

The Season of Glass by Rahla Xenopoulos

EXTRACT 1

The leather soles of the boy's shoes pound the paving as he runs past Capilla del Patrocinio. Down back alleys that only sailors and whores know of, he runs, darting now left, now right down the cobbled roads, undetected by the greedy eyes of the Inquisition. He runs past priests with eyes of deception, men and women cowering terrified, street urchins starving. Past the Castillo of San Jorge where public trials will be held tomorrow. Past the wooden structures set up for hangings, and past the pyres built for the public burnings. How many heretics live in this city? Surely, with all this death, they have by now all been routed out and killed? But every day, hundreds more are killed.

He sprints through drains running with sewage and filth, blood and heartache. Putrid Seville, it is all he has ever known. His feet blister within the leather slippers he's worn for five years, filled as they are with the mud of the city, but still he runs, no stranger to discomfort or fear. Past the abandoned swinging bodies hung this afternoon, and through the desolate marketplace, closed and empty till dawn. He runs fearless, his heart fiercely clutching the hope of another – another just like him.

Daily, and knowingly, he risks his life in the pursuit of a ducat. But this is different. He is determined to live through this night for the promise of one like him, the promise of another.

Seventeen thirty is a most dangerous time to be living in Spain, a mendacious time, filled with people pretending to be that which they are not. They say every age has its violent ways, but it would seem to me that, during these days, mankind has become resigned to the brutality of our ways. Betrayal is whispered on the breath of every man, woman, and child. Seville – just about the world entire – is run by Cardinal Benedicto Martinez. He is not so much a person as an ominous presence. A cloud of fear. Fear exists in every crevice of every building. The shadow of him hangs so heavily, a man could suffocate for the need of air when he is near. Of all the wretched people I have encountered, none has stabbed my very soul as painfully as he. He is motivated, they claim, by God. What kind of a God calls for such cruelty, I will never know, but the Inquisition reigns with murder most wretched. And he has the supreme authority of the Inquisition.

The boy is not aware he is known to the cardinal; if he were, he is certain he would be dead, just as the others. It matters not from what class of society a person comes – be a man rich or poor, artist or clergy, all are vulnerable to the Inquisition. He has heard tales of the cardinal burning human bones after digging the bodies of dead heretics from the ground. Gruesome stories of the cardinal's devotion to the rack, his affection for starvation and hot coals, but most of all, his Judas Cradle. The boy cannot say why, but the Judas Cradle is a thing more petrifying to him than anything else.

He follows the black cloak as it billows in the black night. It leads him close to the docks, and towards the only beacon of hope. Towards the promise of Cinfa's doorway ... Cinfa, the widow of the Inquisition; Cinfa, whose door is always open and welcoming to his heart.

New to him is this glowing, pumping longing, reverberating through his being. He will not be deterred because he has hope of a future different to what has been laid out for him. Hope of another, like himself.

Finally, he comes to the house, small and sure, with the pianoforte playing and the twinkling of drunk laughter emanating from within. He reaches out to the brass lion head of the door knocker. Once, twice, he bangs, pauses, then bangs a third time. He waits a heartbeat, then again bangs, one, two, pause, three. What can she, his only friend, be doing? She knows him; she knows his knock.

‘Cinfa, Cinfa,’ he cries, ‘open, please ... I have news.’ Perhaps her voice is drowned out by the beating of his heart. How loud it must be in his ears, I swear I have heard it from the ten paces I run, hidden, behind him. ‘Cinfa, I know you are here,’ he cries into the doom of a rainy Seville night. ‘Jesus, look down on me, please. Open for me!’

Even God’s tears fall filthy on Spain. The city smells of blood and betrayal.

‘Cinfa, somewhere in the world I have a sister. Please, please, Cinfa ...’ he cries more to himself now than the huge closed door. ‘A sister ...’ he cries, until eventually he falls asleep on the cobbled paving in front of her door.

It is past midnight and the stars are barely visible through the filth and fog of Seville when the doorway is opened, and she appears, illuminated by the moon. Cinfa, Esther, the bearer of promise. Still, I gasp at the sight of her. Even after all her suffering, she is the most beautiful and radiant woman in all Seville, in all the world. She looks anxiously about the streets and I wonder, Is she searching for spies, or does she know I am lurking so close by? How I yearn to touch her as she crouches down next to him. I swear, just the sight of her will break my heart once more, would that I were him, would that she were so close to me. Esther, who stole my heart, Esther, who destroyed my life, how she flickers now as Cinfa, so charming in the moonlight.

Until this night, there has been nothing unusual about Simuel Henriquez Levi, although he does not yet know himself by that name. He is known still as Diego Rodriguez, a boy of his time, a child of the Inquisition, surviving on wits and courage.

Seville is filled with thousands of orphans like him, though few as resourceful. He is unrecognised by church or state, but it is better that way – to slip through life, unnoticed. Being recognised by the church is like the mark of death, unless you are one of them, and even then, so few survive Philip V’s wicked Spain. Never has he felt the need to excel or learn about himself, which is a blessing. I fear, had he known of his family before today, he might have felt special, might have felt even that the world had a want and role for him, which I know it does. But, so too, he is no fool; he would have known the extent of the danger he was in and, worse still, he would not have been silent. He would have searched and found her. Who can say if he would have survived this long? I have yearned to stride like Don Miguel out of the shadows and hear his voice close up, touch his cheek. But ignorance has kept him alive, and he has been protected – if not from the harsh realities of life, at least from the truths of his own life. He has never wondered from where he might come ...

Not until now, the day of his thirteenth birthday. He knows it is his birthday because Don Miguel visits him at the shoddy orphanage only once a year, and this is every year the day. Always with a small gift: once, Don Miguel brought an orange from a foreign land. Every time, it has been a thing small and precious, but never could be kept beyond a week. The visits are brief and taken up more by prayer than conversation. But this year, the thirteenth year of his life, Don Miguel came with tidings of a difference. He came with a gift of an entirely different nature, word that would change the boy’s life forever.

EXTRACT 2

The thick belt of the white fur coat is cinched so tight, she can barely draw breath. And the weight of it is so cumbersome, she can’t move from the couch. It is her stillness the boy finds so disconcerting, so perfectly still and rigid on the green velvet chair, like a painted porcelain doll. Judith, the child who does not walk but leaps, who does not talk but sings; Judith, who floats through life, is so very still, as if she knows what is about to happen. But she can’t possibly know. Not even God could possibly know. Her childish personality cannot be contained in a coat. Its gold buttons, secured a little too tightly around her neck, are engraved with the Levi coat of arms, an ‘L’ and a roaring lion. Outside, the cold of Vienna’s winter

cuts through people's clothing into their very souls, but inside the Levi mansion a fire blazes in every room. The family are safe, protected from both the violent weather and the people outside. They exist like a moist sponge cake, shielded by a layer of marzipan and fondant icing, the Levi wealth and honour. And how he complains, Shimon, the pudgy boy: 'Can you people not see how uncomfortable my sister is?' She is not younger than him; smaller yes, but not younger. She is his twin. 'Why can Judith not take off the stupid coat and come play with me?'

'Because, Shimon, I brought this coat from Paris. The most fashionable young ladies are walking down the Champs-Élysées in this coat.'

'Pooh, pooh, Judith is not a young lady – she is my sister who must come play.'

'No. I tell you, Shimon, she will sit and wait in the coat.' Rachel, my magnificent fiancée, does not raise her voice. Unlike the twins, it is not in Rachel's nature to raise her voice. They say Rachel is her mother's child, but I can't say for certain since all I know of the mother is the Klimt portrait in the hallway. My Rachel is a bewitching beauty. But then they, the Levi family, are all in their way bewitching. Rachel, the twins, and even their absent father, lost as he is to his sorrow.

The gold buttons reflect the family crest proudly in the firelight. 'L' for Levi, the bankers and composers, the doctors and muses, the soldiers and financiers. There have been no Levi rabbis. Judaism is considered a whim, and was almost done away with generations ago in the Levi family. Yet here am I, Chaim Zechariah Cohen, the fiancé to his first-born daughter, standing at the foot of the cascading staircase, as if at home in this mansion.

Was it easy to fall in love with Rachel, you wonder? I fell in love with Rachel as one falls into a warm bath after a cold night. When she came to me, I was a wandering Jew, and her eyes were filled with the promise of a home. In all my life, I never knew of a purpose; I never felt a place of belonging until the night a friend had taken me unwillingly, out of my drab lodgings, to a recital in Montmartre. I had no interest in love or music. But that family, they transcend interest. The little girl, Judith, her voice rang through the dark Parisian night, as if her soul were illuminated. It is crude to say she sang like a nightingale. A nightingale is a bird of this earth. I can look out of my window and hear a nightingale sing, but Judith, her voice was not of this world. We never again will hear anything like her song. Not in this life. Her voice was a miracle. So young and small she was, but filled with ancient wonder.

That evening, Shimon sat at her feet, even then in a position of devotion, her twin, her protector. They were a self-contained universe, a universe of two children.

Then I saw Rachel, standing behind the two children. Who am I to describe the wonder of Rachel's beauty? When I met her, she was the muse of Europe. Artists painted her and poets wrote verses praising her beauty, while composers swore she'd driven them crazy with longing. And she existed apparently ignorant of the disorder her magnificence created. It was not in my nature to consider women like this. I was a poor rabbi, but her beauty beguiled. It was incongruous: her neck was too long, her skin too pale, her bones protruding from her body like weapons set to cut a man's heart to shreds. Her eyes were as black as her hair, and they pierced constantly in question and longing. There was no comfort to be found in Rachel's beauty, but nothing in this life was as compelling.