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# Una mujer como tú

Neus Arqués

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A Woman in Your Position  
(Una mujer como tú)

Chapter 1

Translated by Neus Arqués and Steven Tolliver

## ***A Woman in Your Position***

Is it really better to be alone than in a bad relationship? Is motherhood mandatory? Are girlfriends true friends?

Her father's sudden death brings Ruth back to Barcelona and back in touch with Bel (married to her former boyfriend), Marta (obsessed with becoming a mother) and Luisa (who longs to be something more than just a mother). ***A Woman in Your Position*** follows the four reunited friends in their winding road to personal fulfilment. In the background, the *Théâtre de la Mode*, an exceptional 1945 fashion show, makes a comeback. Both the characters and the exhibit evoke the challenges women face when building an identity of their own.

***A Woman in Your Position*** speaks to 30 to 50-year old readers, for whom it sketches the new female archetypes -the maternity junkie, the dependent single, the self-questioning wife.

## **About the author**



**Neus Arqués** writes about real life for real women. In ***A Man for Hire*** (*Un hombre de pago*) she wonders if sex without love is indeed an efficient proposition. ***A Woman in Your Position*** (*Una mujer como tú*) joins four girlfriends in their winding road to personal fulfilment.

With a fresh voice and a strong sense of dialogue, Arqués dives fearlessly into our secret agendas and uses Almodovar-like situations to present the reader with uncomfortable topics.

Barcelona born and bred, the author, who holds a Master's degree from Johns Hopkins University, runs her own marketing agency. Other projects by Arqués include being a mother, being a wife and keeping up with her friends and her [blog](http://www.neusarqués.com) (www.neusarqués.com).

## Publication & Rights

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## One

They welcomed her, but with less than fully open arms. At that time Ruth did not notice: she was in a state of shock. Just two days before, as she was looking for a cab in the heart of Le Marais, her mobile went off and her heart exploded: "My daughter, your father ...." She left for Charles de Gaulle to Barcelona as fast as she could.

Arrange for the shroud, fill out all the paperwork so that her father could be buried as a Jew ... who could have guessed this would happen to her, she who was the official non-believer? When the wake finally began, reality and vigil blurred. For the last two nights Ruth hadn't had any sleep. Sitting on the leather couch, her mother never lost her composure, and her restraint was unsettling in such a vital woman. Like a sphinx, she welcomed visitors who whispered words of comfort even as they half-doubted such great serenity. And mom used all her energy not to let devastation show through any crack: she could not stand public weakness. Clinging by her side, Ruth stared at her feet, feeling slightly useless. Even without makeup, her mother emanated a force that surrounded everything while she, in her fashionable blouse that had been torn as a sign of mourning and her uncombed curls, she felt small. She hated that feeling.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not see them come in: she heard them instead. "Mrs. Bennasser, Ruth, we are very sorry. We read about it in the paper and we wanted to be with you in this time of sorrow," Bel addressed herself immediately and directly to the mother, whom she knew less, leaving Ruth aside. Her dark jeans made her endless legs even longer. Bel was wearing a nondescript ponytail and spoke fast because she was nervous.

Mother jumped. From the corner of her eye Ruth saw Ricardo, her former boyfriend, elbow his wife so that she would shut up. No one had warned her that it was the deceased's relatives who spoke to the visitors and not the other way around. Ricardo, with his impeccable shirt, creased and ironed pants and slightly long but perfectly cut hair, so aware, so... so much "the publisher" – Ruth thought – he would have researched the matter beforehand: "There is no way that we are going to come off as two ignorant gentiles." Bel turned to Ruth and then to Ricardo, shaking her ponytail, not understanding a thing.

Ruth looked at her mother, encouraging her to speak, and the widow read her mind. "Thank you so much for coming. It is a consolation for us, isn't it, daughter?"

Only then did she speak. "Bel," she whispered and stood up. Ruth felt in the back of her head the questioning stares of the couple: of Bel, latching onto a handbag with one hand and holding her rigidly with the other: of Ricardo, more intrigued by the way the house was set for the

Jewish wake than by anything else. They had removed the chairs and scattered around the dining room floor there were stools and cushions. They had covered the mirror. This was no time for vanity and Ruth felt grateful, because she looked a sight. On the mantelpiece, a candle lit in remembrance of the deceased gave off a light unusual for that hour of the day.

Ruth disentangled herself from Bel's embrace. She was embarrassed. She held Bel's hand and addressed both of them. "Thanks for coming. I ... I am a bit shaken. My father, you know .... He ... he was everything." She realised she stuttered and began again with her breathing exercises in order not to cry. She hated to cry in front of men and forced herself to calm down. "What a surprise to see you. Tha ... thank-you."

Bel let go of her hand. She was uncomfortable with the touch of the woman who had been her husband's great love.

"To think that the day before yesterday you were in Paris! Everything is happening so fast! Has it been long since you last met?" Mother resumed the conversation while the three of them waited in silence and Bel's eyes questioned Ricardo, as if asking "what on earth is going on?"

However, he did not notice that the mother was referring to the deceased, the only appropriate topic of conversation for a wake. "No, it

wasn't so long ago. We had dinner together last month." Upon seeing the shocked faces, he corrected himself. "I think the last time I saw your husband was at our wedding."

The wedding had taken place two years ago. It was Ricardo who insisted on inviting the entire Bennasser family and although Bel was not happy about the idea, she accepted. Ever since, Ruth visited the happy couple every time she was back from Paris. That love triangle – two former lovers and a wife – could be described as exemplary.

"I remember how you and your father used to laugh together. I remember you guys laughing since we went swimming in Calella." Ricardo continued down his own memory lane while he put his arm around Ruth's shoulders. That gesture shocked her. Their families used to spend summer together when they were kids and the coast had not yet been overdeveloped. They then began dating, but that was in high school, twenty years ago ....

An old gentleman, a friend of her father whose name she could not remember, approached to say his goodbyes. "HaMakom yenachem et'chem b'toch shar avay'lay Tzion vee'Yerushalayim". The gentleman whispered the ritual sentence, holding mom's hands with affection.

*"May the Omnipresent comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."* Ruth wished for it to be true. She wished for religion to be useful for something. She wished she could feel more comfortable in that house, with that overwhelming mother, with the candle and that

couple of ... friends? Bel looked at her while Ricardo kept his arm around her shoulders. Was she jealous? Had it not been for her own pain, Ruth would have worried about Bel's. Well, it was their thing after all.

It was Bel who hurried up the departure. She promised she would call her to put a dinner together. Ruth did not even bother to state that during thirty days of *Shloshim* she would not attend any dinner. Not practising was one thing: ruining the family reputation was another and Ruth was set on respecting the wake, no matter what it took. Thirty nights without going out! Well, that was still better than an open fight with her mother, who had also mentally looked at the calendar.

Ricardo and Bel left and they left behind an uncomfortable cloud. Mom went back to her unusual silence and Ruth continued to stare at her feet, in a pair of aubergine coloured high heel boots which would have proven impossible for any less stylish a woman but which looked perfect on her. "Shall I make you some tea?" She needed to talk, even to her mother.

In the kitchen, while they waited for the pot to boil, mom removed the dishes from the dishwasher and stacked them away. "Your friends seem to be good people and they will help you. Maybe it's time for you to come back to Barcelona, Ruth. Besides, someone needs to be in charge of the gallery ...."

They were still in the middle of *Shivá*, not seven days had gone by since her father's death and her mother had already brought up the issue. The bloody gallery, dad's magnum opus, her family's main passion. "Their" gallery, where Ruth had worked until her divorce. As soon as she and Mateo had signed the papers, he left for New York and she for Paris. That had happened twenty-eight months ago which seemed like an eternity now. Her excuse was that she had been commissioned for the cataloguing of a historical collection. While her mother lamented her divorce, her father supported her unconditionally: 'You must do what's best for you, daughter ....' He was as strong as an oak and no one could suspect that a heart attack was going to leave the gallery orphaned.

In Paris everything went according to plan. She started working on the archives of *Théâtre de la Mode*. Couture houses gave her every support to rebuild the collaborative fashion show that they staged in 1945, after the Nazi occupation, using lilliputian mannequins for lack of material to make real-size clothes. To document the miniatures which were shown in order to keep up morale and to relaunch the French fashion industry took up all of Ruth's attention. That was her world.

The project's first phase was just over. A week would be enough to close it for good, but that was not her plan. The Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris had put forth an extension so that Ruth could continue researching the original exhibit and, in principle, she was

going to accept. But her father's death changed everything. Was she to say goodbye to the dolls, lost in the past? On the other hand, she could bring them with her: she could put together a retrospective exhibit based on the figurines, the Occupation and the Resistance. Just as she had left Barcelona for them, she could come back with them. Did she want to?

Ruth looked at her mother, who in turn was staring at her in silence. Her mother was wandering exactly the same thing.

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"Ruth, Ruth, Ruth .... You look as good as always!" On d-day Tony picked her up at the airport. No one picks anyone up at the airport anymore. And when you are on a one-way trip and, in short, when you return from exile, there is nothing scarier than passing through customs, coming face to face with a mob of families, taxi drivers carrying signs with unpronounceable names written on them, and supporters of the local football team and realizing that no one gives a damn that a phase in your life has just ended. For that reason Ruth was especially thankful for Tony's being there and she held him tight.

“Tony, you are the man of my life!” she cried. And she believed it. He was attractive, took good care of himself and of her. And he was so polite that, had he been a Jew, even mom would have okayed him.

“You are a dear, Tony; you really should not have taken the bother. Who did you leave your gallery with?” she asked. That was how they met, at professional events. Ruth’s father himself introduced them. Although they were competitors, Tony and her father had great respect for one another.

“I left it with a new intern, Idunn. She is Finnish, blond, and totally cool. It is impossible to understand anything she says but I don’t care because customers love her. They find her chic. Plus these days there isn’t a lot of movement”. Tony grabbed the suitcase by the handle and started pulling it with one hand and Ruth with the other. “Where are you going to stay? With your mother?”

“No. I’d rather go straight to El Born. I don’t want to move about any more.” Ruth did not feel like explaining to Tony that if she felt under the temptation of going to her mother’s even for just one night, mom would not miss the chance to engulf her, to pressure her into taking charge of the gallery and into rejoining the community, where shortly mom herself would find her a new and suitable husband so she could leave behind that most inconvenient divorce and do the right thing, i.e., have children.

“You are truly brave!” Tony replied and added, only half jokingly: “I have never met a man who was braver than the most cowardly of women.” He paused, hesitated and fell silent.

Luckily, the people who had been renting Ruth’s flat, which she kept as part of the divorce settlement, had left that very month. She had warned the estate agents to take it off the market. She would find it empty but clean. The rest she would take care of little by little. Between what she had brought back from Paris and some stuff she could borrow from mom, she would be able to do an emergency refurbishing.

Tony put the suitcase in the trunk and opened the car door for her. He closed it, got in and squeezed her knee. “Listen, you can stay at my place for a night or two. No more than that, or the neighbours would start gossiping,” he offered as he turned on the engine. Ruth was shocked. Was he looking for something? She declined the offer without speaking and Tony did not insist. His indifference came as a surprise: did Tony want her to go to his place or did he not?

Right then they reached hers. “You are a lucky girl indeed! This is a great neighbourhood: you can jog in the park, walk to the beach, you have as many restaurants as you want, and you have hair salons, stores,” he praised the place as they rode the elevator.

El Born looked more and more like Le Marais and it felt familiar to Ruth. She almost felt happy for her forced return. And should Tony ...

She looked for the keys inside her handbag and opened the door. The estate agents had done their job properly. The wooden floors were polished, the walls smelled of fresh paint. The metal kitchen shone as if it were brand new. She opened the big windows onto Paseo Picasso to let some fresh air in. It was almost dusk. The only piece of furniture was a futon which Ruth left in the agency's custody, foreseeing that one day it may come in handy. Now it looked like an island in the middle of the bedroom.

"Listen, freshen up and let's go for dinner. My treat. And then tomorrow you take your time to do whatever it is you need to do," suggested Tony. Ruth was about to tell him that she was still in *Shloshim* and was not supposed to go out, but she did not. She thought he was a little tense. Maybe he was indeed looking for something. Or maybe that was too much intimacy for him. She never bothered with mind games on first encounters but she was bound to Tony by friendship and by a professional relationship and she was not about to jeopardize either for a quick shag. Furthermore, the tenants of mourning advocated a period of quiet remembrance. Tomorrow she could take care of settling in, of shopping for food and on Friday she would go see mother.

While Tony paced from one room to the next like a caged cat, Ruth removed a pair of pyjamas from her suitcase and left them on the futon. It was a two-piece thing filled with naive wickedness. Would

Tony like it? She would find out some other night. Afterwards, she got out her mobile phone from her handbag. Her call to mom could not wait another day. She speed dialled. "Mom," she said as soon as her mother picked up. "I am home. Shall we spend *Shabbat* together?"

By calling her Ruth avoided the inevitable reproach for not having gone straight to visit her. She did not need her mother to protect her from herself.

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As soon as she opened the door and although she did not say it in so many words, Ruth knew her mother was happy to see her. And so was she. Her mother did not deserve to be alone, just like that, all of a sudden. But she quickly noticed that mom was already recovering. Although she was short and stout, she managed to make the most of her virtues and to hide too generous a bosom, the lack of waist and the big thighs. She was wearing a dark two piece suit and covered her head with a Hermès foulard which would have looked outlandish on any other women but looked great on her. All the many things Ruth knew about fashion she had learnt from her, no matter how hard she tried to deny it. Besides, her mother was so overwhelming that as soon as she opened her mouth, the world forgot about her physical appearance. In the ten short days following the wake Ruth had spent in Paris preparing

her return, her mother had started to rearrange her house. The mirror shone again. The *Shivá* stools had been stored away. In the hall, Ruth spotted several boxes, all labelled. They probably contained those of her father's belongings which could still be of use to the community. After a week of mourning, it was mandatory to get back in action and the widow had followed this tenant. Not even death was going to make mom back down. "If you can't do as you want, you must do as you can", her mother took her by the arm and uttered the refrain by which she planned to rule her life from then on. She could not conceive of her life without her husband but she would not die along with him. She still had plenty of things to do in this world.

When Ruth called, mom had asked if they would be going to *e/ Cal*. They were both silent for a moment. Each was doing a pirouette to come close to the other. It was father who acted as a bridge between them and now they had no broker. Mom was so upfront, so overprotective, so religious. Ruth, on the other hand, has assimilated to a level which her mother found unacceptable. What could she do? Should she go with her to the synagogue or make it clear from the beginning that she had no intention of integrating?

Ruth thought about it for a moment. It was the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. The creation of the world was celebrated as a special occasion. It was not that hard to give in and go with her, maybe

until Yom Kippur. Ten days in total. By then they would both be more upbeat and they could stop acting as if they were Siamese twins.

Of the three synagogues in Barcelona, mom favoured the Orthodox community. Men and women prayed separately. Seating in the upper floor, Ruth concentrated her attention on the different tones of the *Shofar*, which marked the beginning of the ten terrible days, the days of atonement during which believers pray in front of the celestial throne while God examines their deeds and their hearts and decides whether He inscribes them in the Book of Life.

Two and a half years after her divorced, Ruth began her return to Barcelona with a period of reflexion. What had she achieved? Was she better or worse than when she left? In Paris she gave herself some time to recover from a predictable failure. She and Mateo had made a nice couple, nicer in the eyes of the community than in their own. If not for the fact that she had agreed freely to the marriage, one could almost say theirs was *Shidaj*, an arranged marriage. They were so perfect that they had nothing to say to one another. Or maybe there was nothing for them to discover, having spent an entire life together, first in the Sephardic School, later at the Lycée (Mateo was her confidant during her ill-fated relationship with Ricardo) and later still at the Sorbonne. The distance between them was so little that it did not allow for them to grow, and they separated, almost all of a sudden, after letting their frustration grow for longer than necessary. Their

breakup was bitter ... aren't they always? Mateo moved to New York and Ruth swore never to go there. Her mother went livid when hearing about the divorce, just as she was beginning to hope for a grandchild. That was the kind of question Ruth should have been asking herself: Am I a good daughter? Am I a good Jew? In which Book will Adonai inscribe me?

The ten days before Yom Kippur went by both quickly and slowly. Her once familiar neighbourhood required new explorations; some of the stores Ruth remembered were now trendy boutiques. Among the hordes of tourists heading for the zoo or crossing in the direction of Plaza Sant Jaume and the Picasso Museum, the pedestrian mayhem was constant and it often overwhelmed her. Moving was also consuming her energy: it was not easy to get caught up with her father's business. At least once a day Ruth wondered whether she should have stayed in Paris. For, what was in Barcelona for her? She had an overpowering mother set on getting her married again; a polite former boyfriend; his wife, not very open to welcoming her; an art gallery owner/friend who was handsome but distant; a gallery which, more than an inheritance was an obligation; and her own doubts. Clearly, this was not the best time to analyze her sins, unless she wanted to end up with a case of depression.

On the eve of Yom Kippur Ruth went to pick up mom. They were early but the synagogue was already full. For many, this was the only

day in the year they went to *el Cal*. No one missed it, because God was taking a role call. Internally each person had already endlessly reviewed the faults they had committed and anxiously hurried to ask for forgiveness. They came at dusk, having fasted, ready to ask for clemency as soon as the sun hid behind the treetops. And this is how Ruth got ready to start a new life in Barcelona.