

The World Beyond

A contemporary reworking of the libretto of Bizet's Carmen

Jeanette Winterson

Let her go. Don't cut your own throat. Let her go.

Some women are made for the home and some are not. Carmen never owned a pair of rubber gloves.

Go to Carmen's room and prepare to wash up before making a cup of coffee. Go to Carmen's room and the sheets will still be signed with last night's love affair.

So why does everyone want to kiss her? Are you kidding? Who needs to do the washing up when you could be dancing all night? What's a sink-full of dishes compared to a mouth-full of love?

Carmen will never marry. That's why we all follow her.

My mother wants me to marry as soon as possible. It has been proven statistically that marriage benefits men more than it does women. My mother subscribes to *Reader's Digest*; she is an authority on these things.

Let me tell you about myself. My father left my mother when I was a baby. He ran off with a woman who broke horses. My mother is as steady a mare as any child could ride, and if she is blinkered, it is only because she has so long been shafted to the cart.

Freedom takes time, and time is as expensive as love.

I was going to go into the Church – strange phrase, isn't it, that makes the Church sound like banking or accountancy? I don't know what value God places on the soul, because I have never valued my own, even though it's the only thing that belongs to us. Not the body, that decays, or the mind, that is just a compilation of other people's CDs – certainly not your heart, which for most of us is a bypass – but I think the soul has a chance, which is why we are prepared to lose it.

Blame Carmen.

Red hair spread out like a bonfire somebody kicked over.

Eyes as dark as a perfect storm.

Body like a book – open it.

Touch as thin as glass, and as fragile, and as cutting, and as clear.

When she touched me I thought I knew who I was. When she touched me she signed me like a sheet of paper she had written on. When she touched me, it was as light as needing protection, but the light needs no protection – it shines on you and then it is gone.

There's darkness everywhere now. The light is gone.

There was always a light in her room.

The girls used to go there after work – she was a ringleader, a magnet. Even the ones who hated her went and sat in her room, drinking red wine under the red light, smoking, talking, easing out of the day and into the night. Carmen had a way with the night.

The trouble started when she go into a fight with another girl and flicked a blade down her face. It wasn't serious, but the police were called, and that's where I came in – exactly where she wanted me – at the line where her breasts met her dress.

I'm not a free spirit – when I couldn't be an agent of God, I became an agent of the State. I need boundaries, discipline. Carmen needs desire – that's all. You can blame her if you like,

but what has she done wrong, except be herself? That's the worst crime of all for the rest of us – the ones like me, who can never be ourselves, because we have no self to be.

I go to work. I follow the rules.

But I hate the rules. Carmen couldn't care less. Rules mean nothing to her. I follow them like a dog after a hare, but without the joyfulness. When I stray, it's out of resentment, not excitement. I need a safety valve now and again, which is why I started gambling, spent my mother's money, and ended up as all worthless people do – patrolling others because we can't patrol ourselves.

I'm like a full-moon werewolf.

Most of the time, I'm fine, then I go crazy. That's called normal life. Living free, like Carmen does, can cost you your life.

The injured girl came mewling down the stairs and soon the whole bunch of factory girls was littering the floor with petticoats and tears. We had to arrest Carmen, I think because my boss fancies her, and while he was away writing her warrant, he gave her to me to mind.

Might as well give a dog a bone.

I'll tell you what she did – she offered me sex, pure and simple. It wasn't love or romance – that came later – it was her body, and I thought, 'If I die tomorrow, I will have said no to Carmen' and the thought was as shrill as her singing, and as tight as my groin, and what's the point of saving your soul if you've never known it through your body?

I spent my mother's money, now I'm spending my own soul – at least I'm in credit this time, because I swear to you I've never touched my soul.

I agreed to let her escape. She kissed me, and her lips were soft ground. She's a place where roses grow. They don't last long, but they grow. She had given me one from a pot in her garden the day before. I had slept with it on my pillow, wishing it was Carmen, and now it would be. For one simple act of betrayal, she was going to be mine. All I had to do was let her go.

It was easy the first time. Later, letting her go became the hardest thing of all.

I know a nice girl. I should have married her. We could have bought a little house and decorated it together, and I would have planed her a table from apple wood, and she would have sewn me a coat.

We would have had children and watched them grow. We could have argued over the boy, smiled over the girl, and got old together by the fire with memories as sweet as winter wood from the apple tree.

The apple tree. Fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. I know the difference – but the woman gave me the apple and I did eat...

Ever since Eve there have been women like Carmen. Not good gentle women, not the kind a man should marry, but ripe women with smooth skin who hold out their bodies to be touched and taken.

She kissed me, and in that kiss were all the things I had never done – all the place I had never been. In the sweet fruit of her kiss there was a world I wanted. It wasn't the world I knew – it was a living planet in a galaxy beyond my most powerful telescope. I had heard stories about women like Carmen, but I had never seen one like this, never imagined kissing her.

That was part of the problem – my problem. She was imaginative space. I am ordinary.

I did the ordinary thing – said yes to Carmen and no to everything Carmen was, without realizing the murder. I killed my future with her by trying to make it the same as my past. I tried to turn Carmen into a housewife.

The trouble started after my release from prison for abetting Carmen's escape. I tracked her down to a bar, where she was dancing with anything that had legs, even the stools.

She was with her own people – gypsy people, fairground people – the women make me nervous with their hoped earrings and fur coats.

Everyone was drunk. Carmen was flirting with a celebrity footballer of the kind you find in *Hello* magazine. I hated his earring and his hair gel. His bum was tight as a clam.

She was touching him with fingers curling and uncurling on the coral of his belt. She wanted him. She had forgotten me. She had forgotten me before she even knew my second name.

I pretended I hadn't seen any of this, and I waited till he left with his procession of flatterers.

When I stumbled down the stairs into the empty bar, Carmen was alone but still dancing, and I understand in that moment the one thing that might have saved me: I understand that Carmen only dances for herself.

There she was, slim as a bottle, pouring her body like liquid across the floor. You could never hold her in your hands, but you could take her in your mouth. You could drink her to the bottom and she'd be full again.

Then she turned and saw me, and when she looked at me, I saw in her eyes that no one existed but us. We were the world caught in a second. The second that beats between her heart and mine.

She whirled me round, she kissed me everywhere. She demanded to know what I had done with the bread roll, the file, and the money she had sent to me in prison.

I ate the bread roll, threw away the file, and brought back the money. Here it is.

She laughed at me for being so well behaved and cowardly. The truth is I am a peasant with bourgeoisie values. I can't live this mad whirling life but I want to because Carmen is the whirling life. I can tell you she is the most beautiful woman in the world, but I can't tell you what she looks like because she is never still.

She ordered food for us and sat on my knee, and when I told her I was jealous of all those other men, she said that love is free, and that no one can own it. This makes me angry because love is not free. Love is the most expensive thing you can buy. I will have to work all my life to keep Carmen in the best house I can, and buy her clothes and jewels.

When I tell her this she says she lives in the mountains in a cave and she says she can buy her own clothes, or steal them. She tells me to come with her and live freely. She asks me to love freely. She says I'm so handsome – and for the first time in my life I feel that a woman really wants to touch me.

I'm used to loving more roughly and more gently than this; I'm used to persuading and wooing and then taking, and if the woman has pleasure, then it's the pleasure of my desire. Carmen desires me the way I have desired other women. She doesn't want to talk or make plans or go for a walk, she wants us to make love. And on the floor, in the bar, we do.

This is another universe. This is not my village or my country or the blue planet of sea and stars. The ellipse of the earth is way below us; we're sitting on the rim of time. Time has no meaning here with her. Love is keeper of the clocks. I hear a bell somewhere, faint as a summons to someone else, and if the someone else is me, I've left him far behind.

There are no sounds – only the sound of a sea where life is forming. Out of these starry waters in our own corner of the universe, new life is beginning. The surface of her body is lit by stars. Her body is this vast sea.

I used to be shy of my body. I wore it like a suit of heavy clothes. I don't think I've ever been naked till this moment. Is that my skin next to hers?

She pulls me down, down, down into those depths, and if I never come back, it doesn't matter. I've been here. Don't believe them when they tell you there's no such place. They don't want there to be such a place. The ordinary world could never survive if there was such a place as this.

The bell. The bell is crashing inside my head. It's tolling for me. I have to be on duty. I have to leave now, and I'm up off the floor, and scrambling into my clothes, and we're not floating outside of gravity anymore, we're on the unswept floor of a cheap bar and the place stinks of spilled wine.

She can't believe I'm not coming with her. I want a job and some respect. I promised my mother I'd pay everything back. I've got a letter from her in my pocket. She loves me. She forgives me. I have to be a man not a gypsy's boy.

Suddenly there's a knock at the door and my sergeant comes falling down the stairs, dead drunk, and takes Carmen in his arms like a whore. Is he her lover too? I can't think. All I can feel is Carmen in my body, so I raise the part of my body that looks like my arm and I hit that stupid little man with the bald head, and I go on hitting him until he's unconscious.

So I am living the outlaw's life now – and not because I chose it freely for Carmen, but because I have no choice. The walls are closing in. Her freedom is my prison.

It's night. There's a mist coming off the sea that clouds everything. I can't think in this mist. It holds me close as memory, memory of Carmen and her kisses, her kiss all over me like the mist. Catch it and it's gone.

Already she loves me less.

Out of the most comes a familiar shape. I'm alone, guarding the vans, while the others are on a raid. The shape I know asks for Carmen, and his words are a knife across my throat.

She has taken another lover already. Love is free but someone has to pay.

There he is, the sportsman hero, swaggering in his success. He thinks he can have Carmen because he's rich and successful. She cares only for his beauty, and that's what I hate in her. If she wanted the things other women want, I could control her. She cares for nothing but the moment. The past is gone. She is no more loyal to me than she longs to sit in yesterday's sun. She's loyal to herself, and she says that I betrayed her because I didn't choose her freely.

I wanted to marry her. She laughed in my face.

Here he comes, the sportsman hero, pulling out a knife like a cock.

While we are fighting, the gypsies are returning, and Carmen is there, with her rifle slung over her shoulder, and a bag of contraband between her legs.

It's not me she wants, it's him. I'm not her beautiful boy anymore. I'm an exile in heavy clothes.

I'd let him kill me. I'd gladly die, but as we circle each other, my sweetheart from the village runs between us, begging me to come home.

My mother is dying.

It was the day of the game...the town was thick with bodies – slabs of humanity, ugly, compromised, unhappy, forgetting their cares for a day in the glory of the hero sportsman.

I was wearing my wedding suit. I had been married three months. I have a little house and an orchard and my life is slowly filling up with text I can't read in someone else's bad handwriting.

It wouldn't matter if Carmen had never signed herself slant-wise across my heart.

I want to be under her hands again.

The crowd are pushing in to see the game. Carmen will be last, sure of her place, needing nothing, that's when I'll find her, and she'll remember her beautiful boy.

Yes, I can see her now – did she turn her head this way, does she feel me close to her? Carmen! Carmen! She turns her head.

For a moment I am the only thing in her eyes. There are two people in a new universe. My heart quickens as I move towards her.

'Carmen has never lied to you' she says, and my ears are full of seawater, there's a booming in my head as I start to drown, and I can't hear what she's saying because it mustn't be true.

I bought her a ring, she's taking it off and she throws it in front of me, even though I'm on my knees, begging her to touch me as she did once. I won't let her go. 'Kill me or let me pass' is what she's saying. But she's not the one who's dying – I am. Carmen has killed our love.

She throws me off and starts to walk into the game. There's a shout from the crowd. Like a man underwater, I raise that part of my body that looks like my arm, and I find the knife slitting her throat.

Whose blood is that? It can't be hers – Carmen can't die.

But she is dying, and she's in my arms for the last time, and she can't speak now, but her eyes tell mine what I always knew – that she dances for herself and I had no right to this.

I take out my phone and call the police. Arrest me. Take me back to the smaller and smaller world where I belong.

I killed Carmen. They'll say it was for love, but we both know it was mediocrity's revenge.

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