
El Estatus

Report by: Miranda France

El Estatus (Status) is a stylish noir novel by a young writer who has met with great acclaim in Spain. In mysterious circumstances - we know neither the place nor the year - Clara and her daughter Clarita move into an apartment in an unnamed Spanish city. There they hope to be joined by Clara's husband, who has been working abroad for many years. However, the atmosphere in their new home at number 34 Schmelgelme is not as congenial as they might have hoped. For one thing, there appear to be no other tenants in the building, and yet nights are blighted by the noise of thumping and hammering coming from a flat upstairs. The caretaker seems to know terrible secrets but can never reveal them, since he is mute. And, Ichvolz, the suave estate agent who assures Clara that all is well may not be as trustworthy as first impressions suggest. His revelation that another woman and her daughter, who also shared a name, once occupied this same apartment, then mysteriously decided to leave it, is not heartening. Twelve year-old Clarita convinces herself that this pair were murdered by Jesualdo, the caretaker and, although this begins as an enjoyable fantasy, it gains currency as the novel progresses. She becomes convinced that spirits are to blame for things going bump in the night.

In spite of her ghoulish fantasy. Clarita makes friends with the caretaker, Jesualdo, and persuades him to accompany her to different corners of the building. On the upper floors, they find everything in an extraordinary state of dilapidation, but cannot gain access to the apartment from which the worst noise seems to emanate. Meanwhile, Clara spends her days reading and sniping at the maid - buxom Patricia - too scared to venture into the world outside. When the door to their flat is attacked with an axe, she asks Ichvolz to spend a night with them, hoping to snare the troublesome neighbours (and to sleep with the estate agent). When she hops into his bed and finds Patricia already there, Clara is so revolted by the thought of her sexual skirmish with the 'lower orders' that she seems never to recover a consciousness of events around her: first the front door is removed, then her daughter vanishes. For Clarita's investigations of the upper reaches of the house have grown progressively dangerous and finally, she persuades Jesualdo to take her into a room from which, we fear, she may never return. When she describes sensations of extreme coldness and of floating away, we realise our worst fears are confirmed - but we should not be too sorry for Clarita, for she evidently enjoys being a spirit. Beset by anxiety, lawyers and news that her husband is never going to join her, Clara very soon follows her daughter into the spirit world, where the two seem to revel in their bird's eye view of events. We now realise that fragments of voices interspersed throughout the novel, belong to this pair of spirits, commenting on their lives in retrospect. Able to scroll back and forth in time, they discover what has really been going on. It turns out that the whole building belongs to Clara's husband who has employed Ichvolz to manage it. However Ichvolz, secure in the knowledge that his boss wants to dump his wife and will therefore never visit, has been dismantling the building at nights, using his brother to scare away the tenants.

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