

Clara

by [Roberto Bolaño](#) August 4, 2008 (The New Yorker)



She had big breasts, slim legs, and blue eyes. That's how I like to remember her. I don't know why I fell madly in love with her, but I did, and at the start, I mean for the first days, the first hours, it all went fine; then Clara returned to the city where she lived, in the south of Spain (she'd been on vacation in Barcelona), and everything began to fall apart.

One night I dreamed of an angel: I walked into a huge, empty bar and saw him sitting in a corner with his elbows on the table and a cup of milky coffee in front of him.

She's the love of your life, he said, looking up at me, and the force of his gaze, the fire in his eyes, threw me right across the room. I started shouting, Waiter, waiter, then opened my eyes and escaped from that miserable dream. Other nights I didn't dream of anyone, but I woke up in tears. Meanwhile, Clara and I were writing to each other. Her letters were brief. Hi, how are you, it's raining, I love you, bye. At first, those letters scared me. It's all over, I thought. Nevertheless, after inspecting them more carefully, I reached the conclusion that her epistolary concision was motivated by a desire to avoid grammatical errors. Clara was proud. She couldn't write well, and she didn't want to let it show, even if it meant hurting me by seeming cold.

She was eighteen at the time. She had quit high school and was studying music at a private academy, and drawing with a retired landscape painter, but she wasn't all that interested in music, and it was pretty much the same with painting: she liked it, but couldn't get passionate about it. One day, I received a letter informing me, in her usual terse fashion, that she was going to take part in a beauty contest. My response, which filled three double-sided pages, was an extravagant paean to her calm beauty, the sweetness of her eyes, the perfection of her figure, etc. The letter was a triumph of bad taste, and when I had finished it I wondered whether or not I should send it, but in the end I did.

A few weeks went by before I heard from her. I could have called, but I didn't want to intrude, and also at the time I was broke. Clara came in second in the contest and was depressed for a week. Surprisingly, she sent me a telegram, which read, "SECOND PLACE. STOP. GOT YOUR LETTER. STOP. COME AND SEE ME."

A week later, I took a train bound for the city where she lived, the first one leaving that day. Before that, of course—I mean after the telegram—we had spoken on the phone, and I had heard the story of the beauty contest a number of times. It had had a big impact on Clara, apparently. So I packed my bags and, as soon as I could, got on a train, and very early the next morning there I was, in that unfamiliar city. I arrived at Clara's apartment at nine-thirty, after having a coffee at the station and smoking a few cigarettes to kill some time. A fat woman with messy hair opened the door, and when I said I had come to see Clara she looked at me as if I were a lamb on its way to slaughter. For a few minutes (they seemed extraordinarily long at the time, and, thinking the whole thing over, later on, I realized that in fact they were), I sat and waited for Clara in the living room, a living room that seemed welcoming, for no special reason, overly cluttered but welcoming and full of light. When Clara made her entrance, it was like the apparition of a goddess. I know it was a stupid thing to think—and it's a stupid thing to say—but that's how it was.

The following days were pleasant and unpleasant. We saw a lot of films, almost one a day; we made love (I was the first guy that Clara had slept with, which seemed incidental or anecdotal, but in the end it would cost me dearly); we walked around; I met Clara's friends; we went to two horrific parties; and I asked her to come and live with me in Barcelona. Of course, at that stage I knew what her answer would be. After a month, I took a night train back to Barcelona; I remember it was a terrible trip.

Soon after that, Clara explained in a letter, the longest one she ever sent me, why she couldn't go on: I was putting her under intolerable pressure (by suggesting that we live together); it was all over. After that, we talked three or four times on the phone. I think I also wrote her a letter full of insults and declarations of love. Once, when I was travelling to Morocco, I called her from the hotel where I was staying, in Algeciras, and that time we were able to have a civilized conversation. At least, she thought it was civilized. Or I did.

Years later, Clara told me about the parts of her life I had missed out on. And then, years after that, both she and some of her friends told me her life story all over again, starting from the beginning, or from the point where we split up—since I was a minor character, it didn't make any difference to them, or to me, really, although that wasn't so easy to admit. Predictably, not long after the end of our engagement (I know “engagement” is hyperbolic, but it's the best word I can find) Clara got married, and the lucky man was, logically enough, one of the friends I had met on my first trip to her city.

But, before that, she had psychological problems: she used to dream about rats; at night she would hear them in her bedroom, and for months, the months leading up to her marriage, she had to sleep on the sofa in the living room. I'm guessing those damned rats disappeared after the wedding.

So. Clara got married. And the husband, Clara's dear husband, surprised everyone, even her. After one or two years, I'm not sure, exactly—Clara told me, but I've forgotten—they split up. It wasn't an amicable separation. The guy shouted, Clara shouted, she slapped him, he responded with a punch that dislocated her jaw. Sometimes, when I'm alone and can't get to sleep but don't feel up to switching on the light, I think of Clara, who came in second in that beauty contest, with her jaw hanging loose, unable to get it back in place on her own, driving to the nearest hospital with one hand on the wheel and the other supporting her jawbone. I'd like to find it funny, but I can't.

What I do find funny is her wedding night. She'd had an operation for hemorrhoids the day before, so I guess she was still a bit groggy. Or maybe not. I never asked her if she was able to make love with her husband. I think they'd done it before the operation. Anyway, what does it matter? All these details say more about me than they do about her.

In any case, Clara split up with her husband a year or two after the wedding, and started studying. She couldn't go to a university because she hadn't finished high school, but she tried everything else: photography, painting again (I don't know why, but she always thought she could be a good painter), music, typing, I.T., all those one-year diploma courses supposedly leading to job opportunities that desperate young people keep jumping at or falling for. And although Clara was happy to have escaped from a husband who beat her, deep down she was desperate.

The rats came back, and the depression, and the mysterious illnesses. For two or three years she was treated for an ulcer, until the doctors finally realized that there was nothing wrong, at least not in her stomach. Around that time she met Luis, an executive; they became lovers, and he persuaded her to study something related to business administration. According to Clara's friends, she had at last found the love of her life. Before long, they were living together; Clara got a job in an office, a legal firm or some kind of agency—a really fun job, Clara said, without a hint of irony—and her life seemed to be on track, for good this time. Luis was a sensitive guy (he never hit her), and cultured (he was, I believe, one of the two million Spaniards who bought the complete works of Mozart in installments), and patient, too (he listened, he listened to her every night and on the weekends). Clara didn't have much to say for herself, but she never got tired of saying it. She wasn't fretting over the beauty contest anymore, although she did bring it up from time to time; now it was all about her periods of depression, her mental instability, the pictures she wanted to paint but hadn't.

I don't know why they didn't have children; maybe they didn't have time, although, according to Clara, Luis was crazy about kids. She used her time to study, and listen to music (Mozart, but other composers,

too, later on), and take photographs, which she never showed anyone. In her own obscure and useless way, she tried to defend her freedom, tried to learn.

At the age of thirty-one, she slept with a guy from the office. It was just something that happened, not a big deal, at least for the two of them, but Clara made the mistake of telling Luis. The fight was appalling. Luis smashed a chair or a painting he had bought, got drunk, and didn't talk to her for a month. According to Clara, from that day on nothing was the same, in spite of the reconciliation, in spite of their trip to a town on the coast, a rather sad and dull trip, as it turned out.

By the time she was thirty-two, her sex life was almost nonexistent. Shortly before she turned thirty-three, Luis told her that he loved her, he respected her, he would never forget her, but for some months he had been seeing someone from work, who was divorced and had children, a nice, understanding woman, and he was planning to go and live with her.

On the surface, Clara took the break-up pretty well (it was the first time someone had left her). But a few months later she lapsed into depression again and had to take some time off work and undergo psychiatric treatment, which didn't help much. The pills she was given inhibited her sexually, although she did make some willful but unsatisfactory attempts to sleep with other men, including me. She started talking about the rats again; they wouldn't leave her alone. When she got nervous she would constantly go to the bathroom. (The first night we slept together, she must have got up to pee ten times.) She talked about herself in the third person. In fact, she once told me that there were three Claras in her soul: a little girl, an old crone enslaved by her family, and a young woman, the real Clara, who wanted to get out of that city forever, who wanted to paint, and take photos, and travel, and live. For the first few days after we got back together, I feared for her life. Sometimes I wouldn't even go out shopping because I was scared of coming back and finding her dead, but as the days went by my fears gradually faded, and I realized (or perhaps conveniently convinced myself) that Clara wasn't going to take her life; she wasn't going to throw herself off the balcony of her apartment—she wasn't going to do anything.

Soon after that, I left her, but this time I decided to call her every so often and stay in touch with one of her friends, who could fill me in (if only now and then). That's how I came to know a few things it might have been easier not to know, stories that did nothing for my peace of mind, the kind of news an egotist should always take care to avoid.

Clara went back to work (the new pills she was taking had done wonders for her outlook), and, shortly afterward, management, perhaps to pay her back for such a long absence, transferred her to a branch in another Andalusian city, though not very far away. She moved, started going to the gym (at thirty-four she was no longer the beauty I had known when I was seventeen), and made new friends. That's how she met Paco, who was divorced, like her.

Before long, they were married. At first, Paco would tell anyone willing to listen what he thought of Clara's photos and paintings. And Clara thought that Paco was intelligent and had good taste. As time passed, however, Paco lost interest in Clara's aesthetic efforts and wanted to have a child. Clara was thirty-five and at first she wasn't keen on the idea, but she gave in, and they had a child. According to Clara, the child satisfied all her yearnings—that was the word she used. According to her friends, she was getting steadily worse, whatever that meant.

On one occasion, for reasons irrelevant to this story, I had to spend a night in Clara's city. I called her from my hotel, told her where I was, and arranged to meet her the following day. I would have preferred to see her that night, but after our previous encounter Clara regarded me, and perhaps with good reason, as a kind of enemy, so I didn't insist.

She was almost unrecognizable. She had put on weight, and in spite of the makeup her face looked worn, not so much by time as by frustration, which surprised me, since I'd never really thought that Clara aspired to anything. And if you don't aspire to anything, how can you be frustrated? Her smile had also

undergone a transformation. Before, it had been warm and slightly dumb, the smile of a young lady from a provincial capital, but it had become a mean, hurtful smile, and it was easy to read the resentment, rage, and envy behind it. We kissed each other on the cheeks like a pair of idiots and then sat down; for a while we didn't know what to say. I was the one who broke the silence. I asked about her son; she told me he was at day care, and then asked me about mine. He's fine, I said. We both realized that, unless we did something, the meeting was going to become unbearably sad. How do I look? Clara asked. It was as if she were asking me to slap her. Same as ever, I replied automatically. I remember we had a coffee, then went for a walk along an avenue lined with plane trees, which led directly to the station. My train was about to leave. We said goodbye at the door of the station, and that was the last time I saw her.

We did, however, talk on the phone before she died. I used to call her every three or four months. I had learned from experience not to touch on personal or intimate matters (a bit like sticking to sports when chatting with strangers in bars), so we talked about her family, which in those conversations remained as abstract as a Cubist poem, or her son's school, or her job; she was still at the same office, and over the years she had got to know all about her colleagues and their lives, and all the problems the executives were having—those secrets gave her an intense and perhaps excessive pleasure. On one occasion, I tried to get her to say something about her husband, but she clammed up at that. You deserve the best, I told her. That's strange, Clara replied. What's strange? I asked. It's strange that you should say that—you, of all people, she said. I quickly tried to change the subject, claimed I was running out of coins (I've never had a phone of my own, and never will—I always called from a public phone booth), hurriedly said goodbye, and hung up. I realized I couldn't face another argument with Clara; I couldn't listen to her working up another one of her endless justifications.

One night not long ago, she told me she had cancer. Her voice was as cold as ever, that voice in which she always recounted her life with the detachment of a bad storyteller, putting exclamation marks in all the wrong places, and passing over what she should have gone into, the parts where she should have cut to the quick. I remember asking her if she had already been to see a doctor, as if she had diagnosed the cancer herself (or with Paco's help). Of course, she said. At the other end of the line I heard something like a croak. She was laughing. We talked briefly about our children, then (she must have been feeling lonely or bored) she asked me to tell her something about my life. I made up something on the spot, and said I'd call her back the following week. That night I slept very badly. I had one nightmare after another, and woke up suddenly, shouting, convinced that Clara had lied to me: she didn't have cancer; something was happening to her, for sure, the way things had been happening for the past twenty years, little, fucked-up things, all full of shit and smiles, but she didn't have cancer. It was five in the morning. I got up and walked to the Paseo Marítimo, with the wind at my back, which was strange, because the wind usually blows in from the sea, and hardly ever in the opposite direction. I didn't stop until I got to the phone booth next to one of the biggest cafés on the Paseo. The terrace was empty, the chairs were chained to the tables. A little way off, right by the sea, a homeless guy was sleeping on a bench, with his knees drawn up, and every now and then he shuddered, as if he were having bad dreams.

My address book contained only one other number in Clara's city. I called it. After a long time, a woman's voice answered. I said who I was, but suddenly found I couldn't say anything more. I thought she'd hang up, but I heard the click of a lighter and smoke rushing in through lips. Are you still there? the woman asked. Yes, I said. Have you talked to Clara? Yes, I said. Did she tell you she had cancer? Yes, I said. Well, it's true.

All the years since I had met Clara suddenly came tumbling down on top of me, everything my life had been, most of it nothing to do with her. I don't know what else the woman said at the other end of the line, hundreds of miles away; I think I began to cry in spite of myself, like in the poem by Rubén Darío. I fumbled in my pockets for cigarettes, listened to fragments of stories: doctors, operations, mastectomies, discussions, different points of view, deliberations, the activities of a Clara I couldn't know or touch or help, not now. A Clara who could never save me now.

When I hung up, the homeless guy was standing about five feet away. I hadn't heard him approaching. He was very tall, too warmly dressed for the season, and he was staring at me, as if he were near-sighted, or worried I might make a sudden move. I was so sad I didn't even get scared, although afterward, walking back through the twisting streets of the town center, I realized that, seeing him, I had forgotten Clara for an instant, for the first time, and only the first.

We talked on the phone quite often after that. Some weeks I called her twice a day. Our conversations were short and stupid, and there was no way to say what I really wanted to say, so I talked about anything, the first thing that came into my head, some nonsense I hoped would make her smile. Once, I got sentimental and tried to summon up days gone by, but Clara put on her icy armor, and I soon got the message and gave up on nostalgia. As the date of the operation approached, my calls became more frequent. Once, I talked with her son. Another time with Paco. They both seemed well, they sounded well, at least not as nervous as I was. Though I'm probably wrong about that. Certainly wrong, in fact.

Everyone's worried about me, Clara said one afternoon. I thought she meant her husband and her son, but "everyone" included many more people, more than I could imagine, everyone. The day before she was to go into the hospital, I called in the afternoon. Paco answered. Clara wasn't there. No one had seen her or heard from her in two days. From Paco's tone of voice I sensed that he suspected she might be with me. I told him straight up, She's not here, but that night I hoped with all my heart that she would come to my apartment. I waited for her with the lights on, and finally fell asleep on the sofa, and dreamed of a very beautiful woman, who was not Clara: a tall, slim woman, with small breasts, long legs, and deep brown eyes, who was not and never would be Clara, a woman whose presence obliterated Clara, reduced her to a poor, lost, trembling forty-something-year-old.

She didn't come to my apartment.

The next day I called Paco. And two days after that I called again. There was still no sign of Clara. The third time I called Paco, he talked about his son and complained about Clara's behavior. Every night I wonder where she could be, he said. From his voice and the turn the conversation was taking, I could tell that what he needed from me, or someone, anyone, was friendship. But I was in no state to provide him with that consolation. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Chris Andrews.)