Riki Gonzalvez

Enriquetta Maria Conchita Gonzalvez hated her name and insisted on introducing herself as "Riki" to everyone she met, whether in the *Facultad des Bellas Artes* or in the *club los cao gatos* in the Triana district of Sevilla, dancing with her friends to the thumping beat of the latest pop or techno.  She cared for none of them, at least, not as lovers.  Not that she hadn't had lovers, but the last, Edouardo Edilcama, had actually thrown himself from the *puente del Isabel II* into the dark water of the Guadalquivir as they were crossing from the Barrio one evening.

"Marry me, Riki Gonzalvez!  Consent to be my wife or I shall throw myself into the arms of death!"

Riki Gonzalvez was very particular about this kind of emotional blackmail -- it made her furious.  "Go ahead!"

"What?" Edouardo had replied, stunned, from where he stood atop the massive balustrade.

"The answer is No!  Go ahead and jump!" she said, as she started at him as if to push.
Whether he jumped or slipped is a matter of conjecture, then, but, as he plummeted, Riki yelled over the side, "I hope you drown, then!  *Tu estupido polla!*" and stormed off to keep her date at *el Meteor Azur*.

They fished Edouardo's body from the river down around the town of Tobalina, several kilometers south of the city.  Riki attended the funeral, because Edouardo certainly hadn't deserved to die, no matter how stupid he was, but every time she tried to feel sorry for him she just got angry all over again.

"What a childish stunt," she thought to herself.

Now, if it seems Riki was somewhat distracted, perhaps that's because she was.  Riki was a painter, and she hated Van Gogh for his wheatfields and his sunflowers.  Every painter who has tried to paint wheatfields or sunflowers since, hates Van Gogh for his, and it seemed to Riki that even Van Gogh hadn't gotten them quite right, at least, not as they had appeared to her the time she had first crossed the *Sierra del Calvario* en route from her home in El Bosque to Sevilla, where she was traveling to go to university.

Perhaps it was the change in altitude, or the fact that the sky in Andalusia is often as clear and distortionless as crystal, but the hills covered in short, dry, almost-yellow wheat, and the subsequent fields of sunflowers along N-IV as she traveled north, had a numinous quality about them that spoke of something intangible yet which was, to her, quite real.  It was on this trip that she knew that she must try to capture that image, and, if she were lucky, that effect on the observer, and would therefore be changing her major from accounting to fine arts.

I did not really die, of course, and my name is not Edouardo Edilcama, but for the purposes of this story this is a useful, if fictive, nom de plume.  And it is as good as any other I have used.  Riki Gonzalvez is modeled after a woman I knew in the art school in Sevilla, however, and I think she may have wanted me dead.  Every time she showed me her latest wheatfield or sunflowers, I could not help but compare it to Van Gogh's works.  I never actually told her this, but she could see it in my eyes, as though, reflected in them, she could see not her paintings, but his.

Riki Gonzalvez is troubled lately by dreams.  In one of them she is standing in the grandstand of the Jerez bull ring in the rain, sobbing, her tears mixing with the water streaming down her face.  The corrida has been cancelled and the crowd dispersed, the toreros having carefully inspected the now muddy sand floor of the arena in their suits of light and determined that either the bull or themselves (or both) might slip far too easily, with potentially disastrous results.

Still weeping -- for what, exactly, she does not know -- she now finds herself standing in the center of the ring.  She turns, and there is a torero in a scarlet suit of light and his muddy black slippers -- perhaps it is the face of Edouardo Edilcama she sees there -- she is not sure -- and she knows that, whoever it is, she must rush to his embrace.  All of this happens in slow motion, inevitably, inexorably unfolding, as dreams do, as she runs to his arms -- he steps back to his left gingerly, and she is faced with a flash of red cape -- when it is gone, so is he.  She turns, and there he is again.  Again she runs, but this time he raises his sword, and, as she gains upon him, has him almost in her arms, he thrusts the sword through her left breast, between the fifth and sixth ribs, and pierces, fatally, her heart.

Quite shaken, naturally, she wakes up.

Now, I know what all of the Freudians are going to say about this dream of hers, but her response is really something quite different.  She says these dreams of hers have given her artwork a new direction.  Indeed, she is now painting wonderful abstractions that include all the flash and blood and earth tones of the corrida; one in particular shows the stands, she tells me, full of umbrellas in the rain, with the late afternoon sun slanting through the drizzling clouds, and a rainbow just above the eastern wall.

Oh, and she has left the Facultad and moved to Frontera, which is what brings her on occasion to the Plaza de Toros in Jerez.  She no longer worries about her sunflowers.

"What can it mean, Luiz?" she asks over *cafe solo* we are sharing in a little cafe in Puerto de Santa Maria.

"That you did actually love Edouardo, perhaps?  Or that -- "

"Or that -- ?" she asks, her eyes red with sleeplessness.

I shrug.  "Or that you are feeling guilt.”

“Guilt?” she asks.  “Why?”

“Perhaps because you really did push him."

"No!" she says, "I never -- I didn't -- "

"It doesn't matter anymore," I say.  "The fact is that he behaved stupidly and now he is gone.  Would you feel better if I told you that he was just some fictional character in a story I am writing?"

She looks at me as though I had lost my mind.  "Luiz, have you been drinking?  It is too early -- "

"But it does not matter,” I say.  “He risked his life, and he paid the price.  You no more put him upon the balustrade than I did."  I chuckle at the truth, naturally, because, as the writer of this story, I can manipulate these people at will.

Riki, however, is different.  I cannot do her justice and so will not try to describe her as I see her; I just ask you to imagine the most beautiful dark-haired woman you have ever seen, then multiply the effect until your breath is, quite literally, taken away.  She is not conscious of the effect her beauty has upon men, and this is a substantial part of *why* she has this effect on them.

The upper streets of Puerto narrow into sidewalk-less cobbled passages which are seldom discovered by the German, French, English, Swiss, or even Spanish tourists.  The *ventas*, *comidas*, *cafes* and *tapas* bars, *carnecerias*, and *mercados* are small and functional; only the locals seem to know that these unmarked shops are there at all, and that this doorway, say, is a grocer's and that merely someone's front door.

Afterward we walked down toward the harbor, and the woman on whom I have modeled Riki boarded the train for Cadiz, where her parents own a dry goods store which has been in the family for generations, just as so many family businesses have been for so many *Gadetanos*.

So Riki and I become lovers, and I take her back to my little house in Fuentebravia.  There is a balcony where, after we make love and I pour my soul into her, we sit and drink a bottle of Oloroso; as a snack, I serve the remainder of a leftover *tortilla* *con bocarones* I heat in the microwave.  She cuddles up next to me on the wicker loveseat, and her breathing becomes so even and still that it is hard for me to tell whether or not she is asleep, so I wrap a blanket around her shoulders and sip my sherry.

For a while I watch the comings and goings of the little casas across *Calle Naranja*, people coming home from work, watering their plants, calling to their pets, the sounds of their preparing dinner; a melancholia seems to echo in every associated element; the misty air is glowing from the security lights of the *Basa Naval*.

Across the street, below the intervening backdrop of piñons and mariposas, a little casa stands behind a bougainvilla'd wall eight feet high. A lantern lights the small front porch. A window glows through spidery branches, indicating inhabitation. Soundlessly a light goes on in the back part of the house -- a kitchen, perhaps -- a sudden orange glow through slatted blinds. Then, after someone passes back and forth twice, and just as silently, the light goes out. A woman appears at the front door with a small dish, and she calls to a cat, sets it down and pours a liquid into it, returning, when done, through the door and closing it behind her.

I recognize her, of course, because it is Riki herself in another twenty-five or thirty years. She has put on weight around the middle, as most people do in their fifties, and has the care-worn look of one who has spent a lifetime struggling with, and against, her inner desires. She remembers her time in art school as the happiest time of her life. Does she still blame herself for Eduardo’s death all those years ago now? Perhaps I should have told her. Maybe I will, *mañana*.

Twenty minutes later, a young woman, or a younger woman, walks with her dog up to the gate, rings the bell, and waits just a moment before a woman's voice, the same voice as had called the cat, is heard through an amplified intercom system. The younger woman speaks. “*Ola!* It’s Riki,” she says, identifying herself, and the gate buzzes. She and the dog enter.

Now there are two versions of Riki in the house. I prefer the younger Riki to the older, and so eliminate the older woman with my eraser, although I might just as easily have used my computer to block and cut from the preceding text. I would rather not. So now there is the younger version of Riki in the house alone, only in her early thirties, having entered with her key.

Ten minutes later, a late-model Renault pulls up in front of the house, and an older man emerges from the driver's door. He does not use the buzzer to announce his presence, but lets himself in by a key as well. Of course, it is me, in another form, Juan Carlos Altanova. He carries out a bag of refuse to the large, silver-painted receptacle on the street, then closes and locks the gate behind him, crosses to the front door, and enters.

Inside the house, Juan Carlos and Riki, his now much-younger wife, kiss-kiss each other’s cheeks and spend the evening watching the news from Madrid. The economy is in shambles, we hear them say, though not as badly as in England or *norte America*. Afterwards, in the kitchen of the house across the street, I sharpen my knives, and shave off perfect, paper-thin slices of *jamon iberico*. I arrange them on two plates along with some pale yellow, hazel-nut-studded cheese. I arrange those on each plate, reach into the refrigerator for a bottle of *fino*, pick up two glasses on my way out of the kitchen, and call her for dinner. She does not answer.

Back on the balcony, a zephyr coaxes the stray hairs on her head to move to its rhythm, coolly and slowly, as though moved by underwater currents. I let her sleep. While she sleeps, I cover her again, for the blanket has slipped from her shoulders.

All of this, as I shall attempt to explain to Riki in the morning, is the substance of life.  For a writer, these are our colors, our paints.  The events are our brushes and knives.  We select from among them, rearrange them to suit the story without regard to “how it really happened.” Ours is a different sort of truth, and I wonder if she will ever understand me, just as I assume she must wonder whether I will ever truly understand her.

But then, she is not really here.

She has never really existed, except in my imagination.

She will never age or die.

Therefore, she is real.

 No matter where he is, the writer sleeps alone.

— Fuentabravia, Andalusia