

**María Cecilia Barbeta**

**The Los Milagros Tailor Shop**

**S. Fischer, 336 pp.**

**Sample translation available**

When beautiful Analía Morán walks into the Los Milagros tailor shop in Buenos Aires and enters the life of the young tailor Mariana Nalo, everything changes. As she alters Analía's wedding dress, Mariana becomes more and more involved in the other woman's life, which seems both foreign and strangely familiar...

María Cecilia Barbeta's debut novel brims over with emotion, charm, and wit, chronicling the tale of two young women and the curious miracle of love.

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**"Her lack of pretention conceals tremendous literary power."**

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*

**"High-spirited and melancholy, playful and wise."**

*Börsenblatt*

**"A highly intelligent, literary delight, and a truly entertaining page-turner.**

**Impressive."**

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**"An amusing, sparkling little marvel."**

*Literaturen*

**"A dreamy, romantic fairy-tale."**

*Celebrity*

Sample translation of the Chapters 1 -6

Translated by Susan Bernofsky

## Chapter 1

Before Aunt Milagros can utter a single word in parting, Mariana hooks the handle of her cloth bag over her left shoulder and exits the tailor shop, taking the last two steps in a single bound.

Out on the street, she's a completely new person. Inspired by a darkly perceptible sense of confidence, she hazards the guess: one thousand one hundred and fifty. Heading down Gascón from the corner of Potosí, she counts one, two, three, four, five, passing the newspaper stand, six, seven, what was it she ate that morning, she's careful to keep track of both her steps and the time she is passing in this manner. Mariana, the sovereign of time, takes bigger steps than yesterday and the day before, her legs are becoming longer and longer as she shortens the minutes it will take her to reach the building on Castro Barros at step one thousand one hundred and fifty between Avenida Rivadavia and Don Bosco.

In front of the cloister Santa Teresa de Jesús she buttons up her homemade sky-blue little jacket, gazes at the cobblestones, all those asymmetrical brown rocks, and has to fight the temptation to count them. Worried that her tally of footsteps might give way to a tally of cobbles, she looks at her white sandals instead. The bell hanging in the tower at number 449 rings with to-the-second precision, a swift

curtsey, then Mariana prepares to make the sign of the cross. She manages a perfectly timed interplay of her right hand and her feet, which are striding forward, in the name of the Father, thirty, the Son, thirty-one, and the Holy Spirit, thirty-two, when she arrives at Amen and thirty-three, she brings her thumb to her lips, which assume a kissy-shape. Before she takes her next step, she thinks of Jesus and his horrifying death upon the cross, the nails that pierced his wrists and ankles, the countless splinters about his martyred head, lines of prayer are scrolling through her brain like illuminated advertisements: Crucified, murdered, buried/ Descended to the Realm of the Dead / Walking about in a big city like Buenos Aires, you have to be on your guard, because of the many pickpockets, because of the dog shit you're always having to dodge, because of the stupid chewing gum, you could get stuck right there, vigilance is required, there are wretches who'll make a pass at you, or you yourself might accidentally step on an old lady's foot or coat, you could bang into a passer-by who's daydreaming his way down the street just like you, you could slip or stumble over a tree root or one of the iron manhole covers, they're dangerous too.

When Mariana was still little, she always held her mother's hand. Carmen picked up her daughter from nursery school every day after work. When they reached the bus stop for the 160, she would rake through her jangling handbag to find her little brown leather change purse, and then would rake through the little brown leather change purse to find the correct change for two tickets at seventy cents each. Meanwhile Mariana would be busy killing slugs. A huge number of disgusting black slugs concentrated within a half-meter's diameter, a plague difficult

to wipe out, at least that's what it looked like, and therefore Mariana's childish right foot would not rest—ceaselessly, mechanically but methodically moving up and down until a first gentle warning reached her from her mother's lips: "Here it comes, Mariana, thank goodness! We can get on in a minute." Mariana found this announcement annoying, she got nervous, and her systematic labors, which were not quite completed, even though Bus 160 was already racing toward her, began to fall apart. And they weren't real slugs that Mariana, fearing for both her own and the world's peace of mind, was so hastily stamping out. The sidewalk had been perforated at various crossings according to an incomprehensible plan, and beneath it gaped a horribly stinking underworld whose entrances—although clearly evident—had been completely sealed off. Each of the one-ton manhole covers sunk into the sidewalk was extravagantly decorated with little black hillocks the exact shape and size of slugs. In the eyes of this four-year-old girl, they really were slugs, slugs just like the ones she saw on Sundays on Plaza Almagro, creeping about on her favorite red slide, leaving behind them the sticky traces of their meanderings which Mariana, sacrificing herself with a slight feeling of revulsion, would wipe away from top to bottom as she whizzed down. But now came a steep ascent. Her mother—who had already gotten on the bus, bought the tickets and called out to her in vain—now climbed back down the steps, seized the child's hand and tugged so firmly Mariana almost lost her balance. A force like when you're flying a kite, and then Mariana, the great slug huntress, was deposited in the first empty seat on the 160, still ruminating on her defeat, on not being able to let go despite the maternal cries being hissed razor-sharp in her direction from within the bus, and her own never-

ending battle against the evil rubbery slugs and above all their shameless display of gooey nakedness. The child wished she could have stuck to her guns and seen the sidewalk skirmish through to its end: every time she did battle, a few slugs remained fatefully behind. She was short eleven or twelve of them. She hadn't been able to keep track. Eleven or twelve slugs would go on living uncounted.

Nowadays Mariana makes a point of avoiding black and gray when she gets dressed, since black and gray might as well be slug black and slug gray. This afternoon she trimmed a customer's pretty apple-green skirt to the appropriate length, a purpose to which the slightly longer pins with colorful heads from the El Progreso wholesalers proved to be very well suited. If she'd had her druthers, she'd have plucked just the white-headed pins from the multicolored heap. White against apple-green, a good look. Elvira had wanted to keep working on the red blouson and had fastened it first with a yellow pin, then blue, then orange. In order to reach this last pin, the orange one, she'd had to lean far over the wooden work table, instantly releasing a miasma of sickly-sweet perfume. Mariana couldn't manage to suppress a grimace. To collect herself, she dipped both her gaze and her thoughts into the fresh apple green, thinking white, white, white, white, white.

Elvira stared at her distrustfully. It was shocking how her face was coming to look more and more like a shriveled grape. After yellow, blue and orange—and as if she were suddenly able to read Mariana's secret thoughts—she selected a white pin with an exaggeratedly snippy gesture. Yes, that's what she did, erecting her wall of perfume even higher and in this way shielding herself at the same time. After this,

she picked up another white pin, and two minutes later yet another one, and then she was down to one per second: white, white, white, white, white, white . . .

“Elvira, sweetheart,” Mariana blurted out, “it can’t have escaped your notice that all of us need the new pins. Would you please be so kind as to leave a few of them for us to use?”

Milagros recognized the tension in the air and demonstratively knit her brows. All at once she leapt up from her chair and gave a powerful clap in the air above her head. Scrutinizing her two palms—on one side a disfigured corpse, on the other its powdery, light-gray traces—the owner of the tailor shop cried out: “I’m a murderess! . . . Could one of you go buy some sort of spray to get rid of the moths in here? Intolerable little beasts. They’re eating up my best fabrics!”

Elvira, innocence personified, assumed an uncomprehending expression and picked up yet another white pin. After this scandalous conduct, the two exchanged not a single word for the two and a half hours remaining until the end of the day, but now, nine hundred ninety-eight, nine hundred ninety-nine, one thousand, one thousand and one, as she counts, it’s as if all of this has just blown away, Elvira and all her annoyances have vanished into thin air, replaced by this other, darkly perceptible sense of confidence now lending wings to Mariana’s footsteps.

## Chapter 2

The building on the Avenida Castro Barros dates from the era when the conventillos were still flourishing in the heart of Buenos Aires. Workers from out-of-town and students were among the main clientele of these squalid communal dwellings, tenants who had come to seek their fortune in the fabled Paris of South America only to find themselves living even worse than they had in the provinces. There were also Italian and Spanish immigrants—hundreds of thousands of whom crossed the Atlantic in the years between 1870 and 1910 alone—who, like their indigenous neighbors had left behind their homes and families to find their own private El Dorado at the mouth of the Río de la Plata, the River of Silver. The ones who prospered opened modest grocery shops in this city—which was founded in 1536 by the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Mendoza and named for Nuestra Señora del Buen Ayre, the Holy María of Good Breezes—or else bakeries, canteens or bars that were ceremoniously christened, bearing witness to a firm belief in the power of auspicious names, La Providencia (divine providence), El Porvenir (the future) or La Esperanza (hope).

The empty, decrepit conventillo at number 57, a hopeless case for any real estate agent, was virtually tossed in the lap of Nicolás Nalo. This circumstance could be explained by the infamous story circulating in the grapevine, each and every daily paper and the tabloids: A young prostitute from the neighborhood had been discovered in a park with her throat slit, and a former occupant of this particular bit of real estate had been suspected of this horrendous murder or bloodthirsty act of

vengeance, but the investigation had never been resolved. No real witnesses were ever produced, though there was no end of gossip, and malicious speculations had been making the rounds in the Almagro district, but Nicolás Nalo paid no attention. Nonetheless it was quite some time before his family had filled his new digs with a load of ancient furniture, a mix of assorted hand-me-downs and items acquired on the cheap, followed by huge piles of boxes filled with books, notebooks and papers that couldn't be delivered until the paterfamilias had declared the phase of structural improvements definitively over. Meanwhile the shared outhouse was shut down, the water pipes diverted, and all the filth and trash that had accumulated there over the course of several decades removed one dumpster load at a time, until finally Nicolás himself had set to work and painted all the walls a snowy white.

He used the same color to gussy up the ornate colonial cast-iron gate at which Carmen Nalo, bearing enough parental responsibility for two, stations herself at a quarter to five filled with trepidation and vigilant impatience. The moment she recognizes her daughter in the distance—a dainty little dot that with every step towards her becomes larger and more distinct—she is released from this state of petrification. And so the mother, reborn, waves to her daughter from where she's still standing, although she's basically in the kitchen already, putting on the kettle for mate tea. Carmen always avails herself of this mental head start before, giving a sigh, she crosses herself three times and goes in.

Passing through the Nalos' front door, one is forced down a long hallway, a sort of esophagus, a dark sluice in which everything slows down, growing sluggish as it approaches its far end, which is crowned by a circular inner courtyard with a

glass roof. Without exception, all the rooms of the house—which resemble introverted, thin-lipped old maids who clearly prefer to remain among themselves, undisturbed—face this courtyard, leading directly to this hub that has been putting up a fight, staunchly rejecting all attempts at modernization and defending its claim to remain the communal soul, the concentric center around which all these women-rooms orbit, squeezed in side by side here, shoulder to shoulder. The solid wooden doors lead, clockwise, to the dining room, to the kitchen, which also contains the pantry, to the bathroom, which also serves as the laundry, to Mariana’s room, the master bedroom and the library. Both the dining room and the library face Castro Barros, flanking the hallway to the left and the right, which is where Mariana is standing when her mother’s voice reaches her: “Hello, sweeeetheart!” Adding, as if her daughter couldn’t guess: “I’m in the kiiiiit-chen!”

In the kitchen, Carmen has a great deal to report, for example the news pertaining to the new neighbor on Calle Yapeyú, directly above Luis—“Did you see the way she was staring at him the other day? You know what he’s like, poor old Luis, he couldn’t harm a fly... And the look in her eyes! You saw it too, didn’t you, Mariana? This penetrating look, I mean, you were standing right beside me when this Verónica...” —, and then, concerning Paquita’s youngest granddaughter, who’s gotten pregnant— “My Lord, these young people nowadays! I don’t understand her, unmarried, four years younger than you, just imagine, a sweet, shy little girl, and who knows if he..., because most of them... Paquita is at her wits end and can’t even meet my eyes any more, which I can understand! ... Oh, is that all you want?”

“Thank you, it tastes great with the dried bits of orange peel in it, but I’ve had enough, otherwise I won’t sleep a wink tonight.”

Mariana kisses her mother on the cheek and goes to her room. From her dresser she takes the little box with the butterflies, places it on the bed, then inverts the lid on whose underside the letters *N. N.* are written in Chinese ink, the butterflies have been sprayed with a preservative so that their wingspan is shown to maximum effect while the fore and hind wings remain flexible, the antennae and legs unbroken. To make the cardboard itself last longer, Mariana covered it with white cloth a few months ago. She selected just the right fabric from an exquisite short list. Carefully she compared quality and whiteness, again and again going down the stairs of the tailor shop to the street so as to weigh the differences between thirty-three shades of white, examining their nuances in natural light, the first time at 10:30 a.m., then during lunchtime, at 3 p.m., a quarter of an hour before closing, at 7:30 p.m., long after Elvira and Ernesta had left work—Mariana was happy to accept the offer of dinner—, and even at 9 p.m. Aunt Milagros consented to go outside with her carrying the thirty-three fabrics so as to examine what still remained of their whiteness at this late hour. In the end Mariana chose a blindingly white fabric as soft as rabbit’s fur. Standing before her own front door, she embraced Aunt Milagros warmly, thanking her for her support, the dinner and the company. Before she turned the key in the lock, she caressed the rabbit fur, her hand looking rough and yellow in contrast with the delicate cloth beneath the cool moonlight. She removes a yellow pin from the freshly opened package, takes a golden pyralid from the box, its wings gently denticulated at the edges, and retrieves

a wooden hammer that belongs in the kitchen from the drawer of the nightstand, and with its help the impaled butterfly body is now nailed to the wall. — Female pyralids are easy to confuse with delicate cymatophorids, but the two can be differentiated thanks to the underside of their wings. Mariana singles out a green tineid whose rigid body is precisely pierced with a green pin and places it beside a yellow one whose hind wings are adorned with a greenish Y on the underside. A brown sphingid with a wingspan of four centimeters calls for a brown pin. This is followed by an orange-spotted geometrid. — Geometrids favor open, dry surroundings, such as wastelands and flower-covered meadows. Mariana cradles the butterfly in the hollow of her right palm as she uses her left hand to select a red pin with which she positions the geometrid above a specimen with black spots. She sits down on the edge of the bed before she continues with a light blue noctuid. — Noctuids choose sleeping places in the high grass in groups of five or six, which is why they are particularly easy to catch in the early evening hours. As soon as Mariana pierces the stiff, preservative-sprayed body, she can't help thinking of homemade honey cake. Joyfully she recalls escorting her mother to the oven as a little girl—with the smell of dough, vanilla beans and honey filling the entire kitchen—when she went to pull the baking tray halfway out, injuring the cake's icing with a fork and plunging a knife deep enough into it to determine whether it had baked long enough. All around the edges of the resulting hole, it always seems to Mariana that she can discern traces of nectar from blossoms, honey and the juices of fruit clinging to the pin. Since the pins are inserted no deeper than three millimeters into the wall, one might assume each tineid, each tortricid, each ephestia kuehniella, each pyralid, each arctiid, each sphingid, each noctuid, each cymatophorid, each saturnid, each geometrid was hovering

or flying freely. This effect is heightened as soon as natural or artificial light strikes the bodies of the butterflies in such a way that a shadow is projected on the wall. And the moment one blows a little from one side and then the other, a little from the right and a little from the left, the bodies quiver in odd ways, the wings do not move simply up and down but describe a lemniscate, producing a sense of buoyancy, a whole series of lemniscates being reflected on bedroom walls under the spell of the light, being doubled in spirit, endless Moebius strips [ $\log(r) \cdot \sin(\theta/2) = z \cdot \cos(\theta/2)$ ], paradoxical mechanisms at the intersection of geometry and philosophy that—beginning at one point without ever reaching an end—leave behind a lasting impression.

FABRIC PATTERN

**2**

Construction plans for the  
patterns distinguishing  
various classes of  
butterflies

### Chapter 3

Nicolás Nalo was a thrifty, thoughtful, melancholy man who timidly avoided drawing the attention of other family members to himself. When he was reading, he was a fickle, voracious soul who couldn't resist devouring three or four books at a time, obsessed above all with discovering secret links between themes and authors—a personality who secretly, mercilessly suspected every book of promiscuity, of a criminal, obscene desire to maintain irregular relations with other volumes. On the final day of his life, as it turns out, the solutions to several scientific puzzles would reveal themselves to him like an Open Sesame.

His daughter was fifteen when death unexpectedly came to him. That Sunday morning she knocked softly at the door of the library and went in. Her beloved father sat utterly absorbed in a treatise. Lying open for consultation were two of his notebooks, the blue one and the red one. He interrupted his reading only long enough to make further ant-like notations in the yellow notebook, the most tattered of the three and to respond to Mariana's question: No, thank you, no second cup of coffee today. He claimed not even to have time for his favorite lemon cookies, but it didn't matter, his observations had finally put him on the right track, he was hot on the trail of something big and thus in the best of spirits. Which isn't to say that Nicolás Nalo was in a talkative mood, seeing as reading and speaking are mutually exclusive, even the tiniest sound, the faintest flapping of wings might pose a significant danger. No, he wasn't being talkative, but he was gentle, and the soft look on his face communicated to Mariana that he needed to be left in peace. Seconds

later he was so immersed in his research that he didn't even notice that his wife and daughter were engaged in a frenzy of housecleaning. At irregular intervals they appeared in the courtyard where they took a breather, preparing to take on the next room, one of them working right to left, the other left to right, a set of hour and minute hands that appeared to have gone asynchronously mad.

At eleven the bulk of the housework was done, and two and a half hours remained before the communal meal at half past one. Without discussion, as if the two had entered into a pact, they snuck out of the house and reconvened four blocks away at the ice cream parlor. "Two of the littlest cups, please!" Strawberry and chocolate for Mariana, vanilla for her mother.

Nicolás meanwhile was experiencing a most delectable moment. He felt he was just getting behind a sensational secret, it was faintly pulsating, at the beginning almost inaudible, it had softly crept in, one droplet of premonition followed by another, and now it was on the point of running over. At just this moment when a transfigured doctor of the natural sciences was flirting with posterity—rather aggressively, since no one was watching—a surprise guest arrived: shortness of breath, accompanied by a desperate struggle to fill the lungs, and followed half an hour later by Mariana and her mother.

Mariana's father, who had been so in need of peace and quiet all his life, so calm and even-keeled, a person who had lived fairly isolated, now sat on his chair looking like a taxidermy specimen except for his gaping eyes. These eyes now uncannily bore witness to the fact that they'd been sparkling not long before, they seemed to be spitting lava and hellfire into the faces of mother and daughter. His

mouth, once so graceful, so poised, was now a grimace, a contemptuous gigantic O that might have allowed one to peer right down the throat into the interior where everything had sparked and caught fire. The plaid shirt, which was usually always buttoned up properly except for the very top button, was now hanging open, and two red buttons lay on the floor, two glittery drops of blood that had abandoned ship in this battle of life and death.

What was confronting Mariana and her mother here in broad daylight was quite simply outrageous. This dead man looked like an inside-out sock, the entire sight was nothing but a *coincidentia oppositorum*, an oxymoron of the husband and father, a shameless, difficult-to-digest final image of him that they would now be forced to live with. It revealed a vitality that soon spread throughout the entire library with scandalous ineluctability before four astonished female eyes that wouldn't even allow themselves to blink.

Man & Nature

**After the presentation of the data collected from a 46 year old man who died suddenly after being stung on the ear by an insect, various conclusions concerning fatal cases involving insect stings are being evaluated at the Facultad de Farmacia y Bioquímica of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA).**

Scientists report that the venom of stinging bees and wasps (Aculeata) consist primarily of protein-like substances with antigenic properties, histamine, free amino acids, phospholipase A and B, hyaluronidase and cholinesterase. The general and local toxicity of the venoms are primarily caused by hemolysis, damage to the musculature with the induction of harmful contractures, a toxic effect on both capillaries and nerves as well as consequences in the blood count; this is the general pathology in cases of death following a large number of insect stings. Cases of sudden death following one or several insect stings have particular forensic significance. They manifest themselves as a violent antigen-antibody reaction when allergies to insect venom are present. Extensive welts form on the skin, parts of the body swell disproportionately, and vomiting, fever, difficulty in breathing and/or circulatory disturbances up to and including circulatory collapse (anaphylactic shock) can sometimes be observed. Under certain circumstances, anaphylactic shock can result in death within several minutes, making it particularly dangerous. Fatal anaphylactic reactions occur independent of the location of the puncture; glottal edema alone generally does not result in death.

In forensic practice, findings pathognomonic for anaphylactic incidents should be given particular weight in the investigation of sudden, unexplained mortality. Attention is drawn to the possibility of clarifying such cases by making use of the Prausnitz-Küstner reaction.

**Adriana Oliva**

## Chapter 4

After the initial shock, Mariana admitted to herself that the sight of her dead father hadn't really shaken her. On the other hand she was powerless to banish it from her thoughts, it remained stuck there like a stubborn strand of spaghetti on the side of the pot after the salted boiling water has long since been strained off, the pasta served and consumed, when—particularly given the compulsion to overcome the sleepiness that habitually arrives after mealtimes—you have no other choice but to get up from the table and exit the circle of your nearest and dearest in order to attend to the washing-up. Much like this defiant strand of pasta, the image of the girl's dead father adhered to her memory. It stalled and blocked Mariana's sense of time, it suddenly jumbled everything together: The thing that should have been a one-time occurrence appeared to Mariana in endless repetition. The only one-time thing remaining was the cramp in her stomach followed by familiar entities and experiences, a foul-smelling mix of lemon cookies, wafers, bits of strawberry and chocolate milk on the wooden floor of the library, now a repulsive and unrecognizably distorted paradise of childhood flavors.

Ever since she was a little girl, Mariana knew what it felt like to be boiling inside, afraid of bursting at the seams—above all when a person's last strength was being used to conceal one's state insofar as possible. She also sensed that an exertion like this might one day be fatal. Unlike her mother, the daughter considered herself able to calculate with absolute precision the amount of life remaining in this male body, in this man who had often crept through the house on

Castro Barros like one of the undead—quite different from his usual manner. As a little girl who goes for walks with her father in the park, who is allowed to accompany him to the institute or the institute library because she's so well-behaved, who makes a tremendous effort to remain so well-behaved, who so loves to glance up at her young father when she's walking beside him, who strives to copy his way of walking down the street because she's proud, because she sees her own resemblance to him—in such situations, which accumulated over the years and tightened about her neck like a string of pearls, she became acquainted with a feeling of helplessness and then learned its antidote. One sticky, prey-trapping thread here, one stabile anchor thread there, a safety thread to the right, a smooth thread to the left, one additional sticky thread to knot together the junctions—with great attention to detail, the daughter, dusted with pollen, anticipated the bewildering game into which she was about to be drawn, which she hated, which caused her suffering. Mariana the bee saw herself enwrapped in a silken net, hobbled by cords and threads that could be neither disentangled nor cut and, as time passed, clung to her body like wet clothes that seem too tight to the wearer. Mariana didn't want to believe it, yet in the end she found all her dark premonitions confirmed when her father read to her from a book one afternoon that had been lying face-up on his desk in the study. With his finger he'd pointed to it, indicating the wound, *Universal Encyclopedia of Natural Sciences*, the final third of the second column: On their outings, Nicolás, an *Araneus diadematus* [vulgaris: European garden spider], reserved particular threads on which he could cross his net without danger, fixing his gaze as he walked upon one, two, three, four, five, women coming

toward him, all the while giving the impression that he was quite capable of sealing his ears with wax against Mariana's song and Mariana's shouts and Mariana's screams right by his side, evidently underestimating his daughter's splendid ability to decode this high-heeled species of womenfolk in all its details at a distance of five meters, the skintight skirts hugging wasp waists, the flowery lightweight fabrics encircling legs no doubt insufficiently depilated the day before with sugar water, supplemented with a cotton ball dunked in rubbing alcohol, followed by an expensive, imported body lotion. —Mating begins in August. The male spins a thread to advertise his presence and plucks at it. The female recognizes the male by his plucks, using so-called hearing hairs on her legs. If the female is willing to mate, she leaves the center of the net and joins the male. Mating lasts only a few seconds and is usually repeated several times. In autumn the female lays her eggs in yellow cocoons made of particularly fine-spun threads and then dies. The eggs spend the winter in the cocoon, then hatch in April or May, after which the hatchlings hibernate for a second winter and are ready to mate only the following year.

Back home again, Mariana threw her arms around her mother. Like a turtle shell, Carmen bent over her daughter, tenderly stroking her hair, kissing her, touching her cheeks and, showing surprise each time, asking the girl's father in a slightly reproachful tone where his daughter had been rolling around, then devotedly straightening Mariana's clothes, patiently removing little twigs, little leaves, blades of grass, a few remaining threads and dead creatures from her disheveled hair, the odd severed head, a spider leg, a fly's wing, lots of broken off, pinched off insect antennae. He's betraying you, he's betraying you! Every time, he

doesn't see you! Because I see, I can see exactly how he sees! He sees all the others who cross our path, who insist on going astray with their flashy shiny skirts that they smooth down again afterward and their long hair hanging down to their hips like tentacles. They see salacious disrespectfulness as a way to vault the boundaries of tact and decency, in the halls of the institute, in the library corridors, in the paths through the park, revolting!, they keep waving their skinny little legs in our direction, while I—I alone—am filled with despair and keep trying to make him listen to me, make him hear me, he who is suddenly tugging and plucking at threads of his own as he slips away from you! How can you be so blind? These are truths Mariana would have liked to hurl in her mother's face. Instead, she held her tongue, the sole victim of her siren's sing-song, as she turned red with fury and pent-up rage.

After her hot bath and as long as her mother was still preparing dinner, she was permitted to play "police siren" in the kitchen. "You there! You're under temporary arrest!" A tidily ordered cosmos lay before the control tower at the dining room table, with an infinite number of white and black jail cells. Rogue letters of the alphabet were being hunted down, her mother said, as the sirens wailed oooOOOoooOOOoooOOOooo. "Stop, stay where you are, damn it, or I'll shoot!" Mariana warned. "I'm going to shoot, do you hear?" In the middle of the prison grounds, the prison-warden-sir! was personally keeping watch—a well-ordered world which was soothingly reflected a hundred thousand times reduced in size in her pupils.

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'  
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.  
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

## Chapter 5

Analía is carrying a large bag with a hidden two-way zipper, and she wears her thick, dark hair tired back in a ponytail, two wayward strands falling into her face as she walks. Her classes at school are being covered by the trainee, with whom she discussed the essentials the day before: “Please sign the roll book, review adding and subtracting, continue working on multiplication and division, and above all have the students work out the arithmetic problems in the textbook, then assign pages 104 and 105 as homework, maybe 106 as well.” The house number on Gascón is clearly legible. Even if it weren’t, there would nonetheless be no getting around it, not with the sidewalk sign standing right in the way of the passersby but nonetheless not apparently giving them sufficient grounds for complaint. Generally the sidewalk sign produces an irritation that vanishes again as quickly as it arrived. Analía lets her eyes wander across the listed services before she scrutinizes the building’s façade with equal curiosity, and someone drives right up to the curb. The car stops, the driver honks, and the passenger rolls down the side window to say: “Pardon me?”

Analía transports the two wayward strands of hair behind her ears before turning around. The young men in the interior of the red Renault 4 have turned

their heads toward her and are allowing their eyes to linger on her figure with obvious pleasure. She can imagine what's coming.

The passenger, grinning, says: "I'd like to know where you can buy raffle tickets around here." Pointing to Analía, he adds: "There's a prize here I've really got to win."

The boys' laughter intermingles with the music from the car radio, Analía has no choice but to shake her head, but at the same time she can't quite suppress a smile, the occupants of the car are feigning infatuation, the refrain arrives on the radio and, one blink of feminine eyelashes later comes the next bit of commentary: "Could you at least tell us the name of the pirate stupid enough to lose such a treasure?"

Now the rear window, too, has been rolled down. Analía cannot discern a single doorbell or knocker, she caught a glimpse of dimples on the driver's cheeks, he turns down the music and declares: "My ravishing beloved!" Then he leans over the wheel and purrs: "You ought to be taking your walks in the shade, the sun can melt bonbons like you!" She shakes her head, only ostensibly unmoved, places her hand on the brass knob as if to give it a shake, then feels it giving way beneath her hand as one of the boys shouts after her: "I'd play with a sweet doll like that!"

The door clicks shut, and the seductive dimples are gone, along with the finger scurrying down the wheel in the rhythm of the pop song, the self-confident laughter and the challenging flash of eyes, she can imagine the window being rolled back up again and the muted growl of the motor. A flirtation with lines of demarcation like rubber bands now lies behind her, and before her is a greenish

doormat and narrow stairs that seem to have been cut to the exact size of her shoes, as she walks up them she feels as though she's dragging her bag behind her, as if the bag had a decision to make and didn't quite know what was the best option. The steps are followed by a landing upon which Analía stops short beside a stout, black short-haired cat which is lying there waiting for better times. She has the choice between three doors. The door directly in front of her bears a plaque with the inscription TAROT AND ASTROLOGICAL CONSULTATIONS, the door to her right reads PRIVATE, and the door on the left displays a sign of impressive proportions: LOS MILAGROS TAILOR SHOP, and beneath this the words PLEASE ENTER, and even further down NO HOUSEPETS ALLOWED.

Analía depresses the door handle and goes in. A little bell mounted on the inside of the door announces her presence ting-a-ling-a-ling. She has entered a rather dark vestibule which contains almost nothing besides an on first glance not terribly inviting sofa set, beside it an upholstered chair, not far from this a sturdy reception table, which in turn contains nothing at all besides a further plaque of modest proportions that is nonetheless displayed in such a way that customers notice it straightaway. The words

**DEPOSIT REQUIRED ON ALL WORK**

can be read here black on white. Analía is received by Aunt Milagros in person, a plump, friendly individual who will prove to be both chatty and shrewd: Good day, she says, introducing herself as Milagros Nalo and asking who recommended her well-known tailoring business to the young lady, and would she please take a seat

on the sofa there, and would she like a cup of tea, and what sort of garment of hers requires alteration, what needs to be mended or tailored to make it all the rage, or else lined with durable material? Lord knows, she adds, she's been at her trade long enough to be able to brag that no one—not even her customers—are able to tell afterward whether a garment she's worked on is altered or new. Analía opens her bag, proposing that Señora Nalo first get an impression of the quality of the fabric. The customer describes her ideas and desires in the most elaborate terms, Milagros nods, Analía is beaming, Milagros nods, the customer is basically dreaming of haute couture, Milagros nods but is already secretly determined to free herself as soon as possible from the self-inflicted stagnation she always seems to succumb to when seated in this vestibule, the young lady has indeed made herself quite comfortable upon the sofa, Milagros nods, thinks up a price, which she then states at the next available opportunity. The customer pays, a pleased-with-herself seamstress issues a receipt and stamps it and has every reason to grant Analía entry to the next room, where she really is served the promised cup of tea.

**ALTERATIONS WOMEN**

**CHILDREN'S AND**

**MEN'S CLOTHING**

Carpet Repairs

Tailoring – Leather, Fur, Knits, Curtains

Made-to-Measure

Monograms

Patchwork

Embroidery

Invisible Mending

Buttonholes

and much more

Look with both your eyes, look!  
Jules Verne, *The Courier of the Czar*

## Chapter 6

“Come right on in—come in, come in, my dear!” Milagros says, thrusting open the double doors that separate the vestibule from the studio proper. The feet can never catch up with the eyes, and so a first glance is cast into the sewing room before the first foot crosses its threshold. A person can therefore stop short there as if taking root, the taste of the unnamable upon her tongue. Evil tongues that have set foot in no more than the vestibule of LOS MILAGROS claim that behind the double doors—which, in all honesty, they have no desire to pass through—the ocean is roiling, and the large worktable of the seamstress Milagros Nalo is the last bit of wreckage that hasn’t yet vanished in the maelstrom. It’s enough to take your breath away. Upon this threshold, however, one’s first impression pales, a notion of orderliness creeps in, this room is downright..., the word will be arriving on one’s lips shortly, for soon one will have recognized an all-encompassing principle behind the clutter and disarray to which both tools and materials have submitted, and—lo and behold—since one already finds oneself in the sewing room, one picks up the invisible thread which, following an extraordinary logic, is stringing together all these items one after the other, “... a real cabinet of curiosities!” the customer

whispers, profoundly impressed, her ears filled with the hum of the sewing machines.

“In here I said!” the seamstress reiterates, hooking arms with the young lady to lead her to the nearest chair at the shared worktable and pour her out a cup of fragrant lemon balm tea. — Lemon balm is helpful for colds, headaches and vertigo.

“Ladies, allow me to interrupt! A new customer!” Milagros solemnly proclaims once she’s set the teapot down again. All present stop what they are doing. All present lift their heads from their work to look at Analía.

Just like a visitor who, wishing not to disturb the performance, wants to take a seat in the very back row but then is discovered by the trapeze artist, summoned into the ring and up onto the trapeze for good measure, an Analía who has been thrust into the limelight, who is drinking tea and thus gaining time glances around in search of a safety net. What she finds instead are safety pins, strewn here and there upon the table around which Señora Milagros and now also her three employees are clustered, along with a can of moth spray with the price tag still on, a middle-sized snap setting tool, scissors, a little bottle of sewing machine oil, a magnetic pincushion to keep the pins handy, three thimbles, a tin of beeswax, various sheets of copying and grid paper, an eraser for textiles, a universal ruler and a flexible French curve.

Behind the table, an imposing mirror mirror on the wall lords it over the room. Tucked away in the right-hand corner behind heavy, deep-red velvet curtains is a spiral staircase leading up to Milagros’s private realm. On the wall to the left, beside the window looking out on the courtyard, the collection of spools of thread is

mounted. The panopticon ranges from pure white, natural, powder, gold, citron, sun, brass, bisquite, papaya, mandarin, berry, bordeaux, copper beech, fire, rose, peach, old rose, fuchsia, lavender, violet, orchid, bleu, ciel, opal, aquamarine, bluegray, turquoise, via mint, grass, emerald, hunter, khaki, laurel, mud, olive, caramel, topaz, nougat, cinnamon, crimson, maple, coca, bark, mocca, cedar, nut, copper, terre, silver, pale gray, onyx, smoke blue all the way to gray, granite and black, all the spools 1000 meters long, all the thread polyester, all extra-strength—pure sensory overload, this panoply of colors—and right beneath them, buttons galore, in all possible sizes and materials, buttons made of plastic and wood, round and rectangular, buttons in the shape of hearts and stars, snaps, eyes like the ones on angels' wings that stare at the observer until he can endure their gaze no more and discovers the wooden cabinets that line the lower half of this same wall. All the drawers are numbered and labeled in crayon: rubber bands, curtain fittings, cords, sewing, darning, embroidery and crochet needles, edging, lace, bobbins, zippers, marking tools, garters, organza pin-on flowers, buckles, appliqués covered with rhinestones and sequins, skirt and trouser waistband fasteners, and in the final drawer: hooks and yet more eyes.

On the opposite wall, the alphabet of fabrics is spelled out.

At various heights hang:

**B**atiste, burlap

**C**hiffon, corduroy, cotton

**D**ouble knit

Excuse me, please! It just occurs to me that I scarcely gave you a chance back there  
in the vestibule to tell me your name!

Felt, flannel, fleece, foulard

Gabardine, gingham

How silly of me to just throw myself at you like that

I really have to beg your pardon

Jersey, jute, jean, just can't seem to

Keep my wits about me

Lace, leatherette, linen, linen blends, loden

Microfiber

Nylon

Organza

Plush, polyester, poplin

Quite an ordeal, getting older!

Really, by the time you're 50 you're practically

Senile, sailcloth, satin, seersucker, serge, silk, stretch

Taffeta, tulle, tweed

Understated patterns, camouflage and fake fur: bear, leopard, lion, wildcat...

Viper, velvet

Warbler, wildebeest, wool

Xenocongrid

Yellow parrot

Zebra

“Oh, that doesn’t matter at all. My name’s Analía, and it’s so lovely here by the way!”

“Ooooooh but it does matter, an unforgiveable error,” Milgraos insists. “Analía is a wonderful name that suits you very well, I ought to have guessed it myself when I caught sight of you in the vestibule, of course: Analía! And the second part?”

“Analía Morán.”

“Morán? I do believe... Morán... Somehow your name sounds familiar ... Did your mother ever use our services? Señora Morán?”

Analía negates the question using only her head. “No, but we saw the sign outside.”

“Ah, there’s no help for it! Women disintegrate so quickly. With men it’s different,” Milagros laments and cleans the lenses of her eyeglasses. Then she proceeds: “Would you please allow me to introduce you with no further ado to my associates. This here is my niece.”

“Hi there, I’m Mariana.”

Analía gives her a polite nod.

“Mariana is the heart of this enterprise. Her work is outstanding, and she has what I like to call exquisite taste. She’s an unrivalled master at anticipating our customers’ every wish,” the girl’s aunt added with pride, directing her gaze by turns at Mariana and Analía with equanimity.

“Oh, Auntie, you exaggerate!”

“Not at all! Why such modesty? You got that from your father, my dearly beloved brother, a highly intelligent, even-tempered man, God bless his soul!”

Milagros's gaze, which has floated up towards Heaven, now flits back down. "And these are my faithful oldest employees! Both of them have supported and assisted me from the very start, both of them eternally willing—one on the left, one on the right—to lift me up in time of need. One cannot possibly speak too highly of such service..." All of this is presented in a tone of voice that bears witness to genuine gratitude while simultaneously settling toward the bottom of the scale, an explicit sign that Milagros Nalo is now prepared to cede the floor to another speaker.

"I'm ElviraErnesta, pleased to meet you," the monozygous twins introduce themselves, speaking as with a single mouth and involuntarily giggling.

"Shall we?" Milagros now inquires of all and sundry. "Analía, if you'll permit..." The master seamstress picks up her bag, circles the dissecting table and makes her way past four sewing machines to the door. In the left-hand corner of the room stands a high-quality Singer brand dressmaker's dummy that she acquired decades ago at a liquidation sale although it was already showing distinct signs of wear. With the help of a sort of telescoping rod it adjusts from sizes 36 to 48, thus covering virtually the entire spectrum. Two further cranks can be used to set the shape and size of the breasts separately. Mariana's aunt, who since the early morning hours has willingly been confined within a starched pleated skirt, removes Analía's offering from its bag and with the unfamiliar item of clothing over her arm becomes an insinuator. After the formerly tucked-out-of-sight wedding dress has turned into a chameleon by assuming the feminine forms of the dress form, a meteorological surprise presents itself, something that the 7:15 a.m. Radio Nacional weather forecast was unable to predict, a severe storm such as hasn't been seen in

years, with all the attendant digressions—electrical discharges, lightning bolts and thunder, wind and huge black storm clouds, turbulent gusts from North and South, a deluge-style quivering in the air from East and West that begins to spread the moment it's arrived: starting at the LOS MILAGROS tailor shop, it sweeps down the Calle Gascón and then blasts across the Almagro neighborhood until it's filled the entire city. In Buenos Aires it's raining cats and dogs, just a caprice here, an inappropriate showdown, though if truth be told nothing's even begun yet.

Fabric Pattern 6