town . . . oh God, I want to die.’

Then it just started flowing, and we put together a story from the odds and ends of our two separate ones: chance meetings at a basketball game, the church door, the queue at the bakery; sometimes conclusive, at others impossible, but which we vehemently assented to nonetheless, spiting the insipid truth with deception. For her, it also meant additional security: the stranger she’d let into her house, who was banging her a couple of hours later as her daughters slept in the next room, had been transformed into a child in red trunks, chasing her in and out of the picnic tables on the island, squirting innocent yet premonitory jets of water at her with his little carnival-clown squeezey bottle. I suppose that was another reason why she opened up:

‘You know what struck me about you? You met the girls from the start, but you stayed. With the others, you have no idea; I’d sometimes spend months thinking up excuses for them not to come round, because I don’t want to see them pull that face, and the day I do is the last I want to see them. With you I don’t have to worry.’

‘I want to see you,’ I said to her. ‘I’ll turn on the light.’

‘No, Felipe,’ she tried to head me off.

I should have listened to her, but she was too late; my hand was already on the switch. She managed to cover herself, but not the way a naked woman usually would: she’d left her breasts and cunt exposed, while her hands had flown to cover perfectly innocent parts of her breast and belly. Immediately I realised why. Ten people wouldn’t have had enough hands to hide the marks that swarmed over her body like insects, denser in the parts she was trying to hide.

‘Now you’ve seen me,’ she said to me angrily. ‘Now turn it off.’

I didn’t. I approached the sofa, sat down on the edge and touched one. It was as if they’d pinched very hard and torn a piece out, the surrounding skin then stretched like a darn to cover it. It was these shiny little scars that my fingers had detected, confusing them in the dark with some obscure tactile illusion produced by my enchantment; only now did the map I’d drawn by joining up these dots with my fingers begin to take shape. Gloria stared at me in resignation, waiting for me to make up my mind, and I’d like to have obliged: what, when, who. But I already knew the answers. They did it to this skin, I could feel it in my throat, in my eyes; they were capable of doing this to this skin.

‘The lighter ones are cattle prod; the darker ones, cigarette burns. And don’t worry: they’re more than ten years old. They won’t bite any more. Or are you the compassionate sort? Can you turn the fucking light off, now, or do you want to see more? Look.’

She opened her arms, exposing her body. I got up and turned off the light. Without approaching her body again, which I sensed was as tense, hostile and tight as a shut clam, I spoke without thinking.

‘You think you have a monopoly on suffering? I was sent to the Malvinas war when I was nineteen; I was wounded in the head and spent a year not being able to speak. Yeah, I know, it doesn’t compare. I’m way down the rankings. I have no right to complain.’

I thought that she’d be even more pissed off after that and kick me out, but instead she sat down, hugging her knees, and asked me:

‘Where in Malvinas?’

‘Puerto Argentino. Longdon. What, you’ve been there?’ I said, a little more sarcastically than intended.

‘Not on Isla Grande?’

‘No. Why?’

She didn’t answer, but I could see her loosen up and propose a truce by tucking away her legs to make room for me. ‘You want the details or just the gist?’ she said to me after a minute’s silence, and I told her there was no need to if she didn’t want to, I’d heard plenty of stories like hers. ‘I can promise you,’ she corrected me, almost disdainful in her self-assurance, ‘you’ve never heard one like mine before. By the time I finish, you’ll probably want to leave. So think about it. You still have time,’ she finished, and from the way she said it I knew I had no option but to stay. Gloria went to fetch a blanket for herself and another for me; she brought cigarettes and smoked the whole time she was talking, without moving from her end of the sofa (nor I from mine); without touching each other once the whole time, each enwrapped in the cocoon of our own warmth.

‘The first time I realised what was going to happen I was eighteen and dating this boy from the Guevara Youth Group, who loved to talk at the meetings. He wanted me to go and live with him, but I wasn’t sure. I’d just started my degree (Law) and, although his passion turned me on, he wasn’t very bright; so naïve he was a bit thick, actually. There was a meeting that night in the faculty building, some kid who’d been wasted by the Triple A, and Fabián took to the podium in the street, which we’d cordoned off, and began to mouth off about all the blood spilt, the martyrs, the Revolution . . . As an orator he stank: one cliché after another, nobody took much

notice of him except me. But I wasn't listening to what he was saying. He suddenly looked so lovely up there, so full of life, that I felt something here, and said to myself there and then "Yes, alright, I will live with him, yes, I do. As he was climbing down, I waved to him and started to jump up and down to call him over; I could barely contain the urge to shout it out to him from where I was standing. But I wasn't the only one: someone else was calling him from a parked car. His old gesture, as much as to say "Look woman, the cause comes first; you'll have to wait," always used to really get to me; but this time it filled me with tenderness, and I was trembling with impatience as he approached the open car window. Without a word an arm came out and hit him in the forehead with a hatchet. A hatchet: one of those little axes you use to cut the wood for the barbecue, and Fabián fell on his back with the hatchet still stuck in his forehead, and the car pulled off and disappeared before he'd stopped moving on the floor. There was pushing, running, shouting; people opened up to let him die, alone, in the middle of the circle of spooks that materialised out of the rally as it broke up. Me, I was paralysed, I couldn't even shout. A friend pulled me away and I let her without resisting; the only thing I could think of was that they shouldn't leave him there with the hatchet in his head, that someone should show some compassion and pull it out, I couldn't stand the idea of him lying there like that with that look of frozen astonishment on his face and the hatchet buried in the middle of his forehead. That day was like a revelation to me, you see? As if it had been my own head the axe had split in two. I stayed in the movement, even after the coup, but only as a reflex, on automatic pilot, because the other alternatives were even scarier. I'd seen that day that we'd never beat them, that we weren't capable of doing anything like that to them, that if we played by their rules, they were bound to win. 'It took them some time to catch up with me, late in the hunting season, when urgency had become routine to them. They asked hardly any questions: there wasn't much they didn't know by then. They left the hood on the first few times. It was horrible because I never knew what was going on, whether they were about to do something to me or not, my body couldn't brace itself, I lived in a constant state of terror. I know I just blanked out at some point, like they'd pulled the plug: it just disconnected. Sometimes the intolerable thing is the awareness of what they're doing to you, and when I lost that, I stopped caring about it; when the pain gets really bad, you faint and that's the end of it. I lived in a total stupor for months: I suppose I must have been eating and sleeping and shitting, but I can't remember anything, except those moments of pain from another world which, in the otherwise general void, eventually merged into one long howl of pain. They got bored with me in the end – some fresh meat must have arrived – and they threw me into a corner. One day they stuck my head in a bag, shoved me up and down the stairs and dumped me on the floor of a van with others like me. They took us, I found out later, to the Garage Olimpo two blocks from my apartment – which I never set foot in again; I think they kept it. They did things differently there: *they* were the ones wearing the hoods. I learned to recognise their bodies; there can't have been more than four or five of them, and there was one who was clearly the boss: they called him "Captain". The others came and went, but he was always there, like he was turning up for a date. From the taunts of the others I realised that he reserved this privilege for me alone. That brought me back. In the middle of nowhere, there was suddenly something I could hang onto – a ledge. And when he took his hood off one day, when I could once again put a face to him, give an identity to the sheer animal

panic my whole world had become, I began to recover my own. You know who I'm talking about, don't you?'

I suppose so, but the idea was so intolerable that I didn't even dare to tell myself, and I sat there dumbly waiting for her to do so. After all, I wasn't the one who'd started this little game.

'My ex-husband. The girls' father.'

I ought to have got up and split that very instant, but that's what generally happens with the most harrowing stories: you're disturbed yet so fascinated at the same time that you can only listen till the end, utterly in the grip of the teller, who makes the story last to prolong their control over us for as long as possible. Most of us Malvinas veterans are old hands at it: we know all the tricks.

'Gradually my situation improved – between sessions of course. They treated me, clothed me, fed me. They did it routinely, anonymously, as if it were the same for everybody, but I knew that, if I'd outlived my shelf-life, it was because *he* wanted it that way. They were more careful during the sessions too: they put out their cigarettes and closed their knives, and they were careful to do the picana shocks where they wouldn't leave such deep marks. And I was only scared when I couldn't see him, although he hardly ever let me down. It would have been absurd to: they were our dates, the sessions were. In the few seconds when the total pain stopped, my eyes would search out his. And when they met, I felt as if his hand were holding mine and wouldn't let go. Once – I'll never forget that day – I noticed they were full of tears. I was strapped to the bed-springs, you see; they'd used the picana on me till I'd fainted, then thrown a bucket of water over me. And I was feeling sorry for him. Really, my brain must have been mashed potato by that stage, but at that moment I felt as if my suffering had a meaning, as if I'd be capable of putting up with all that and a thousand times more as long as he was there. It felt like a triumph. Think about it. Him, a man who'd done this a thousand times without batting an eyelid, he was crying now – and all because it was me, not just anyone, tied up there. How could I not feel flattered? There and then I made up my mind not to let him down. I'd put up with any pain, any atrocity to show him I was worthy of him. I smiled, to let him know and, though the smile could barely have been visible through my deformed features, I think he understood, because he wiped away his tears and gave the order to continue. I closed my eyes, bathed in tears too, but tears of gratitude. I was no longer alone. Someone had reached out a hand to me across the darkness; the terror had gone and in the soft, golden light bathing my soul the intermittent shocks of the picana flashed like distant lightning.

'He made me abort my first pregnancy because I'd been raped by so many men that he couldn't be sure the child was his. "If you'd talked earlier, we wouldn't have come to this," he yelled at me, as if I'd held out on purpose so as to have sex with lots of men. There was a grain of truth in it, of course: I preferred the rapes to the picana; I used to thank God when I saw one of them pulling his zip down, although his companions often used to give me more just to watch their pal jump from the shock. It was one of their favourite jokes: they never tired of it. His accusations hurt me because they were so unfair. I have proof that he himself sent them to rape me: by having me belong to everyone he thought he'd be able to loathe and forget me. The result, of course, was just the opposite: the more he gave me away, the sicker his desire became to possess me absolutely. He tried to free himself from my fatal spell and took me on

one of those night flights . . . to let the sea take care of me. At the last moment, naked in his arms, drugged as I was by the cold coming in through the hatch or God knows what else, I embraced him tenderly (that's what he told me) and at that moment, when he realised he couldn't let me go, he thought about crossing the threshold with me. What a romantic, right? The sea would have been our wedding bed, he said; he didn't know how much I hate fish. The only result of that flight (I can't remember a damn thing, because they'd used horse syringes on us) was that I caught a dose of flu. I never saw my travelling companions again, of course.

After that he moved me out of the cell and took me to his house, locking me away like a nun in a cloister. I'd have stayed anyway: I didn't really want to see my family and told them as little as possible. That he was a soldier, yes. That he'd got me out of there too. They never understood any of it anyway; my mother, the silly cow, no doubt even thought "Well, well, who'd have imagined it? The girl gets herself thrown in gaol and comes out with a real catch?" Did I mention that they'd caught me at my parents'? The men holding their shotguns and my old man puffing out his chest. "If my daughter's done something she shouldn't have, I won't be the one to stand in your way. Do your duty, officer." What could I do in my situation? Call a friend? I did try though, more than once, but I'd hang up when they answered. Once I rang a friend of mine they'd taken in earlier, to see if she was still alive, and without hesitation she asked the silent receiver "Gloria? Is that you? Won't they let you talk?" I stopped calling my friends after that: it only made me suffer. He made me unworthy of them and without them I had no other option but to get closer to him. And when I fell pregnant again, that was it. The friends I have now are all new. I don't have to tell them anything, and if I do, they have nothing to compare me with: the only Gloria they know is this one. Funny, isn't it? Most people who've been through what I have are afraid of bumping into their torturer in the street. Not me. I was nearly nine months when he didn't come home one night, nor the following night either. It wasn't the first time, but he always used to give me some sign: leaving the house full of food or something (I still wasn't allowed to go out alone). Before the week was out, I heard the news about the recovery of the Islands on the radio and realised where he'd gone. Along with the revelation came the labour pains. I could feel them inside me, as if they were trying to peck their way out, and eventually a neighbour showed up with the police, woken by my screams. It was sheer agony, the worst of all. The last pain he caused me. My two beautiful little girls were born in the ambulance on the way to the Santojanni, and I was born with them that night. They had to give me a caesarean without anaesthetic on some street corner or other. I was covered in blood. Later they congratulated me on how well I'd withstood the pain. Ha! Mamma mia! They weighed one kilo eight hundred and one kilo nine hundred, because they were slightly premature. It was the night of 2nd April 1982.'

She went quiet, trying to guess from my expression whether I'd had enough, drawing long and deep on her cigarette. Through the half-closed blinds filtered the headlights of a car disconcertedly going round and round the hub of all those streets, trying to guess which one to escape down.

'Did he make it back?' I eventually asked. She nodded as she put out her cigarette in the cone of fag ends that spilled over the ashtray between us.

'He was one of the last. He came straight from the ship. I hadn't had any news of him, not a thing; one hand wanted him to come back soon and look after the three

of us, for him not to leave me alone in a situation like that – I wouldn't swap my girls for anything in the world now, but at the start . . . The other prayed – alone – that he'd tread on a landmine and blow himself up, or be riddled with bullets, or captured on a mission

(the bastard was a commando), and that they did to him what he'd done to me. Too bad they were English – such gentlemen! The Chileans would have been much better. The Gurkhas were a disappointment, weren't they? Did they cut off anyone's head in the end?'

'Not that I know of . . .'

'I kept dropping things, cutting myself, burning myself when I was cooking: one hand versus the other; they could barely do anything together when they were looking after the girls. And in three months everyone was back, and there was I hearing rumours of prisoners being taken to England in secret as hostages, getting used to the idea he wasn't coming back and beginning to enjoy it. But the bastard always turns up just when you least expect him. But this time I had a surprise in store for him; this time it was me who'd pulled a fast one on him. It was a night like this, nearly ten years ago, I heard the doorbell go and opened the door. He was still in uniform, carrying his kitbag, and, without so much as a hello, he stared at my empty belly and said "I want to meet my daughters." He was gone, way gone (he'd never really been on the hither side) but this time I knew he'd gone for good; thousands of kilometres out to sea. My letters had fallen into that black abyss staring at me now, along with everything else. When he saw the girls asleep in the light from their night-light, he stood there stockstill, struck dumb. Fifteen minutes, without moving a muscle or making a sound. I was on the verge of yelling at him when he asked me in this neutral drone, still not moving, what I'd called them; Malvina and Soledad, the way you wanted, I told him, digging my nails into my palms to stop myself screaming. But we can change them if you like, there's still time, I began; but he stopped me and held up one hand. Then he said "No, it's fine. It's fine," he said, looking at the girls sleeping together, one little hand on top of the other, face down in their cot. "It's fine," he said, looking dumbly at the room, "It's fine," he repeated, measuring me with his eyes, and again, "It's fine," as he picked up his bag, "It's fine," as he opened the front door, and one more "It's fine" reached me as I peered out onto the pavement, riding on the noise of his footsteps receding loudly on the flagstones, hard with winter cold. He never came back and, a few months later, someone who didn't want to identify himself phoned me to tell me he was dead and that I should never try to find out any more. Can you believe it? The terror of the camps, the hero of the Malvinas, ran away from a woman and two newborn babies.'

'Would you rather he'd stayed?'

A flash of the old pain, still capable of life, like those dried-out fish that gradually revive when placed in water, flitted across her features. She went on the attack.

'What if you lot had won the war? What if the girls graduate as lawyers? Do me a favour, Felipe. Haven't you understood what kind of a creature he is? For Christ's sake don't give me that cliché about the guy who tortures, rapes and murders in working hours, and then goes home and is a loving father and exemplary husband? Bullshit. A torturer's a torturer everywhere he goes. He just changes his style, his instruments. At home he's more patient: he has years ahead of him. A bastard's a bastard and he defiles everything he touches.'

'The girls too?'

'No, not the girls. My body filtered out all the harm. The girls were born pure. Can't you see? What do I care if they aren't intelligent. What I do know is that there isn't a wicked bone in their bodies. That's where I beat him. It was my only way out. If they'd turned out normal and they'd had this much intelligence, he'd have turned them into what he wanted. This way he didn't get the chance. You know what they are, my girls?'

'What?' I asked, instead of giving the obvious answer, out of politeness.

'Angels.'

She said nothing else. When she tired of waiting for a reply, a remark, anything, she whisked the blanket off her with a toreador's flourish and went to the bathroom. The light in the corridor lit the fall of her shoulders, the gentle wobble of her buttocks, her ankles as slender as wrists. Pity, I found myself thinking as I was getting dressed, with such a pretty body as that.

'Leaving already,' she said when she came back and saw me dressed.

'Yes,' I said, trying not to look her in the eye.

'You got scared.'

'No, it's just that . . .'

'What. Got to feed the cat?'

I ought to have gone, I thought, while she was pissing. Done a runner. Now I was trapped again.

'Don't go, Felipe.' Her tone had lost its sexual insinuation: all of a sudden, she was begging. 'At least not tonight. The girls and I need you to stay tonight.'

I lay there, stiff as a statue, and Gloria's caresses began to slide off the 'No' of my body like water off a waxed surface. Eventually giving up, she sat down on the sofa beside me, rigid, her hands on the angle of her closed thighs.

'I don't understand,' she told me. 'Things happened to you too, if you haven't been telling stories. I thought that that. . . And Malihuel, too.' She was doubting.

'Malihuel yes,' I managed to mutter as I adjusted my belt.

Then she did something I wasn't expecting. She went down on her knees, hugged my legs, grovelled.

'Please don't go. Look, I'm swallowing my pride and begging you to stay. If you don't want to sleep with me, if you don't feel like touching me, you can have the bed and I'll sleep on the sofa. Or you can take us to your house, we'll get by in any old corner, I swear we won't bother you. Just for tonight. I haven't slept properly for over a week, and if I don't sleep tonight I think I'm going to go mad.'

'He's alive,' I said.

She nodded.

'You ran into him,' I went on, taking my time not because I was guessing step by step, but because everything had suddenly become so clear that I couldn't process so many bytes at once. 'Where?'

'At . . . You know.'

Yes, I thought. Of course.

'There, in the tower. That day.'

'He was the last in before the doors closed. After ten years he stepped out of my worst nightmares and walked into that room. I was paralysed, it always happens to me with him, I sat there nailed to the chair watching him approach, his eyes drilling

into me. But that wasn't the worst of it. He looked at me the way you look through glass, he walked straight past me as if I wasn't there: he passed through my body like a ghost through a curtain. That more than anything made me certain he hadn't changed: it was his signature, unmistakable, and he was writing all over my body again.

'Was he looking for you?'

'Do you think he didn't know where if he'd wanted to? No. He was as surprised as I was. He probably even thought it was *me* that had finally located *him*.'

Translated from the Spanish by Ian Barnett in collaboration with the author.

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