

## CAPERUCITA ROJA

Désirée Zamorano

She had wanted a vibrant, playful pink, and somehow she had ended up with strident red. Red! That terrible cliché of hair colors.

Valeria scowled at herself in the mirror.

It was a late Sunday afternoon of a three-day weekend in an unseasonably cold February. Some people might go to Big Bear or Mammoth for a three-day weekend of skiing and snowboarding (those kinds of people she didn't know), others to Disney using their annual pass (like a few of the crazy friends she had), or some might simply fill their days with household projects and swap meet shopping (those kinds of people she did know—like her parents). She was surprised when her parents called her to invite her for a drive and weekend down in Rosarito Beach. Valeria had declined. She enjoyed her own company.

Her vacation weekend project had been changing her hair color. The payoff would be Tuesday at Dr. Ky's, when the other dental technicians saw her, and greeted her with smiles and gasps, and when the clients commented, always kindly, always generously. They knew, outside of dental hygiene, hair was her thing.

Had she misread the damn label? Followed the wrong directions on YouTube?

She spent five miserable minutes staring at herself and mentally hurling recriminations.

Now what? She couldn't bleach the color out, she'd only damage her hair, and her shoulder length hair was already at its limits. Cut it off? She squirmed.

Her phone coughed. It was her brother, Gilbert. She was relieved they weren't Facetiming.

"Hey, Val" he said, "We've got a problem with Gram, can you help out?"

"She rob a bank or something?"

Their grandmother had a complicated history.

"Not sure. I'm supposed to check on her this weekend and she's not picking up. You remember what happened last time."

Gram had gotten dehydrated and gone wandering. She had been found that same day, near the creek of her gated community, but still, Valeria could feel in her bones the panic of that day all over again.

"Yeah, course," she said. "You want me to come with you?"

"That's the thing, I've got a couple of jobs piling up here, forgive the pun."

Gilbert ran his own towing business. "Not only that, the last time I drove through south Orange County I got pulled over and ticketed for bullshit; one more ticket this month and I could lose my business license."

Valeria frowned. She really did used to think her brother was a drama queen, up until the night she was in the car with him, coming back from Gram's, when they pulled him over in Irvine. Going five miles over the speed limit. The thing was, he hadn't been over the speed limit, but she didn't argue. She used all those people skills she wielded with Dr. Ky's patients and the cop gave Gilbert a warning instead of a ticket. She never doubted her brother again.

“What do you need?” she said. “I got nothing going on.”

“Just go over there, you know? Maybe it’s nothing, maybe she forgot to charge her phone or turn it on. Check in. Take her some food, you know? Mom said she hasn’t been eating right.”

“No problem, Gil. How’s the professor?” She liked to tease him about dating an older woman.

“I’ve gotten to know her so well now, I don’t even have to call her professor,” he said, hanging up.

She went back to her reflection in the mirror. Her hair still was a disaster. A couple of minutes and numerous bobby pins later, Valeria had twisted a small handful of her hair into a tiny bun on each side of her head, and left the rest hanging behind. Minnie Mouse! Gram would get a kick out of that.

At Super A, she swung the shopping basket around her hips and wondered-- what would a 78-year-old need?

She picked up a roasted chicken. A tub of salsa, a tub of guacamole, flour tortillas, a dozen eggs, a brick of Monterey jack cheese. A bottle of Kahlua. Her Gram really had a thing for Kahlua. Valeria wondered what that was about. It really was a teenager’s drink, too sweet and syrupy.

Provisioned, she pulled her Ford Escort out of the lot, headed on the IH-5 freeway, southbound for Gram’s gated community in Laguna Woods.

Gram was not like any other abuela Valeria had met. She didn’t cook, she didn’t sew, she didn’t knit. She didn’t display photos of her children or grandchildren.

She used to smoke red boxed Marlboros until Gil and Val begged her to give it up. As small children, they stole her cigarettes and cut them into pieces, flushing them down the toilet until the toilet clogged and backed up. That was the only time she and Gil had ever been spanked.

Now Gram vaped.

As a small girl, Val had caught a glimpse of a tattoo on her thigh, and it wasn't until she was a teenager that she had the courage to ask her Gram about it.

“A dead lover, mija. That was from when ink meant something.”

Gram was a woman with two husbands, one Valeria had never met, her actual grandfather. Gram sniffed at the conventional life her daughter—Val's mother—embodied, but enjoyed the largesse of her second husband's legacy, buying herself a two-bedroom condo in Laguna Woods.

“I always wanted to integrate this part of the world,” she said to Val, winking.

Gram, known as Sandra Cazador to the rest of the world, lived there ten years now, cobbling together a multicolored coalition of bad girls in their 70s and 80s. Bawdy girls. Naughty broads.

Sometimes their peals of laughter scared Val. Two or three of them together just made her feel smaller. Like she needed to be big, bigger.

Gram would say, a Kahlua and vodka in her fist, “You gotta shake the world, don't let it shake you.”

What did that even mean?

Not all grandmothers had pictures of naked women on their walls either. The framed, casually nude brown women, appeared after the move to Laguna Woods. Gil and Val had looked at each other. “Do you think?” Val had asked. Gil widened and blinked his large brown eyes, as if to confirm it.

And now Gram was missing. Her car radio reminded her that there were women turning up dead in Orange County.

Easy, easy, Gram may have just forgotten to charge her phone, to turn it on. And she was the wrong demographic, much older than those murder victims.

Val was so caught up in her daymare of crisis and calamity it took her moments to realize the Orange County Sherriff’s car behind her was flashing his blue lights at her. She was jolted by the loud speaker.

“You in the Ford-Escort—PULL OVER.”

She pulled off of the freeway. Irvine. She should have guessed. She drove down the offramp, and onto a side street. She turned off the radio.

It was late afternoon and her car was shrouded by the shadows of the towering trees in this immaculate planned community. Irvine had no 7/11s, no AM/PMs, just the money of the Bren and Irvine families that had seeded the university, and churned into upscale tract housing and the kind of people who could afford it.

Not people like Val. Or Gil.

She willed herself to sit still. She did not lean over to the glove compartment to pull out her insurance and registration. No cause for confusion, or ambiguity. She rolled down her window and made her face friendly and apologetic.

Val looked up into the face of a shockingly handsome white man. Beautiful man, sharp cheekbones, light coloring. His hair sandy brown, a mustache and goatee perfectly groomed. His presence jolted all her small, conciliatory talk out of her head. He looked down at her, kindly. There was something mesmerizing about those eyes, those eyes.

“How can I help?” she sputtered.

“License and registration, Red.”

She leaned over and pulled out the registration. She heard broken chatter come through the speaker on his gun belt.

She dug through her bag and pulled out her driver’s license. His name plate read B. Ulv. Scandinavian?

“Be a moment, Ms. Esparza,” he said, returning to his car.

She watched him in her rear-view mirror. He moved fluidly, elegantly. Was she attracted to him? She polled herself.

White boys. She hated herself for having a thing for white boys.

She watched him return. He crouched at her window as he spoke to her. His body was attractive, his face was handsome.

“This picture doesn’t do you justice at all,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, flushing, feeling flattered, feeling annoyed with herself for feeling flattered.

“I see you live in Cerritos,” he said. Was he telling her he knew where she lived? “I don’t know if you realize this, but you were going 15 miles over the speed limit.”

Shit. She probably was. She hadn’t even thought to look at her speedometer. Lock in people skills: “It’s just that I’m so worried about my grandmother. She may be missing and I guess I wanted to get there as fast as I could. I honestly had no idea.”

His mouth was a firm line. Her people skills were failing, weren’t they? She ramped it up.

“You know, last time we found her roaming around in her jammies, half-starved.”  
Dramatic effect.

“That is really simple, Ms. Esparza. Let’s call in a wellness check. What’s her address?”

He jotted it down on his pad. “Now, you slow down out there, you hear?”

She nodded, “Thank you. I sincerely appreciate it.”

She watched him walk back to his car, the chatter coming from his tool belt fading. She saw him on his hand-held device, talking to whomever he talked to. A few moments later he roared around her, the blue lights flashing. Maybe she’d track him down online someday. Was this her meet cute?

She called Gram, still no answer.

She pulled back onto the freeway.

At the gated entrance, the elderly couple running interference between the gated community and the outside world were confused by Val's request for admission, by the computer system checking entrance privileges, and by Val's impatience.

Twenty minutes later Val pulled up in front of her grandmother's triplex. The two end units were illuminated by warm and welcoming interior lighting. Gram's center unit was dark.

She could be dead, Val thought, sadly.

She could be dead, calm and peaceful in her bed, her grandmother's full days of adventure finally at their end. 78. It wasn't a bad age, or a bad way to go. Not that she wished it on her grandmother, it's just that all lives ended, right?

Val parked, grabbed the large rustling plastic bag of provisions and stepped up the walkway. She jiggled the security screen door. Locked. She dug through her circle of keys, chose the one marked with pink nail polish and unlocked the security door. She passed through the patio, triggering the exterior motion detector light. The interior of the home remained dark and unlit. She rapped at next screen door and tried the front door. Locked.

She found the key marked with blue nail polish, and unlocked the front door.

She sniffed the air. Did it smell of death?

Val flicked on the lights. No, she decided, it did not. "Gram?"

She set her things on the tiny dining table, cluttered with takeout debris. The condo was calm and silent, although a little cold. She walked through the



hallway, flicking on all the lights as she went. The bathroom door was open, empty. The guest bedroom was empty.

Gram's room? Her door was closed.

Anxious about what she'd find, she knocked.

Silence.

She entered. The small lamp on the nightstand was on. Gram's bed was a riot of rumpled bedding and scattered pillows. As Val drew closer she saw that Gram's phone was plugged into its outlet, fully charged.

"Okay," Val said. Also on the nightstand was Gram's full pill dispenser—Sunday AM/PM to Saturday AM/PM.

Today was Sunday. How long had Gram been without her medications?

She'd have to ask the neighbors if they'd seen her, she'd dig through Gram's phone and get Lilly's and Betty's numbers. Val realized she should have had all these numbers before.

She sat down on the bed. She picked up the phone and the pill dispenser. She opened the drawer of the nightstand.

Aw, shit. Gram's gun wasn't where she kept it.

She'd have to let Gil know.

She sat there a moment, trying to sort out which most important thing to do first, when she heard the screen door rattle shut.

“Gram!” she said, dropping the phone, the container, leaping up and rushing through the hallway.

The figure in the living room staring at her as she raced towards it was definitely not Gram. She stopped at the tiny dining table.

“Hey, Red,” said the officer. “Got a call for a wellness check,” he said, moving towards her.

She stopped, stared, considered. “They sent you?”

He bobbed his head, as if to agree.

The silence of the condo shrieked in her head. Valeria felt the air leave the living room, leave her lungs. She felt dizzy.

He remained standing, blocking the door.

“I need something from my car,” she said, stumbling forward. She needed air, she needed her phone, she needed to get outside.

“Hold on there,” he said, not moving out of her way, watching her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Let me grab something out of my car.”

“No, let’s talk about the lady who lives here.”

When he gripped her arm, she became cold all over, and her teeth began chattering.

He steered her to her grandmother's sofa, the sofa where she and Gram and her friends watched *Vanderpump Rules* and *Rica, Famosa, Latina* and those memories seemed far away, blurry, buried, unattainable.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

She thought of the young dead women showing up in Orange County.

Through chattering teeth, she said, "Killing me counts as hurt."

He laughed.

Her body went slack with despair.

"C'mon, Red, don't take it so hard. We can have some fun, I promise you."

Her brain was a transmission filled with interrupted relays and switches. He was saying words, but all she could see was the awful look in his eyes, dead, cold, amused, calculating. Awful, awful, awful. At the same time little snapshots swept through her mind, her and Gil on the beach as kids, her mom so proud over Val's apartment, her dad breaking down a swing set in the old home in Bell.

He kept his left hand on her sternum, pinning her down on the couch, while he used his right hand to unwrap his tool belt, and lay it gently on the low coffee table. Chatter came again through the speaker. Would they hear her if she yelled? If she shrieked? But the air was gone from her body, his hand weighed her down, and now her mind was filled with all the things that might have been, all the things that never would be.

“There, there, there,” he said, now working on his shirt buttons.

Now her mind was filled with him: the pressure of his hand on her chest; the sounds of his small grunts as he undressed himself; the sight of his face casually glancing at her then back to his task.

Her Gram’s phone rang and rang and ended. She could hear her cough of her cell on the dining table. He froze. Then laughed.

She willed her body to move but it ignored her. It had already given up. She felt the trickle of a tear make its way down the left side of her face.

“There, there, there,” he said again, and wiped the tear with his finger, then licked his finger. “You salty like that all over, Red?” he said.

If she could just—what? Seriously, if she could just what?!? Was that going to be her last thought? Was his going to be the last face she ever saw?

He held plastic tie wraps. Almost naked he got on top of her, one leg on the floor, now pinning her down with his knee on her chest, crushing her with his force, his malice, her despair.

“Who the fuck are you?” came Gram’s raspy voice.

The officer, down to his underpants, leapt up off of Val and reached for his gun belt.

Val rolled off of the sofa and onto the floor while he pulled at his hand gun.

One, two, three explosions.

Cordite, spatter, kickback. Shriill ringing in her ear. Spatter on the wall, smoke from the doorway.

Gram leaned over the body on the coffee table.

He never had a chance against her.

Gram was talking, but the ringing in Val's ears was too loud. She looked up at her, oh my god she had never looked more beautiful to Val. She looked 30 years younger, her dark eyes lighted up, her salt and pepper hair short and spiky, her lips a deep shade of vibrant red, her skin perfect. All these details struck Valerie. God, did she love her grandmother. The ringing softened so she could hear:

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," Gram said. "What a sick fuck."

When she could bring herself to speak she said, "Where did you come from?" staring up at her from the floor.

"Right next door at Betty's. I could hear you moving around, that's why I called."

"We thought you were missing."

"How could I be missing? It's our poker weekend, annual blow out. Three days and two nights of ribald revelry! I was up \$50. Yesterday. Today I'm down around \$200." She rolled her eyes. "You sure know how to kick up a party."

Gram looked more appraisingly at Val.

"Red's not your color, mija. Now, pink. Pink! That's you. Look, you wanna help me drag this body to the creek?"

Val gaped up at her grandmother during the uncomfortable silence.

“I’m joking!” Gram said at last.

While the *Orange County Register* buried Officer Ulv’s connection to the string of dead young women deep in the paper and its online counterpart, it ran Sandra Cazador on the front page with an unflattering photo of her grimacing at the camera under the headline, “Gun Totin’ Granny.” Despite the lurid coverage no charges were filed against her. But for months afterwards, Valeria wondered if Gram really had been kidding about the creek.

She was just too afraid to ask.