

CARLOTA PARÍS

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Translated from Spanish by Emily Hunsberger

The Garden of Earthly Delights

I'm going to start at the beginning and tell you this story exactly how it happened, but I better warn you: this is no fairy tale. There's no princess trapped in a tower, no frog princes, no fireworks at the end. In fact, it all began with detention. And I'm not talking about any old detention, I'm talking about detention at The Paidelia School, the greatest of injustices. So consider yourselves warned.

If I had to write a list of all the reasons you could get detention at my school, I could fill a thousand pages. For example, you can get detention if you don't wear your uniform exactly as you're told. Or if you don't feel like eating lunch at the time you're told. If you're bored in class and you get up to leave and go do something else, you'll get a note sent home from the teacher. And the worst thing is, the rules change every year. New teachers with new pet peeves. Except for the rule about not being able to leave in the middle of class, that one never changes.

Paidelia is an old school—really old. It was built over a hundred years ago in Sierra Brisa, just west of Madrid, at the end of a road that's so narrow it's not even on the map. Even though it's super old, it's also sort of progressive, in its own way. At Paidelia, there are no tests until upper school, and we don't really spend that much time in the classroom. Last year, for example, we spent a whole quarter foraging wild berries in the woods for botany class and rehearsing *Antigone* in the amphitheater for the spring show. But the best thing about Paidelia is it's super easy to keep the professors happy without trying too hard. I've almost perfected my own personal method for it.

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thing is just for show. "A school full of infinite possibilities," my mom always used to say. More like full of lame nerds.

This is what's going through my mind while I wait for Rulo to get out of detention. Detention at Paidelia isn't held in a classroom like at a normal school. Here they do it in the school garden, out past the stables, next to the lake. The teachers think that if you can study or do homework during detention, then it's not really punishment. The purpose of detention is to make you think about what you did. But Rulo could care less if the Pope himself gave him detention at the Vatican. Thinking about what he does is just not how he rolls.

Rulo has been my friend longer than anyone. Of course his real name isn't Rulo, but he doesn't like people knowing how he got his nickname. He's a year above me, in the first year of upper school, but he's already been held back once. And the adults say he's going to get held back again, sooner or later. Everyone thinks he's dumb, but not me. At least he's not lame like the rest of them.

Rulo does things his own way, just like me. Like if on a Sunday afternoon he all of a sudden gets an idea for a model airplane, he'll stay up all night building it. And if Monday morning comes along and he still hasn't finished it, after his sister drops him off at school he'll go straight to the woodshop to keep working on it instead of going to class. The only difference between me and Rulo is that he always gets caught. That's why he's always getting detention, and I'm not. Like I said before, I've almost perfected my method for handling the teachers at Paidelia. Most of them, that is.

"Carlota."

That's Rulo. He's pretty tall for his age, and his blond hair covers his forehead down to his eyes, like a corn-silk helmet. Barely anyone knows he has green eyes, because they're always hidden

behind his hair. He isn't coming from the direction of the garden like I expected. He's jumping out of one of the music room windows.

"What were you doing in *there*?"

"I snuck out of detention earlier, but I forgot my pan flute."

He shows me a small flute with six wooden tubes that he made himself and starts playing a melody that reminds me of a cartoon theme song. We start walking together down the hill, toward the school gates. The buses left a while ago, but Rulo's sister can give us a ride home in her car. We're practically neighbors, as much as you can be neighbors in a city like Madrid. That's why I've known Rulo for as long as I can remember. We used to sit together on the bus when we were little kids, even though for years we didn't say a word to each other.

"What did you get detention for?"

"Actually, I went to the garden because I was hungry," he says, grinning. "I skipped lunch to finish my technology project. I only got detention because Jesús caught me sticking some plums in my backpack."

As Rulo talks about fruit, I walk ahead a little bit to reach the fence that surrounds the school parking lot, and there it is: a sky-blue ribbon, like the ones little girls wear in their hair, tied in a perfect bow around one of the posts. There's one there every day, without fail. I quickly untie it and put it in my skirt pocket before Rulo catches up to me. It's not something I feel like talking to him about. But we'll get to that later.

Since Raúl is at work and Pablito is at soccer practice, Rulo's sister invites me over to their house. It's like a silent pact we've had since we first became friends. It started with a standing invitation

to come over after school on Mondays. Then she invited me over on Thursdays, and now I spend basically every afternoon at their house. Raúl—that's my dad—works a lot. Like, a lot a lot. More than anyone else I know. He's a lawyer. And my brother—Pablito—plays a different sport every day of the week. Today he has soccer. To be honest, it's the sport he's best at. My brother may be too scrawny for capoeira, but he can run like nobody's business.

I'm pretty sure Rulo's sister thinks he and I are bound to be boyfriend and girlfriend one day. Either that or I'll be a good influence on him. Get him to focus on his schoolwork or whatever. I think that's why she's so nice to me. And I can't bear to disappoint her with the truth: Rulo and I have never once done schoolwork together in our lives, and as far as being an item goes, no way. Sometimes I want to write her a long letter explaining everything and tuck it into her sock drawer or something, so that only she can find it. But I also really like hanging out at their house, so I don't want to ruin it.

There's something else you should know about Rulo: his room looks like an adult lives there. It's always neat and tidy, and he never leaves any stuff out. There's no posters, no pictures, not even a rug. And everything matches, right down to the quilt on his bed. It's really weird. The first time I saw his room, I thought I was in the wrong place. His older sister's room, on the other hand, is a pigsty. They're a complete mystery, those two.

"Play me some new music," I say as I fall back onto his perfectly made bed.

At Paidelia, nobody knows anything about music. Or anything else, to be honest. I remember the first time I actually talked to Rulo. What I mean is I remember why I finally talked to him, after so many years of sitting next to each other in silence on the bus. It's because I realized he was the only one who wasn't wearing headphones.

"Why aren't you listening to anything? Is it because you don't like music, or are you coming up with some kind of evil plot to blow up the bus?"

"It's because that's no way to listen to music that's truly worth listening to. And because I had something on my mind, that is, until you got here."

That was it. That's when I knew we were going to be friends.

Rulo pulls a record off the shelf and shows it to me: "Las Zebras: Travelers on a City Train."

"They look like a bunch of criminals," I say, pointing out the tattered shirts and tattooed arms of the guys on the album cover.

"You'll like the lyrics," Rulo replies, ignoring me.

I close my eyes and feel myself melt into the melody coming from his turntable, while Rulo works on his "technology project:" retrofitting his new longboard with the wheels from one of his dad's old roller skates from the seventies. It's a project he assigned to himself, apparently. This is how we spend most afternoons. Rulo's good at fixing stuff. His mom, Paula, owns a popular antique shop in the neighborhood called Serendipia. That's why almost everything in his house is from the last century. His dad, Martín, lives in Argentina. His parents are divorced. I really like being at Rulo's house because nobody bothers you about stupid stuff. Sometimes I wish I could live here.

"I brought you a book," I tell Rulo as I'm getting ready to go home.

"I don't like books."

"I know, but you'll like this one, trust me."

"Why?"

"Just read it, okay?" I say, with the same tone I use with Pablito when he's being annoying, and I hand him a copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

"This is a kid's book."

"What are you talking about? They read it in university literature classes."

I made that last part up, but it doesn't matter. It's not like Rulo knows anyone who's at university and can tell him otherwise.

"Okay."

What I don't say is that I'm always lending him books because I hope he'll show me the ones they read in upper school. Rulo never really tells me anything about what he's learning, and, to be honest, he probably hasn't even done any of the required reading. Like I said before, he's not a very good student. But I'll keep trying.