
El mapa de la vida

Author: Adolfo García Ortega

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Reader: **Peter Bush**

This map of life is a part historical, part mythical palimpsest of a fiction powered by a response to the 2004 terrorist bombings in Madrid. The opening pages take the reader into the minds of a series of individuals travelling in the trains as the bombs go off. The novel then focuses on the lives of Gabriel and Ada, two of the survivors, who meet by chance in the Prado Museum and abandon relationships that have gone sour in order to live together. The bombs have maimed them for life: Gabriel has a gammy leg and uses a walking stick; Ada lost a breast.

Their respective jobs and former partners bring a layered series of ironies to García Ortega's plot. Gabriel is a freelance designer of roller coasters and has a regular client, based in Switzerland that contracts to construct for fairgrounds throughout the world. He is in the business of using his imagination to create a ludic experience of horror from the feeling of being on the precipice of death. Post-Atocha he loses interest in inspiring such artificial sensations of terror. Ada is researching and writing a book on Giotto; she particularly focuses on his failed attempts to build a high tower in Florence and create wings to enable humans to fly. Three times the tower collapses and building workers are killed. Nobody dares to fly using Giotto's aviation techniques though several peer over the cliff edge with wings attached. Their streams of consciousness have leitmotifs of climbing and falling.

In the tissue of stories surrounding the main plot – the layers of the palimpsest – there are sequences inspired by Nazareth and that Annunciation, by Fra Angelico's related painting, (various angels and devils pop up in Madrid almost like whimsical narrators taking the lid of the city and linking up the various historical and Renaissance art themes) and by the (invented) lives of over twenty who died in the trains. A further layer of narrative details the state of mind of an inmate in the US prison in Guantánamo who has decided that the hunger strike he has started isn't enough and is desperately seeking a means to kill himself in an environment that has been tried and tested as safe against suicide.

The gallery of portraits - snapshots of the lives of the dead and their nearest and dearest – profiles both the random nature of suicide bomb targets and the new multicultural population of Madrid. The victims are from Morocco, Peru, Romania, Ecuador... bankers, solicitors, cleaners, school children... Muslims, Christians, atheists... the usual mix one would expect to find on a suburban commuter train coming into a European capital city in the early morning, though the map is of contemporary Madrid and of lives striving to provide for families there as well as in far-flung parts of the globe. Each life story is told with an immediate, dramatising slant. The Polish woman is on the way to redeem her winning lottery ticket that will bring in 30,000 euros that will enable her family to pay for the expensive cancer operations her father urgently needs. The Romanian goes swimming in a club and is on the point of making open contact with a fellow swimmer she's been sharing eye-contact with over weeks. On the vital day, she won't be there and he will never know why.

However, the main focus is the immediate, middle class entourage of the protagonists and the associated tangled web of emotional family and adult sexual relations. Ada leaves her husband and two adolescent children. Her husband is a cardiologist and as one of those 'heartless heart-healers' enjoys a fondness for sadistic sex that leads him to violently rape his wife and think that she derives the same enjoyment from his attacks.

She and Gabriel develop a love of great tenderness, one aspect of which is her missing breast and the trauma over her decision to have a silicone replacement whose operation is carried out by colleagues of her husband. Their professionalism seems stained by the ethos of surgeons too long caught up in the round of making money via cosmetic surgery.

For his part, Gabriel has a group of drinking friends that include his former girl friend, Eva, who manages an expensive shoe shop in the city centre. There is also an American, Fred, and his Egyptian flatmate, Sayyid. The latter is an Egyptian doctor who initially seems an affable humanist but turns out to be an ex-nationalist Marxist and the sleeping member of a terrorist cell about to become a suicide bomber.

Sayyid's story, within García Posada's ingenious set of parallel lives, gives the plot the main suspense element and supplies the layer of the active preparation of a new attack: how these things are done via amateur bomb-making equipment and preparatory, jihad inspiring calls to his mobile that also offer him immediately available sex to help puncture the inevitable tensions. The Egyptian has other ideas and hang-ups that include sticking with the coterie that regularly meet up for drinks at an Irish pub, Finnegan's, nostalgia for the Egyptian foot-balling scene, and a fling with Gabriel's ex, Eva.

Gabriel keeps an eye on them both and frequently looks from afar at the shoe-shop window and what Eva and her assistant are up to inside. However, his espionage is impelled by lingering jealousy and possessiveness rather than suspicions about Sayyid's hidden agenda. The only one to have a sense of that is the seven-year –old Colombian boy who lives in Sayyid's block of flats. The Egyptian and Colombian have a friendly, bantering friendship and that helps Sayyid decide to give the parcel with the bomb to the young lad for safekeeping.

As with *The Automaton* (to be published by Harvill Secker) García Posada reveals a real flair for mounting complicated plots based on a myriad of fascinating small stories and characters. *The Map of Life* is much more ambitious in that he succeeds in marrying that kind of proliferating narrative with a tragic fictional account of the Madrid bomb attacks and a celebration of Madrid as a city that has survived.

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