

Nina's secret life

Scholarly sources:

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Meet Nina

Nina was a fifteen-year-old Gitana living in Spain in 2000. In her public life, Nina was a sweet, sometimes oppressed girl surviving in a minority community. But Nina also had a private, secret life, and in this life she was anything but oppressed.

But we'll get to the secret life in a moment. First let's learn a little bit about her public life.



Nina's public world

Nina was a member of a *Gitano* community. *Gitanos* are gypsies who had settled in Spain by the 1400s. In the year 2000 a large population of *Gitanos* lived in Madrid. They spoke their own dialect of Spanish.



Nina lived in the Jarama district of Madrid with other Gitanos. She went to a government-run school and was a top student.

In the district was a large Evangelical Pentecostal Church. Many of the Gitanos in Nina's neighborhood had converted to that religion, but Nina's family had not. Her family said they were Catholic, but really did not practice any faith.

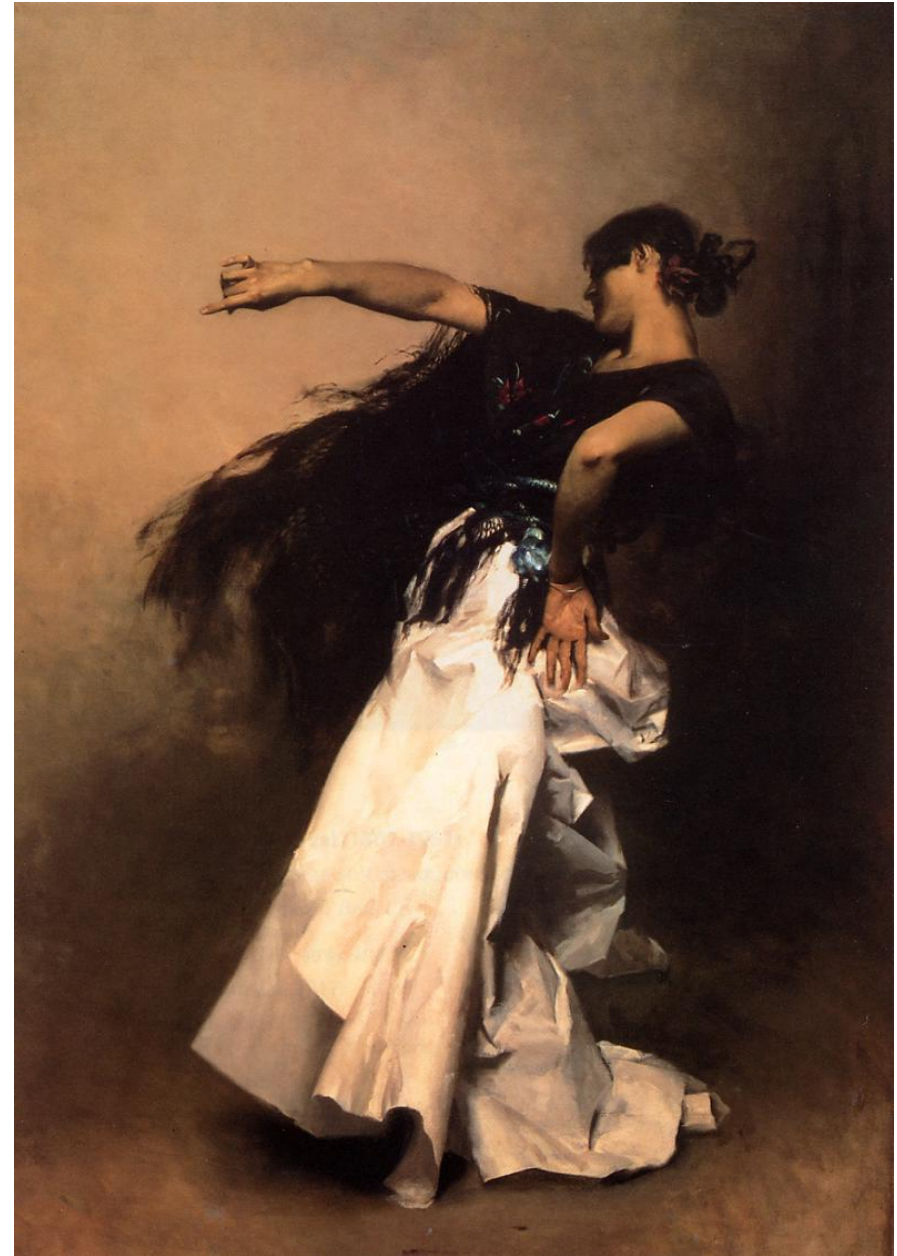


Nina, her parents, grandparents, and two older brothers lived in public housing that included a large concrete plaza where the family could socialize with other *Gitanos*.

At night the men would often sit outside chatting or playing dominoes.



At times the women would do some Flamenco dancing on the plaza.



Gitanos looked down on the other Spaniards, whom they called *payos* (which meant non-Gitanos). They said that *payos* had no morality because they didn't care for their own elders in their homes, leaving them to fend for themselves

Gitano culture stressed respect, but also stressed the value of freedom. Gitanos preferred jobs where they could work when and how they wished. Only a few took jobs for others.



Gitano culture was also male-centered. They tended to settle in communities with the descendants of one male ancestor. This was called a patrigrup or patriline.

The Gitanos in Nina's community also believed that the role of women was to be subservient to their husbands. Wife beating in Jarama was, unfortunately, fairly common.



In Nina's household, her brothers received first consideration in food, privileges, and material goods. Nina's mother would often talk about how disappointed she was when she found out she was pregnant with Nina—a girl—after giving birth to two boys.



Nina was constantly reminded to be very modest in her dress and behavior like the older *Gitanas* in her community. This way she would one day have no trouble getting a husband.

While Nina loved school and was a much better student than her brothers had ever been, her parents paid little attention. They were illiterate and saw no real value in education.

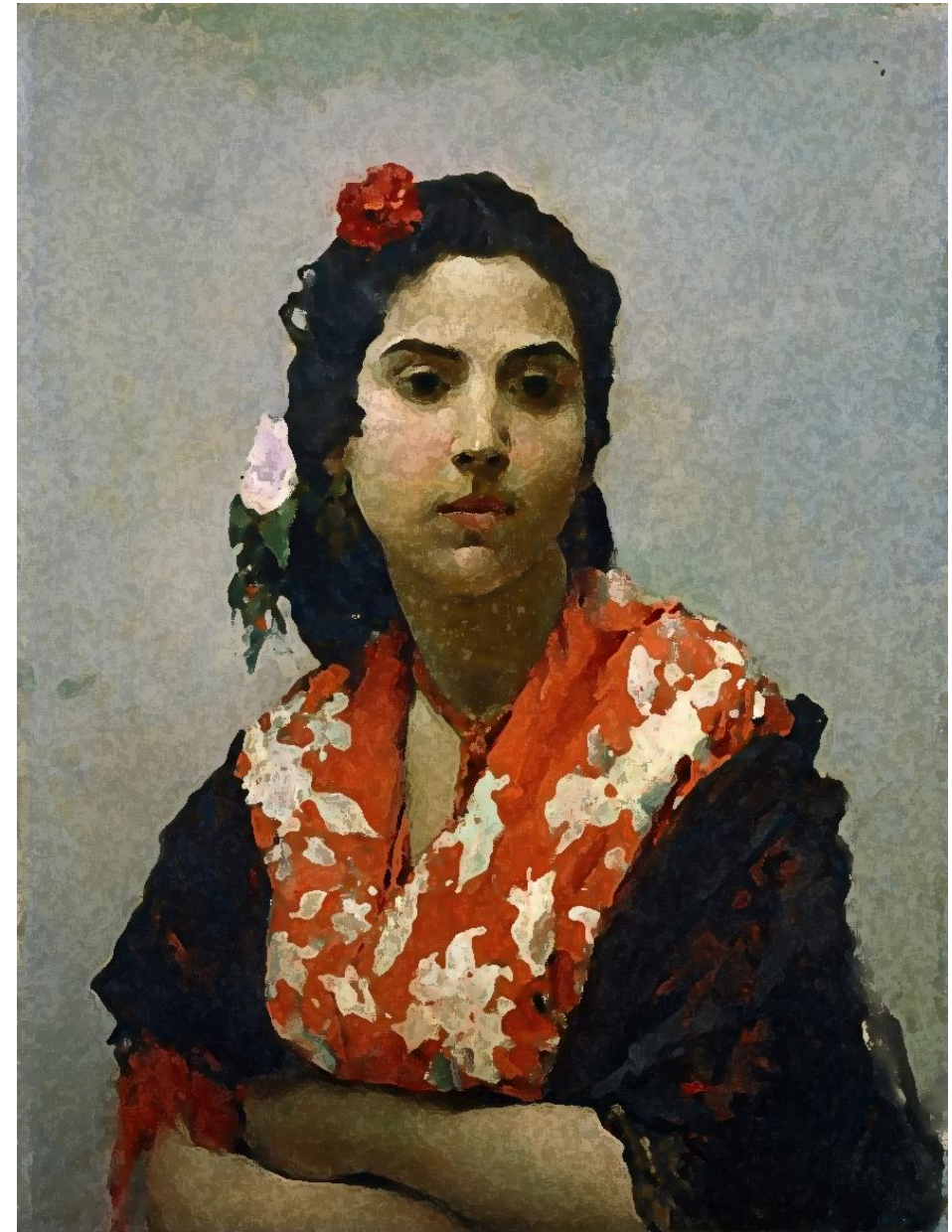


The one Gitano in Jarama who frowned on female subservience and illiteracy was the local man of respect, Tio Luis. He often reminded the men that wives deserved respect too.



Tio Luis was one of a few men in Jarama who paid monthly fees for a vending (selling) permit. He sold produce at a local open air market. He managed to save a good deal of money over the years and sent his only daughter Sara to college. In Spain far more Gitanas participated in higher education than Gitanos.

However, when Sara graduated and took a job in tourism in Seville, Tio Luis swore he would never encourage a young woman to go to college again. He felt betrayed because his daughter did not return to her community.



As Tio Luis got older, his son took over his vending business. Nina's two older brothers, Pepe and Rufo, filled in for Tio Luis' son at the market now and then. But the brothers, like most Gitanos, did not like the idea of working for others.



Although Tio Luis now had more time to devote to community leadership, talking the men into better treatment of their wives was not his highest priority.

Recently, drugs had entered Jarama from other areas of Madrid. Tio Luis was very busy trying to find the source of the drugs and weed out any drug users.



Nina's parents were also vendors—in a manner of speaking. Her father had serious asthma so didn't work very hard. He gathered scrap metal across town for his brothers, who refashioned the scraps into other products for sale, or they simply resold the scraps as they were.



Nina's and her mother made napkins and table cloths that they sold on street corners. Nina's father would drive them to various commercial areas in Madrid.

However, unlike Tio Luis and his son, Nina's mother refused to pay for a vending permit. Hence she would hide all her wares in a backpack while she and Nina looked for a promising street corner.



When the mother opened the bag to set up her wares on the sidewalk, it was Nina's job to look out for police. Most of the time the mother and daughter were able to remain at the street corner for an hour or more.

If police were sighted, they'd quickly stuff everything into the backpack and head for Nina's father's car. Sometimes they did not make it and Nina's mom would be taken to jail and forced to pay a fine.



This was quite an adventure for Nina. But this adventure was nothing compared to what young Nina did in her secret life.



Nina's secret life

Nina's secret life involved her two older brothers, eighteen-year-old Rufo and sixteen-year-old Pepe.



Despite Tio Luis' efforts to keep drugs out of the Gitano community in Jarama, some had been smuggled in. And perhaps the two biggest abusers in the neighborhood were Rufo and Pepe.



And the drugs were not cheap. In order to finance their habit they had to do a lot more than just working a few days at the vending stall of Tio Luis' son.

To get enough money to buy drugs, the brother's had to come up with creative and very illegal ways to get money fast. They devised a few nasty schemes.



One of their best schemes involved just one weapon—
a squeeze container of mustard.

But to carry out the mustard scheme, they needed an
excellent location and a third person.



The location they selected was Madrid's Atocha Railway Station. Crowds were always present, and many people in these crowds were rich tourists who were carrying all their valuables from one location to another.



The brothers would target women carrying large handbags.

They would follow a woman and secretly squeeze a stream of mustard on the back of her top. They would then yell to the woman about the mustard and offer to help her clean off the mess.



While the two brothers and others were trying to wipe off the mustard stains, one of the brothers would cut the strap of her purse, grab it, and they would both run off.

But the problem with this plan was that the woman might notice her bag missing immediately and scream out to everyone to catch those thieves.



That's where the last step of their plan came in. As soon as the handbag was snatched, a girl in urgent need of help would appear. The girl would run up to the woman, sob that she was lost, and beg her to help her find her parents.

Of course the girl playing the role was Nina. She'd learned her lines in several languages so the siblings would be able to target a lot of different tourists.

When Nina finished reciting her lines, she'd count to ten in her head. Then suddenly she'd pretend to spot her parents and run off. By that time the victim would realize her handbag was missing, but the brothers would be blocks away.



For her role in the robbery, Nina got a share of the valuables and money found in the handbags. In addition to this, the scheme also gave her considerable power over her brothers. They knew that if she ever decided to report their drug use to Tio Luis, he would take it to a Gitano court and it might mean that the brothers would be expelled from the community. Expulsion from his patrigrup without any job skills could lead to homelessness for the brothers.

Hence, even if Nina's parents did not give her an equal share of household goodies, she could always demand them from her brothers. She now had considerable power.



And given that Nina did not use drugs, she got to keep all the money she earned, Nina did not spend a cent. She kept the loot in a secret place for college.



See, because her parents had never filed any taxes, she was told she would never be eligible to get student loans for college. She had to come up with the cash.



And Nina really wanted to go to college.

Now there were things in her community she sincerely liked. She had a lot of friends. She really loved her grandparents. She didn't want to do what Tio Luis' daughter had done and leave her community behind.

But Nina also wanted a choice. She did not want her only option in life to be marriage. She didn't want to become a wife of a man who would treat her like she didn't count.



But there was also regret.

There were moments when she felt bad for the women whose money and belongings she had helped steal.

There were moments when she wanted to stop helping her nasty brothers.

But she simply did not know what else she could do.



There were times she just wanted to reach out to strangers and ask for advice. Maybe strangers like all of you. Let's give this some thought.



Let's start now

Let's discuss Nina's decisions.

1. Was her decision to join her brothers in robbery justifiable, given that it gave her some needed power over them? What might have been other options to get equal treatment in her family?
2. Was her decision to gain money illegally a wise choice to get her into college? What other options might she have tried?

The end