

Raúl

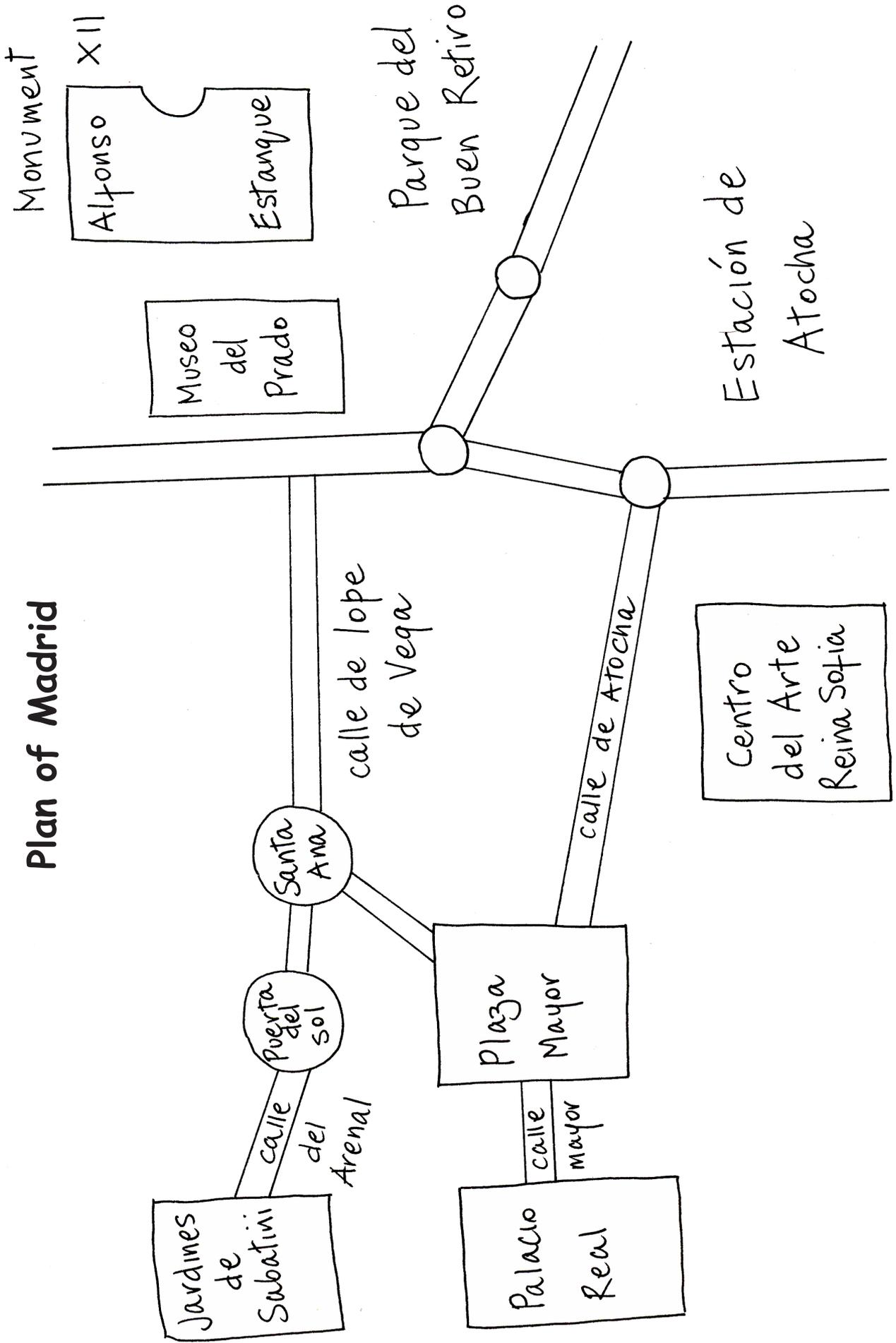
the hero rat
in Madrid



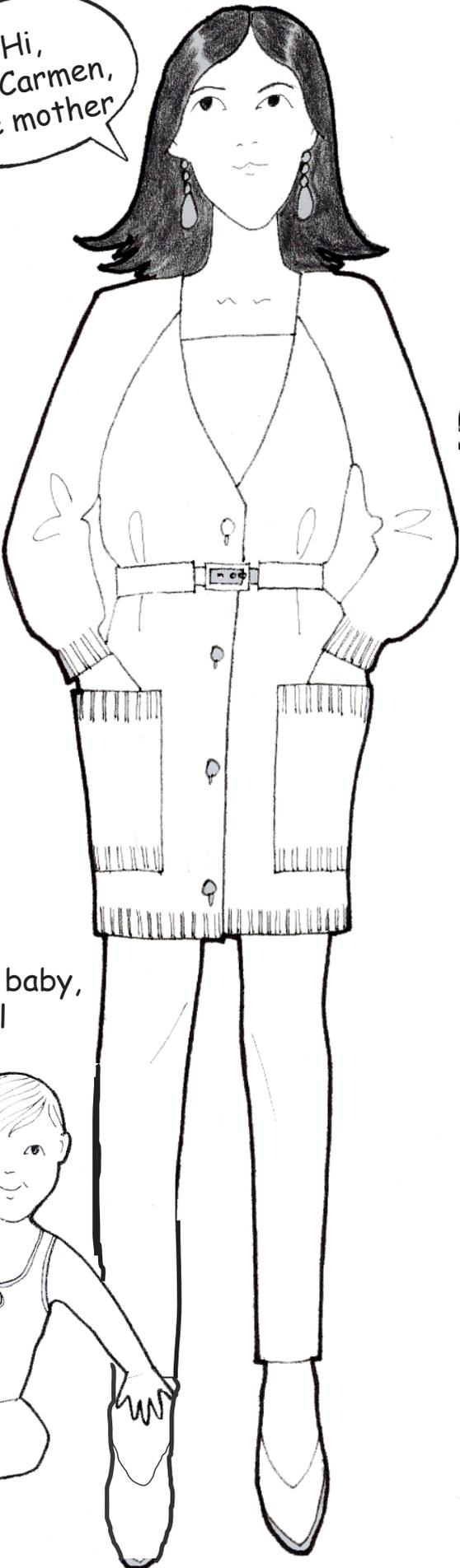
by
Gwendoline Boland

Drawings by
Colette Lambe

Plan of Madrid



Hi,
I'm Carmen,
the mother



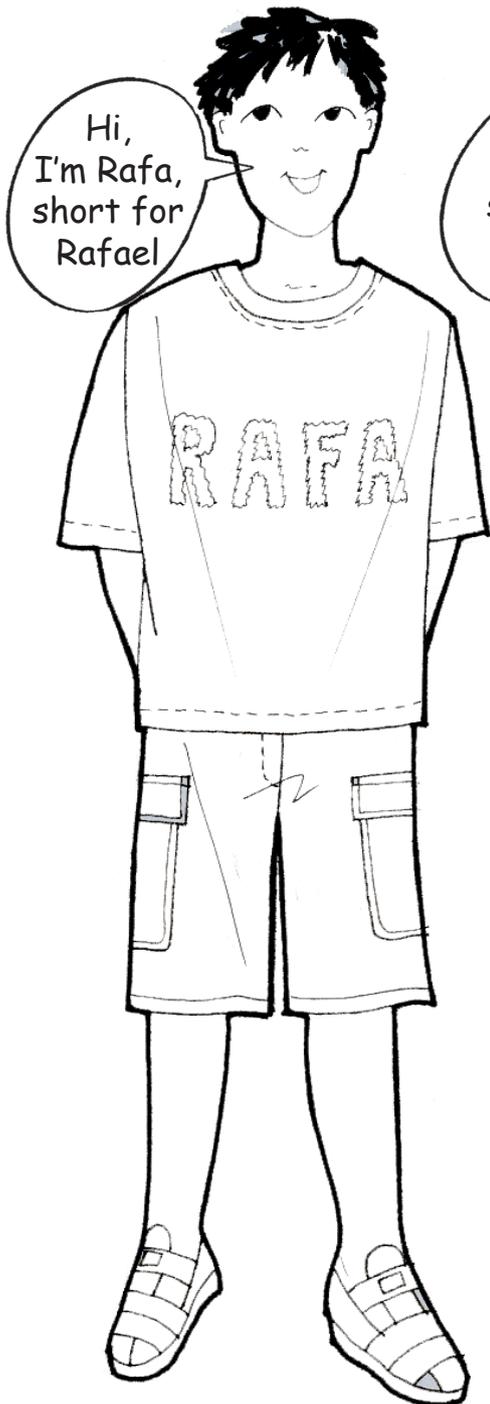
Hi,
I'm José
Luis, the
father



This is the baby,
Isabel



Raúl's family





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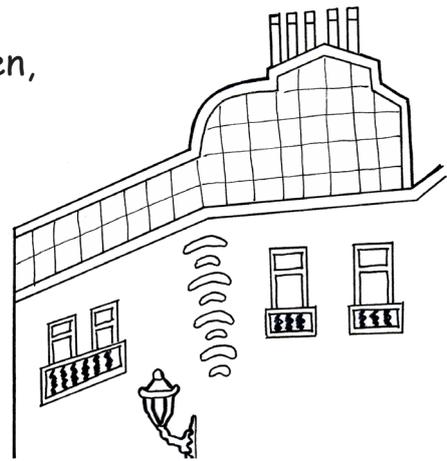
The Madrid summer was very hot. The Sanchez del Castillo family were back in their apartment high up above Calle Lope de Vega after a holiday in England. They were only staying for a few days before heading off to Mallorca for two weeks to spend the rest of their glorious free time with their grand mother, their abuela.

Rafael and Roberto, the nine-year-old twins, were in the big, glass-walled living area looking down over the wide Paseo at the end of their street towards the Prado museum beyond.

"How long till we go to granma's?" wondered Rafa.

"Only a few days," answered his mother, Carmen, who was busy with baby Isabel's breakfast. "I shall want you and Robey to find plenty to do till then because I have work to finish. Your father has to go to Sevilla so I have to cope with Isabel single-handed."

"Can't Maria-Cristina help you?" asked Rafa, hoping that this would keep his elder sister busy. Maria-Cristina was fourteen and she was quite strict with the twins.



"No! Maria-Cristina will be watching you and Robey. She can take you to the Art Galleries to see our famous Spanish paintings."

"Oh, b-but it's our holidays," both twins wailed. "Why do we have to work?"

"It won't be work," Carmen answered. "There are special activities for children and you can take packed lunches into the Retiro Park afterwards. But, tomorrow, you can all go to see your father off from Atocha Station."



"Yes, and you can tell me all about the paintings you see when I get back," said their father, José Luis, from behind that morning's 'El País'. "Strange," he continued, "there's news here that an international gang of art thieves may be targeting Madrid."

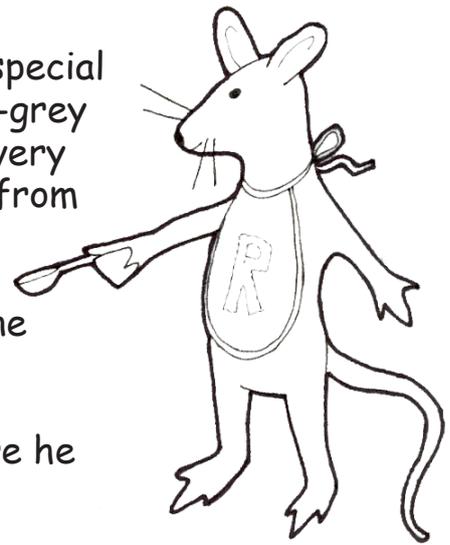
Rafa and Robey couldn't help wishing the gang had already struck and left no pictures to look at. No such luck! They knew they would have to do as their Mum had planned. Carmen was a famous travel writer and the visit to England was research for a series of articles that she had to write up immediately.

Maria-Cristina came into the sunlit conservatory-in-the-sky shielding her eyes and yawning. "Do I have to look after them?" She gestured towards the twins while taking care not to look at them. "They'd better behave and they're not to bring that rotten rat anywhere near me."

Rafa and Robey protested, "He's not rotten; he's a hero. He's done wonderful things. Even you kissed him once when he saved..."

"Yuk! Don't remind me," hissed Maria-Cristina.

Rafa and Robey were indignant. Raúl was their special friend. True, he was a rat - with a soft, pinkish-grey coat and big, brown, lustrous eyes - but he was very intelligent and he had saved a castle in England from destruction during their holiday there. Raúl understood everything the twins said. In fact Raúl understood every human language but no-one realised this.



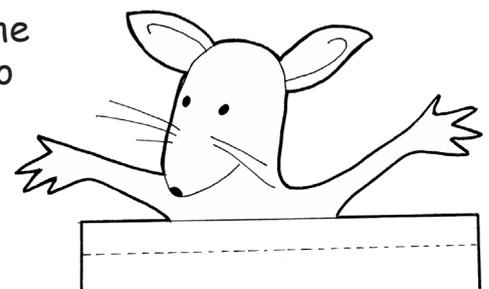
"Eek!" he said now from Isabel's high chair where he was sharing her breakfast.

"Yuk!" repeated Maria-Cristina.

The next morning was sunny and warm as they got into the taxi with their father. Carmen waved them off - the plan was that the children would walk back from the station and go to the Prado Museum while she settled Isabel and started her work.

Atocha Station is a beautiful, old iron and glass building rising up in a semi-circle over the rails and trains. It was full of noise and bustle as the children hurried with their father to his waiting train. They made sure he bought himself some sweets, and some for them, and they waved till the train pulled out of sight. Raúl popped up from Robey's pocket to wave his little paw.

"Let's walk back past that funny wall with all the plants," said Robey, pushing Raúl gently down so that he was safe.



This wall was at the end of a row of buildings where others had been demolished so there was waste-ground in front of it. There was always a crowd gathered to admire the display of cacti

and succulents that grew on the vertical wall-face. These had been planted to make a pattern covering the wall.

"That's weird," said Maria-Cristina. "I can see a dog in the design. It wasn't there before. It looks as if it's drowning - see all the waves lapping around its neck. Oh, poor thing!"

"Huh! You wouldn't say that if Raúl was drowning," said Rafa but, secretly, he was impressed by this gentler side of Maria-Cristina, hoping it might make her a bit kinder to him and Robey.



In Robey's pocket Raúl was thinking, "No, it wasn't there before. The dog has appeared magically ... or been put there to tell us something." Raúl always picked up a warning before anyone else. "I wonder ..." but the children were moving on. "I'll have to listen for any hint or clue ..." he thought.

"Chirrup, Chirrup, Chirrup..." sang the signal at the crossing-lights to tell pedestrians it was clear to cross. The children had been instructed to listen for this sound and never to step out onto the road until it was playing. The 'chirrup' sounded when the green light shone, and when the green light began to flash the 'chirrup' became a sharper alarm to warn that traffic would start to flow soon.

"Save the Dog, Chirrup, Chirrup ... Save the Drowning Dog ..." Raúl heard this and sat bolt upright in Robey's pocket. He couldn't believe the children hadn't heard it; they were still walking over the crossing, so he nipped Robey's finger just as the "Cheeeep, Cheeep, Cheeee..." alarm started. "Cheeeep, Cheeee... Steal The Dog ... tonight. Painting - Prado ... Cheeeep, Cheeeee..."

"What's up, Raúl?" asked Robey when they had got safely to the other side.

"Eek! Eek!" was as clear as Raúl could be.

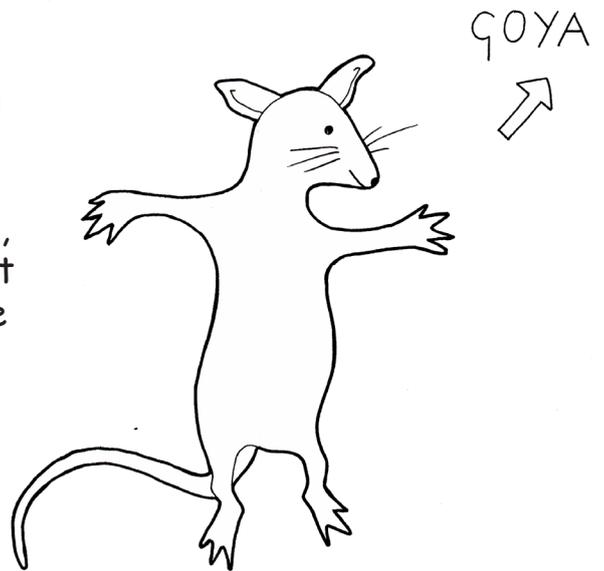
But he knew the children were going to the Prado Museum so he sat tight and said no more. The little group walked over dried, dusty grass under shady trees to the imposing entrance in the pink walls of the old building.

Once inside, the children were greeted by a guide who smiled fixedly at them.

"Joining the Children's Tour, are we?" he smirked. "Over there, my dears, with all the other ... annoying little nerds."

The Guide said this last bit under his breath, but Raúl heard him, and even the children got the feeling he wasn't altogether comfortable in his job.

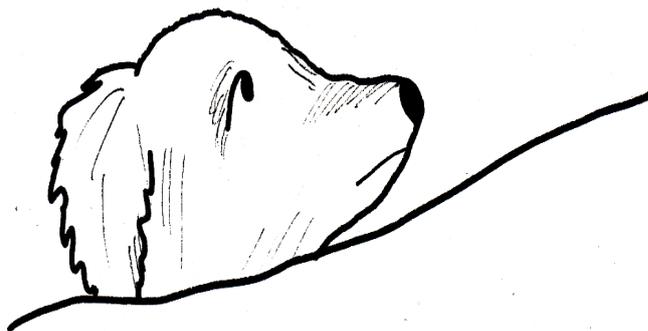
"Follow me," he ordered. "We are going to the rooms that house the paintings of Goya. This way." He swept up marble stairs and the children scampered after him.



"Here we have Goya's 'Black Paintings', so called because they are black in mood. Feast your eyes, my dears, because these are very valuable ... and this may be your last chance to see one of them ... heh, heh, heh!"

Again he said the last bit under his breath and none of the children heard his nasty laugh. But Raúl did!

Just then Maria-Cristina gasped and pointed at a strange painting of a dog's head just out of water, or sand or swamp. The dog was struggling not to go under. "Oh! Poor thing!" she said again, and then recognised the image from the flower-wall.



"You like that one, do you, my dear? It's very famous, very valuable," the Guide wheedled at her. "It may not be here for long," he whispered. "You never know, it may get stolen." His voice was very low now, as though he knew he shouldn't be saying this, but couldn't help himself.

Maria-Cristina wanted to get away from him and the frightening pictures and she grabbed the twins to hurry away. They were only too pleased to go with her and the three of them ran along the cold marble corridors and out into the sun.

They didn't notice that Raúl had decided to stay. He wanted to keep an eye on that worrying Guide.

"Something's not right," said Maria-Cristina once they were outside and eating their packed lunches in the Retiro Park. "That Guide was creepy and the poor dog in the painting seems to be following us and trying to say something."



"Let's get to the other museum as well this afternoon so that we've done what Mum wants and then we can have all our time to solve the mystery," suggested Rafa who preferred a good adventure to Fine Art.

"Come on, then," agreed Maria-Cristina. "We've got to look at a picture called 'Guernica' by Pablo Picasso in The Reina Sofia Museum - it's not far away if we walk quickly."

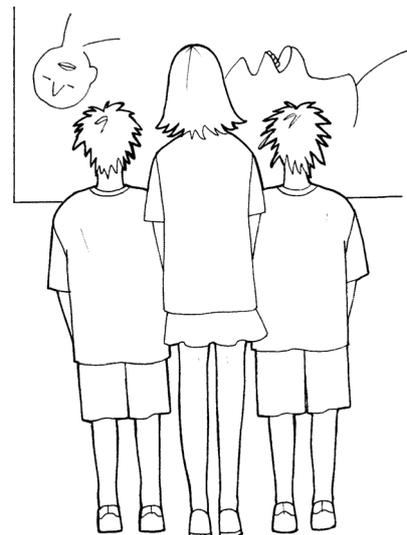
"Hey! That's the museum with the cool lifts on the outside," Rafa shrieked. "They're glass and you go really high and you can see out. Come on." He was already running towards the crossing.

"Wait for the 'chirrup'," warned Maria-Cristina, as she and Robey ran to catch up.

"Chirrup ... Chirrup ... Guernica - bull - horse ... danger ... Chirrup." The children heard it this time. "What?" they were asking just as the sound changed, "Cheeep ... Chee ... now - action - steal ... Cheeep."

They ran to the museum and found the gallery where Guernica hung. Everything seemed normal and the children pushed to the front of the crowd admiring the painting.

A guide was addressing the crowd, "This famous painting depicts the suffering of the Basque town of Guernica in a bombing raid during the Civil War. It is valued by Spaniards as a symbol of Spain's spirit and suffering and it would be an insult to Spain if it was ever ... heh, heh, heh ... stolen." The Guide's laugh was muffled and unheard by the crowd. He added, in a whisper to himself, "It is, of course, valuable in other ways too ... heh, heh, heh ... money."





Maria-Cristina didn't like the way the Guide's face glistened with sweaty greed as he spoke. But she loved the big canvas of 'Guernica' with all the broken-up images of people and the strange eye floating above them. She saw the huge head of the bull and the frightened horse and she wondered what the message at the crossing could have meant; a bull, a horse and the dog in the other picture - what was going on? Dad had said there could be a gang of art thieves ...

"Come on," Rafa and Robey were pulling at her. "We want to go in the lifts. We've seen this."

The glass elevators were fun. They went right up to the top floor and you felt you were falling off the building if you looked down because you were outside!

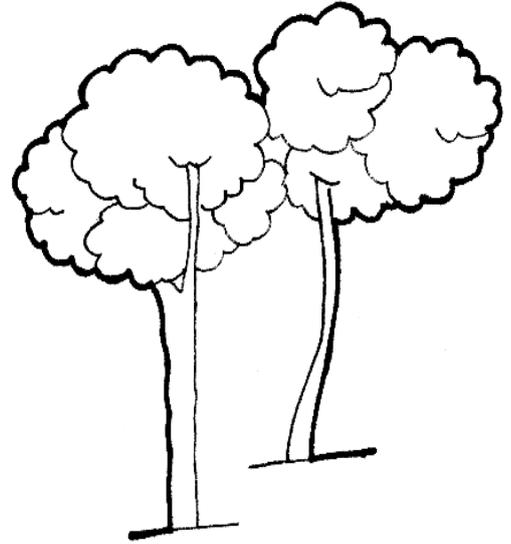
"Once more," the twins pleaded as they reached the ground floor for the third time. Maria-Cristina was just going to risk saying a firm 'No' when a deafening alarm rang and the lifts froze. Doors to the building were slamming shut but the children just had time to step outside.

"What's going on?" they wondered as the sound of police sirens grew in the distance.

They didn't have time to find out because the twins realised then that Raúl was missing ...

As soon as the Goya gallery in the Prado was cleared, Raúl got to work. He sensed these pictures were in danger. The Guide had said one might be stolen, and the message in the crossing lights had warned that the 'dog must be saved'. Raúl didn't have time for further thought. He had to act! First, disable alarms - Raúl had a sensitive nose for cables and wiring - he had chewed through plenty! He found the main box - sharp nip - splutter - end of alarm. Now! Get picture! How? Shame to do it, but ... nibble, nibble, nibble with my heroic teeth ... that's it - get the main bit out; drag it to stairs - down here - nearly at the exit ... keep going ...

Just as he pulled the painting through the doors the horrid Guide saw him. Strangely, instead of raising the alarm, the Guide mumbled into his phone. Raúl thought he was safe and scurried towards the Retiro Park to hide but two men in dark glasses put their phones away and leapt towards him and he had to race away along a pathway marked out by knee-high bollards. The men changed direction quickly to follow him and both of them fell over the bollards that they hadn't seen. They crashed to the ground and then sat up rubbing their bruised knees and faces.



Raúl knew he had to hide. He saw some bushes ahead that had been clipped into the shape of clouds ... if he could just climb up and into them and drag the picture with him. He did it, just as the limping men reappeared. He heard them talking into their phones, "No sign of it - months of planning down the drain - that's the one you were going to steal tonight - it's gone - with a - a rat! Idiot." The men kicked the trunks of the cloud-bushes in frustration, but Raúl was safe. For now!

High pitched alarms began to ring from the Prado and the men scurried away. Police sirens approached and people hurried to see what was happening. Raúl stayed where he was.

At home that evening in the Calle Lope de Vega the twins were disconsolate. They had hurried back to the Prado to look for Raúl but the whole area was cordoned off and police were everywhere. The children had to come back to the apartment without him. Even Maria-Cristina was upset because she was charged to look after the twins and keep them out of trouble and their Mum was cross that she hadn't done so. Carmen was worried that the children had twice been caught up in police raids and she thought the city was becoming too dangerous to let the children out. She had planned to take them later to see the street festival at Lavapiés but she was wondering now if this would be wise.

When the TV news came on there were headline reports about thefts from two Madrid museums:

"GUERNICA - GONE" screamed the reporter in front of the Reina Sofia.
"Our national treasure snatched from the wall during a routine fire drill

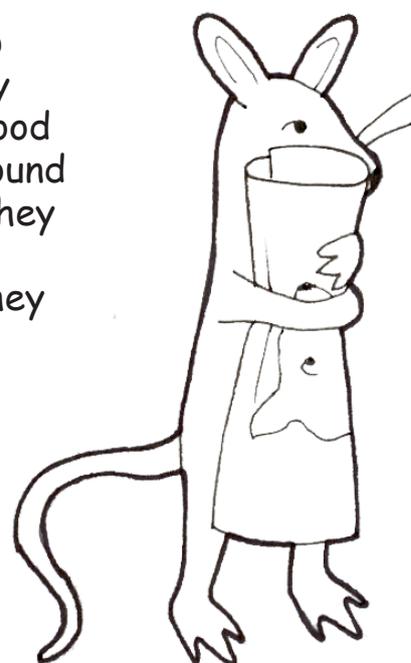
today. How far can thieves have got with this huge picture? This is the question being asked today ... "

"And in a second and simultaneous raid one of Goya's lesser-known 'black paintings' is chewed - yes CHEWED - from the wall of the Prado. Called 'Perro semihundido', often translated as 'A half-submerged dog'. It expresses Goya's despair and melancholy and is sometimes thought to represent Goya's own feelings on illness and death. Police are asking if a sympathetic canine can be the thief but they are following leads that a suspicious pair of thugs were seen limping injured from the scene ..."

Carmen snapped off the TV. "OK, kids! We're going out. I've been in all day and Isabel's been whingeing. I'll put her in her baby pouch and we'll all get some fresh air. If it's only art thieves there shouldn't be much trouble on the streets now. Come on. It'll take your minds off Raúl, and we can find a restaurant later for dinner."

It was dusk when they reached the Calle Argumosa and waited for the band to begin. There were crowds of people enjoying the warm evening standing around in groups drinking or sitting outside cafes eating tapas. From many of the bars there was lively music playing. Most of the people here were locals and chatted loudly to each other. Stall holders were shouting their wares.

The twins were getting restless and could not stop worrying about Raúl. At last the band began to play and they went and stood near the stage to get a good look at the musicians. People began to dance all around them. Carmen grabbed Maria-Cristina's hand and they joined in the merriment. The twins looked on scornfully - you wouldn't catch them dancing! As they looked idly at the musicians they suddenly caught sight of a familiar figure. Surely that couldn't be Raúl peeping out from behind one of the massive speakers? But it was! He winked at the twins who made their way slowly to where he was hidden, careful not to draw attention to themselves. Raúl had seen the band loading up their van next to the Prado and had, on the spur of the moment, slipped into it. He had rolled up the painting to make it easier to hide. When the band had



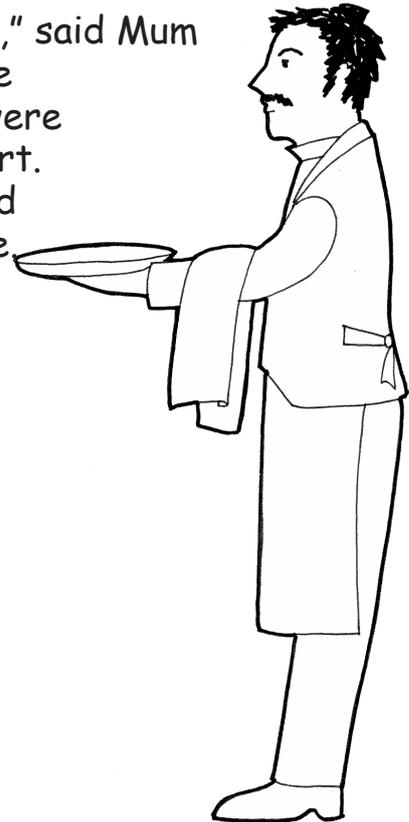
unloaded the van in the Calle Argumosa and set up their instruments on the stage he had hidden behind the speaker whilst he thought about what to do next. He was just beginning to feel that he had been hiding for years and that he'd missed several birthdays when a miracle happened - Rafa and

Robey appeared and lifted him down without any fuss. When Raúl nodded towards the painting they took that as well. They too realised it would be safest to act in silence.

"Let's find a restaurant, now," said Carmen as the crowd dispersed.

The twins thought it best to hide Raúl in case his presence would change Carmen's mind about food. They were very hungry now and they walked to the nearest restaurant.

"This may not be what we like but it will do for now," said Mum as they entered an old-fashioned dining room where starched white cloths covered the tables. There were only two other diners, both alone, at tables far apart. The waiters wore wine-coloured waistcoats and held white napkins over their raised arms ready to serve. Above, suspended on a net under the ceiling, were ranks of wine bottles looking like an army prepared for war.



Rafa looked at the menu and ordered crème brûlée but Maria-Cristina told him to be quiet.

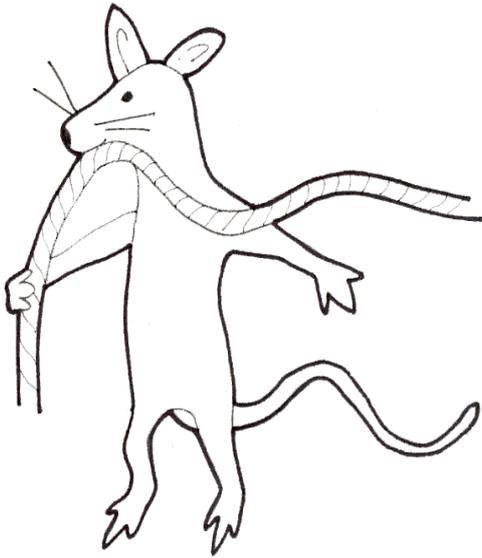
"Why? I don't have to have proper food first..." he started to argue, but she kicked him under the table.

"Listen," she hissed, "Listen to him on the phone..."

"Dog ... drowned ... heh heh heh! Bull and Horse ... heh heh heh ... taken! Mission accomplished," cackled one of the diners sitting on his own under the net of wine bottles.

Just then, and before the children could do anything, the other diner leapt up and rushed towards the man on the phone saying, "I arrest you on suspicion of art theft. Anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against yooooou....." The art thief had grabbed him around the neck and begun to strangle him.

Before the children even knew what was happening Raúl had scrambled up a curtain and was gnawing at a rope that connected with the net holding the wine bottles.



"C R A S H..." The bottles bombed down onto the art thief releasing streams of dark red wine. Shards of broken glass ricoched off the floor like shrapnel and the art thief whimpered and cowered as these pierced his clothes. He thought the red wine was his blood and he fainted.

For the third time that day the children heard police sirens approaching; the other diner, who was a detective, had called for support and soon the restaurant was filled with uniformed police. The waiters still stood, shocked, waiting to serve whilst

Carmen was worrying that the loud bang would wake Isabel. She hadn't yet realised what was happening when she heard Rafa and Robey saying:

"We've got the stolen painting - Raúl found it. Raúl is our friend ... he is a - er - a RAT."

"No! Not the rat... not here," came from Carmen, faintly.

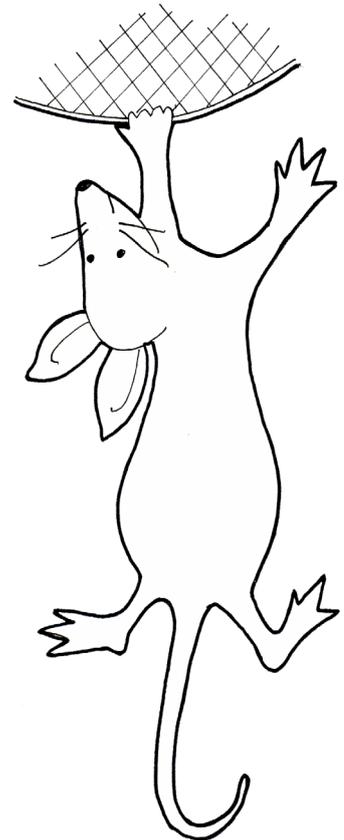
But Rafa and Robey were holding aloft the painting of 'A half-submerged dog' by Goya. The police were applauding and Maria-Cristina was telling a handsome, young officer how she had trained Raúl in citizenship.

Raúl swung down from the ceiling holding on by one paw to the edge of the net - he was sure everyone would be watching him and ready to praise and reward him.

Instead the police were packing the art thief into a prison van and asking where 'Guernica' was.

No one knew! The late TV news reported, "Drowning Dog Saved but Guernica Garnered by Gang.."

At Atocha station next morning the children's father ran from his train and hugged them. He had heard on the news that there had been trouble at the museums and he had been worried. Now they walked back happily - the children telling him how they had saved the Goya painting. Inside Robey's pocket Raúl scratched his head - surely it had been him?



"The only thing is, Dad," said Maria-Cristina, "They haven't found Guernica. Even though the gang has been arrested after the thief in the restaurant squealed, no-one has said where it is."

"I suppose its value is so great that they think it's worth doing time in prison and then selling it when they come out," said Dad. "Little do they know but it will be too hot to sell - every police force will be on the look out for it for centuries to come."

They were approaching the wall covered with plants and Maria-Cristina became thoughtful - and quiet...

"D...a...d," she said eventually, looking at the wall as though in a trance. "D...a...d, why is the picture different. It used to be ... but now - I don't believe it. It's like GUERNICA!"

The others looked. It was - it was true. Under a camouflage net threaded through with cacti and succulents was the faint outline of a huge eye ... and a bull's head, and a frightened horse. It could be Guernica, artfully hidden by plants.

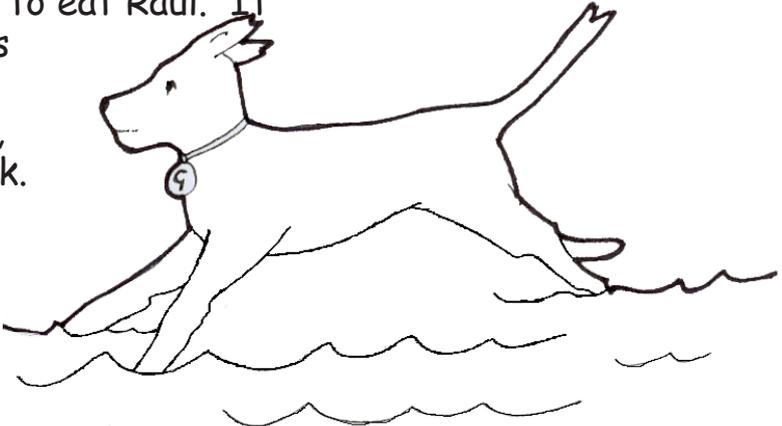
For the fourth time the children listened to police sirens approaching - Dad had raised the alarm immediately. Guernica was saved and that night on TV the children were interviewed and presented with awards.



At last the excitement was over and the family was re-united; Dad was home, Carmen had finished her work, Isabel was awake and it was Sunday. The Retiro Park was alive with jugglers and miming statues and all sorts of performers to entertain the crowds. The children ran to the railings around the big lake as a shoal of goldfish swam by - 100, 101 ... 192, Raúl ...197... What? Raúl? Why? He was swimming a lap of honour with the fish -

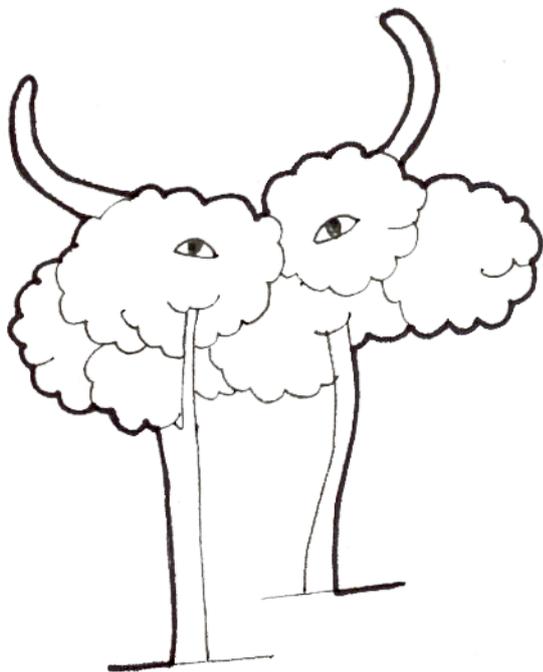
there he was, a funny, pinkish-grey body with flailing paws amongst the plump red fish with their elegantly swishing tails. He was doing the crawl - quite professionally for a rat - and he raised one paw in salute as he passed the children.

A sudden splash announced the entry of a large dog into the lake and the children screamed that it was going to eat Raúl. It doggy-paddled towards him while its owners on the bank shouted, "Goya! Here, boy. Here! You'll drown! Back, boy. Back!" But Goya didn't turn back. He dived under Raúl and lifted him out of the water onto his back and barked his thanks and congratulations. Raúl, as well as all human languages, could interpret Dog so he understood that, at last, he was appreciated. Everyone in the park realised that Raúl was the true hero and there was cheering and applause for him which he acknowledged by elevating his paws and holding his head high while he balanced on Goya's strong and safe back, as they continued their circuit of the lake.

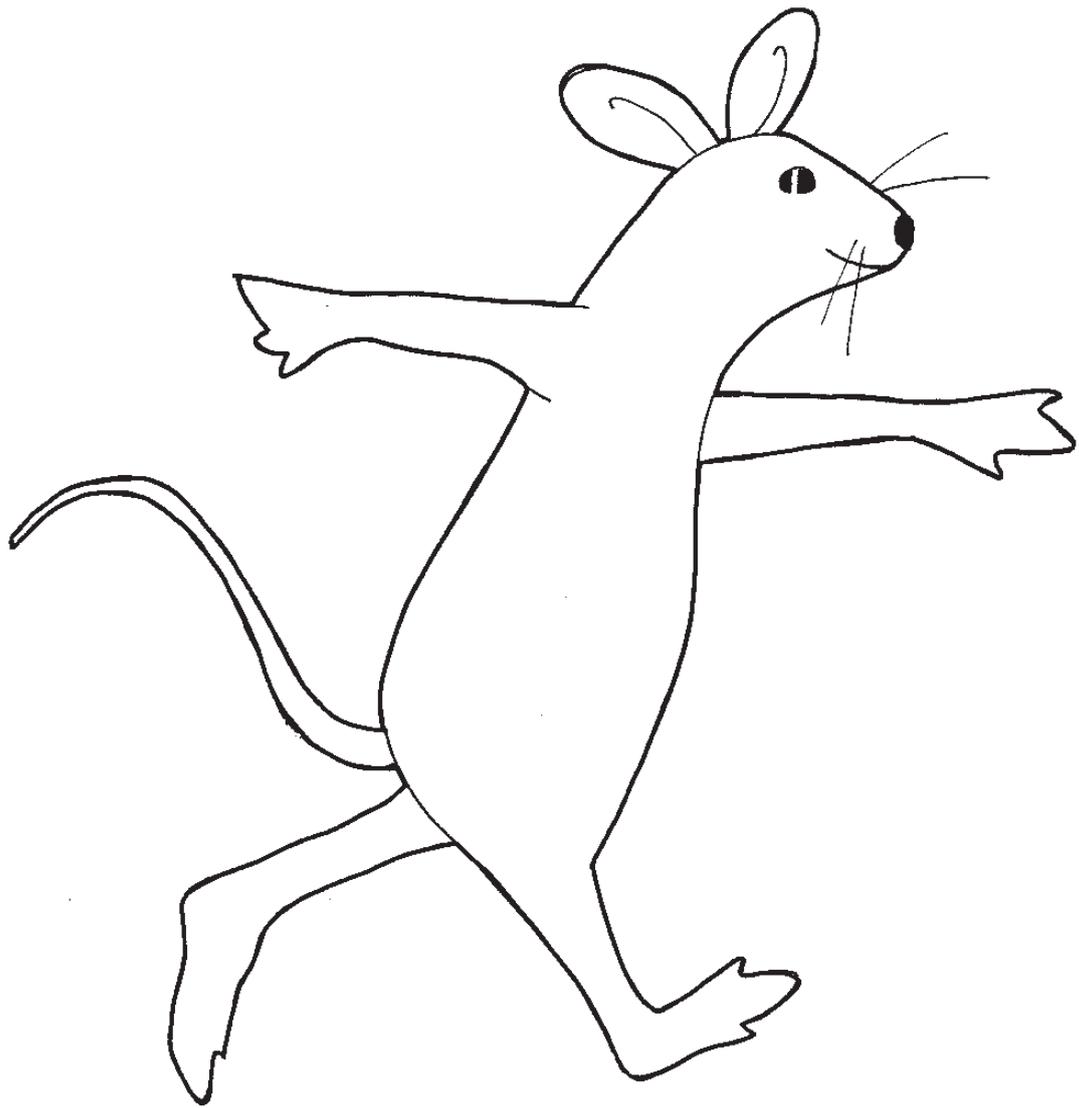


A beautiful horse, passing them on the path, neighed congratulations and thanks. "Trot on, Guernica," ordered its rider while nodding respectfully towards the swimming party.

The bushes that had been clipped into the shape of clouds now resembled a vast bull's head that roared congratulations and thanks towards the lake. All the people, who were glad to be alive and to have their paintings back, cheered and cheered until Raúl, who loved the children, scrambled out of the lake and indicated with uplifted paws that they were his deserving partners in anti-crime. There were cheers for the children as well. Meanwhile in the quiet outside the park the museums had closed and the two paintings were being proudly re-hung ready for visitors for years to come.



In police cells in Madrid two thugs, two bogus museum guides and the gang leader arrested in the restaurant were spending their first night behind bars. It was to be the first night of many.



"See you in London. Hasta luego."

