

The Lost and Found and Other Stories



Miss Carmen



In Concepción, Chile, Carmen lived with her seven brothers and sisters. Sometimes she lived in the homes of her sisters, other times in the homes of her brothers. In the United States of America, in the Valley of San Joaquin she lived in guest bedrooms in the homes of wealthy matrons. In America, wherever she lodged, she had a colored television set. This was not so in Chile. She was middle aged, unmarried, had short, wavy gray hair as well as a silver-capped front tooth which she called the “beauty tooth.” And then there was something one remarked about her cheeks when she smiled, perhaps that they were plum shaped and nothing more. Or else that they overwhelmed her mouth and gave her the look of a dizzy woman.

For a time, before leaving Chile, she had stayed with her brother, Jorge, who had begot three children, including an

exquisite daughter named Lupita, who had been crowned Little Miss Concepción at the age of four. Precious Lupita's hair had been dyed yellow for the competition but as Jorge's wife was a hairdresser this was carried off quite well. Carmen took meticulous care of the child's clothes, hand-washing them in delicate bleaches and ironing them. In truth she had been content at the house of Jorge, just as she had been at Juanita's and Carlos's and Pochi's and Victor's and Lima's, and Julio's. Only what is contentment to a willful dreamer? So little indeed. Certainly not enough. Carmen did not possess that arbitrarily extravagant *je ne sais quoi* common to the poetic soul. She wasn't a fantast in that way. Her dreams never exceeded her want but were a perfect echo of it. Never had she been falsified by a vision, by an unobtainable something. What can be said is that the recurrent image of herself propped on a Louis XIV *fauteuil* rested vivid in her mind's eye.

It was Carmen's cousin, Alberta, who had urged her to come to the Valley of San Joaquin. An affluent matriarch by the name of Mrs. J. M. Walker for whom Alberta polished silver, was looking for a live-in maid for part-time work. Alberta thought of Carmen who had always loved beautiful objects and the luxurious interiors of the homes in "Los Ricos y los Despiadados." She wrote in her letter, "Here the homes are the beautiful ones like those in 'The Rich and the Pitiless.' They can be cleaned with a pinkie. So there is very little work to do. And closets filled with fiesta shoes of the mistress. When she is gone you can put them on and iron this way. Here you will learn the names of things, things you have always wondered about. You will learn the names. And from the laundry you will

know the private doings of the mistress and her mister. This would please you, would it not?"

Carmen thought about it. This proposition did appeal to her. She saw the hitherto-closed hand of opportunity open, offering its palm to her as a crossing bridge. Leading where? Ah! Carmen could not say. The salary was a handsome one too and she insisted on this as she would have a burden. Nevertheless she was somewhat apprehensive about leaving the milieu of loved ones, the familiar rituals, the concatenation of vowels. She thought of how they must speak in the Valley of San Joaquin and she feared it was something awful, ducklike, and exasperating.

For two weeks Carmen thought this proposition over. It sounded bad, it sounded good. She weighed it in her right hand, she weighed it in her left hand. Then, one Monday morning at ten o'clock, she walked down to the bus depot in a black and white checkered dress and bought a ticket. What made her do so? Perhaps she was swayed by a menopausal whim, or by the advice of a revenant. It would be hard to say. She announced her decision to leave that night at Jorge's dinner table. Jorge looked at her solemnly and held her by the shoulders with his arms outstretched. He said to her, "You are not my only sister, but you are my only sister who has cared for the clothes of my children. For this I will miss you." Her farewell was bid in a bon voyage party that lasted seven days, each of the seven siblings paying a day of tribute to their sister Carmen. When the festivities were exhausted, Carmen packed two suitcases and boarded the bus, the first of the many that would take her from Chile to the Valley of San Joaquin. Carmen's journey was a long and difficult one

and is a story in itself. Let it be said that she arrived in the Valley of San Joaquin with a provisory black patch over her left eye. What had happened? She never told.

When Mrs. Walker showed Carmen her room, she looked from right to left and said in her language, "It will do." Had Mrs. Walker understood this, she would have been vexed. Carmen, however, did not say this to insult, nor was she being by any means discriminatory; she was simply concerned with what would do. She had never been a landlord and couldn't have understood the vanity of one. Her room was on the first floor and was furnished with a twin chintz covered bed, matching curtains and a love seat. There was also a small TV sitting on a commode. It should be said that Carmen was an ambitious woman in her own right. And if one were to ask how an aspiring woman could have concerned herself with the clothes of her brother's children, the wash and the wear of them, she would have said, "I have done this out of love." She could do one thing for love and be strongly desirous of another so very different. Clearly there were two hearts and two minds. She spoke to them in mismatched voices. Carmen was the sort of woman who could divide the family's pot of beans into sixteen equal servings. Nobody would feel cheated.

In the Valley of San Joaquin, she vividly saw what could be had and would not consider herself as a "have-not." Often she told Alberta, "The humans are divided into those who have and those who have-not; those who take and those who are taken. As this is true, I am one who takes and will have. This is prudence." When she saw the cumbersome jumbo television set in the billiard room, she

resented Missie Walkie, as she called her, for her own insignificant one. Once, while she was dusting, she accidentally knocked the volume knob off the jumbo set. She pocketed it. Mrs. Walker was happy enough with Carmen although she found her a few too many times sitting in an armchair when she should have been waxing or vacuuming. Mostly she had her cook and serve luncheons and dinner parties. For this Carmen was given a white doily to wear on her head and a matching apron. As she was awed by decorum and the wearing of uniforms, she found these occasions almost titillating. She smiled demurely at the guests. Her intention was to exhibit the beauty tooth and to seduce them. What this little trick got her was several jobs moonlighting outside the domain of Missie Walkie. For one there was Missie Smithie, president of the Junior League, who hired her to serve at her daughter's wedding reception. Carmen passed out dishes of relish on silver trays. Yes, she was quite skilled at this. She could walk up to anyone of any disposition and offer an hors d'oeuvre. Her latina gait, that slow, indolent sway of the hips was curious to some. It irritated and enticed in the same way as her smile. There was something puerile and almost sly about her, something that either coaxed a citizen of the Valley of San Joaquin or made him wary. She held out the tray and said, "You wantie?"

Carmen didn't pay taxes. She really was doing quite well and opened a savings account. She had easily procured more and more jobs for herself and could afford to refuse an offer if it reeked of the "difícil," as she said. Her speciality was catering. She loved the gala events. She

abandoned Missie Walkie's doily for an oversized white bow that she clipped on the top of her head. She had a black mock evening gown, hemmed to knee length that she put on for catering. On her feet she wore white ballerina slippers. Shrewd as she was, Carmen managed to delegate the work to the "help" and arranged it so that her participation in the clean-ups was minimal. "Go do cakie," she might say. And the others would cut and serve the cake. "Washie dishie!" And the others would wash. It never occurred to Carmen that she couldn't speak English. She was understood. And she misunderstood when it was necessary.

After three years or so of industrious living in the Valley of San Joaquin, Carmen saw the many seeds she had sewn flower into nameable things, some of which she could wear, some of which she could tap. She had acquired much, including the jumbo set she had eyed and modestly vandalized in Missie Walkie's house. But there was one seed she had not thought of planting, perhaps because she knew how it could and had thrived, or because it had once been common enough to her. That one was the seed of the heart.

Time and again, Carmen had tried to entice her brothers and sisters to come settle in the Valley of San Joaquin with her. She had even made a down payment on a two-bedroom house for her brother Jorge and his wife and children. But Jorge was kept in Chile by several dubious mining investments. The others all had one excuse or another not to join her. Carmen eventually gave up on the idea altogether and for a while was angry and sent vindictive letters, boasting of her successes and threatening to

disown them. But had she ever owned them? She asked herself this and felt merciless, as if she tread alone in a world without mercy. Grace! When was the last time she had felt the luminosity of it in her body? Hope? Things sufficed and the jaded soul didn't search it. Charity? She fed the pigeons! Carmen was not a woman to plead, "I'm lonely in the Valley of San Joaquin." Such a confession would either have cured or worsened her spiritual disarray. She took a middle ground instead and was childishly bilious. She overpeppered luncheon consommés and mistreated ladylike palates. She loaded the dishwasher with crystal. Missie Walkie suffered the losses. Carmen was cavalier and ornery with the peerage. On Thanksgiving she stuffed Missie Walkie's turkey with a fiery mole filling. The family was aghast although some were proud and feeble-minded enough to eat it. Only to be all the more miserable with gastric fever the following day. After this, Missie Walkie dismissed Carmen, giving her three days to prepare her departure. She could not forgive the nimety of blunders and Carmen offered no apologies.

Carmen was proud but she was also a taker. Her pride then, was merely a convenient peccadillo, a vanity that kept her on the desirous side of humanity. It in no way hindered her propensity to help herself. Nor did the rift with Mrs. Walker preclude her from finding another refuge in the milieu. Carmen had someone in mind when she left, the widow of a ranchero tycoon from Spain, Señora Valdéz. Señora Valdéz herself was not Spanish, she was from a Southern state and emigrated to the Valley of San Joaquin as the result of a dust storm. She met the Señor Valdéz at the Raisin Ball and made a fruitful marriage. She

needed someone to “do vegetables and linens” as she put it, and on several occasions had offered Carmen her guest house in exchange for kitchen help. Carmen did not call her up, as she never used the phone, but walked there. She lived seven blocks down from Mrs. Walker on the same street. It was an easy walk for a robust woman like Carmen and when she got to the house of Señora Valdéz, there were some twenty cars parked around it. Señora Valdéz was entertaining. Carmen was intent on her predicament and didn’t hesitate to walk through the gate and into the backyard where the cocktail party was in full swing. Señora Valdéz, a flamboyant blond with an imperious nose, was holding a highball and laughing, her head thrown back. Surrounding her were several dashing gentlemen looking bemused in summer suits. Although Carmen spotted her straight off, she made a stop at the hors d’oeuvre table first. She was famished. After having a few bites, she walked up to Señora Valdéz from behind and tapped her on the shoulder. The woman reeled around and saw her there with the white bow on her head.

“It’s Missie Carmie!” she let out for the others’ amusement. The woman was lit. Then calming a bit, but with the same condescending tone she asked her, “Carmen, what can we do for you? Or are you here for the party?” Carmen ignored this mockery and kept to what she knew best, not self-righteousness but seduction. She smiled coyly at Señora Valdéz and bared the beauty tooth. “Missie Carmie not at casa Missie Walkie more. She do kitchen for Señora and live in house?” “Oh God, the vegetables. That’s right. Got to have someone do the vegetables. You know, that Costa Rican

girl I had just left last month ... Left with the neighbor's gardener! She told me he had had his stomach tied. You know, he was fat. F-A-T! I said to her, 'Juanita, if those tubes come untied you got yourself a lard ass.' But she left with him. I just got a letter from her in Mexico. She was such a sweet thing. And you know, she just loved me. She kept herself so clean. So clean!"

She took another sip of her highball and narrowed in on Carmen, a bit too severely, as was her way.

"OK Carmen, but you know how I like them done."

And here she demonstrated with her hands, as if pulling threads. "Julienne, like they do in Paris. Julienne!"

Then an expansive woman in a green mousseline dress appeared and took Señora Valdéz by the arm claiming that she hadn't seen her in ages. Carmen left and went into the kitchen where a heavy-legged woman named Fanny was slowly decorating a platter of Armenian delicacies. Carmen swiftly took the platter from her and went back out to the garden. She wove her way through the guests, serving and seducing them, not with her sex appeal, for this she took to heart and saved for her people, but with her quaintness, her bow and her accent. Those were her gimcracks and she arranged them most successfully. Late that night when the company finally left, Señora Valdéz, in her apres soiree stupor, handed Carmen the keys to the guest house. Carmen found the bed and slept until ten o'clock the next day.

Working for Señora Valdéz suited Carmen as it was essentially a morning job and left her afternoons free for going to the shopping malls or watching soap operas. Señora however, was a difficult, exigent woman who im-

patiently repeated herself and demanded perfection from her entourage. She was a Catholic though, unlike the other matrons for whom Carmen had worked. At least she wouldn't have to think of her as a heretic. Every Sunday Señora took Carmen to mass with her at Our Lady of Victory. Carmen usually would take the bus home from the church as she liked to stay after and play bingo with the Las Mujeres del Salvador guild. She never risked befriending anybody in the group. She was afraid she might be asked for something. Carmen was fundamentally clanish. Had one of the women been from the same village as she, then perhaps she would have extended a hand and opened her breast in intimacy. But then again maybe not. For Carmen there had always been family and others, never a friend, never a foe. Her relation to either group went unquestioned, to one she was inextricably joined by blood and obligation and the other she observed indifferently, like the cat that sniffs at his dinner only to walk away and then come back later to nibble disdainfully at it. Carmen fed off others and with a sense of duty, which for her was love, fed family and family only.

The most wonderful thing about the house of Señora Valdéz was, to Carmen's mind, the opulent selection of arm chairs in the formal living room. One of them was a faux Louis XIV so like the one she had envisioned for many years. "Yes," she thought to herself, "It is this one." How stunning it was, how ravishingly fine in every way. Carmen was benumbed at the sight of it. She was overwhelmed by the beauty of the object, by the rich persimmon color of its upholstery. The chair itself sat in a posture so ingeniously conceived. It sat, formidable and

beckoning in a corner of the elegant salon. For weeks Carmen would go into the living room to gaze at it. Everything about it was sublime and as she looked at it, both ardor and despair welled in her. She moaned. And pulled at her pantyhose. And hugged herself as if protecting a child at the breast.

It so happened that one evening Señora Valdéz asked Carmen to stay in the house while she was gone. She was going to a gala at the country club and as her neighbor had just been robbed the previous night she was worried about leaving the house empty. Carmen agreed to do this. Señora Valdéz had four TVs and an ice box filled with Belgian chocolates and French pastries. So Carmen took her knitting with her into the house, bid Señora good-bye and locked the doors behind her. She sat in the kitchen for a time and watched the channel *vente-uno* news. She helped herself to soda pops and chocolates. Then she decided she needed to go to the bathroom. She just loved the bathrooms of Señora Valdéz which were plush with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, marble counter tops and gold faucets. They were very different from those sober ones in Missie Walkie's house. This was because Señora was a Catholic and the other was not. That was how Carmen saw it. To get to the bathroom she had to pass through the living room and it was in doing so that she was stopped short in her tracks. In fact nothing impeded her physically from going on. Yet there was an incandescent stillness in the room that defied a trespasser, that belittled the need to get from one point to another, a silence that said of itself to the intruder, "Silencio, Por favor!" It was as if the dim light of the room were issued from a singular dream-hole.

And as if this dream-hole had been carved above the objet d'art to illuminate it. The rest of the room was left in the glow of its wake. It was a brazen jewel the color of a stone unheard of and never seen. Carmen's mouth watered. It was a fruit of ecstatic flavors unknown to the tongue. She craved and ached for it. Carmen stood in the middle of the room, her eyes riveted upon the fauteuil. But it was not her eyes that perceived the chair's beckoning. What registered this were the cords of her body, her yearning instinct. Carmen went to the armchair, solemnly with her head tilted upward and sat upon it transfixed. And at once she fell into a reverie so vivid and fiery, a reverie of carnal delights and dignity balls, of sumptuous banquets and courtesans. She dreamed of what was wicked and splendid, here of the sublime, there of the abject. It was an amalgam of slothful postures and pristine comportments. Did she want all this? God knows. Carmen surpassed herself. For the first time in her life perhaps, she surpassed herself.

As it turned out, Señora was a good deal deaf and asked Carmen to answer the phone when she was in the house doing vegetables and linens. This didn't please her a bit and when she answered she said, "Hola." She was curt on the phone. Some days she unplugged all of Señora's phones for her own peace of mind. Usually Señora didn't notice. She spent her mornings in the beauty shop in any case. The voices on the line were always the same to Carmen. They were nagging ones, asking things of her she found unbecoming and didn't care to understand. One day however, when she answered the phone, the voice she

heard was not a Valley of San Joaquin voice but one kindred to her own. It was a man and she immediately addressed him in Spanish.

“If you want the Señora Valdéz, she is not here. If you know her then you know that she is at the beauty shop every morning until twelve. At twelve she comes home and has the dietetic lunch which I weigh on the scale for her. Then she naps until three: She does not take calls before three. She doesn’t call back so you needn’t leave a message.” Carmen was able to say what she had wanted to say many a time and this was a great relief to her.

“Tell her that the foreman of the ranch has called. She knows me by the first name. I am Manuel, the ranch foreman. Tell her that I will be by at four o’clock with five legs of lamb, bread that I baked in the ground and six crates of seedless grapes. There is business I must do with her. “

“I will tell her this.”

But Carmen forgot to tell Señora and when the foreman drove up in his truck, the woman was still in her nap-time negligé. Carmen was sent out to stall him until the other could make herself decent. Manuel was a heavysset man, florid in the face and with a square Spanish brow. He had several boxes of grapes in his arms when Carmen greeted him. She had her bow on top of her head and had put on a scoop neck sundress that flatteringly revealed her embonpoint.

“Hello,” she said through the beauty tooth. “You can set those down in the kitchen. Come this way.” She led him through several gates and then through the back door

into the kitchen. The man put them down on a counter with a grunt and went back out to get the rest of what he had brought. Carmen followed him.

“I would help you but I am not meant to carry heavy things. I am not a housekeeper who pushes vacuums and overturns sofas. I do vegetables and linens only. I live in the guest house next to the pool. Where do you live?” Carmen watched his back as he lifted the heavy burlap sacks of lamb out of the truck. She watched the strength of his arms and his back and his squatty legs as he swiftly delivered his goods, one and then the next into the kitchen. She watched him intently and pondered. He reminded her of something, something she hadn’t seen in many years it seemed. Yes, he reminded her of a man. He was a man! She was giddy. Had things become such that she had forgotten? What about all those men she served finger foods to at the galas? Clearly they were different from this one. They were another something. This manual laborer, this Manuel clad in ranchero wear was a man, like those she had left behind her in Las Pampas. Carmen shuddered.

“I live in the foreman’s house on a hill above the ranch. It has two bathrooms and two bedrooms. There is a living room with a very big window. It gives onto the Valley of San Joaquin like you have never seen her before. She is not a greedy valley but she is a mean one.”

Carmen said no more. Nor did he. Señora Valdéz walked in and effusively greeted the foreman, kissing him on both cheeks as she had seen her late husband’s people do. He was a simple man as they say and this sort of theatrics embarrassed him. His face turned almost purple.

Carmen quietly left them and went back to the guest house. There she laid down on her back and thought of the man.

What Señora and Manuel spoke of in part, was Señora's own garden. She asked Manuel to pick the grapes that hung ripe and abundantly from her trellis. The birds were making a mess of them and she needed it taken care of right away. She also asked him to pick the peach trees of which there were six. Manuel agreed to do so the following week. Carmen was in the kitchen cleaning leeks when she saw him through the window walking into the backyard with burlap and canvas paraphernalia and cutters in hand. Then he went into the toolshed and brought out a ladder, setting it underneath the vineyard trellis. He began clipping off the grapes. For several hours she watched him as she cleaned, peeled, sliced, and diced. She imagined herself the fruit in his hands, in the hands of Manuel. She saw that they were strong and had held much of life. They were indiscriminate hands and for this Carmen wanted to kiss them. Because such hands were the finest but were never rewarded. They were hardly loved appropriately. It was a scorchingly hot day but Manuel did not take off his shirt. He was in the garden of an Anglo-Saxon and didn't forget this.

When the Señora came home, she waved hello to Manuel and proceeded into the kitchen for the dietetic lunch. She asked Carmen to make some sandwiches for Manuel. Carmen made a copious lunch platter for him with two roast beef sandwiches, potato salad, three-bean salad, corn on the cob, and chips. For dessert she would later give

him a fudgesicle. She also gave him two beers and a sparkling water. She set all this on a tray and carried it out to him.

"Lunch!" she called out.

Manuel looked up a bit stunned, as a man who forgets his hunger in work until he is reminded of it, and came down from the ladder. Carmen set the tray down on the table and waited. Manuel took off the burlap bags heavy with grapes he had been wearing and wiped his hands with a handkerchief. Then he sat down to eat. He looked briefly at Carmen and said, "Gracias," nodding his head. Carmen took this as an invitation to sit down at the table. Manuel was very hungry indeed and ate greedily. Carmen thought of the roastbeef sandwiches she made, she had put horseradish on them and was glad at that moment for having done so. "He is a caballero," she said to herself. She could see that he took pleasure in eating, like a wolf, and did not speak to him. Carmen watched him and had he not had such an appetite he might have noticed this. As it was, he was seemingly unaware of her presence or at least undisturbed by it. When he was at last finished, he pushed the tray away from him and sat back in his chair. He rested his hands on his belly. And began to speak, perhaps to Carmen but most likely not.

"A man can live alone with sheep and vineyards for many years and then one day it will not be enough. He can build his own house with the fruit of his labors and this will not be enough. A man can invent a machine and this too, will not be enough."

"Yes," said Carmen, although she didn't understand him really.

“A man,” he went on, “wears pants, a shirt, suspenders, and shoes. A caballero wears a hat. Still this is not enough. A man is judged on these things that are not enough. They are nothing. There are very few honest men. But even an honest man is not enough.”

Carmen was beginning to fathom his words and wanted to say to him, “I am enough! I am!” She wanted to assuage that misery in him, the sadness that made him say that all he was and had was not enough. She wondered how he could say such things when everything was at his feet, when everything that was, was enough. It was! And she was there, his angel of mercy. “See me! see me!” she wanted to cry out. “For the love of you I am enough!” But Manuel didn’t see her. He stood back up, loaded himself with burlap sacks and climbed the ladder.

Manuel came three more times that week and each time Carmen fixed him a lunch and watched him eat it. And after each lunch he would lean back and speak of regret and sorrow in a way that excluded Carmen, that fixed her as a voiceless listener. How she wanted to say, “You are missing me! Missing me while I sit in front of you.” But could not. His way tied her throat in a knot. It was only at night under that same trellis that the knot worked itself free and Carmen was given to monologues so tiresome, so depleting that several times she finished the evening curled up under a peach tree.

After Manuel finished his work at Señora’s there was no sign of him, although Carmen longed desperately for one. She no longer unplugged the phone but nervously picked it up when it rang hoping to hear his voice on the line. Often she pictured him in front of the big window he

had spoken of looking out at the Valley of San Joaquin which was mean and beautiful but not enough and she wept for his sorrow, which was hers. That was enough for her. Perhaps the only respite she had from her pining was the fauteuil. The armchair had become for her not simply an object, but a phenomenon and a haven. She sat in it once or twice a day, careful to know the whereabouts of the Señora when she did so. And in the chair she gave herself up to the most delicious of reveries, sometimes elaborately baroque, other times serene and windless.

It was true that there were days more hope filled than others for Carmen. On these more inspired mornings she arose from bed with the good faith that there would be news of her beloved. She took a naive pleasure in such mornings but was left by the end of the day in a state of utter want, all the more desperate and dispirited. Carmen frequented the armchair often and usually at one o'clock when the Señora spoke on the kitchen phone with her best friend, Trudy. It was in the month of October, two months after Manuel had left and not come back that, while sitting in the Louis XIV, she had a fleeting vision. In this vision she was wrapped in scarlet drapes and carried by birds through the sky. She was being taken back to her homeland, to the alluvial plains of Bio-Bio. Everything appeared so quaint below her, she laughed. Her laughter sounded like tinkling bells. The birds brought her to a green mountain, one she had seen in her childhood. Only it had been carved into a castle. The birds left her at the door of it and she stood there regally for a moment, draped in crimson. Then Carmen came back to herself and to the room and felt the chair under her hams. The vision had left her more

awake than she had been in months. Her senses were frighteningly keen. She could smell the rose bouquet from the back bedroom and her eyesight was so sharp she noticed a minute whiskey stain on the carpet that even the impeccable Señora had not spotted. But she was most stunned by her ears which registered clearly the phone conversation in the kitchen and by her crisp mind which effortlessly understood every word of that language she had grown so weary of and no longer bothered to listen to.

“No, Saturday is out. I’ve got that damned wedding to go to. You know, the foreman’s getting married. Manuel ... That’s right. I was out at the ranch yesterday. I gave him a little bonus, you know. And he says to me, ‘Señora Valdéz, it would be an honor if you would be our witness.’ So I’m in for the whole works. He’s got himself a picture bride from Mexico. She gets here Friday and the wedding’s Saturday. Olay! Oh my Gawd! He showed me her picture. Real excited about it, you know. She’s got a round face like they do but she’s pretty enough now. Just wait though. I tell you, in a few years she’ll be F-A-T like the rest of them. I mean F-A-T! ... “

Carmen picked herself up, untied her apron, and went out the back door. It was hot in the Valley of San Joaquin. Even in October it was hot. It was a desert in fact. As Carmen walked down the street, her white ballerina slippers turned gray with dust.