

# Piñata

By Daniel Saldaña París

Translated by Christina MacSweeney

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Widely described as an important emerging voice in Mexican literature, [Daniel Saldaña París](http://dsparis.tumblr.com) <http://dsparis.tumblr.com> is a critic, poet, and novelist whose work has appeared in a variety of platforms, both in his native Mexico and internationally. His short story ‘Three Hundred Cats’ recently appeared in the anthology *México20* (Pushkin Press, Trans. Daniel Hahn), published to celebrate Mexico’s presence at the 2015 London Book Fair. In his brilliant first novel, *En medio de extrañas víctimas* (*Among Strange Victims*), which is to be published by Coffee House Press in 2016 in a translation by Christina MacSweeney, he displays a surprising mastery of the narrative art, weaving plot with speculation, real life with fiction, and all this done with a huge dose of humour. Saldaña París’s prose displays the succinct precision of the poet he is, with every word carefully chosen; indeed its apparent simplicity leaves

space for the reader to enter more fully into the questions and ideas bubbling beneath its surface.

—*Christina MacSweeney*

## **Piñata**

**By Daniel Saldaña París**

**Translated from Spanish by Christina MacSweeney**

Alicia didn't go in for moderation, and was even excessive in many ways, but she was just what I needed at that time, the only relationship that could give me back some form of enthusiasm for Madrid and so postpone my return to Mexico, which I'd been announcing to family and friends during the last months, fed up as I was with my solitude and, more specifically, my single state.

Although we had attended a number of the same classes in the faculty and had a couple of friends in common, we'd never really spoken until that summer, the hottest of any I'd experienced in Spain. Several other philosophy students were discussing some topical political issue in the sweltering sun and Alicia, who hadn't taken part in the conversation and was sitting slightly apart from the group, didn't hesitate to tell them, in complete seriousness, that they were a bunch of fairies and that making a revolution needed a level of virility that they lacked. I, who had never wanted to make a revolution, much less flaunt my virility before others, thought that I had to fuck her. I wasn't imagining a relationship, but just that: fucking her from time to time. Alicia had such an iron will that, of course, if the initiative had been left to me, it would have gone no further; luckily, when we exchanged our first words, she smiled and, without beating around the bush, came out with "What you want is to fuck me", which caused me, a Mexican after all and more given to circumlocution, to give a nervous laugh that she took for consent. And that's how it all began.

Two months later, we moved in together. Or rather, she moved into the small apartment belonging to my family, where they allowed me to live rent-free while I

was doing my degree, on the sole condition that I didn't have loud parties (the neighbours tended to complain) or let anyone else stay there. Alicia's parents, however, were conservative in the way only certain suburban Madrid residents can be, and it had been just a question of time before they kicked her out, given her rather licentious lifestyle.

The intensity of our love – excuse the hyperbole – was marked by the swings between the extremes of her character and my almost total passivity in the face of this buffeting. Firstly, Alicia declared that, based on what she'd been reading lately, monogamy was an impracticable imposition. I didn't fully agree with her, but for some strange reason (I've never again been able to take such a detached attitude to the issue) it didn't bother me to know that she was frolicking with other guys in the university gardens. For my part, I tried, on a couple of occasions, to have parallel affairs, but it all seemed to need an inordinate effort and I resigned myself to fidelity without much of a struggle. Alicia was an amusing, intelligent woman and while she was around, Madrid was more bearable.

Her birthday, at the end of September, seemed to me a good opportunity to invite various friends – hers – to the apartment and publicly formalise a relationship that, behind our backs, was described as a matter of convenience: she was living with me because she'd been kicked out of home and I tolerated her presence because I wasn't capable of living alone. Seeing with their own eyes how splendidly we interacted, I thought, the others would shrink from suggesting sex in the bushes to her, and the tempestuous multi-party relationship would give way to a university romance of a more conventional hue.

I suggested to Alicia that we make a couple of papier-mâché piñatas so that the party would have a Mexican touch and she, whose ignorance of the nuances of all things Mexican was total, proposed that it should also be a fancy dress party, with a Western theme. I thought this was a crazy, but ultimately fun idea, so I agreed. We designed an invitation asking “gunslingers” and “dancehall girls” to our “saloon” for a “Dionysian” (she came up with the adjective and I couldn't dissuade her from including it) celebration; “bandits” and “outlaws” were all welcome to the “piñata

party” (I explained that no such thing existed, but it seemed credible to her so I ended by giving way).

Someone made the undoubtedly deliberate mistake of photocopying the invitation and soon the whole faculty knew about the imminent revelry.

The preparations at home brought us closer together. I purchased balloons, made the paste and explained the procedure for fabricating a piñata from newsprint before giving it her chosen form. My design was the traditional star, but Alicia, being more imaginative, proposed making a pregnant woman. I told her that attacking a pregnant woman with sticks wasn't a particularly nice idea, that it had connotations of gender-related violence and could shock many people. Alicia trotted out theoretical arguments based on who knows what feminist text to justify her piñata; it would be very cathartic for women, she parried, to destroy that allegory of the social expectations of their function – or something like that, and I thought that the argument was fairly pointless and that it was, in the end, her piñata and she could make it any way she wanted.

I can't say that the finished product was very convincing. A woman dressed in white, with her head hanging to one side, who would carry in her belly the traditional celebratory fruit and candies. It was a horribly sordid piece of sculpture, especially when compared with my perfect star, with its conical points and bright colours. Two days before the party, Alicia decided to take her piñata to a friend's house so they could add the finishing touches together, and sew the costumes in which they would attend the party; she wanted it to be a secret, a surprise, she said, and so I was not to see her disguise in advance.

I took advantage of those days to finish an essay on Hobbes's Leviathan that was almost overdue and to buy everything we needed for the party (alcohol and peanuts) in a nearby supermarket.

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The first people to turn up were a group of strangers: three women with garter belts showing and two sheriffs with pistols at their waists. They told me they were friends of Alicia and I left it at that. Two hours later, there were around twenty more people I'd never met before packed into the miniscule apartment, and I was feeling tempted to ask some of them to leave since they were behaving like hooligans; breaking my Ikea crockery and playing (awful) Spanish Rock music at top volume. Alicia hadn't yet arrived. I decided to get drunk to relieve the stress of the occasion.

Just a few minutes before midnight, Alicia finally came in through the front door and immediately went to the balcony, where she deposited the pregnant piñata. Her costume was an ambiguous mixture of a nun's habit and an East German terrorist's garb, with no relationship at all to the prevailing cowboy theme. I went up and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips, which she received coldly; when I put my arm around her waist, she rebelled and slipped away to pour herself a drink. She told me that she hardly knew anyone there, which worried me a lot. I thought they would steal my few belongings and go on a bender of epic proportions. Alicia tried to calm me by stroking my prick in front of everyone, and went on about the ritual of the piñata. The alcohol had dulled my judgement a little, but I was still uneasy; I asked her if we could start right away with my star piñata, to get the thing over with, and in the hope that the party would finish before 8 a.m.

My piñata turned out to be well constructed. It took a gorilla in a Mariachi costume, with bulging biceps, to break the papier-mâché so that the revellers could make a dash for the candies. Then Alicia put a rope around her pregnant piñata (I thought I noticed a wine stain on its belly) and requested that, to make it more exciting, hers be broken open with the lights out.

In a final attempt at damage limitation, I took everything breakable out of the living room in case some high-spirited cowboy should lash out blindly in the darkness – scarcely penetrated by the light from the balcony, which I refused to switch off, despite Alicia's insistence. We formed a fairly wide circle and I handed my girlfriend the wooden stick, but she passed it to another girl and hid herself away at the other

side of the room, near the front door and far from what she termed as my “constant attempts to exert patriarchal control”, and which I, still, called “affection”.

I couldn't see exactly when the belly of the horrible piñata cracked, but I don't think it can have taken more than two strikes. I silently reproached Alicia for her lack of diligence in layering the newsprint and, with childish excitement, got ready to grab my share of the candy. At the third or fourth blow, given by one of the supposed dancehall girls, the piñata split open like a coconut and its contents spilled out onto the floor with a squelch. A slender beam of light from the balcony illuminated the reddish lump that the majority of the guests – with their backs to the source of light – could not see. I heard a shriek and several repetitions of the the expression “What the fucking hell?”

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By two in the morning, there was no one left at the party, except for Alicia – tangled up with one of her lovers in the room where we normally slept together – and a couple of dancehall girls in an alcohol-induced trance, sleeping in each other's arms in the bathtub. The stinking, offal-stained rags were drying out on the balcony railing and I was on all fours, trying to get the remaining blood out of the cracks in the floorboards, with the help of a knife.

I thought that the moment had come to return to Mexico. I thought that Alicia was a magnificent woman who I never ever wanted to see again.

*About the translator*



**Christina MacSweeney** is a literary translator specializing in Latin American fiction. Her translations of Valeria Luiselli's *Faces in the Crowd*, *Sidewalks*, and *The Story of My Teeth* (published by Granta and Coffee House Press in 2012, 2013, and 2015 respectively) have received critical acclaim. Christina has also published translations and articles on wide a variety of platforms, including *Words without Borders*, *Brick Magazine*, and *A Public Space*, plus in the anthology *México20* (Pushkin Press, 2015). Her translation of Daniel Saldaña París's novel *Among Strange Victims* is forthcoming from Coffee House Press in spring 2016.