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My Own Resources ESL/EFL

The mother

W. Somerset Maugham

Two or three people, hearing sounds of a quarrel in the patio, came out of their rooms and listened.

'It's the new lodger,' said a woman. 'She's having a row with the porter who brought her things:

It was a tenement house of two storeys, built round a patio, in a back street of La Macarena, which is the roughest quarter in Seville. The rooms were let to working men and the small functionaries with whom Spain is overrun, postmen, policemen, or tram-conductors, and the place swarmed with children. There were twenty families there. They squabbled and made it up; they chattered their heads off; they helped one another when help was needed; for the Andalusians are good-natured people, and on the whole they got on well enough together. One room had been for some time unlet. A woman had taken it that morning, and an hour later had brought her bits and pieces, carrying as much as she could herself, a gallego - the Galicians are the general porters of Spain - laden with the rest.

But the quarrel was growing more violent, and the two women above, on the first floor, anxious not to miss a word, leant over the balcony.

They heard the newcomer's shrill voice raised in a torrent of abuse and the man's sullen interjections. The two women nudged one another.

'I shan't go till you pay me,' he kept on saying.

'But I've paid you already. You said you'd do it for three reales.'

`Never! You promised me four.'

They were haggling over rather less than twopence halfpenny.

'Four reales for moving those few things? You're crazy.'

She tried to push him away.

'I shan't go till you pay me,' he repeated.

'I'll give you a penny more.'

`I won't take it.'

The dispute grew more and more noisy. The woman screamed at the porter and cursed him. She shook her fist in his face. At last he lost patience.

'Oh, all right, give me the penny and I'll go. I'm not going to waste time on a slut like you.'

She paid him, and the man, throwing down her mattress, left her. She flung a filthy word at him as he went. She came out of the room to drag the things in, and the two women in the balcony saw her face.

`Carai, what an evil face! She looks like a murderess.'

A girl came up the stairs at that moment, and her mother called out: 'Did you see her, Rosalia?'

'I asked the gallego where she came from, he says he brought the things from Triana. She promised him four reales and then wouldn't pay.'

'Did he tell you her name?'

'He didn't know. But in Triana they called her La Cachirra.'

The vixen appeared again to fetch a bundle she had forgotten. She glanced at the women in the balcony watching her unconcernedly, but said nothing. Rosalia shuddered.

'She frightens me.'

La Cachirra was forty, haggard and very thin, with bony hands and fingers like a vulture's claws. Her cheeks were sunken and her skin wrinkled and yellow. When she opened her mouth, with its pale, heavy lips, she showed teeth that were pointed like those of a beast of prey. Her hair was black and coarse; she wore it in a clumsy knot, which seemed on the point of falling. over her shoulders, and in front of each ear fell a straight wisp. Her eyes, deep-set in their sockets, large and black, shone fiercely. Her face bore an expression of such ferocity that no one dared come near to speak with her. She kept entirely to herself. The curiosity of the neighbours was aroused. They knew she was very poor, for her clothes were wretched. She went out every morning at six and did not return till night; but they could not even find out how she earned her living. They urged a policeman who lived in the house to make inquiries.

'As long as she doesn't break the peace, I have nothing to do with her,' said he.

But in Seville scandal travels quickly and in a few days a mason who lived in an upper room brought the news that a friend in Triana knew her story. La Cachirra had only come out of prison one month before, and she had spent seven years there - for murder. She had lodged in a house in Triana, but the children, finding out what had happened, threw stones at her and called her names; and she, turning upon them with foul words and with blows, had filled the whole place with such tumult that the landlord gave her notice. Cursing him and all who had turned her out, La Cachirra one morning suddenly disappeared.

'And whom did she murder?' asked Rosalia.

'They say it was her lover,' replied the mason.

'She can never have had one,' said Rosalia, with a laugh of scorn.

'Santa Maria" cried Pilar, her mother, 'I hope she won't kill any of us. I said she looked like a murderess!'

Rosalia, shivering, crossed herself. At that moment La Cachirra came in from her day's work and a sudden oppression fell upon the talkers. They made a movement as if to huddle together and looked nervously at the wild-eyed woman. She seemed to see something ominous in their silence and gave them a rapid, suspicious glance. The policeman, to make conversation, bade her good evening.

'Buena sera,' she replied, with a scowl, and, passing quickly into her room, slammed the door.

They heard her lock it. The evil, sullen eyes had cast a gloom over them and they talked in whispers as if under a mischievous spell.

'She has the devil in her,' said Rosalia.

'I'm glad you're here to protect us, Manuel,' added her mother to the policeman.

But La Cachirra seemed indisposed to give trouble. She went her way, unbending, never addressing so much as a word to anyone, and brusquely cut short every attempt at friendliness. She felt that the neighbours had discovered her secret, the homicide and the long years of imprisonment; and the lines in her face grew sterner, the expression of her deep-set eyes more inhuman. But gradually the anxiety she had caused was dispelled. Even the garrulous Pilar ceased to pay attention to the silent gaunt figure who occasionally passed through the group sitting in the patio.

'I dare say the prison has sent her mad, they say it often does.' .

But one day an event occurred to revive the gossip. A youth came to the reja - the wrought-iron gate that serves as front door to the Sevillan house - and asked for Antonia

Sánchez. Pilar, who was mending a skirt in the patio, looked up at her daughter and shrugged her shoulders.

`No one of that name lives here,' she said.

'Yes, she does,' the young man answered; then, after a pause: 'They call her La Cachirra.'

`Ah!' Rosalia opened the gate and pointed to the door. 'She's in there.'

`Thank you.'

The youth gave her a smile. She was a pretty girl, with a high colour and fine bold eyes. A red carnation threw up the glossy blackness of her hair. Her breasts were full and the nipples were prominent under her blouse.

'Blessed be the mother that bore you,' he said, using a hackneyed phrase.

'Vaya Usted con Dios, go you with God,' answered Pilar.

He passed on and knocked at the door. The two women looked after him curiously.

'Who can he be?' asked Pilar. `La Cachirra's never had a visitor before.'

There was no reply to his knocking, and he knocked again. They heard La Cachirra's rasping voice ask who was there.

'Madre!' he cried. 'Mother.'

There was a shriek. The door was burst open.

'Currito!'

The woman threw her arms round- his neck and kissed him passionately. She fondled him and with a loving gesture stroked his face with both her hands. The girl and her mother who watched would never have thought her capable of such tenderness. At last, with little sobs of joy, she dragged him into her room.

'He's her son,' said Rosalia, with surprise. 'Who'd have thought it! And a fine fellow like that'

Currito had a lean face and white, even teeth; his hair was cut very close, shaved on the temples, and set on the scalp with a truly Andalusian perfection. The shadow of his precocious beard showed blue beneath his brown skin. And of course he was a dandy. He had the national love of fine clothes, and his trousers were skin-tight; his short jacket and his frilled shirt were as new as new could be. He wore a broad-brimmed hat.

At last the door of La Cachirra's room was opened and she appeared, hanging on her son's arm.

'You'll come again next Sunday?' she asked.

'If nothing stops me.'

He glanced at Rosalia and, having bidden his mother good night, nodded to her also. ,

'Vaya Usted con Dios!' said she.

She gave him a smile and a flash of her dark eyes. La Cachirra intercepted the look; and the sullenness which her intense joy had driven away suddenly darkened her face like a thunder-cloud. She scowled fiercely at the handsome girl.

'Is that your son?' asked Pilar, when the youth was gone.

'Yes, he's my son,' answered La Cachirra gruffly, going back to her room.

Nothing could soften her, and even when her heart was brimming over with happiness she repelled the overtures of friendship.

'He's a good-looking fellow,' said Rosalia; and she thought of him more than once during the next few days.

It was a terrible love that La Cachirra had for her son. He was all she had in the world and she adored him with a fiery, jealous passion that demanded in return impossible devotion. She wished to be all in all to him. On account of his work they could not live together and it tortured her to imagine what he did when he was away from her. She could not bear him to look at a woman and she writhed at the bare idea that he might pay court to some girl. No amusement is more common in Seville than the long flirtation in which the maid sits at her window half the night long, guarded by iron bars, or stands at the gate, while her lover in the street pours his rapture into her willing ear. La Cachirra asked the boy if he had a novia, a sweetheart, aware that so attractive a youth must enjoy the smiles of women, and she knew he lied when he swore he spent his evenings at work. But his denials gave her a fierce delight.

When she saw Rosalia's provoking glance and Currito's answering smile, rage leapt to her throat. She had hated her neighbours before, because they were happy and she was wretched, because they knew her terrible secret; but now she hated them more, already fancying, half crazily, that they were conspiring to rob her of her son. On the following Sunday, in the afternoon, La Cachirra came out of her room, crossed the patio and stood at the gate. This was a proceeding so unusual that the neighbours commented upon it.

`Don't you know why she's there?' said Rosalia, with a stifled laugh. `Her precious son is coming, and she doesn't want us to see him.'

`Does she think we'll eat him?'

Currito arrived and his mother took him quickly to her room.

`She's as jealous of him as if he was her lover,' said Pilar.

Rosalia looked at the closed door, laughing again, and her shining eyes were filled with mischief. It occurred to her that it would be very amusing to have a word with Currito. Rosalia's white teeth gleamed at the thought of La Cachirra's anger. She stationed herself at the gate, so that the pair, when they came out, could not help crossing her; but La Cachirra, seeing the girl, moved to the other side of her son so that not even a glance should pass between them. Rosalia shrugged her shoulders.

'You won't beat me so easily as that,' she thought.

The Sunday after, when La Cachirra took up her place at the gate, Rosalia went out into the street and strolled along in the direction from which she guessed he would come. In a minute she saw Currito, and walked on, elaborately ignoring him.

`Hola!' said he, stopping.

'Is it you? I thought you were afraid to speak to me.'

'I'm afraid of nothing,' he answered boastingly.

'Except maroma!'

She walked on, as if she wanted him to leave her; but she knew very well he would do no such thing.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'What has that to do with you, Currito? Go to your mother, my son, or she'll beat you. You're afraid to look at me when she's with you.'

'What nonsense.'

'Well, vaya Usted con Dios! I have commissions.'

He went off rather sheepishly, and Rosalia laughed to herself. She was in the courtyard once more when he passed through with La Cachirra on his way out; and this time, shamed into courage, he stopped and said good night. La Cachirra turned red with anger.

'Come, Currito,' she cried, with a rasping voice, 'what are you waiting for?'

He went away, and the woman stopped a moment in front of j Rosalia as if she were going to speak, but, with a visible effort, she restrained herself, and went back to her dark, silent room.

A few days later was the feast of San Isidoro, the patron saint of Seville, and to celebrate the holiday the mason and one or two others had put a string of Chinese lanterns in the patio. They glowed warmly in the clear summer night. The sky was soft . against the shining stars. The people of the house were gathered in the middle of the patio, sitting on chairs; and the women, p some with babies at their breasts, fanned themselves with little paper fans, interrupting their ceaseless chattering to fling a word of abuse at some older child who was making a nuisance of himself. The cool air was very pleasant after the day's breathless heat. . Those who had been to the bull-fight were telling the less fortunate all about it. They described with precise detail a wonderful feat . that Belmonte, the famous matador, had performed. With their vivid imaginations, the particulars gained every minute in variety and colour, so that it appeared that never in the history of Seville had there been a more excellent corrida. Everyone was present but La Cachirra, and in her room they saw the light of a solitary candle.

'And her son?

'He's in there,' answered Pilar. 'I saw him pass an hour ago:

'He must be amusing himself,' said Rosalia, with a laugh.

'Oh, don't bother about La Cachirra,' said another. 'Give us a dance, Rosalia.'

'Yes, yes,' they cried. 'Go on, my girl. You dance:

In Spain they love dancing and they love to look at dancing.: Years and years ago it was said that there was never a Spanish: woman that was rot born to dance.

The chairs were quickly set in a ring. The mason and the tram conductor fetched their guitars. Rosalia got her castanets, and stepping forward with another girl, began.

Currito, in the poky room, pricked up his ears when he heard the music.

'They're dancing,' he said, and an itching shot down his limbs.

He looked through the curtain and saw the group in the mellow light of the Chinese lanterns. He saw the two girls dancing. Rosalia wore her Sunday clothes, and, as is customary, she was heavily powdered. A splendid carnation gleamed in her hair. Currito's heart beat quickly. Love in Spain grows fast, and he had thought often of the handsome girl since that day on which he first spoke to her. He moved towards the door.

'What are you doing?' asked La Cachirra.

'I'm going to look at them dance. You never wish me to amuse myself.'

`It's Rosalia you want to see.'

He pushed her away as she tried to stop him, and joined the group that watched the dancers. La Cachirra followed a step or two, and then stood, half hidden by the gloom, with fury gnawing at her heart. Rosalia saw him.

'Aren't you frightened to look at me?' she whispered, as she passed him.

The dancing had made her light-headed and she felt no fear of La Cachirra. When the measure ended and her partner sank into a chair, Rosalia marched up to Currito and stood in front of him, upright, with her head thrown back and her breast heaving with the rapid motion.

'Of course, you don't know how to dance,' she said.

`Yes, I do.'

'Well, come then.'

She smiled provokingly, but he hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at his mother, whom he divined, rather than saw, in the darkness. Rosalia caught the glance and its meaning.

'Are you afraid?

'What should I be afraid of?' he asked with a shrug of the shoulders.

He stepped into the ring. The guitarists strummed away and the onlookers rhythmically clapped their hands, punctuating the time with an occasional cry of Olé. A girl gave Currito a pair of castanets and the pair began to dance. They heard a little hiss, as of a serpent in the darkness, and Rosalia, quite reckless now, looked with a laugh at the face, ghastly white, that gleamed from the shadows. La Cachirra did not move. She watched the movements of the dance, the swaying of the bodies, the intricate steps; she saw Rosalia lean back with a graceful gesture and smile in Currito's face as he wound about her, clapping his castanets. Her eyes glowed like coals of fire and she felt them burning in the sockets; but no one noticed her, and- she gave a groan of rage. The dance came to an end, and Rosalia, smiling with pleasure at the applause, told Currito she did not know he could dance so well.

La Cachirra flung herself into her room and bolted the door. She gave no answer when Currito came and bade her open.

`Well, I shall go home,' he said.

Her heart bled with pain, but she would not speak. He was all she had, all she loved in the world; and yet she hated him. She could not sleep that night, but lay thinking, half-madly, that they were robbing her of her son. In the morning she did not go to work, but lay in wait for Rosalia. The girl came out at last, rather bedraggled after the night's festivities, and she started when La Cachirra suddenly faced her.

`What do you want with my son?

'What do you mean?' replied Rosalia, assuming an expression of surprise.

La Cachirra quivered with passion and she bit her hand to keep herself quiet.

`Oh, you know what I mean. You're stealing him from me.$

'Do you think I want your son? Keep him away from me. I can't help it if. he runs after me wherever I go.'

`That's a lie!

'Ask him!' And now Rosalia's voice was so scornful that La Cachirra could hardly contain herself. 'He waits an hour in the; street to see me. Why don't you keep him to yourself?'

'You lie, you lie! You throw yourself in his way.'!

`If I wanted lovers I could get them without asking. I don't wan the son of a murderess.'

Then everything grew confused to La Cachirra; the blood leaped to her head and choked her eyes. She sprang at Rosalia and tore her hair. The girl gave a shrill cry and sought to defend herself, but immediately a passer-by wrenched them apart.

'If you don't leave Currito alone, I'll kill you!' cried La Cachirra.

`Do you think I'm frightened? Keep him from me if you can. You fool, don't you see that he loves me better than his eyes?

'Now then, go away,' said the man. 'Don't answer her, Rosalia.'

La Cachirra gave a little roar of passion, like a wild beast baulked of its prey, and pushed past into the street.

But the dance had left Currito madly in love with Rosalia, and all next day he thought of her red lips; the light of her eyes shone in his heart and filled him with enchantment. He passionately desired her. At nightfall he wandered towards the Macarena

and presently found himself at her house. He waited in the darkness of the porch till he saw her in the patio. At the other end burned his mother's lonely light.

'Rosalia,' he called in a low voice.

She turned, stifling a cry of surprise.

'Why are you here today,' she whispered, going towards him.

'I couldn't keep away from you.'

`Why?' she smiled.

`Because I love you.'

`Do you know your mother nearly killed me this morning?'

And with the embellishments necessary to the Andalusian temperament, she related the occurrence, omitting, however, the final taunt which had enraged La Cachirra beyond endurance.

`She's got the temper of the devil,' said Currito; and then, with bravado: 'I shall tell her that you're my sweetheart.'

`She will be pleased,' said Rosalia ironically.

`Will you come to the reja tomorrow?'

'Perhaps,' she answered.

He gave a little chuckle, for he knew by her tone that she would. He swaggered even more than usual when he walked through the Sierpes on his way home. She was waiting for him when he came next day and, as is the way with lovers in Seville, they talked for hours under their breath, with the iron gate between them, and it never even occurred to Currito that it was a needless impediment. When he asked Rosalia if she loved him she answered with a little amorous sigh. They tried to see the passion that burnt hotly in one another's eyes. Then he went every night.

But fearing that his mother knew of his visits, Currito did not go to see her on the following Sunday. The wretched woman waited for him with an aching heart. She was ready to fall on her knees and beg him to forgive her, but then, when he did not come, she hated him; she would have liked to see him dead at her feet. Her heart sank when she thought that another week must pass before she could even hope to see him.

The week passed and still he did not come. She could not bear it. Anguish, anguish! She loved him as no sweetheart could ever love him. She told herself that this was Rosalia's doing and when she thought of her, rage filled her heart. At last Currito plucked up his courage and went to see his mother; but she had waited too long. It seemed as though her love was dead. She pushed him away when he wanted to kiss her.

'Why haven't you come before?'

'You locked the door on me. I thought you didn't want me!'

`Was it only that? Had you no other reason?'

'I've been busy,' he said, shrugging his shoulders.

`Busy? An idle loafer like you. What have you been doing? You wouldn't have been too busy to come and see Rosalia.'

`Why did you hit her?'

'How do you know I hit her? Have you seen her?' La Cachirra strode up to her son; her eyes flashed. `She called me a murderess.'

'Well, what of it?

'What of it?' she screamed, so that they heard her in the patio. `And if I am a murderess - it was for you. Yes, I killed Pepe Santi; but it was because he was beating

you. It was for your sake that I lay in prison for seven years - for seven years. Oh, you fool, you think she cares for you, and every night she spends hours at the gate.'

'I know,' Currito answered with a grin.

La Cachirra started violently. She shot a puzzled look at him and then she understood. She gasped with pain and wrath; she clutched at her heart as though the agony were too intense to bear.

`You've been coming every night to the reja and you never came near me? Oh, how cruel!. I've done everything in the world for you. Do you think I loved Pepe Santi? I endured his blows so that I could give you bread; and I killed him when he beat you. Oh, God, I only lived for you. But for the thought of you I would have died rather than suffer those years of prison.'

`Come, woman, be reasonable. I'm twenty. What d'you expect? If it wasn't Rosalia, it would be another.'

`You beast. I hate you. Get out.'

She pushed him violently to the door. Currito shrugged .his shoulders.

'You needn't think I want to stay.'

He walked jauntily through the patio and slammed the iron gate behind him. La Cachirra stalked to and fro in her tiny room. The hours passed slowly. For a long while she remained at the window, watching with the horrible steadfastness of a savage beast ready to spring. She stood motionless, repressing the convulsive restlessness that tore at her heart-strings. There was a clapping of hands at the reja as a signal that someone was without, and she peered forward with panting mouth, her fiery eyes almost starting from her head. But it was only the mason. She waited longer, and Pilar, Rosalia's mother, came in and walked slowly up the stairs to her room. La Cachirra clutched at her throat to relieve the intolerable oppression of her breath. Still she waited. Now and then an extraordinary quiver travelled through all her limbs. .

At last! There was a clap of light hands at the gate, and a voice above called out: 'Who is it?'

`Peace!'

La Cachirra recognized Rosalia's voice. She gave a gasp of triumph. The door was opened from above, and Rosalia, entering, crossed the courtyard with a buoyant and easy step. The joy of life was in her every motion. She was about to put her foot on the stair when La Cachirra sprang forward and stopped her. She caught hold of her arm and the girl could not shake herself free.

`What do you want?' said Rosalia. `Let me pass.'

`What have you been doing with my son?'

'Let me pass, or I sha!1 call out'

`Is it true that you meet at the reja every night.'

`Mother, help! Antonio!' Rosalia cried out shrilly.

`Answer me.'

`Well, if you want the truth, you can have it. He's going to marry me. He loves me, and I - I love him with all my heart' She turned on La Cachirra, trying to free herself from the vicious grip. `D'you think you can prevent us? D'you think he's frightened of you ? He hates you, he told me so. He wishes you'd never come out of prison.'

`He told you that?'

La Cachirra shrank back. Rosalia pursued the advantage.

'Yes, he told me that; and he told me much more. He told me that you murdered Pepe Santi; and that you were in prison for seven years; and he wished you were dead.'

Rosalia hissed the words venomously, laughing with a shrill voice when she saw the wretched woman shrink as though struck by palpable blows.

'And you ought to be proud that I don't refuse to marry the son of a murderess.'

Then, giving La Cachirra a push, she leapt to the stairs; but the movement revived the woman, stunned by the horrible taunts, and with a cry of brutal rage she sprang upon Rosalia and caught her by the shoulders and dragged her down. Rosalia turned and hit her in the face. La Cachirra drew a knife from her bosom, and with an oath buried it in the girl's neck. Rosalia shrieked.

`Mother, she's killed me.'

She fell to the bottom of the stairs and lay huddled up on the stones. Blood made a little pool on the ground.

Half a dozen doors were flung open at the despairing cry, and people rushed to seize La Cachirra; but she backed against the wall and faced them, with an expression of such ferocity on her face that no one dared approach her. The hesitation was momentary, but Pilar ran from the balcony shrieking, and the common attention for an instant was distracted. La Cachirra saw the, opportunity and ran forward. She reached her room and locked and bolted the door behind her.

Suddenly the court was filled with people. Pilar with loud' dreadful cries flung herself down on her daughter and would not let herself be dragged away. Someone rushed for a doctor and someone else went for the police. The crowd surged in from the street and collected round the door. The doctor hurried in with a black bag in his hand. When the police came a dozen people at once excitedly explained what had happened. They pointed to the door of La Cachirra's room, and the police broke in. There was a scuffle and they came out with La Cachirra handcuffed. The mob rushed forward, but the police surrounded her and with their scabbards beat the people off; but they shook their fists and hurled curses at her. She looked at them scornfully. She deigned to make no answer. Her eyes shone with triumph. The policemen led her through the patio and they passed by the body of Rosalia.

`Is she dead?' asked La Cachirra. . 'Yes,' the doctor answered gravely. `Thanks be to God!' she said.