

Golondrina: A Texas Story

A novel by Bárbara Renaud González

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Chapter 1 *Amada*

The five-year old *niñita* runs barefoot all the way to the plaza, holding tight to her precious basket of *pan dulce*, her voice a pink aria sweeter than the precious bread she carries. At the Plaza of the Embraces, Amada's voice chimes right after the morning church bells, and before the taxis arrive at the plaza followed by the Coca-Cola trucks, the honking buses, and the unchaining, metal door-rising of a hundred stores. Some people say the morning can't begin without the angel-pastries delivered by this little girl singing a verse for each sticky *campechana*, a dance for every half-dozen *empanadas*.

Sometimes, the plaza's best and youngest saleswoman offers boxes of Chiclets rattling like marbles, or homemade dresses rinsed with a squeeze of lemon, steaming with the starching on her desperate arms. She wants to play, but she can't, she can't. Her family is starving, it's the years after the Mexican Revolution, and her own mother is sewing, embroidering, crocheting, baking, doll-making, ingenious in the way that only poverty can make you create something out of nothing. But there is never any money, no matter how hard Amada works. *La gente* buys from her, circling her, so that she can barely see the mountains and cathedrals circling them. *Ay*, how she makes people laugh and spend, but more than anything she wants to go to school, *quiere ir a la escuela*, but there is no money.

And then at thirteen and barely in the fifth grade, they take her out of school, when her mother finds her with a book and her legs wide open, innocent about what her miniskirt is showing. She cries for weeks, then, forever. Two years later, Amada marries the first man who asks her. She's fifteen, and he's more than twice her age. She calls him *Sapo*.

Chapter 2 *The Boleros*

The toad-man, *Sapo*, keeps her in a three-story *rosa mexicana* house with the *mosaico* floors in Tequisquiapan, and now the plaza's best salesgirl has servants to clean her blood-stained panties if she asks, but she doesn't know how to give orders, only how to obey them. Behind the stone walls of her mansion, Amada passes her days trying to be the good wife. She likes mopping the turquoise-tiled floors with the purple and yellow Moorish suns fading into another language, she enjoys washing the linen sheets by hand in the stone-ridged sink, then rinsing and soaking them on the terrace in hot blue foam, hanging them on the clothesline below that blue-starch sky that she imagines must be the color of pure freedom. Yes, blue must be the color of love too, like the *boleros*, those songs promising a new world and something else, something that she aches for, but she didn't know what it is, only that it's the color blue.

All day the *boleros* accompany her on the radio while the *Sapo*'s away at work. And it's that omnipresent wanting for blue, crying for blue, the bluest kisses and flowers, the dancing under the blue stars, and something more, the red hiding under that blue, there's a hunger grabbing her hand, pulling her away from him, to think about leaving him in the middle of the night, to steal away while he's toad-snoring, to crawl out from under him, to abandon her daughter in the crib, to write a note of goodbye pinned to her pink-crocheted blanket. But for now, she just embroiders *te quiero mijita*, flowery words and clouds on the satin border.

Chapter 3 *El Sapo*

The Sapo rapes her on their wedding night. Amada is a virgin of course, and she feels like a whole *jalapeño* has slammed into her mouth, bursting inside without her biting it, except it happens down there, in that mouth, so the *jalapeño* burns and cuts, squeezing itself into every corner and closet she has.

She cries and he doesn't care, boasts that she's his, that he owns her.

Then he makes her champagne-filled *boca* ache too with his *jalapeño*, big and fat and greasy with his toad-juice. Swallow it! She's choking. And he laughs. It spills from her mouth, though he pushes her lips together, and it tastes like runny, poisoned, milk. Urine.

Putá! He wheezes. What a whore you are!

He pushes her here and there, sucking her nipples so hard they drip blood from his *sapo*-feeding, forces her head face-down on the bed, grabbing, pressing, thumbing her body like *masa* for tortillas. She squeals with his thrusting, and he just laughs more. Her flesh is his *masa*, his *gordita*, and he's grunting like a pig when he turns her over again, ordering her to open her legs wide, wider, flattening her with his frogself. And she opens her legs until she breaks into pieces. Wider. *Más. Más!*

Hija de puta. He calls her a whore, and that's worse than all the rest he's doing to her. You like it, I know you want it. You're like all the others, daughter of a good-for-nothing-whore.

Then he does it again. *Putá-madre!*

He yells, his *jalapeño* exploding for the last time that night. Whore-mother-daughter-of-a-whore are his last words before he snores himself to sleep.

She can't walk for days. That was the first night.

Chapter 4 *Lázaro*

So many pretty horses.

“Huerco chingado, quien chingados te dió permiso?” The horse Lázaro’s father holds in his farmer’s hand will be the last time, the very last time.

Lázaro thinks of horses, how he always wanted one, it helps to think of them, to not think of pain, of burning, of lightning, but to hear the thunder, to witness the magic of them.

Tordillos, light grays.

Lázaro is twenty-one, and tomorrow he’s going on a train to the Army, to fight in World War II. He’s from Texas, and never been anywhere except this farm a few miles across the Mexican border, all his family has left after the U.S. Mexican War.

Moros oscuros, dark grays.

They have a few hundred acres, blood-acres his father says, and as the oldest son it’s up to him to save the farm after all that’s happened. There are ten children in the family, but the other brother is still too young, and the rest are girls. It’s up to Lázaro.

Moros claros, blue grays. Tordillos dorados, dappled grays.

Lázaro always wanted a horse, but his father hates them. They remind him of death.

Tordillos manchados, fleabitten grays. Escarchados. Canelos, rosillos, sabinos. Cinnamon, rose red, strawberry.

The last time. Lázaro’s father went to town to try and get Lázaro released from the Army, he was needed on the farm. No, they tell him, there’s a war going on.

Besides, your son is six feet tall, all sinew and muscle. Uncle Sam wants him.

Chino, curly horse. Caballo romo, roman-nosed, ram-headed.

Pretty horses. That night, before he leaves for the Army at dawn, his father grabs him, after Lázaro's packed, showered and shaved, and tells him about the horses.

But it's too late.

Chapter 5 *Aranzazú*

After *Sapo* falls asleep snoring like a bear that's just eaten a whole deer, Amada goes dancing. The trumpets are the first to call her, *ándale vente*, pulling her hand out from the crowd, courting her especially, unstitching her skin from the bones so that she becomes the woman only she knows and no one else. And then she's dancing dancing dancing alone in a ballroom, which becomes the *zócalo*, the salty-air one in Veracruz where the people gather to dance in the plaza, and then she's gliding like water on stone, a butterfly on the wave of a breeze, she's the guitar on two perfect legs, her ankle-strapped high heels keeping time, and the whole orchestra follows her, like the stars follow the moon.

But it's just a dream, and there's a man too, and together they walk to get an ice cream on Hidalgo Street, hands entwined strolling through the Plaza de Armas. At the *nevería*, they take a long time to choose. *Cajeta? Tres leches? Piñón? Pineapple? Strawberry? Tamarindo? Cinderella's kiss, maybe? Bit of Moon? Or should they go crazy and have ice cream with mole? Cactus? Avocado? Tequila? Persimmon?*

In this dream, it's always Sunday evening and the plaza's a merry-go-round of pretty girls promenading 'round the square with their boyfriends. No one as *guapo* as her smoke-man, Jorge, because that's the name she's gives him.

From the open-air *nevería*, they hear the city's *sinfónica*, the violins rumbling up their thunder of notes, bursting the cobalt sky open, indistinguishable from the summer's breeze, the notes mingling with the yodeling of the red-bandanna *haupangeros* and their cane-syrup baritones who are singing about a brown woman they left behind at the

rancho. They decide to have a bowl of *pico de gallo* ice cream made of *jícama*, papaya, orange and a sprinkle of *chile*, strolling to the Aranzazú Convent to see the sunset.

At the plaza, the foodstands offer fried potatoes, *churros*, sweet bread, *atole* with fresh anise, a basket of *tamales* steamed in banana leaves, piles of fried *tacos* with squashflower on the makeshift griddles, clay bowls of hot *pozole*, steaming red *enchiladas* with minced potatoes, goat cheese and green *salsa*. Amada and Jorge decide on the peanuts instead of the almonds and pecans. Salted, sweetened, spiced, which kind? The trumpet follows Amada, like a silky ice cream on their tongues with the sharp bite of red *piquín*.

They stop to admire the fresh ears of roasted corn with the accompanying *queso blanco*, sour cream, pale-yellow butter and dried chile powder. For the older men, there is *pulque* made from fermented potatoes and another kind from pineapple. They even have a sip of that, which makes Amada stumble and laugh. The music embraces, caresses, there under the palmtrees lining the plaza where the orange *flamboyán* trees encircle the fountain and the bougainvillea is dropping its pink petals on the gazebo as the symphony plays, its cymbals sweet and sour, accented by the hide-and-seek of children and the tang of Sunday's lime colognes and lemon-rinsed hair, everything and everyone shining in the transparent air, each person a note, some are the violin's sonnet-string, and others the trumpet-cry of hunger, while Amada's heart is pure as the muted French horn, dreaming she and Jorge are going to be happy ever after.

The fountain water mists them, walking through the Alley of the Palm on their way to Aranzazú. The sunset's amethyst drapes the dried and sweetened pumpkin, squash, and apricot for sale in hand-woven baskets, and there, in the shadows of the

convent's arches where so many young women entered and never left, Amada and Jorge hold each other as it's walls turn blue sapphire in the dusk, and he takes her tiny palm to his mouth. Amada hears the plaza's trumpets from far away, its song swirling through the convent's arches, a soft golden wind reaches the ancient stone, breaking through stained glass, lands on the mahogany stairs, tinkling candelabra, alighting on the saints, a velvety murmur that asks, touches, confesses, burns through skin, consuming the pages of the Holy Bible, one by one, to that place where words begin.

When Amada wakes up, her lips are bitten red with cigar and tequila, but her fingertips taste of lavender.

Chapter 6 *Secrets*

Amada's job is to make sure his meals are on time, take care of their baby daughter, and look pretty at night.

But her real job is to open her legs. To say nothing when he reminds her that she was a good-for-nothing urchin, that he alone rescued her, a whore, from a life of the streets. That her family is nothing, that she owes him everything. That she's ugly, worthless, stupid.

Then he begins to beat her.

Because she doesn't obey. Not with her eyes. There's no one for her to talk to. Sapo forbids it. Little by little she begins to realize that her secret is the secret all women seem to carry in their purses and on their faces. It's in the too-red lipstick and unwalkable stilettos. It's connected to wanting and then the sorry that comes from wanting, why their shoulders hunch a little more for every year of married life. The men threaten the women from telling it. The women are enslaved, only they don't call it that.

And the men, she realizes, are slaves too, that's why they have to be masters of the women. Because of what happened to their own mothers and the mothers before them for hundreds of years, maybe forever, she's knows her history. And the men, being men, take vengeance for their mothers by doing the same, because that's all they know.

But she's just sixteen. And sometimes when the toad spits into both of her mouths, and after washing out his stink, she tries to fall asleep, pretending. That she's in one of those tropical clubs where *Toñia la negra* sings about men who want bad women.

Mentira, Salomé me quiere a mi/Ay Salomé/Dice que me quiere a mí

Amada knows how *Toñia la negra*'s distilled rum-voice makes the breeze sizzle, how the congas and palm trees and sweaty men and trumpets and *maracas* sway in unison, expecting something she can't name, and in the brilliantine flash of faces she watches how men desire a bad woman like Salomé, how they believe she loves only them.

And she dreams she's just like Salomé, and sometimes she dreams she's holding hands with a man who's not a toad. He's tall and ranch-hardened, nothing like the big belly Sapo's proud of, no, this man is like those handsome men in the *fotonovelas* she likes to read. He's a real *caballero*, inviting her to the Cine Azteca on Sunday afternoons at the plaza. And in the dark of that theatre, his fingers make a soft circle there in the middle of her palm, slow, quiet, then a smaller circle with his middle finger, smaller yet, finally pressing into the center, there, and she closes her eyes and trembles when he whispers that he loves her, forever and ever.

Chapter 7 *Salomé*

When Salomé first tastes her milk, Amada's surprised at the way it tingles all the way down to her thighs, like the trumpets. Salomé, her *muñeca*, her little daughter, cups, gulps at her breast, caressing them, not at all in the delicate doll-way she imagined it would be. The *leche* squirts from their mutual clumsiness all over her baby's face, and Salomé doesn't notice, that's how hungry she is. Amada didn't know she could love her daughter, how she prayed and prayed the little girl would die in her stomach, fearing she would be ugly as *Sapo*.

It made her wonder what her mother dreamed when she was pregnant with her. Is that why her own mother, Eulogia, named her beloved? Because she didn't love her, thinking her ugly, or did she hope someone would love her because she couldn't?

Salomé's first bath. First sleep. First smile. Her cry makes Amada cry too because little Salomé hurts and she doesn't want her to know what it's like to be hungry. The baby girl grasps Amada's fingers, Salomé's big *sapo*-eyes follow her every step, such an innocent aching, and how ashamed Amada is to have the same want, marveling that her little girl's body vibrates when she walks in the room.

Salomé's first *caca*, like sweet guacamole. Amada doesn't know that a baby needs to be changed twelve times a day. First time she sits up, crawls. First time that Amada twirls Salomé's baby-hair, tapes one tiny pink plastic bow on her head. First *goo-goo*. Salomé throws the bottle away from her crib, stands up, howls for real food at six months. First delightful spoon of soupy mashed *frijoles*.

Amada falls in love for the first time, glimpsing how love comes after and despite hate, proof that love is the stronger of the two. Salomé will have everything, she vows. It will be different for her. My daughter will be loved.

