



## VESALIO'S SECRET

sample translation by Thomas Bunstead

Thrilled to announce that **World Spanish & Catalan** rights to the amazing Vesalio's *Secret* by Jordi Llobregat have just been sold to Silvia Sesé at Ediciones DESTINO (Planeta), who plans to publish the book in May 2015.

Also,

**World English** rights have just been sold to Jon Riley at QUERCUS.

**German** rights to Eva Schubert at BLANVALET (Random House Germany).

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... futher languages rights to be included on this list very soon.

# I

1888

*Barcelona: the docks*

Scanning the murky reaches for a third time, the old man cursed between gritted teeth. The silence across the water was broken only by the sound of the waves bumping the hull. Rain drifted down, soaking the poop and the tobacco crates. It was the hour before dawn, and a sea mist enveloped the old port, making vague, looming shapes of the boats at anchor and of the dockyard huts, and dropping a veil over the shoreline itself. Manoeuvring the jetty pilings in such conditions was not to be taken lightly. He was an old hand though, and would have a few more runs at it still; that wasn't what he was worried about. Try as he might, he could not shift the feeling: something was afoot, something ill. That was the heavy sensation like ballast gravel in his stomach.

The wind picked up, turning the water choppy. The creases around his eyes deepened further as he swept his gaze back along the boat, taking in his sleeping son and the mast with the sail furled tight. He went back and quickly unfastened it, and, somewhat relieved to see the cloth bulge with wind, he fastened the end to the spar. Clenching his fists, his fingers in their wool gloves creaked like old ropes. The rain and cold had long penetrated the weave of his clothes, down to the bone. He sighed. Operating the boat was getting no easier; soon he would have to step down. He had the strong sense he would not live to see the end of the century, and the marvels of which men spoke. But then again, what matter a pack of clanking machines? What match could such contraptions ever be for a good man with two strong arms? He spat vehemently over the side and tacked the boat a quarter turn.

A little light began tinting the sky, revealing the city's foggy outlines. High above on the port side, the peak of Montjuich reared up. The old man aimed for the

unload point deep in the Lazaretto dock, a place out of sight of the castle watch and clear, too, of the steamships that began crossing at that hour.

A current dragged the boat towards a cluster of rocks. He was working the tiller when something in the water caught his eye. It was less misty in the inner harbour, he could discern the white of the foamy surf around the pilings, and there, not fifteen feet away, between floating scraps of wood and the dangling block-and-tackles, a bulky object had bobbed up. A wave washed over it, and when the swell receded it had gone again. The old man clicked his tongue and waited. It wouldn't be the first time a piece of cargo had fallen off the side of some rich merchant vessel. A stroke of luck for whoever happened to find it.

A minute passed, and then another, and, grudgingly, he accepted that perhaps his old mind might have been playing tricks. But, readying to turn inland again, he heard a splash. The object bobbed up, a few feet closer now, listing this way and that in the water. A smile spread on the old man's face, his teeth a jumble of rotten black stumps, and he swung the boat around: it was an oak chest roughly the size of a wine barrel, with stamps along it that looked, to his eye, French. The binding ropes were in tact, so the piece would still be watertight. The French were known for their porcelain, for fine cloths and spirits, any of which would be worth more than enough to risk a scrape to the boat. Holding the tiller straight now and letting out the sail, he turned back towards the sleeping form in the hull.

"Up with you now. Up and get the gaff."

The youngster looked up at him uncomprehendingly, until the old man gestured to the chest. The boy hurried to his feet and went back to rummage among the nets and ropes, finally extracting a long pole with a hook at its end. As they drew closer, and as his father issued instructions in a low voice, the boy reached out and hooked the chest. The old man brought the boat about, fastened the tiller, and went over to help. Little by little they brought it in, and then began hefting it up the side, careful at the same time not to capsize.

"That's it, easy... Jesus and Mary!"

Suddenly a claw, humanoid and with sharpened fingers, sprang forth and grabbed hold of the old man's arm. Dumbstruck, the old man stared in disbelief; it was pulling him down towards the dark waters. Before he could react, a wave struck the boat and, as quickly as it had showed, the apparition was gone.

The boy grabbed the fishing lamp, pulling back the shutter: the shaft of light fell on a creature gripping the side of the trunk, trying to stay above water. It turned its face towards the light: in place of eyes were two dark openings. A sort of grimace or snarl overtook its features, it seemed to be trying to speak, but, instead of words, a gurgling came out, and then a groan. It didn't look as though it would withstand the sea's buffeting much longer.

The father hesitated.

"Keep the chest steady," he finally said.

The boy stood stock-still. Ashen, he could not take his eyes off the creature. Another wave came, separating boat and chest a few feet further.

"Damn it, boy!"

"Father, are you... Should we?"

The chest began to go under again.

"Come on, heave!"

The son jerked the gaff, and as he dragged the chest and its passenger up and in, the old man steadied himself. Seizing the creature with both hands—it was slippery to the touch and gave off an acrid smell—he hauled it aboard, very nearly capsizing them in the process. The boy moved aft as a counterweight, and finally they got it up.

Swivelling on the deck, it twisted round onto its back and then lay still. Rather than the tail of a fish, as the old man had expected, waist-down it had a pair of legs. It was naked, and rather than a pelt had skin so brilliantly white as to seem almost transparent. Its stomach bore a terrible, blackened gash. The boy was reminded of scaled fish you saw at market.

The old man moved closer, leaning cautiously down and prodding the form for any sign of life. A shiver ran through him; it was extremely cold to the touch. Pushing lightly, his hand sunk into the skin, which had all the solidity of butter. The stench of rotting reached his nose and he stumbled back into the tobacco crates in horror. The boy went over to help him up, and the pair, huddling close together, eyed the battered figure.

"What have we brought aboard, father?"

"As Christ is Lord, I do not know."

Then, after a moment, the body of the creature lit up: a momentary brilliance that revealed, beneath the skin, a structure that seemed to resemble the branches of a tree. A single pulse of light. In unison, father and son made the sign of the cross.

## II

*Twenty-four days before the start of the World Fair*

"That's enough for today, gentlemen."

The lecture theatre filled with the sound of benches being scraped back. The young professor, standing at the lectern, gathered his papers and put them in his satchel. He watched the students file out. Much as he tried to give off an air of sobriety, gravity, *gravitas*, he couldn't help but smile; only a few months earlier he himself had been one of them, and now here he was, having just given his second lecture of term.

He went over to the window. The sky was full of dark grey clouds but, unlike the gloom of certain other places, it could do nothing to puncture his high spirits. His path to that lectern had been long and winding, and no one could say he didn't deserve it. Looking out over the quad, he was on the verge of letting out a contented sigh, when a voice sprang up behind him.

"Professor Amat!"

A young student stood at the door.

"Yes?"

"Apologies, Professor. Sir Edward wishes to see you."

"I'm on my way."

Just listen to that. Professor. Professor and faculty member at Magdalen College, one of the most prestigious colleges in all of Oxford. He'd been brought in as cover for Professor Brown, who had gout, but that hardly lessened the achievement. He was on his way; he'd have his own post in no time. When the opportunity had arisen, he'd jumped at it. Gathering his effects he left the room where, for the whole of the rest of that term, he was to give lectures in Greek. As he made his way along the corridors, he felt students' eyes upon him. He remained an object of some curiosity.

Gathering his gown about him he stepped outside. It had begun to rain and, though May was near at hand, an icy wind swirled around the quad and cloisters. From the lecture theatres came a constant hubbub; they were at the sharp end of the academic year. He quickened his pace, passing the college chapel on his right and coming through the lychgate into a further quad with ivy-lined buildings. Cutting across the gravel path through the flowerbed in the middle, he felt the rain on his brow and neck, but even a thorough drenching couldn't alter his mood.

The Porter had been watching out for Amat and opened up as he saw him approach. Walter was a college institution. It was said that he had occupied his post since Magdalen's inception, though mainly by students who seemed not to know that the college was over four hundred years old. Yet his stooped and wrinkled appearance did suggest something of that. He could get his hands on tobacco, spirits, and many a delicacy beside, all at not unreasonable prices. Such fare was of course prohibited within the college walls, which meant Walter did a roaring trade. Daniel himself had, on occasion, asked a favour or two of the man.

"Mr. Amat... Or should I say," he smiled, "*Professor* Amat..."

Daniel nodded hello. For all Walter considered him a "swarthy foreigner"—as he'd dubbed him the first time he saw him—they had by now developed a mutual fondness.

"How are we this morning Walter?"

"Not so well as yourself, I dare say. It's cold, and when it's cold my bones ache."

"An iodine cure would do you good. I know a man."

Walter looked offended.

"Put myself in the hands of a quack? Why would I want to do that?"

Daniel smiled.

"Sir Edward's expecting me."

"Of course, of course, *professor*. Don't let an old man hold you up, least of all an old man who's not much longer for this world."

Daniel couldn't help but laugh.

"Thank you, Walter. Oh, one thing: I might be needing one or two of those bottles you keep in your store later on..."



"Have to see what I can do," Walter said, feigning dejection. "Can't make any promises, mind." He turned and, murmuring to himself, disappeared back into the lodge.

As Daniel climbed the stairs, he thought of all the great scholars that had trod these same steps. Up on the first floor, at the end of a short passageway, the Rector's door was ajar. Daniel knocked nonetheless, and a voice called him in.

The Rector's study was nothing if not Spartan. Walnut shelves lined the walls, dark rugs covered the floor as far as the desk, and a modest fire burned at the back on the left—a painting of the Battle of Bannockburn hung on the breast. Daniel knew it well. He had spent many hours in Sir Edward's study, some of them, by his reckoning, the happiest of his life. Sir Edward had been his first tutor when he started at the college, and their immediate rapport had developed and deepened over the years.

"My dear Amat, whatever are you hanging about in the doorway for?"

Sir Edward was well into his fifties, but the deep bags under his eyes and his lank, receding hair did little to erode his kindly manner. An eminent historian, he was a well-known orator. Specialising in ancient languages—also Daniel's subject—he had assumed the post of Rector a decade earlier, following the previous incumbent's death.

"Good day?"

Daniel tried to order his thoughts; his mind was skipping from place to place. Euphoria and weariness competed in his system.

"Wonderful, Sir Edward. Wonderful!"

"How pleasing. High hopes, my boy, high hopes."

"Thank you, sir. I'll try not to let you down."

Dismissing the doubt with a waft of his hand, Sir Edward settled back in his chair.

"How long now since you arrived? Six years, unless I'm mistaken?"

"Going on seven."

"Seven years! How it passes." He squinted. "I still remember the day you walked through that door, fresh from Barcelona."

At the mention of the word, Daniel's face darkened. Sir Edward, however, seemed not to notice.

"Yes! Soaked to the bone you were, there had been a downpour, and for luggage all you had was a single suitcase. I could hardly understand that accent of yours, and your general appearance, my goodness!" He laughed. "I was of a mind to call the constabulary, did you know that?"

Daniel shook his head.

"I have always wondered what brought you to these parts. And you, in turn, have always been so tight lipped on the subject."

"Oxford is world-renowned, sir. I always dreamed of studying here."

"Mm. Yes, of course." Sir Edward straightened up. "In any case, you're no longer that green lad who walked through the door. No, you've left him far, far behind. It's a man I see here before me, yes indeed, quite the candidate!"

"As I say, sir, my only hope is -"

"Yes, yes. Well, during this fortnight in Professor Brown's shoes, by all accounts, you've acquitted yourself in exemplary fashion. In fact that's why I sent for you." Sir Edward paused. "Your capabilities are beyond all doubt. You've given us more than enough reason to believe in you. Yesterday was our annual head of faculties meeting. Among other things, a proposal was agreed upon, unanimously in fact: we're offering you a post in the faculty of Classical Languages. What do you say to that?"

A wave of gratitude and joy washed over Daniel. He couldn't believe it—so soon! Sir Edward's smile broadened at the younger man's stuttering response.

"Well? What do you say? Do you accept?"

"But of course, sir! Of course. It's... fantastic! I can't begin to... I owe you everything."

"Nonsense. You've earned it. You've shown first class dedication, first class. In all my years I've seen very few as well fitted to the job."

Sir Edward got up and went over to the drinks cabinet, pouring two generous glasses of brandy.

"And my daughter, eh?" he said, passing a glass across the desk. "She'll be pleased no doubt? I'm delighted she accepted our, should I say, *your* proposal. I'm very much looking forward to welcoming you in to the family as my stepson. The dinner tonight, we're going to announce it then. Alexandra is my everything. I'm sure you'll make her very happy."

"I love her very much."

Sir Edward nodded, and raised his glass.

"Alexandra is, like her mother, a most marvellous creature. I feel I ought to warn you of something, however, lest you reproach me further down the line for not having done so... Oh, she's beautiful, capable, knows how to run a household, it's just... That temper of hers! You never know when it will rear up." He winked. "Well, it'll be the Welsh in her I suppose. Dragon country and all that!"

They both laughed. Daniel had a deep fondness for his father-in-law to be. When he had been most in need, he'd been the man to take him in—no questions asked. His world had come crumbling down, and Sir Edward had been there to pick up the pieces. He would never be able to fully repay him.

"To your health, Amat, and to the many grandchildren you're going to give me!"

They clinked glasses, and, out of respect, Daniel took a small sip. Then, placing the glass down on the table, he got to his feet.

"I have a few matters to see to before dinner tonight, Sir Edward. With your blessing..."

"Of course, of course, that was all. A little bird tells me some student colleagues of yours have organized a gathering? Fear not, my lips are sealed. Just don't be late for dinner—Alexandra will have your guts."

Laughing, Sir Edward saw Daniel to the door.

"Oh," he said, raising a finger, "I almost forgot."

Going back over to the desk, he sifted through a pile of documents, finally alighting on a mustard coloured envelope.

"A telegram came this morning."

"For me?"

"Indeed, indeed. The mark says Barcelona."

As Sir Edward handed it over, Daniel's nerves nearly gave him away. The old man seemed not to notice his trembling hand, and Daniel managed to stow the envelope without dropping it.

"I'll... read it later on," he said. "So many errands!"

"Yes, yes."

Leaving the office and making his way down the stairs again, Daniel set off as fast as his quivering legs would carry him.

Back in his old student quarters, he collapsed into the chair. Finals, the professorship, the engagement to Alexandra, it had all happened so quickly that he hadn't had time to move rooms. His trunks were ready in the corner, but he was still to pack any of his books or clothes. But, just then, none of this could have been further from his thoughts. His jubilation had melted into nothing. The professorship, the wedding, these all seemed to be facets from some other person's life. He took the envelope from his pocket and considered it.

How? After all this time?

His hand went to the scars on his neck, the same unconscious gesture that had developed into a tic during these last seven years. He ran his fingertips across the dead tissue, a constant reminder of the fire... How could he have thought he'd truly escaped? A simple telegram and the spell was broken.

He tore open the letter. Inside was a pink sheet of paper. Unfolding it, he scanned the filigreed lines, but couldn't take in what they were saying. He took a deep breath and started again.

Seven years, gone just like that.

He went over and braced himself against the window frame. Outside, the rain continued to fall on the grounds, darkening the greenery and the university buildings. After all these years, they'd found him. He'd known they would, sooner or later, but he hadn't imagined... Perhaps he ought to be in pain, he thought, but all he felt were searing sensations, rage, guilt. He shut his eyes and rested his head against the glass, tried to stem the anguish. He clenched his fists, and his whole body tensed up. Crumpling the telegram into a ball, he threw it to the far end of the room. Only then did the tears come, intermingling with the raindrops that streaked the windowpane.

### III

The sound of snoring shook the hovel. There was a sheet pinned to the window frame, and daylight entered at the edges. It was the usual Raval guesthouse – just as good a place as any to pass out drunk. Cramped, stuffy, with drips in several places, occupants would usually rent for a few months at a time. The current inhabitant had been there for five months.

“Be damned!”

A figure stirred on the straw mattress. Glancing wildly around, he appeared to be trying to remember where he was. Swinging his legs over the side and getting to his feet, he stumbled back onto the bedding. With hands on head, he unleashed a series of curses in a gravelly voice.

“Bread!” he called. “And some of that Alsace wine!”

Groaning, the man stood up out of bed. He tottered over to the desk, where he began swiping aside mounds of old newspapers and scribbled-on sheets. Finally, alighting on a brass clock, he exclaimed triumphantly. Undoing the clasp, and seeing that the hour hands approached midday, his giddiness seemed suddenly to drain away.

“It can’t be...”

He began dashing around the room in his undershorts. He filled the basin and splashed his face with cold water, cursing the while. The ache at his temples wouldn’t abate; he plunged his head right in. This set him shivering, and he dried himself with the bed sheet. Trousers, shirt, boots came next, and on his way out he took a gulp from the coffee cup on the side—immediately regretting it. The dark liquid, quite cold, tasted like a stagnant pond—it was the fourth time he’d used the same grounds, he remembered. Spluttering, snatching down his straw hat and checked jacket from the stand, he dashed from the room, tying his bow tie as he hurried down the stairs.

“Señor Fleixa!”

A man with a large paunch stepped into his path. He glared at Fleixa through drooping eyelids. The man smelled strongly of garlic, which did little to help clear Fleixa's head.

"Señor Gonzalez! I was just thinking about you. How's that saint of a wife?"

"Three months' rent you owe me. The room's up."

"Three months? How is that possible? Well, not to worry, my friend. I'm owed some pay from the reports I've been writing recently—we'll have this ridiculous matter solved in no time. As you know sir, we well-known journalists have certain social obligations, and I've had some unforeseen costs as a result."

"I know all about your social obligations. You said the same last month."

"There must have been a mix up. Your wife was kind enough to let me defer my latest payment."

"Jacinta? When did the two of you speak?"

"Yesterday, middayish..."

"But yesterday she was at mass at midday."

"Oh, later on in that case."

A smile of comprehension spread on the landlord's face. Perhaps, thought Fleixa, it hadn't been the best idea to bring Jacinta into it; better, perhaps, not to mention the agreement they'd come to after the previous day's amorous encounter. Gonzalez was known throughout the area for his dull wits, but perhaps even he could sense the horns his wife had, for quite some time now, been fixing on his head. Fleixa didn't much feel like hanging around to find out, and made a dive for a gap that had opened up to the right.

"Wait just a second!"

Pretending not to hear, Fleixa carried on down the stairs.

"At the end of the month," he called back up. "You'll have your money, I promise!"

A stream of insults followed him out the door.

He hurried down the street, shouldering his jacket as he went. The Raval was extremely overcrowded and stank of several kinds of rot; migrants from across Spain had been piling in here for years now, drawn by the promise of work in the

neighbourhood's factories. But Fleixa was happy enough here, he relished the bustle of it all. The cobblestones resembled a small river in places, so ill equipped was the drainage system to deal with the heavy rain they'd seen of late. The earthen path had become a mud bath in places. Fleixa glanced from the ground to the sky and back down again.

"If it carries on raining like this, the port will come up to meet us one day. So much for the start of summer!"

He came past a shopkeeper emptying slops into the street, and then a pair of colliers pulling their coal cart behind them and openly eyeing a group of women across the way. The journalist, as was his custom, tipped his hat to the ladies. They, taking refuge in a doorway, didn't seem all that suitably dressed for the weather. One of them stepped out to speak to Fleixa. An infant boy with a dark shock of hair clung to her neck.

"Dolores was looking for you last night, rascalion."

"Manuela, hello! Have you done something? You are looking especially lovely."

Straightening her hair, the woman smiled bashfully; she had perhaps three teeth in her mouth. Her considerable cleavage announced the barely concealed breasts beneath her blouse, against which the child's head bounced. She smelt of brandy, onions and firewood.

"You do know," she said, "when you get bored of her, you could always come and see me..."

Now it was Fleixa's turn to smile.

"Be a good girl and tell Dolores I'll see her later."

She snorted, and with a twirl of her skirt went back over to the group.

Exiting the alleyway, Fleixa came out onto Las Ramblas, which was alive with crowds at that hour. Fruit and vegetable carts, headed for La Boquería market, vied with horses and traps. Along came the Cataluña line tram, hand bell ringing out. Match sellers, newspaper venders and florists cried their wares as the well off ladies and gentlemen strolled by. Fleixa dived through the middle of the mass of people, crossed to Calle del Pi, and after a few minutes was at the newspaper offices.

The *Barcelona Correo* had been running for ten years, and had recently gained a foothold as one of the main papers in the city. Its name would ring out each morning, along with that of the *Diari de Barcelona*, The Liberal Party's *La Vanguardia* and the *Noticiero Universal*, which was the newest, and made great claims of independence. Residents of the city were avid readers of the news, and the papers were their best way of keeping up to date. The *Correo's* headquarters stretched across the four floors of an old gothic building whose stone façade gave an air of respectability that kept the owners happy. The porter greeted Fleixa in his typical respectful manner.

"You, Señor Fleixa, are late."

"*Seraffín!* The news keeps no fixed schedule."

"Tell it to Don Sanchís. I've heard him shouting your name from here."

Don Pascual Sanchís was editor in chief at the *Correo*. Not a man known for his good humour, he was rumoured to have smiled the day the *Correo* broke the story of town councillor Rusell's affair, and the edition went to three runs. His office was always dense with cigar smoke; he was rarely seen without an enormous Montecristo lodged in the side of his mouth. He ruled with an iron fist – the *Correo* wouldn't have been half as successful had it been otherwise.

Fleixa felt ill at ease as he ascended the stairs; it was never good if Sanchís was after you. And the man's mood was hardly likely to improve when he found out that Fleixa hadn't yet closed his latest piece. But what could he do if a source had failed to show? Three nights in a row he'd been to the meeting point at Set Portes. The matter had become a little more complicated on the last of those nights; Fleixa had had some wine, to pass the time, and let himself get involved in a game of cards. He had not won. Feeling quite certain Luck couldn't desert him twice in the same night, he'd taken the tram over to the hippodrome: another seventy-five pesetas down the drain. That had added to the seventy he already owed La Negra, a moneylender with a reputation for always reclaiming her debts. She was just about the only one he could still borrow from, and now things were getting serious. To top it off, the *Correo* had also stopped paying him advances.

He was panting by the time he made it up to the editorial department. A couple of printer boys came past, but he ignored their greeting, heading straight to his shared office. Upon his desk, on top of the stacks of dusty papers, was a pair of large shoes. The man to whom the feet belonged was sat reading that morning's news.



“Good day to you,” said Fleixa, scraping back his chair.

“My!” came a singsong voice from behind the paper. “Señor Bernat Fleixa in the flesh! To what do we owe the honour -”.

“Leave it out, Alejandro.”

Alejandro Vives had been appointed political editor four years earlier. Slim as a lighthouse, and nearly as tall, he had small eyes and a very long nose—it was said that his nose would find out a story before the man himself. He always seemed to be in a good mood, even around Fleixa—Alejandro was just about the only member of staff who hadn’t given up on him.

“Rough night?” he said.

Fleixa weighed up the sarcasm in the question. Alejandro continued to read.

“Not the best,” said Fleixa. “How is Sanchís today, by the way?”

“I believe he’s been somewhat desirous of your company.”

“Fine, let him be.”

Rummaging through his desk drawers for some tobacco, Fleixa glanced over at the paper Alejandro was reading—it was that day’s edition. Something caught his eye and he stopped. His eyes grew wide as he scanned the column in the bottom right hand corner.

*Body found floating in port*

*An individual, identity unknown, was found down by the Lazaretto port in the early hours of Sunday morning. A pair of fishermen brought the body in. The authorities are not treating the death as suspicious, pointing to a mishap that had been reported in the early hours. With no criminal investigation taking place, the family will be able to bury their kin. The ceremony will take place at midday today at the Oeste Cemetery.*

Felipe Llopis had the byline.

“What the hell happened to my piece?” Fleixa cried.

Fleixa left the office, crossing the department floor in the direction of the editor in chief. There were several barely-concealed smirks as he passed—an article being pulled and replaced by another, that was bound to be common knowledge. Fleixa was fuming. Not bothering to knock, he barged open the heavy glass door.

On the far side of a table filled with galley proofs, teletypes and copies of rival papers, stood a man so broad he made everything else in the room seem small. Seeing Fleixa, his face darkened.

“Why’s my report been pulled?” Fleixa cried.

A voice came from behind him:

“The death of a hundred chickens, down at the Sans warehouses, is after all undoubtedly front page copy.”

A young man in an impeccable suit was sitting on the armchair at the back of the office. Felipe Llopis always combed his fair hair with oil, and his delicate goatee was always immaculately sculpted. The female typists fawned over him, and he had even managed to charm his way into the esteem of his colleagues. No one knew who his sources were, or the secret of his knack for always landing a story first. The *Correo* had poached him from *La Campana* the previous year. In Fleixa’s eyes, he was the most perfect imbecile imaginable.

“Llopis! I thought something smelled in here!”

“Your natty jacket, no doubt.”

“What do you mean -”.

“Enough!”

Sanchís thumped the table. They had the attention of the whole department now.

“Felipe, we’ll talk later. Shut the door behind you.”

There was even a certain elegance to the way the young reporter stood up from the armchair. He winked on his way past Fleixa, who merely glared back, clenching his fists.

“Damn it Pascual, letting him rob my column like that!”

“Sit down and be quiet!”

Fleixa sat down, before immediately disobeying the second part of the command.

“Why’s that cobbler in my City Life column?”

“First of all, it’s my column, not yours, as with the rest of this paper. And that cobbler happens to deliver news. You meanwhile -”.

“I’m this close on that story I was telling you about, any day now. It’s going to blow everything else out of the water.”

Sanchís shook his head, flapping his generous jowls. Fleixa was put in mind of a British bulldog.

“How long have you and I known one other?”

Fleixa shrugged.

“You’re not making this any easier. You show up late, you work when you feel like it, it’s been weeks now and only fillers from you.” A pained expression entered his face. “Years we’ve known each other, Bernat, and I’ve never seen you like this. Look at your clothes, and could your eyes get any redder? You stink. Back at the cards? How much do you owe?”

Fleixa didn’t answer.

“I’m going to come clean with you: I’m thinking about giving you the push.” He pointed his cigar towards the department. “Llopis wears fancy suits and he reckons himself quite the little lord, but he’s out there day after day. He gets himself in the right places, and once he’s there, damn if he doesn’t root around. He brings me what I need: copy. Same as you not so long ago. This is a *newspaper*, Bernat, we live or die by that. Look at the city. Barcelona’s changing. The world’s changing. Before we know it the World Fair’s going to be underway. *Times* are changing, and men like Llopis are right there at the coalface.”

Fleixa cleared his throat.

“I just need a bit more time.”

Again the flapping of Sanchís’ jowls. He took a deep breath and massaged his neck. The smoke in the room settled by a few degrees before he came to speak again.

“I know this is a bad idea... A week I’m giving you, seven days, and that’s it. Then I’ll make a decision, and I won’t go back on it. Clear?” He thrust the cigar in the direction of the door. “Out now, and get yourself a wash, would you?”

As Fleixa went out, he heard the man murmuring behind him.

“A newspaper, this is a newspaper, damn it.”

The sound of the typewriters and conversations in the department were back to their normal level now. Fleixa caught sight of Llopis at his desk, surrounded by a group of young hacks. Llopis nodded as he passed, and in reply Fleixa stuck his middle finger up and carried on his way. An alarm was going off in his head, nothing to do with Llopis: he sensed he’d forgotten something, some

important detail, but couldn't pin it down. His focus wasn't helped by the combination of a hangover and the prospect of losing his job.

"How did *that* go?" asked Alejandro when Fleixa came back into the office.

"Could have been worse," he said.

His colleague, reclining in his chair, was still leafing through the paper. Then Fleixa remembered... He began foraging around among his notes.

"Time?" Fleixa demanded. "What's the time?"

"What? Pawned your watch again?"

"What's the time, damn it!"

"Nearly one o'clock, why..."

With that, Fleixa dashed from the room, leaving a trail of whirling papers scattered in his path.

## IV

Montjuich Cemetery enjoyed a beautiful out over the sea. Not today, though: midday had just chimed on the bells of Poble Sec, but so deep was the gloom it could almost have been the middle of the night. The rain beat down, and a flashes of lightning lit the marble mausoleums. Saints, angels and virgins, all of them weeping furiously, seemed to become animate when Daniel glanced their way. He put his hand to the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. The journey from Oxford had been long, and he was tired.

He shifted on his feet, the gravel crunching beneath them. The mass had been brief, the minimum of fuss: his father would have been pleased about that. Daniel had refused the invitation to speak. His memories were of an elegant man, always immaculately presented, and of how distant he'd become when Daniel's mother had died: father and son had become strangers that day. Daniel's father had thrown himself into his medical work, which from then on had become the single governing influence in the life of the family. How well Daniel could hear the voice, commanding silence from the children: the great man was trying to work. Silence, always silence, broken only by the occasional lecture, and that always on the same topic: how the children were to follow after him, honouring the name by growing up to become medical men and women too.

He had never done so.

He looked over at the adjacent grave, that of his brother. His hand shot to the scars on his neck. Pursing his lips, he focussed on the soothing sensation of the rain bathing his neck – though he also knew, very well, that even such a torrent could never wash away the memories. He regarded the handful of mourners. Four umbrellas surrounded the grave like dark toadstools, sheltering men in long black coats and brimmed felt hats. Old colleagues of his father's. All of them with the same indifferent expressions; they'd attended many such affairs.

A municipal clerk was also there, representing the local authorities. His father had always been a well-connected man. Don Alfred Amat i Roures was an eminent doctor and professor, and his burial was no small matter, but in such weather the functionary would doubtless be making his excuses at the earliest opportunity.

Four or five students were hanging back to Daniel's right. They moved about uncomfortably in the downpour, huddling close in their jackets; he imagined they'd be leaving soon enough as well. He thought he glimpsed a hipflask being passed between them.

No more than a dozen people, and that included the cemetery workers who just then began passing the ropes beneath the coffin. A life of sacrifice, dedicated solely to the advance of medicine, only to end your days under a mound of dirt thrown there by a few strangers. The men began lowering the coffin, which wobbled unceremoniously, before, with a splash, coming to rest at the bottom of the grave. Meanwhile the priest – over whose head an altar boy, himself drenched, held an umbrella – intoned from Ecclesiastes. The creaking scrape of the ropes as they were pulled from beneath the coffin drowned out the priest's concluding words. Daniel leaned down and tossed a handful of mud into the grave. The impact seemed to echo throughout the cemetery; Daniel was slightly surprised not to see his father clamber out and tell him off for being so noisy. As the shovel loads of earth filled in the grave, the mourners began bidding hurried farewells. A freezing sea wind had picked up; there were better places to pass such an afternoon than in the Montjuich cemetery.

His father's colleagues were the first to come over and offer condolences. Guarded expressions, the customary phrases, a few memories summing up his father's merits – a great doctor, a great advocate of the sciences. And so on. Daniel barely registered the tributes. Nodding, he held out his hand to shake theirs automatically, all the while avoiding eye contact. The last of the professors, walking with a stick, came over. He'd come without an umbrella, and the water trickled through his drenched hat.

“C-c-condolences. I- I'm v-very s-sorry f-for y-your loss.”

Daniel murmured a thank you, offered his hand, and looked past the man to the next in line. But the man didn't move on, instead clearing his throat and continuing in his whispered stutter:

"M-my name is Joan Gavet. I was, let's say, a f-friend of your f-father's."

Daniel nodded unenthusiastically.

"I h-hope your ret-turn to B-Barcelona has b-brought you *s-some* p-pleasure, after all these y-years."

"Not exactly. In fact, the moment I stepped off the train I was involved in an incident."

"N-no! What m-manner of incident?"

"Oh, it was nothing," said Daniel, cursing himself for mentioning it. "My luggage was stolen. I only brought a few clothes, one or two personal items, nothing hard to replace."

"All th-the same, I-I'm awfully s-sorry."

"Really, no matter. In any case, I don't plan on staying long."

"O-oh?" said the man, seemingly disappointed. "A sh-shame, I'd h-hoped we m-might have a ch-chance to m-meet and t-talk. A p-pleasure to h-have m-met you, all th-the same."

And with that, the singular doctor turned and set off into the rainy afternoon.

The rest of the mourners dispersed like ravens at a gunshot. Daniel readied himself to do the same, but then noticed a young man still standing by the grave. He looked genuinely stricken, and for a moment Daniel's heart went out to the stranger: someone had cared about his father, after all. The youngster glanced up, his almond-shaped eyes momentarily meeting Daniel's – but he immediately looked away, before gathering his coat about him and hurrying off down the path.

Then it was just Daniel. He watched as the men shovelled in the rest of the earth. Daniel took a deep breath of sea air. Taking in the sight of his father's final resting place, he adjusted his hat and was making to leave when a waft of jasmine came past him. Across the path, under a cypress tree, stood a figure dressed in black.

A graveyard illusion, Daniel wondered? He approached slowly, fearing that the figure might vanish. The woman looked up at him through a dark veil. She

pursed her lips, watching as he approached; her eyes were just as green as he remembered. She held an umbrella in her gloved right hand, and her astrakhan coat close about her in the other. A few strands of dark hair had fallen loose from her fascinator, and these swayed in the wind. Daniel stopped a few paces from her, and each regarded the other, weighing the impact of the years. She broke the silence:

“Señor Amat.”

Daniel nodded in reply.

“Irene,” he said, barely containing the waver in his voice. “Good of you to come.”

“The least I could do – I was fond of your father.”

Daniel looked in her eyes for the young girl he’d known in his youth – her voice had changed more than her features, the Caribbean accent having faded and the tone deepening. She removed a lace handkerchief from her bag and dabbed her eyes. Lifting the veil, she revealed a glimpse of mulatto skin.

“What a long time it’s been,” Daniel managed to say.

“Too long.”

“How have you -”

“Fine, fine. Good of you to ask.”

She glanced towards the cemetery entrance. A coachman stood waiting. A brief look of concern entered her features, and as she put the handkerchief away her hand seemed to tremble very slightly, but she composed herself just as quickly.

“I ought to go,” she said.

Daniel felt the urge to stop her, but what could he say? She waited for a moment – Daniel seemed about to speak – but when the words didn’t come, she gathered herself and left. Then, on an impulse, he hurried after her, catching her at the elbow. She was close enough for him to feel the warmth of her body. Memories collided in his mind; the cemetery faded to nothing... Seeing her glaring at him through the veil, he came out of his reverie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she said.

“I should...” he said, “I should have written.”

“But you didn’t. Maybe it was better that way.”

“I’d like to come and see you before I leave -”



“You can’t. Not now.”

Removing his hand from her arm, she set off again. Daniel watched her go, her figure passing beneath the dripping cypresses, growing smaller in the distance.

Alone once more, Daniel considered his father’s resting place for the final time, before turning and making his way towards the cemetery gates. Irene’s incursion had affected him – what a fool he was! Why had it not occurred that she might come? Forgotten feelings raced around inside him. Why did it matter to him, after all this time? He’d made a new life for himself, was betrothed, had a position at the University: his was an altogether enviable future. She was the past. A past that was at no danger of returning.

As Daniel was about to reach the road, he was distracted from his thoughts by the sound of someone panting and wheezing.

“Señor Amat? *Damn* this rain.”

A short, moustachioed man was just behind him, leaning over to catch his breath. Wearing a checked jacket, with a bow tie and straw hat, his steamed-up glasses had slid to the end of his nose, revealing bulging eyes. Blinking the rain away, he smiled, which cocked his moustache jauntily. Daniel did not remember seeing the man at the ceremony.

“Do we know one other?”

The man proffered a wet hand.

“Bernat Fleixa,” he said, before fishing in his jacket. “My card.”

Daniel scanned it. His eyebrows shot up.

“Journalist?”

“That’s right Señor. With the *Correo*.”

“And what is it you want?”

“A few minutes of your time, if at all possible.”

Handing back the card, Daniel turned on his heel.

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

Fleixa scurried after Daniel.

“Well, really,” he said, “it’s more what I’ve got to say to you. You’re the spit of your father, did you know that? Far more youthful, that goes without saying...”

“Ah! You knew my father!” said Daniel. “But of *course* you did.”

“Doctor Amat and I had certain dealings. In fact -”

“Listen, Señor Fleixa,” said Daniel, turning brusquely to face him. “If you in fact *had* had any dealings with my father, you would know the low esteem in which he held journalists. He’d rail against your kind at any opportunity, and the slander that is your stock and trade. Even the weeklies were beyond the pale by his reckoning. Never in a thousand years would he have even two words to say to a man such as yourself.”

“Well, he did. As it goes, he sought *me* out, Señor.”

Now it was Daniel’s turn to take deep breaths. He felt suddenly worn out. The journey, the ceremony, Irene... All he wanted now was to sleep, a good long sleep in a clean bed, and then to board the return train, the one whose destination was his real life.

“A minute of your time,” said Fleixa. “That’s all I ask. After that, you need only say the word and you’ll never hear from me again.”

The man was a pest; Daniel quickened his pace.

“Wait!” came Fleixa’s voice. “Your father and I were supposed to have met, but he never showed up. He was prevented...” Fleixa caught up with Daniel, and went on in a low voice: “Señor Amat. Your father was murdered.”

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