



A Hat Party

In the 1960s I lived in Madrid, in one of the older residential neighbourhoods not far from the Avenida del Generalísimo. There was something a little surreal about being a foreigner in Franco's Spain. The civil war had been over for nearly thirty years, but the dictatorship still imposed limits on Spaniards that did not apply to expats like me.

By day I worked at an advertising agency, wearing a coat and tie and a crisp white shirt. But at night I moved in bohemian circles, dining late and frequenting cabarets and flamenco bars and jazz clubs in the wee small hours of the morning. I travelled in excellent company: my roommate, Juanín, shared my interest in the bright lights, and possessed impeccable credentials as a boulevardier and all-round bon vivant.

As we whiled away the evenings at sidewalk cafés, we wondered aloud about expatriates in other places and times. We talked about Paris in the 1920s and wished we could have been there in those exhilarating days, mingling with the writers and artists who were pushing the boundaries of traditional art and literature. I was very keen on Hemingway at that time; his novel *The Sun Also Rises* had inspired a pilgrimage to Pamplona to see the running of the bulls the previous July. Perhaps we were too easily impressed by the presumed glamour of other places. We certainly seemed to spend a good deal of time wishing we were somewhere else, or someone other than who we were.

One aimless, rainy afternoon as we waited at a traffic light in the old part of town, we noticed a shop on the corner. The sign over the door said, "Blanca's Theatrical Costumes." In the window were dozens of hats of every imaginable kind, and above them a handwritten sign that said, "Going Out of Business Sale. ¡Bargains! ¡Bargains!" As we stepped over the threshold into the shop it felt as though we had gone backstage at the Teatro Calderón. There were costumes of every colour and fabric, rows and rows of them hanging chaotically on racks against the walls. There were suits of armour, horse's heads, swords, wishing wells, and half-moons hanging from the ceiling. And there was an

all-pervasive fragrance of greasepaint, geraniums, and dust.

We were met by a very small woman of indeterminate age. Her hair was platinum blonde, cut in a pageboy style. Her eyes and lips were heavily made up, and in her red-tipped fingers she carried a cigarette in an extremely long holder. "I am Blanca," she said in a deep, melodious voice. "How can I help you?"

We pointed to the hats in the window, and she arched her eyebrows and blew out a long plume of smoke. "You like the hats?" she inquired. We nodded, yes. "Which ones you like?"

There were top hats and berets, bowlers, elegant felt homburgs, fedoras, jaunty straw hats, ladies' hats with veils, green ones with feathers, turbans, a fez or two, Stetsons, trim-looking derbies, sombreros, bonnets, sailor hats, shiny black tricorneres, picador's hats, pillboxes, splendid maroon velvet toques, a crimson cloche, and a marvellous mauve boa several feet long.

As we examined them one by one, Blanca smoked pensively and watched us through half-closed lids. "Every hat is special, you know, like a costume, and much better than a mask" she told us. "With each one you can be whoever the hat makes you feel." We nodded again, yes, exactly. She shrugged her tiny shoulders in a gesture of extraordinary eloquence and murmured, "Why not take them all?" So we did.

Two weeks later we threw a Hat Party that is still talked about by the regulars at the Café Gijón. Hats of every description were scattered about the apartment, on the furniture in the hall, and on coat hangers by the door. As guests arrived, they chose a hat and put it on. Some wore the same hat all night; others exchanged hats with people they had never met and discovered things about each other that nobody had ever known before. Miraculous conversations took place as people came to see themselves as they could have been, should have been, and indeed would have been, if only they'd been wearing the right hat.