

*Ñ* in English: Translating the Metalinguistic Humor of David Soriano's Satirical Novella

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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In 2006 an obscure Catalan science fiction writer caught the attention of genre enthusiasts with his short novella *Ñ*. It was the introductory tale in an anthology of alternate Spanish histories – uchronias in Spanish – titled *Franco: una historia alternativa*. Readers responded to the story's sharp political thriller plotting, biting satire and, most of all, its incisive critique of the politics of ethnolinguistic conflict in Spain. But in Soriano's "Espanya", it is the Castilians who are fighting in 1975 for the normalization of their language and demanding political autonomy after decades of sharp repression from a Catalanist dictatorship.

This thesis attempts to create an English language version of the story for a general interest audience. A major challenge is how to handle a suite of humorous wordplay conceived for a readership intimately aware of the simmering conflict between speakers of Catalan, the native language of much of the eastern littoral and Mediterranean insular Spain, and Castilian Spanish, which is overwhelmingly dominant in the rest of the Spanish state as well as Latin America. The translation opts for a straightforward rendering of this humor, trusting that context and fast paced plotting will keep potential North Americans readers from being dissuaded.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Miguel Jiménez, Laura Ramirez and Michael Rockland for the time they generously spent helping me complete this project. Without their interest and expert advice, I doubt this remarkable piece would have finally been translated. I would further thank their colleagues in the Rutgers Department of Spanish and Portuguese, under whose patient tutelage I spent roughly a decade earning a second undergraduate and now a master's degree. They lifted me from an adulthood of monolingualism and taught me to appreciate the words and thoughts of another billion of my fellow inhabitants on this Earth.

## DEDICATION

To my wife, Sharon Marie Cook, who would not let me walk away from this challenge.

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## Introduction

Will humorous wordplay between two closely related Romance languages still be funny when it is translated into English? That is the central challenge of rendering an English version of David Soriano Gimenez' acclaimed 2006 novella *Ñ*, the opening story for the speculative fiction anthology *Franco: una historia alternativa*. The conclusion of this translator is a partial 'yes'. North American readers can be counted on to grasp, either through a passive knowledge of the Spanish language and its culture or through contextual details provided in the story itself, enough of the metalinguistic wit of the story to sustain their enjoyment. But that partial yes concedes that a full appreciation of the situational humor requires a nuanced understanding of Spanish ethnolinguistic history. So this translation takes a standard strategy of focusing on the most accessible elements of this humor to English-speaking readers – and accepts the rest be obscure in its more or less straightforward rendering in English.

### Soriano's Speculative Tale

It is the end of the long dictatorship in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spain. Spaniards are emerging warily from decades of fascist rule to embrace democracy and reform, to cast aside exhausted patriarchal social control and enjoy the prosperity and personal freedoms that characterize the neighboring liberal states of Europe. Inevitably the long-suppressed linguistic minorities that Spain comprises choose this hopeful time to challenge central authorities now weakened and discredited.

Indeed, the actual history of post dictatorship Spain included a flowering of regional languages and identities long suppressed (and often violently) by the

Españolismo agenda of the regime of General Francisco Franco. But in *Ñ*, it is not the end of the dictadura in España but rather in Espanya. And in this history millions of Castilians from dusty highland interior of Iberia want the freedom to publicly use their language and choose their regional leadership, privileges long denied by the Catalan overlords of Soriano's alternate Spanish state.

### Another Time, Another Spain

Published in 2006 as the opening tale in *Franco: Una Historia Alternativa*, the Iberia of *Ñ* closely resembles our own. In the late Middle Ages the nascent Spanish state absorbed its regional rivals and then created a great empire in the Americas. But in Soriano's telling, it was the Catalano-Aragonese King Jaume II who defeated his Castilian rival Fernando IV in the late 1300s, thanks in part to the decimation of interior Spain by the Black Plague. (Soriano 30-31). By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Soriano's Spain is in the same sad state as the España in our own history. Shorn of its empire, it stumbles into dictatorship in 1938 when a general by the uber-Catalan name of Feliubadaló seizes power with the help of the Nazis (again echoing the ascent of our Francisco Franco).

What follows are nearly four decades of authoritarian nationalist rule, aided by the crypto fascist lay religious order, Germandat dels Guaites de la Mare de Déu de Montserrat (Brotherhood of Sentinels of the Mother of God of Montserrat), that comes to a familiar disintegration in the progressive 1970s. With the death of the Catalanist Gerent, Feliubadaló, in 1975, the caretaker government, called the Gerencia, sees the inevitable and prepares for a transition to a pluralistic and plurilingual democracy.

### The Tale of *Ñ*

Soriano's story opens when the decrepit but still dangerous Germandat summons a thuggish young fixer, Ermengol Massana, to its headquarters in the Spanish capital of Lleida. His mission: assassinate the Castilian nationalist leader Emeterio Ruiz de la Barca-Fery, just then returning from a long exile in France.

Thus Massana begins his long and poorly financed road trip across a rapidly changing country. As he leaves the northeast and heads inland to the planned assassination in Valladolid, the hitman is at first puzzled and then outraged to see highway signs for one community after the next overwritten from standard Spanish – that is Catalan – to new spellings. La Cahiga becomes Cagiga, Madrit becomes Madriz, and so on. “The place names of these lands seemed in the grip of a virulent orthographical distress”, thinks Massana before noticing the mysterious circled Ñ beneath each vandalism. (Soriano, 30) It is the symbol of unilateral normalization of the Castilian language in central Spain.

In its final pages the story comes to a literally thunderous climax as Massana tries and fails to execute Barca-Fery at a packed stadium during a soccer game of Pucelano Atletico, the Castilian national team (shades of FC Barcelona). But in a shocking twist the deed is done by a fellow Castilian leader, a populist rival to the old moderate hero. And the story ends with events rapidly departing from the “Café para todos” doctrine that created the integrated autonomous governments at the end of our history's Spanish dictatorship to a likely Castilian secession.

In an appreciative review published in the February 2018 edition of the journal *Hélice*, Youngstown State University Professor Diana Palardy called the 2006 story “prophetic” of the subsequent secessionist movement in Catalonia. In the novella, Barca-

Fery, while Castilian to his bones, is deeply ambivalent about his homeland actually seceding from the Spanish state because “there have been several centuries of co-existence, some cultural and historical ties with the rest of Spain that would forever render its unmaking traumatic.” Tellingly, the author has this humanistic and liberal leader cynically murdered by the younger and much more radically separatist Ruy Aznacod, a dynamic politician with demagogic tendencies who sees moderation and accommodation as a failed strategy of the past. Though, Palardy adds, that by making the dynamic of oppressor vs. oppressed in reverse of actual Spanish history, “it suggests precisely the universality of the question of (these) moral dilemmas...” (Palardy, 63-65)

### Translating *Ñ*

The novella *Ñ* is remarkable then for several of its qualities: period detail, trenchant political analysis, biting satire of ethnolinguistic independence movements (and nationalism in general), the sharp plotting of thriller. All of those things can be translated to English in a straightforward fashion. But the story’s humor is another matter. So much of it depends on the readers’ understanding of the Catalan-Castilian linguistic conflict that has simmered in Eastern Spain for decades. The original, written in Spanish for a readership in Spain, could reasonably expect the interlinguistic jokes to land. But this translation’s target audience will be English language readers mainly in North America. How to render the dozens of interlinguistic jokes in an accurate but also comprehensible fashion for this audience?

At first this translator considered hybrid approaches that would combine anglicization of some words – changing *Espanya* and *espanyol* to *Spain* and *Spanish*, respectively – while leaving other lexical details as in the original. But this approach

turned muddled and confusing. Soriano is economical in his application of the Castilian vs. Catalan humor. He helpfully puts key Catalan phrases in italics to emphasize their deviancy from our current situation. Why diminish his prose for questionable outcomes?

Moreover, a translator can take into consideration that the potential audience for this version, readers in the United States of America, now includes 60 million fluent speakers of Spanish – more than the population of Spain itself. Add to that anyone who takes Spanish in an American high school (half of all students) and you have a significant potential audience who will at least notice the weirdness of Soriano’s Catalanist Espanya. So in the end, the course chosen was to trust the author and the audience’s intelligence and render the original straightforwardly. In other words, to foreignize the text to a certain degree.

For instance, there was the previously mentioned matter of Italicized Catalan words and phrases that Soriano sprinkles through his Spanish text. The italics therefore serve to emphasize the strangeness of this parallel Spain, where the dominant tongue even in Latin America is the Catalan language. This translation maintains most of those italics, which are generally self-explanatory even to a monolingual anglophone. For example: *organizació, Guardians d’Esquadra, Avant Espanya, bon profit, merda*. This translation drew the line at extended turns of phrase or complicated Catalan-Castilian wordplay. In the first scene Oriol Maria Puigfariol, the director of the paramilitary religious society that helped the dictator Feliubadaló rise to power in 1938, is dismissing the lack of sentiment of his fixer Ermengol Massana: “Un *fill* siempre es un *fill*... ¡aunque sea un *fill de puta!*” This version added an extra ellipsis preceded by the English translation of the noun (Soriano, 21)

## Place Names in Soriano's Espanya

It goes without saying that proper names of characters and institutions need to be rendered without translation. This pertains also for historical figures, such as Ferran IV of Castile (Fernando in Spanish, Ferdinand in English) and Jaume II (Jaime in Spanish, James in English). But place names posed an additional challenge. An important part of the humor and strangeness of this story are the Catalanized place names scattered throughout interior Spain: Valladolit for Valladolid, Madrit for Madrid, Xadrac for Jadraque, Saragosa for Zaragoza, Catallaüd for Calatayud, and many others.

In the third chapter of the story, as the hotheaded Massana tools along the highways through the Maseta Central, he becomes increasingly irritated by the bespoke revisions he sees to the road signs along the way, which he gradually realizes are a unilateral normalization of place names to the native Castilian standard: “Beyond some h’s changed to g’s or j’s, some asshole had wiped out the Catalan f l s, ny’s, x’s, tx’s, ss’s and ç’s, substituting in their place for the Castillian l, ñ, j, ch, s or z as per their fancy...He had not even left the final t’s of the names, converting these into d or even z, as in the case of a sign that informed him that he was 190 kilometers of ‘Madriz’.” (Soriano, 30) The last point is quite funny to anyone familiar with Castilian Spanish since it is not uncommon for substandard pronunciations of the capital to end with a theta instead of the hard d. Is it funny to a monolingual English speaker? Probably not, but as Lawrence Venuti has theorized in his 1998 book “The Scandals of Translation”, leaving these foreignizing touches signals the linguistic and cultural differences of the origin text, “sending the reader abroad.” (Venuti, 178)

## Talking Like a Catalan

Beyond the Catalanization of Spanish place names, the novella comments on how majority speakers of Catalan tend to butcher delicately euphonious Castilian names. In chapter 5, a prominent TV interviewer tries to correctly pronounce Don Emeterio's full name: "A Aznacod le rechinaron los oídos. En boca de la periodista, el nombre del viejo president había sonado 'Amateriu Ruís de la Barca-Fery'." So this is a Castilian Spanish rendering of how a Catalan speaker would mispronounce the Castilian name. This version opted for overtranslation to show American English speakers how the Catalans rely on clipped consonantal endings, schwa vowels, and unstressed o's becoming u's -- a very un-Spanish and guttural sound to American ears: "Uh-muh-TEAR-eeoo Roo-EECE duh luh BARC-uh-FAIR-ee". Given the very low profile that Catalan language and culture have in North America (where all eyes look to the southern border when Spanish is mentioned), it is likely that few potential readers would be familiar with this issue, which is modestly important in the progress of the novella.

## Wordplay vs. Metalinguistic Humor

In 1996 the Belgian translation scholar Dirk Delabastita defined wordplay as "various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings." (Delabastita, 15) For Delabastita, the key to translation of wordplay and other humor is the similarity, cultural and structural, between the origin and target language. Similarly, another Belgian humor scholar, Salvatore Attardo, conjectured that the translatability of a

humor depends on its use of universal references or intrinsic “metalinguistic” characteristics that are resistant to translation. (Attardo, 223)

Clearly the humor in this text presents both referentially -- “a son...a *fill* is always a *fill*, even if he’s a *fill* of a bitch!” -- and metalinguistically – the road signs Massana encounters in Central Spain. As stated earlier, the approach of this translator has been to render the metalinguistic challenges with little or no alteration and therefore accept the translation loss this inevitably entails. The novella nevertheless offers more than enough in terms of plotting, dialogue, setting and political acuity to compensate for a general North American reader. And this translation is most definitely aimed at the general reader of English. It is the hope of this translator to find a publisher and that audience, particularly given the ongoing and escalating political difficulties in Eastern Spain. From its humor may come a useful understanding of a very old conflict in the cradle of European culture – the same cradle as our own.

## The Translation

David Soriano Giménez

Ñ

Although he has published only a dozen stories, David Soriano (born 1966) has managed to attract the attention of the science fiction- fantasy community with almost each one, despite never having taken the leap to a longer format. With regard to *Ñ*, suffice it to say that the idea of this anthology arises from the impact that this story had in its original publication in the anthologies of *Artiflex* magazine. One important point: David is Catalan by birth.

Author's note 1: History in this tale unfolds in an alternate universe, one torn from our own some centuries ago. Such universes evolve totally independently from the moment of their separation. They do not retain continuity into the present and the few similarities between the two would derive from the fact of having shared a portion of the past. Thus, I decline to accept any responsibility for the connections or identifications that a reader might be able to establish between persons, organizations or conditions in both universes. In the end, they must be viewed as the unique and exclusive product of his imagination, provided that the reading is not malicious or insincere.

Author's Note 2: 'Ny' is pronounced phonetically, the same as the Spanish 'ñ'. And the Catalan 'ç' is pronounced, as in French, like the letter 's'.

Translator's Note: Catalan is a Romance language closely related to Provençal French that is remarkable, when compared to the vowel-rich Spanish language, for its clipped, consonantal word endings. It is spoken by upwards of 10 million people in the Western Mediterranean and is the official language of one European Union nation, Andorra.

I'd like to be as tall as the Moon

to see the soldiers of Catalonia.

From Catalonia I come to serve the King

with the full leave of my colonel I bring.

(Popular folksong)

Lleida, capital of Espanya, April 19, 1976

The Brotherhood of the Sentinels of Our Lady of Montserrat had its local headquarters on Victòria Street, a narrow and ancient alleyway that opens onto the Plaça dels Herois. It was, therefore, located in the exact historical center of the town just a few steps from the Paeria, the city hall. It was easy to recognize the Sentinels' headquarters with its storied iron balcony from which waved two flags: the Spanish, with four red stripes over a yellow background, the national two-headed eagle embroidered over all; and the insignia of the Brotherhood, vertical sashes of blue, red and blue on a shield divided by the Cross of Saint George and the outline of the black Virgin of Montserrat, who lent her name to the organization.

Ermengol Massana stopped below the colorful standards and absently recognized their limpness while taking a last hit from his cigarette. Then, after tossing out the butt on the damp paving stones, he opened a large door that was the entrance to the headquarters and sank into the dark and carpeted anteroom, where he was greeted by a faint yet stale

odor and the patriotic illustrations decorating the walls. Nothing seemed to have changed since the last time he had been there. He went up the ten worn but sumptuous stairs that separated the anteroom from the first floor and, without stopping, pushed open the door of emerald green crystal that dominated the center of the landing. Inside, time seemed to have stopped since a year ago. It was as if the passing of Feliubadaló ten months earlier had not plummeted the nation into profound sadness and confusion. Massana beat back all the nostalgia that had built up in his heart over the past year of forced seclusion, nostalgia that up to now he had not felt or had not wanted to feel. He contemplated the posters that half hid the sour filth of the walls and his glance stopped at his favorite: a commemoration of the aid the German National Socialists had lent Espanya in '38 at the beginning of the glorious social revolution that lifted Feliubadaló to the Directorship, and set right the course of the nation. He liked the combination of the swastika and the Spanish eagle, each one at an extreme of the poster as a lovely symbol of the sacred alliance that both peoples had sealed against the enemies of God and Humanity.

But this was water under the bridge. The swastika had decades earlier sunk into despair, and with the death of Feliubadaló, it was not even certain that the eagle might keep safe its two proud heads.

Without looking up from her typewriter, Massana noticed, the secretary Laia Bonfill made furtive glances at him over her little reading glasses while her jaws furiously chewed an eternal piece of gum. La Laia was about 70 years old and not so good in the head, but she was also a widow of one of the founders of the Brotherhood who had fallen in 1940. The organization was all that she had left. So it was with a mixture of pity and respect to the national symbols that Puigfarriol, the local director of

the Sentinels, had kept her as his official secretary even though each day it became more difficult to find duties appropriate to the woman's diminished and dwindling mind.

Actually, most of her administrative tasks fell to younger associates who volunteered in their spare time for the management of the organization.

“Hi, Laia. How is it going?” Massana greeted her.

“It goes. The director is expecting you,” she said, turning back to her typewriter and apparently forgetting Massana's presence. It was as if she had last seen him just the previous evening, and not a year before. Clearly each day she was getting a little worse. He half cracked the door behind the secretary and stepped into the opening.

“May I come in?”

“Hey, it's you! Come on, come on,” answered the director's slightly hoarse voice.

Massana entered the office and, upon closing the door, shot a glance around the room to make sure that everything remained in place. It was. The photograph of Feliubadaló continued to occupy the most visible and best lit spot in the room. In it the late First Director of Espanya was decked out in the complete uniform of the Sentinels: brown shirt and slacks, belted, a figurine of the Black Virgin and red-blue scarf at the collar. The representation personified Spanish pride and *seny*, good sense. It was autographed and dedicated especially to Puigfarriol, something about which he was naturally proud. Also prominent was a reproduction of a great 18<sup>th</sup> century oil painting – a Santoleguer – that portrayed the surrender of King Ferran IV of Castella, the historical event from which sprang the history of Espanya as a consolidated nation. Kneeling before the triumphant Jaume II, Ferran laid down his arms, and by extension his entire kingdom,

at the other's feet. The position of the painting had been selected so that the play of light and shadow heightened the gravity of the scene, particularly the humbled expression of the vanquished monarch.

Completing the display was an old-fashioned library replete with ancient tomes and an enormous mahogany table, luxurious but somewhat worn from use, that the well-known Majorcan industrialist Bartomeu Pons had donated to the Brotherhood. On the table were two photographs of Puigfariol's wife and two offspring, a pile of folders, a plastic organizer, a silver crucifix embedded in a granite paperweight, a terracotta reproduction of the Virgin of Montserrat and a checkered pennant in green and blue, the colors of the Imperial Ilerda Soccer Club, the official team of the capital of Espanya.

From behind the table emerged the graying and somewhat rounded figure of Oriol María Puigfariol, dressed also, like Feliubadaló in the photograph, in the brown uniform of the Sentinels, though without the leather straps or scarf and with shirt sleeves rolled up the elbow.

"Long time no see! I see the sabbatical year has gone well with you," Puigfariol spoke in somewhat pompous Catalan, full of neutral vowels after the fashion of his city of origin, Vic.

"Well, Oriol María," replied Massana, squeezing the hand that the other had offered him. "Apart from-other than firing a few rounds in Cadí, the only thing I've done is sit around. And lying around doesn't suit me. You know I'm a man of action."

"That's because you are...how old? Thirty-two? I used to love to rumble, but when you get past 50 things look different. So you get a desk job where you age

gracefully. Like this,” he added, running his hand over the polished surface of the table. “We bureaucrats also serve the fatherland, eh? Even though the young turks look down on us.” Puigfariol got serious fast. “OK, Ermengol, enough of this *xerrada*. You probably want to know why I called you.”

“I came as soon as they gave me your message. So the *organització* thinks I can come out of hiding?”

Puigfariol shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s been a year now, and things have settled down. It’s curious,” said Puigfariol, his glance straying to a point between the wall and the ceiling, “it’s curious how times change. Could you have imagined that one of those commie brats had a daddy in high places?”

“No way. Had I known, I’d of planned things differently. At the least I would have worn a mask and been saved this shitty year,” Massana said, smiling wolfishly.

“And considering what it brought me, I would have gone easier on him.”

“What a disaster, I’m telling you. We smoothed things over, but we had to pull a lot of strings with the cops and even bring in a couple major players.”

“And look how mad the guy got. If you have a Commie son and he got beat up badly...well, tough shit, get used to it.”

“Man, Ermengol, c’mon. You do what you can for your kids.” The director gazed lovingly at the picture of one of his own. “A son...a *fill*, is always a *fill*...even if he is a *fill* of a bitch!”

Both laughed heartily at the pun.

“Anyway,” Puigfarríol sighed, “these are tough times for patriots. But back to point, let me tell it to you clear and Catalan, no beating around the bush: there’s somebody we have to rub out.”

Massana blinked a couple of times.

“An *enemic* of Espanya?”

“An enemy of Espanya. Are you up to it?”

“If it has to be done, it has to be done. Who is this guy?”

“Emeteri, or *Emeterio* in Castilian, Ruiz de la Barca-Fery.”

“Who?”

Puigfarríol looked surprised.

“You don’t know? Don’t you read the papers?”

“Not usually,” grumbled Massana, like a schoolboy caught not doing his homework. The truth was that he seldom even made it through the monthly bulletin put out by the Brotherhood.

“Then you need to be reading them. *Avant, Correu Nacional, El Despertaferro*...any of the major dailies. You’d have some idea of who is taking us to the cleaners these days.”

Puigfarríol searched through the folders on the desk until he found a clipping, which he placed in front of Massana. At the top of the scrap of newsprint was a dingy

photograph of a gloomy old man with a Bohemian air, dressed in baggy suit with a waistcoat and striped tie. He was seated in what appeared to be an office crammed with books, turning away with his arm on the back of the chair, as if answering someone outside of the frame of the picture. What most called attention in his features were the thick lenses of his glasses that imprisoned the wandering pupils, and disorderly locks that blossomed above his ears and made a long and hairy counterpoint to the baldness of the rest of his head.

The cutline identified the subject of the photograph” “Ruiz de la Barca-Fery in his residence in Grenoble.” And below, a phrase in capital letters announced:

“DIRECTORSHIP GIVES THE GREEN LIGHT TO RUIZ DE LA BARCA-FERY”.

From the text that followed below this headline, Massana learned that his future victim had been the president of the Castilian Commonwealth from '39 to '41, the year he had to go into exile in França to avoid the patriots' just wrath. In his heyday, he had been the supreme director of the Left Commons, the red separatist party that had played a special role in the Third Republic. Massana read with unpleasant surprise that the party had just received approval from the Ministry of Documentation and Civil Control for re-legalization.

But worst of all, the crux of the news article, was that Ruiz de la Barca-Fery had obtained permission from the Directorship of Espanya – that is to say, the emergency committee that had assumed control of the government after the death of Feliubadaló – to return to the country to reassemble his gang of *brètols* and parasites. Massana swallowed hard. A year before when he had been obliged to drop out of circulation, things were already happening that he couldn't get his head around. But this was too much. What

was the Directorship trying to do by opening the gates to this lefty bloodsucker whose only talent had been to fleece and intoxicate the humble folk of Castella? People who only wanted to live in peace, care for their land, speak Catalan -- all in all to be a perfect Spaniard.

“This is really bad.”

“Worse than bad. Disastrous!” said Puigfarriol with an inappropriate chuckle that managed to shock Massana. The Director seemed incapable of hiding his anxiety, which made Massana reflect on the seismic shift that must have altered the ground on which they all tread these past few months. “I don’t want to hide anything from you, Ermengol. Espanya is being eaten on all sides. Already I don’t know what to think about President Bernau and the rest of the Directorship, who seemed to have swallowed the compromise pill. They talk about constitutions, about democracy... See here, as if we didn’t already have enough democracy in Espanya! Well democracy is one thing but anarchy is another altogether. They pulled a constitution out of their pocket. They legalized the opposition parties. All of them! You hear that? The Marxists, the separatists, even the Canary terrorists, the FROGA. And now they’ve announced elections after the summer. And I ask myself: Man, where’s it going end up?”

“Right. And by knocking off this geezer...”

“By knocking off Ruiz de la Barca we will try to give the chicken coop a good smack. We can’t count on the Directorship, but the Army and the *Guardians d’Esquadra* still have some true patriots. We hope that they will take up arms in Castella and that the

Directorship will grow balls and send in the tanks. It will be the moment to return to control and put things back in order.”

“Are the troops with us ?”

“And how! Both the troops and *Guardians d’Esquadra* – answered Puigfarriol. Then he added, “The loyal ones, obviously.”

“The Hapsburg?”

Puigfarriol pinched his lips in an ambiguous grimace.

“We are working on the little prince. It’s a question of timing. If he wants the crown, he had better help us.”

“And the clergy?”

“They aren’t clear. Some yes, some no, the majority aren’t fish or fowl.”

Puigfarriol’s voice hoarsened nervously, as if the conversation was beginning to tax him. “Ermengol, we have to think this through.” He poked around again in the files and pulled out a longish envelope that he handed to Massana. “In the envelope you will find the address of a confidential contact in *Valladolit*. He will be your guide and work with you on anything you need. If you have to communicate with us, do it always through him. It’s estimated that Ruiz de la Barca will arrive in *Valladolit* inside of four days, by plane. I have included a list of places he will go and events he will participate in during the two weeks after his arrival. There might be alterations because this itinerary leaked out to us a few days ago already. Oh yeah, I’ve also given you 20,000 *pessetes* to cover your

expenses, even though... Well, best to try and not overspend. The *organització* is not exactly flush right now.”

“So,” Puigfarríol concluded, “we are entrusting you with an important task – and a dangerous one. The outcome of the operation will largely determine if Espanya continues as great and prosperous nation.”

“Yeah, yeah, but what’s the plan, Oriol María? How am I supposed to do it?”

“Bé... Look,” Puigfarríol stammered. “The decision was just arrived at and there hasn’t been time to make up a plan of action. Basically, there is no plan. Precisely for this reason you have been chosen. Because you have been doing this kind of work for years. Because you’ve got balls, and because you know how to be careful and discrete. We cannot leave the job in the hands of some amateur. It may be that when you look over this itinerary,” Puigfarríol motioned to the envelope with a nod of his head, “you will have to decide for yourself when, how and where. Yeah, I know, it seems like a joke, but ....”

“But it is what is,” Massana finished the sentence. “Tell the ones at the top with the clean hands that Massana will do what they want.”

“I expected nothing less,” said Puigfarríol with clear relief. “I’m happy you are taking it that way. When you return, we will celebrate with a good fish *suquet* at the Port of Barcelona – at the expense of the *organització*, of course!”

There followed a silence that Puigfarríol broke before it became too clear that neither of two had anything further to say.

“Well, Ermengol, time to get to work,” the Director said standing up. Massana did the same and the two reached over the table to shake hands. “God be with you, *meu fill*.”

Standing at attention, Puigfarriol raised his right arm, folded his thumb against the palm of his hand and raised and spread the rest of his fingers, a representation of the four stripes of the national insignia.

“*Avant Espanya!*”

“*Avant!*” responded Massana, his arm also aloft.

Valladolid, Capital of the Region of Castilla, April 21 of 1976

The city hall clock was about to strike 10. Dr. Ruy Ganzalo Aznacod y Berjusa stanchd the moisture that the Duero Valley red had left on his lips, pushing away from the remains of a plate of fish and leaning back against a chair made in the soberly Castilian style that lent him support. Covering his lips with the white linen napkin, he suppressed a belch recalling the magnificent beast that just now sat happily in his stomach. Good fish. From the North. In his house there would be none of that sissy Mediterranean stuff.

At his back, behind the grooved panes of double crystal glass of the window, the street lights spread a morose luminosity, almost a caress, over the paving stones and walls of the city hall and the noble houses that lined the Main Square. A lovely place, Valladolid. One of the loveliest on earth, in spite of some distasteful details that struggled to mare this presentation: the Phoenician banner on the municipal balcony, usurping the spot that by right should belong to the banner of Castilla; the street signs written in

Spanish; the double-headed eagle presiding over all official business; the negress virgin, perhaps Christian but not Castilian... To say nothing of the blockheaded industrial policy that had turned the suburbs of Valladolid into a garbage heap, that had attracted a great mass of jabbering losers from the most miserable zones of the peninsula to the outskirts of the city, now the scene of overdevelopment as speculative and as it was chaotic. In other words, the visible signs of the secular Phoenician yoke that was draining Castella, that kept it from being the agent of its own history, from assuming its rightful place amongst the developed nations of the world. Nonetheless, the limpid tranquility of the historic district made it easy to forget all this. Despite the sorrows, there the town seemed a beautiful and bucolic setting where Aznacod had not hesitated to establish his home and medical office. And he had been right to do so. He and María Sonsoles, his wife, both had belonged to families of the rural aristocracy and were not made for the hubbub of city life. Neither had any difficulty adapting their minds and bodies to the new neighborhood. Through the last 15 years, Aznacod had tenaciously struggled to make a place for himself in the society he had chosen. The results had exceeded his expectations. Dr. Ruy Gonzalo Aznacod y Berjusa was now a respected personality, influential, important not only in the city but also throughout the provinces of Castella. And not thanks to his medical practice, but rather to his new vocation that in recent times had become his greatest passion, and perhaps his only one: politics.

Correction: soccer was also a great passion that granted him enormous satisfaction. Moreover, his work directing the Atlético Pucelano team had only cemented his political image among his fellow Castilians. Soccer and politics fed each other. They were almost the same thing.

He passed his hand through his pomaded black hair, carefully parted by a line that seemed almost traced with a marking pen. He lowered his chin to his breast, closed his eyes and allowed himself to be lulled by his musings. Today, at 43, he looked back and acknowledged all that he had risked, which made his achievements glitter even more brightly. The years of clandestine political activity had offered tremendous thrills. Never could he have imagined that danger might be so...moving – that was the word. María Sonsoles did not always see it this way. In fact, she almost never did. Maybe that was the worst thing about it; her accusations of irresponsibility, of putting the future of their children in jeopardy. The fear that over the years had darkened her countenance, thus rendering it the perfect reflection of Aznacod's uneasy conscience. María Sonsoles demonstrated her inability to comprehend the scope of what he was doing. She felt a terrible fear that one of her husband's "pranks" – she used expressions like this to wear him down – might end up rocking the foundations of the comfortable and predictable universe in which she resided. "If only I'd known I was marrying a revolutionary!" she complained to herself. María Sonsoles was rather conventional or, to borrow a Phoenician phrase, a bit *panxacontent*.

Clearly María Sonsoles was not entirely wrong. Aznacod himself had to admit that on occasion he has been scared. Really scared. Not long before, during the dragnets that the Guàrdia d'Esquadra had carried out in the illegal bullrings and other manifestations of nationalist pride, they often had "settled accounts" with detainees back in the police stations. Then, in the prison cell, his fear turned to panic, even though with prisoners like himself, scions of patrician families, it never amounted to more than a little slapping around. And the worst, without a doubt, had been the eight long months he spent

in the penitentiary for crimes of subversion and antipatriotic activities. The loneliness and helplessness. The laconic visits of María Sonsoles. Her look of reproach-- that had been the worst.

Now that all seemed water under the bridge. With Feliubadaló in the grave, the regime staggered visibly from the burden of its unsustainable contradictions and internal corruption. Now they were the ones who were afraid. Only that could explain why, given the Catalans' hatred for Castella, they had been making concessions. Three months after the death of the dictator, the Directorship had decreed an amnesty for all political offenses, which had also benefitted Aznacod. Then they legalized the parties. Now they had consented to the return of Ruiz de la Barca-Fery from exile. They were afraid, but one must neither trust nor lower one's guard. The Catalans, naturally treacherous, had tricks hidden up their sleeves. When you least expect it, Pow! They lacked the honor and manliness that so defined the Castilian character, that noble predisposition to openness that, sad to say, also constituted the Achilles heel of the good people of Castella. For that reason one mustn't let down one's guard. Aznacod was in favor of keeping up the pressure now that a breach had opened in the ranks of the enemy, of continually bombarding them with demands and appeals so as not to give the Directorship room to breathe. Such was the strategy he had mandated for Christ and Castella, the party he had founded four years earlier and of which he was the prime leader.

He made a mental review of the political happenings that he and the party had been deeply involved in: "Ñ", the campaign for complete normalization of the Castilian tongue – which the barbarous Phoenicians officially dismissed as a "dialect" – and its use in all aspects of the country's civil life, including instruction in the schools and for place

names; the campaign for legalization of bullfighting and other activities and festivities germane to Castilian folkloric traditions; restoration of the Castilian Commonwealth, that had functioned during the Republican period; the return of artistic patrimony looted from Castella during the dictatorship and compensation for works the Feliubadaló regime had undersold to foreigners to finance itself. And finally, the campaign that Aznacod had often privately called “Not one coin to Phoenicia”, even though it was officially given another name: “Statute of Political and Economic Autonomy for Castella.”

Thanks to all this massive undertaking, Christ and Castella was continually better known and supported throughout the country. And the party’s political identity didn’t hurt. They were neither communists nor social democrats – ideologies foreign to the Castilian character that Aznacod predicted would have no future, despite the notable support they were receiving in the current situation – nor did it explicitly align itself with the right wing, which would have located the party in the same end of the political spectrum as the Feliubadalism. Far from that, Christ and Castella defined itself as a big tent party, appropriate for either a nationalist voter or one with a religious orientation. The formula was working. The names of Aznacod and his organization echoed in byways of the land. Its membership grew daily. In projected races, they could compete head to head with leading parties of the Marxist Left, confident that the people were on their side and theirs only. What sad disappointment lay ahead for their rivals! Beyond its Christianity, Castella was above all a practical nation and would not happily fling itself into the drink of utopian and radical experiments.

In truth, there was only one other political leader who might be able to overshadow him: Ruiz de la Barca-Fery. Don Emeterio. Indubitably the old Republican

and premier in exile could count on the approval of a majority, if not all, of the population of Castella. Not in vain had he built a heroic image during his 35 years of exile and clandestine opposition to the regime. Moreover his party, the Communal Left, had an accessible, Castilianist ideology that was only moderately left-wing. Nevertheless Barca-Fery was an old and decrepit man, however much some not to see it. His time had past long ago.. Aznacod had been able to verify this in Grenoble, during the visit that each Castilian political leader found himself obliged to make. Don Emeterio himself had insinuated that would return in order to form a transitional government that would, God willing and by means of the new Spanish Directorship, lead Castella to regional elections, which could not be delayed. Having achieved this objective, the old man would retire from the political scene. That, without a doubt, would put Aznacod sufficiently on the fast track.

Already in his daydreams Aznacod saw himself installed as premier of nation, one hand gripping the balcony of the Palace of the Castilian Courts while his other waved to the multitude tightly packing the plaza, bestowing upon him ovation after ovation. At his side, María Sonsoles would make a magnificent first lady, a just compensation for all the troubles and unhappiness of the past few years. And who knows? Perhaps in the future they would manage to disentangle the country entirely from the Phoenician tyranny and together reign over...they would govern an independent Castella: Christian, free, peopled by bold men and real women, as pure in blood as in spirit.

*Xadrac, Province of Guadalajara, April 21 of 1976*

Massana's blood was almost at the freezing point. Now he had become acutely aware of the how things were changing in Espanya after only a single year. A year that he

had spent in the fog of a forced retirement that permitted him no chance to stay informed. He had seen the warnings already in Lleida: commie slogans painted the walls, the singular agitation that the people exhibited in the streets and political and media chaos, the sense of having lost all bearings that one experienced just by turning on the television or radio. Doubtless this was nothing compared to what he could expect as he traveled beyond Catalunya, in direct proportion to an invisible line that signaled the end of Aragón and the beginning of Castilla.

He suffered his first shock upon arriving at La Cahiga, a small Aragonese town located 40 kilometers past Saragossa. On a sign posted at its entrance, someone had shamelessly painted in black over the name of the town, transforming the ‘h’ into an incongruous ‘g’. Cagiga? Confounded, Massana asked himself if it was meant to be pronounced like the Catalan ‘g’ in Girona? This vandalism was signed with a phonetic symbol, “Ñ”, set in a circle, an absurd calling card that the hooligan had stamped on the blank bottom half of the street sign. For Massana, “Ñ” seemed like some old-fashioned dialect letter, something far from the Catalan norm. So this *bretolada* could only be the work of Castilian separatists.

He had time to become accustomed to these scrawlings during the kilometers that followed, many doubtless due to the roadway improvements that the Ministry of Public Works was doing along the national highway between Burg d’Osme and Aranda. At the peak of Catallaüt, still inside Aragón, a laborer for the Public Works ministry had advised him to turn towards the south, in the direction of Madrid, in order to return to the way to Valladolid. The detour was considerable, but the highway was in reasonably good order he had time to spare.

He saw fewer of the graffiti while driving through Aragonese territory. But as he penetrated the province of Guadalajara they proliferated rapidly so that, for another 60 or 70 kilometers, not a single road sign remained without its corrections. Beyond some h's changed to g's or j's, some asshole had wiped out the Catalan fls , ny's, x's, tx's, ss's and ç's, substituting in their place for the Castillian l, ñ, j, ch, s or z as per their fancy. The place names of these lands seemed in the grip of a virulent orthographical distress. He had not even left the final t's of the names, converting these into d or even z, as in the case of a sign that informed him that he was 190 kilometers of "Madriz".

But the bastard was not acting alone. Before long Massana was convinced that there were several, perhaps many, dedicated to covering Espanya with their scribbling. It was not only by the vastness of the crime but by the variety of signatures that attested such various authorship. Beyond the Ñ encircled, Massana reencountered his lifelong opponent: the sickle and hammer, which now dirtied walls, public signs and traffic signals with total impunity, with a raised middle finger that seemed aimed directly at him. So Oriol María was right: things had altered a lot. The toponymical vandalisms alternated with exhortations for independence, socialism, liberty for Castella, written in the coarse Castilian dialect and endorsed by the acronyms of political parties and organizations that Massana did not recognize: PCC, PSTC, UPC, PSLN, CyC and ICC. In the last abbreviation, Massana recognized the Communal Left of Castella, the party that his superiors had assigned him to decapitate.

He fantasized about the possibility of catching one of these professional vandals red-handed and in the open. He was not against doing a little extra work on this mission, as the icing on the cake of his principal task. He permitted himself a little smile when,

through his windscreen, he was greeted by a friendly phrase, “*Avant Espanya*. Long Live Feliubadaló”, sharing the blank space on a whitewashed wall with an advertisement for a chemical fertilizer. It was signed by the Brotherhood. He was heartened to realize that they also were out there and they were making themselves heard, or read, as much as anyone else could.

But a couple kilometers down the road he read something that left him so trembling he had to park his Simca 1200 after the first exit off the highway. The phrase read: “FUCK ESPANYA. PHOENICIAN SONS OF BITCHES”. Even though it was in the Castilian dialect, Massana had difficulty comprehending neither the meaning of the message nor to whom referred the term “Phoenician”. Things had changed. A lot.

He had chosen a table next to a not particularly clean window that looked over the entire locale and from which Massana could keep an eye on his car under the sun shelter. The television set in a corner was blinking in all possible tones of gray. The TV speakers were blasting over the clatter of the express cafeteria, the tinny whine of the slot machine and the coarse voices of the clientele, comprising mostly truck drivers and other highway folk. Leaning over the red and white checked tablecloth, before him a plate of Castilian garlic soup too hot to eat, Massana could not avoid the sensation that history had left him behind. He felt like some antediluvian beast trapped in a changed and hostile ecosystem, but he intended neither to become extinct nor to evolve. In the triangular ashtray he set down a cigarette he had lit while waiting for the soup to cool and stirred the thick red mixture with his spoon. Even though the first half sip had burnt his tongue, he had to admit it tasted good, better than he expected. He took a look around. What he saw was a simple and cheap highway eatery in which one could detect the thinning of Spanish civil

life. Maybe his perceptions were being influenced by the nastiness he had encountered on the road. Maybe it was also because the staff of the restaurant and a good portion of the clientele used the Castilian dialect. If they resorted to Spanish, it was only to trade insults. “*En català*, goddamit, we’re in Espanya!” he wanted to shout. Apart from this, he sensed the same uneasiness in his fellow patrons, the same inner agitation that he had noticed in the streets of Lleida. It was something diffuse and vague, but it managed to unnerve him.

The waitress took away the empty plate and left on the table one of the regional sausage with tomato sauce and a green salad that Massana had requested for his second course. She emitted a mechanical “*bon profit*” to which Massana replied with a sullen grunt. He was shaking the plastic salt shaker when a little incident in the restaurant grabbed his attention. Apparently something coming out of the television in that moment had awoken the interest of all in the room, to the point that everyone at the bar got up and arranged themselves around the set. One of the waiters responded to a request and, stepping up on a stool, raised the volume to the point that it even reached to those having lunch in the dining room. Massana went completely still.

“...has decided to move up by two days his return to Valladolid because, in his own words, after 35 years of exile he feels himself incapable of waiting until the previously scheduled date to reunite with his countrymen. That being the case, he has decided to cancel some engagements...”

“*Merda!*” Massana blurted out. Afterwards he immediately reproached himself when he realized that, in a nearby table, the masculine half of an elderly couple directed a wrinkled and suspicious look his way.

The off-screen newsreader continued to images of Ruiz de la Barca-Fery descending the portable staircase of the plane, leaning on a walking stick in one hand, a folded raincoat in the other, his nearsighted gaze unfocused and the thin hairs on his head twirling in the wind.

“Shit”, Massana repeated quietly to himself. What kind of nonsense was this sudden return? The jackass suspected something, for sure. He was varying his previous plans to outwit his possible enemies. That is to say, to outwit Massana. Sly old fox. Massana dug into his salad and sausages, dipping bread into the tomato sauce until the plate was spotless. As luck had it, the bad news had not hurt his appetite. Meanwhile, the off-screen voice provided detail of the personal life and political career of the traitor as the visuals showed scenes of the welcome he had been accorded, at the same airport, by legions of newspaper reporters and a certain number of persons whose faces Massana saw for the first time. They were big shot reds or separatists probably. There was a crowd of onlookers as well, but the camera didn’t linger on them and there was no sound with the images, so it was difficult to ascertain what were their intentions with respect to the newly arrived celebrity and his gang. Regardless, a cordon of Guàrdies d’Esquadra had taken upon itself to maintain order in the gathering, and that awoke in Massana a sense of solidarity towards the police. So many years of watchfulness to maintain the order and security of the nation and now they were required to protect the enemies of the fatherland, precisely those who would not hesitate to smash it to pieces and then sell these off to the highest bidder. Humiliating. How maddening and how shameful, the poor lads!

The screen changed to show images from the press conference that Ruiz de la Barca had deigned to preside over at the Hotel *Sanç I de Castella*, located in *Valladolit*. Almost everyone in the restaurant seemed eager to hear what the rogue was going to say. Massana did not understand this sudden interest for politics that was emerging from nowhere, that was beginning to spread like measles amongst the citizenry. Had they not lived well enough until this moment, each concerned with his own affairs and leaving to others wiser and better prepared the reins of the nation? Why on earth this mania for politics was spreading like measles all the sudden? Why can't they realize that they can only expect lies and hallucinations from this traitor? No. To judge from the faces staring in stupefaction at the TV, nobody realized anything.

“...the immediate future of Espanya?” a journalist at that moment asked.

Ruiz de la Barca answered in a grave, stentorian voice, which was surprising by contrast with his unprepossessing physique. His Catalan had the strong and unpleasant accent of the central Iberian plateau, perhaps a bit Frenchified.

“I look forward with hope but also with concern. The Directorship seems to have embarked on the road to democracy and that is good. Everything depends on its willingness to erect a federal project that encompasses all the national and political sensibilities that today make up the Spanish state. A polynational project that excludes none. We Castilians support that, with generosity but also a determination to pursue our national aspirations.

The next question was:

“Just now you referred to Castella only as an entity integrated into Espanya. Does this mean that independence is not among your objectives, now or in the future? Does it mean that a Castilian nationalist can come to see Espanya as his ‘homeland’? Thanks.”

Before answering, the old man cracked a smile that struck Massana as vampiric.

It all depends, *senyoreta*, on whether being Spaniards comes into conflict with our primary and irreducible Castilianness. In that case, Castella will have no other remedy than to develop its own project as a future on the margin of Espanya. Still I am confident that the political will of the current directors will not make this necessary. With respect to your second question, my homeland has only ever been, and only ever will be, Castella.”

The last sentence elicited a general ovation from the television viewers and the shouts, in the local dialect, of “*¡Olé tus cojones!*”, erupting from the throat of some chubby, red-faced clown who was built like a stevedore. Massana finished the caramel that he had been served for dessert, paid the bill and departed the establishment in search of his vehicle. A little longer in the company of that bunch of losers and he was sure he was going to throw up.

*Valladolid, April 21 of 1976*

He jumped at the noise of silverware and plates being cleared from the table.

“¡Ay! Don Ruy, I woke you up!” Vicenteta said in an apologetic tone. The girl, ruddy and round, had worked in his home for the past three years.

“It’s no problem, Vicenteta,” Aznacod answered, also in Catalan. “This is not the time or the place for sleeping.”

“It’s tiredness, doctor. You work too much. Shall I bring you dessert?”

“No...” Aznacod looked at his wristwatch. It was a little before 10:30 p.m. “Turn on the TV for me, *sisplau*.”

The buxom lass fiddled with the buttons on the TV set and then continued clearing the table. The television buzzed while it started up and the screen began to fill with dreamlike images. The appliance, an imported Telefunken, was the pride of the household. Though still muddy, the first recognizable image was that of a lovely lass who was commenting on the virtues of a certain brand of bath gel, showing as proof her own skin, smooth and youthful. There was five more minutes of commercials and then, over a tiresome musical theme words appeared in white letters upon a black background: “L’HORITZÓ ESPANYOL”. The title corresponded to a newish interview program symbolic of the recent political winds blowing through Espanya and the openness of the current Directorship. The host was a young Galician journalist, noted for her boldness and, according to positive or negative rumors, close to the socialists – in so tight that it was supposed she was sleeping with the director of that party. The show debuted four and a half months earlier and already the most important leaders of the recently legalized parties, among other national celebrities, had appeared there. Aznacod harbored a secret desire to appear on the program and his ego began to bristle that they had still not called him. Obviously he was a little premature, because the most popular personalities were the ones making their victory laps: on the one side, the leaders of the principal parties at the state level, and on the other the old anti-Feliubadalista rebels, the names that everyone recognized like Ruiz de la Barca-Fery. This night it was don Emeterio’s turn.

“*Bona nit*, Ladies and Gentlemen,” said the hard-hitting journalist in profile. “On today’s program we will speak with someone who has spent the past 35 years away from Espanya and more to the point, from his native Castella, where he was president for three years prior to the accession to power of Feliubadaló. Having arrived a few hours earlier from Grenoble, he finds himself in our studios in Valladolid, where we go now. As everyone already knows, we are speaking with Emeterio Ruiz de la Barca-Fery. Did I say it right, don Emeterio?”

Aznacod’s ears hurt. In the mouth of this newscaster, the euphonious name of the old president had a dull Catalan ring: “Uh-muh-TEAR-eeoo Roo-EECE duh luh BARC-uh-FAIR-ee”. He recalled too well the way the police pronounced his own name when he was processed for arrest: “Roo-ee Goon-ZAL Uhs-nuh-COAT Berry-OOZE-uh”. The young woman swiveled around in her chair until she was face to face with a battery of television screens that encapsulated the smiling, giant-sized image of Ruiz de la Barca.

“Fine. Perhaps you need a little practice but I’m delighted with the effort.” And his grin widened a bit more as he added: “In any case, it’s a pleasure to hear it said by a young woman as lovely as yourself.”

“¡Olé!” Aznacod exclaimed to himself. At seventy-some years, he’s still a charmer. A good way to compensate for his diminutive physical presence. Caught by surprise, the young woman’s blush was evident even in black and white.

“Don Emeterio, you are very charming,” she said, recovering her composure and control of the situation. “I promise to improve my pronunciation. To begin, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart that you have agreed to appear on this show on

your first “legal” day in Espanya after so, so many years. Did you receive a warm welcome from your countrymen?”

“And how: with Sepúlveda-style roast lamb!”

“An unforgettable homecoming feast, no doubt. Now, with your permission, I am going to do a brief biography on you in order to inform our viewers about who you are, your importance in the recent history of our country and, in all likelihood, its future. Is that acceptable?” The newscaster turned toward the camera and was immediately replaced by images of a bucolic rural landscape. “A native of *Niudàliga* (or in Castilian, Nideáguila), on the outskirts of *Sagòvia*, he was born in the bosom of a family with deep roots in Castella. Emeterio Ruiz de la Barca-Fery began very early...”

Meanwhile, Vicenteta had cleared away the plates and tablecloth, passed a washcloth over the tabletop and now, she was carefully placing the woven table runner and the flower vase that sat at the center of the table when it was no longer needed.

“If the Doctor wishes for nothing else...” the girl said, swallowing a yawn.

“Nothing else, you can leave if you want...But wait one moment, Vicenteta. I want to ask you something,” Aznacod pointed to the television with a nod of the head. “What’s your opinion of that man.”

The girl scrutinized the TV screen with her forehead wrinkled and eyes squinting. The alarm that colored her features had the virtue of diluting a bit the wildness of her expression. “She is not as stupid as she looks,” Aznacod thought to himself. “She can smell trouble.”

“Please speak freely,” he said reassuringly. “I only want your opinion as a citizen.”

Something about ‘citizen’ must have pleased Vicenteta, because she subsequently relaxed and her eyes turned towards their usual bovine expression.

“This man is the politician, that one from the Republic who was in França and they wouldn’t let him come back, *oi?*”

“Precisely. Ruiz de la Barca-Fery, president of the Castilian regional government from ’39 to ’41.”

“Then for me, I’m glad he’s come back,” said the serving girl, twisting her washcloth between her hands. “I think everyone has a right to defend their ideas. Though you should never confuse freedom with free love, that’s sure. The thing I don’t get is all this business about speaking in *castellà*. If we’re all Spaniards, why do we have to speak different tongues. Doesn’t it seem that way to you, don Ruy?”

Aznacod sat looking at her with a certain astonishment. Could it actually be that, after three years in the country serving in his home, she had not learned anything? She was not a fool – she was a moron. Her response made Aznacod consider the problem of the *chapurros*, the immigrants from other areas of Espanya. With a few honorable exceptions, the majority had not the least interest in learning the Castilian language, Castilian culture and customs, nor of anything connected to the land that had accepted and fed them. For this reason they were called *chapurros*, because they “chapurrean”, or mangled, the language. Aznacod had spent some time considering the issue. He wanted to believe that *chapurros* who were properly brought up via a process of cultural immersion

would end up converting themselves into authentic Castilians. But other times he thought they were only an obstacle on the road to Castilian sovereignty. Something then would have to be done with them.

“You’re a Murcian, right, Vicenteta?”

“Yessir. From the *Reineta del Carxe*, on the border of Murcia in the County of *Carxe*,” the girl responded, as if she was reciting some ditty learned in nursery school.

Aznacod considered her with a pensive look. Then he cut short his own thoughts with a nod of his head.

“Nothing more. *Bona nit* and pardon me for holding you up with my chit chat.”

“It’s no problem, don Ruy. *Bona nit*.”

Once the dining room was empty of the orotund presence of the young woman, Aznacod focused his attention on the television interview. Luckily he could see “L’Horitzó Espanyol” clearly without interference. María Sonsoles had gone to bed at 10, as she often did when the evening TV programming didn’t please her, and she knew where the kids were. At that exact moment Ruiz de la Barca-Fery was attempting to respond to a question from the host that Aznacod had not heard.

“...in spite of what’s constantly claimed, neither Espanya nor the world have confronted a situation like this, because historical forces, invisible and inexorable, are pushing them in that direction. Curiously, in all this the historians of the regime agree point for point with the Marxist historicists whom theoretically they detest. But it is a

scientific fact -- today it's not going that way. For some time it's been accepted that the course of History is determined by an infinity of contingent facts, which can alter...

"Excuse me for interrupting you, don Emeterio, but your answer is a little overwhelming for those in our audience who don't have a background in historical theory. In simpler language, how would it be applied in the case of Espanya?"

"Well, let's see, in the case of Espanya it means two things: one, that if, for example, the plagues of the 13<sup>th</sup> century had decimated the population of the east of the Iberian Peninsula instead of the central plateau, perhaps the balance of political power would today rest with Castella. Perhaps the capital would be Valladolid and not Lleida. Perhaps the majority language of Espanya and South America would be Castilian and not Catalan. Perhaps..."

"...would we have a democracy?"

"Perhaps. Or maybe a dictatorship. But instead of Catalan, what's even better, the dictator would be from Extremadura, or Andalusia, or the Basque Country. Or", the aged Republican smiled, showing his teeth and arching his eyebrows, "who knows, maybe from Galicia."

"Or Castella, don Emeterio."

"Or from Castella, of course," the politician conceded.

"And the second implication?"

"The second point is that things don't have to remain as they are if we don't want them to. In other words, we are the masters of our own future and therefore we will be

responsible for the country we are going to bequeath to our descendants. Nonetheless, looked at rationally, for these changes to come to pass we must have an adequate form of government.”

“A republic?”

“A parliamentary and pluralist democracy. If it is a republic, even better.

There followed a trickle of questions about the economic situation in Espanya and Castella, about the foreseeable future of the country, about what international support it could count on, about the reaction to be expected from the various sectors of the society opposed to the move toward liberalization. The old president was like a fish in water, showing off with a mixture of confidence, hearty cheerfulness and erudition that made it easy to forget the pathetic geezer that he was and see instead as a giant of politics, a true father of the country. Given such loftiness, the public could not but be electrified. For his part, Aznacod tried to learn every expression, every gesture, every wink to the audience with eye towards distilling his own style of addressing the masses.

“Do you feel yourself a Spaniard or only a Castilian, don Emeterio?”

Aznacod was startled. No one yet would have the courage to include a question like this in the script of a television interview. And even less would anyone accept such a query, he thought on behalf of Ruiz de la Barca.

The old republican prefaced his response with a studiously candid and beatific smile.

“Look, for a moment I had the temptation to answer you with an evasion...to flee the studio as do useless politicians throughout the length and breadth of this world when they are asked difficult questions. But that would mean falling into a vice which I myself have criticized many times. So I will try to give you as sincere a response as I possibly could.”

“Anything would be marvelous.”

“*Bé*. I believe the main issue one has to face is a problem of sentiments. I feel Castilian because I cannot feel otherwise...Nor would I want to, *és clar*. I mean that I am Castilian because I was born in Castella and since childhood I have been inculcated in the culture, the customs, the landscapes, the language, etcetera, of Castella. With being Castilian comes a way of seeing and doing things, clearly. All this ends up constructing the spirit and personality. Anything against it, even if desired, would be a pointless struggle.”

“But this is not the case for all of us, don Emeterio. I am also otherly ‘constructed’, as a Galician, but I don’t stop being feeling myself Spanish. The same is true for the Basques, even though they have an ancestral language of their own. And in Extremadura, and in the western fringes of *Andallussia*, where they also speak Castilian, the people have no problem being Spanish.

“Yes but in Castella there is the complication of a sense of pertaining to a collectivity, a differentiated, national unity. This is often called a ‘national consciousness.’ Don’t ask me why it is so in Castella or the Canaries and not so in other

regions. It's something that has been forged over the course of centuries and has been influenced by an infinity of factors.”

“Then to put in fewer words, you don't feel Spanish.”

“No, that's not exactly right. What is happening is that I cannot feel Spanish with the same intensity that I feel Castilian. I can manage to feel comfortable in Espanya and even engaged in Spanish institutions if that doesn't get in the way of being what I am: *castellà!* It's much better if my Castilianness can be expressed, if the rest of Espanya understands that, in my case, the only way I can be a Spaniard is through being Castilian. That way I can enjoy the advantages of being a Spanish citizen and prefer to remain inside the state rather than without. Beyond this there are the several centuries of co-existence, various historical and cultural ties with the rest of Espanya that would always be difficult to break.

“But focus on one thing,” the politician continued, stifling a new question from the journalist. “Everything that I've just finished saying amounts to a rational analysis, and a cool one at that, about the advantages and inconveniences of being Spanish. I can want to be Spanish or not want to be on a strictly rational basis. On the other hand, I cannot want or stop wanting to be Castilian because it is something visceral, primal, non-rational. Do you get that? If I stop being a Spaniard, I will carry on as a Castilian. But, if I am not Castilian, then I am nothing!”

“Is this the general feeling among the citizenry of *Castella*, don Emeterio?”

“In Castella, as in Espanya, differing sensibilities coexist. Perhaps what I just said could apply to the majority, although there are some Castilians who desire independence above all else. And others who feel themselves Spaniards as viscerally as *castellans*.

“Would you support a referendum on independence for Castella?”

“I wouldn’t oppose conducting a referendum if it were proposed by a Castilian government legitimately elected by the voters. Without a doubt, I would never support a referendum if it wasn’t absolutely necessary.”

“What a weakling you look to me, don Emeterio,” thought Aznacod, saying to himself that at least he would have answered in the affirmative: ‘I would support a referendum if I thought it was necessary.’ Forget the ‘absolutely’”.

Through the ether and at a distance, the newscaster seemed to have read Aznacod’s thoughts and then asked:

“Perhaps this means that many will be disappointed.’

“Perhaps. But that is what I think. To say otherwise would be lying.”

“Let’s move on to another topic, if that’s alright with you. You have lived for more than three decades in França, a country with which Espanya has maintained a contentious relationship: the loss of Vallespir, Conflent, Fenollat, Capcir and Roussillon – the counties of North Catalonia. How did you see the question of these disputed territories from there? Did you have an opportunity to investigate it?”

“Well, in the last 30 years I will have made...six or seven visits to that region, yes.”

“And what was your impression?”

“To be honest, I think that this a question that would matter most to the Ph... Catalans.” He had come within a whisker of saying *Phoenicians*, Aznacod smiled to himself. “Really, to be honest here, I don’t see how either you nor I can be affected by whether or not these counties are part of Espanya. In any case, I will tell you that after my visits, it doesn’t appear to me that the citizens of that region of França actually want to change their nationality.”

“And what about national dignity, don Emeterio? And the historical claim that Espanya has over these territories, annexed by França as spoils of war?”

“There is no national dignity or historical claim that goes beyond the rights, individual or collective, of the inhabitants. That is my opinion.”

“So you deny then the right...?”

“*Escolti, miri*, I will propose a fictional case,” the politician cut her off rather brusquely. “Suppose for a second that Portugal might demand the return of Galicia in the same terms that the Spanish state reclaims North Catalonia. Would you want to be consulted or would you not want to be consulted, *senyoreta*?”

Snared in her own trap, the newscaster had no other recourse than to move ahead with the script of the interview, which provoked in Ruiz de la Barca-Fery the smile of an animal old and expert.

“Now, don Emeterio, I would like it if you might tell us your opinion of the political leaders who have seen their parties recently legalized and are preparing for the

elections the Directorship has announced for after the summer. We will begin, if it's alright with you, with Isidre de Sevilla, secretary general of Socialist Party of Espanya."

The interviewer and her subject went over a list of the primary figures in the incipient Spanish democracy in order of descending importance. In general, the old ex-president and ex-exile praised everyone's commitment to fighting the dictatorship and respect for the rules of the democratic game. He only had criticism, and light at that, for the leader of the pro-Soviet communists, whom he characterized as a fine director but lashed to an obsolete ideology, and for the Canary independence group, the *Guanxe* Front for Liberation, the only group that openly advocated armed struggle against the state.

"The political objectives of FROGA are perfectly legitimate and defensible in a democracy," he said. "I believe they must abandon the path of violence, give a vote of confidence to the new Directorship. As the rest of us have done."

"And the right wing of the *Aliança Nacional*, what would you say about them?"

"They are the inheritors of Feliubadalism and only for this they have it difficult. Nevertheless, they have agreed to the Constitution and democracy, which is a great step forward." He added ironically, "I will not be the one to deny them the right to smarten up! In time we will see if they are capable of adapting, of dropping the authoritarian ties. At the moment, and this is good, they have parted ways with the brutal style of the Brotherhood of the Sentinels."

Aznacod's self-esteem shrank as the interview went along. They had forgotten about him. The public powers, the new as well as the old, ignored him because for them, in the unlikely case that they would even had heard of him, he was only an insignificant

politician, Castilian and Castilianist, too young even if he had a respectable resume as an opponent of feliubadalism. New proof that the Phoenicians – and Spaniards in general – didn't give a fuck about Castella or the feelings of the Castilians.

Beyond...beyond...Aznacod felt subtly captured by what the newscaster was saying in that instant. Listening to her, beyond interrupting his digestion of the offence, he felt himself elevated to a mental state more delightful than he had ever previously experienced.

...want to ask you about someone whom I have expressly left for the end. A young politician who runs a recently emerged party, but whose popularity in Castella seems to be rising steadily..."

"You are referring to Ruy Aznacod, of Christ and Castella." Aznacod stifled an orgasmic moan at hearing his name singled out by the lips of the old hero.

"Exactly. Do you know him personally?"

"I met him this past year, in Grenoble, during a visit that he had the kindness to pay me." "Kindness," said Aznacod, smacking his lips with pleasure.

"And what's your opinion of him?"

"Young, courageous, ambitious. A committed Castilianist. Moreover, a very well know person in Castella, outstanding for his work as director of Atlético Pucelano. All that, along with the Christian orientation of his party and its anti-Feliubadalism, explains his popular appeal. Parties like Christ and Castella have come to fill a space until now left vacant in Castella and also in the rest of Espanya: the democratic right." At hearing the word "right" Aznacod lurched back as though he hadn't expected the spit that just hit him

in the eye. “You know what I mean? In Espanya we are bereft of politicians of the democratic right, as there are in França, for example, who are above suspicion, who do not have ties to the dictatorship. Yes, I believe Dr. Aznacod is perfectly capable of leading the democratic right in Castella,” said De la Barca, clinching it.

“I am not the right, you jackass. I’m a centrist, Christian democrat, not a right-winger.” The declarations of Ruiz de la Barca had left Aznacod tasting bile. While saying wonderful things about him as a person, all these allusions to his theory about the right did the younger leader no good at all. Aznacod had gotten screwed and he knew it. Perhaps he had done it out of spite. Why else?

“We have come at the end of the program. However, I could not let you leave, don Emeterio, without asking you the best guarded secret in your party. Are you or are you not the candidate of the Communal Left for the presidency of Castella?”

The politician let loose a toothy, guttural laugh.

“Nothing has been decided. It’s just that there are people, comrades of mine in the party, who insist that I be a candidate, and...”

“And?”

“And as they are very dear friends of mine, I find it getting more and more difficult to resist their entreaties. *Deixem-ho així.*”

“Let’s leave it there then,” the interviewer repeated De la Barca’s vague answer. “All that remains is to thank you for joining us...”

“He’s going to run. The old bastard is going to run.” Now Aznacod understood why all the “right” and “rightwing” applied to him. The clever fox was clearing the road by slyly disqualifying the candidate identified as his principal rival. These days, with political sensitivities just below the skin, to say someone was from the rightwing was to accuse him of fascism or being a Feliubadalista. Aznacod debated between two contradictory sentiments: on one side, the attention De La Barca lent him flattered his vanity; on the other, he was enraged by an affront that in another epoch would have resulted in a duel. Well, the duel would take place, although it would be one without gunfire or death in the physical sense of the word. After all, Ruiz de la Barca-Fery was a cottonhead, a shriveled prune, and the people of Castella were a wise folk. “They are not going to vote for a geezer who can’t hold in his farts.”

Not even he believed himself. The clock on the consistory tower rang twelve o’clock.

*Valladolid, April 22 of 1976*

Anarchy, libertinism, partying. “These people will use any excuse whatsoever to party.” Massana said to himself from the large window on the second floor of Els Segadors, a café that occupied one of the corners of the square that made up the Plaça Castella of Valladolid. From his lookout, the agent of the Brotherhood viewed the entire plaza, including the noble balcony from which Ruiz de la Barca-Fery would have to pop out to receive the accolades of his followers and henchmen. Rivers of humans continued

flowing from tributary streets to a plaza that gave the impression that it could fit neither one body nor soul more. There were banners everywhere. Many showed a large tower in a white field, a fair number with a red, five-pointed star in the upper section. Or with two C's, one at each side of the tower, and a crucifix where the previously mentioned had the star. Others had a red background upon which was embroidered sickles and hammers, stylized fists, more Castilian towers or emblems of corresponding political parties. Some were red and nothing more. Also there flourished yellow banners with a giant Ñ inscribed in a circle.

“From which party are those?” Massana asked his companion.

Sadurní Lòpeç Mendoça, his contact in Valladolid, was skinny little man, swarthy with ratlike features and greasy, lank hair. He had a long, thin nose that he pointed toward the glass as he tried to locate in the panorama the banner Massana was referring to.

“The ‘Ñ’? It’s not a party. It’s a campaign to promote Castilian on road signs, so that kids learn it in school, to publish stuff in it...So that everybody will speak *castellà*. Right.”

Lòpeç Mendoça spoke in the miserable Catalan that seemed to be common in these backwaters, with that *xava* accent, so full of sharpened vowels and lispings consonants, and a bleating tone that Massana disliked intensely.

“That’ll be the day,” he spat out.

Then there were placards dispersed throughout the plaza like sails on a ship of fools. From his vantage point, Massana made out what some of them were saying.

Almost all were in Castilian, though he was surprised to see a few in Spanish also demanding “llibertat”, the “estatut” or “democràcia.” Even more surprising to him was a great network of anarchists, displaced in one corner of the plaza, whose enormous (legend) in black read: “DE LA BARCA: MARIONETAS NO” “Marionetas?” The word sounded offensive. Were they perhaps accusing De la Barca of being a “marieta”, or effeminate?

“No, not a homo, a *titella*. They are accusing him of being a marionette in the hands of the Directorship in Lleida,” Lòpeç Mendoça explained.

“When the hell do these people ever work? Yet they want to be independent? I would put them to work digging ditches!” Massana was scandalized. Despite the fact that it was a workday, the city had the holiday air of celebrating its patron saints. Included apparently was a rock concert that night, pompously entitled “Concierto por la Libertad.” Massana saw signs announcing it everywhere. “What a waste of time and money,” he kept repeating to himself.

Beyond the dialect, the other thing that made him uncomfortable and out of place was the impudent exhibition of luxury and bad taste that the inhabitants of the city gleefully indulged in. The women with their furs and jewels, the men with their double-breasted suits or three quarter length coats with leather collars, cuff links, and then gold rings and watches. Almost all of it expensive bad taste, when not just bad taste. Massana studied his companion Lòpeç Mendoça. Even he, whose nails must go weeks without seeing soap, whose shoulders perpetually are full of dandruff, showed off an ostentatious gold seal with a ruby mounted on his left-hand ring finger and a wasteful unmarked jacket.

“What is the three quarter that you are wearing made of? Canvas?”

Lòpeç Mendonça seemed to emerge from some eternal dream.

“Huhhhh...? Oh, the jacket! He kept looking at Massana with his little rat eyes half-closed, wondering what interest his greatcoat could have for this executioner of De la Barca. “It’s Loden.”

The disorderly murmuring that came from the other side of the glass increased suddenly in volume at the same time it gained cohesion. Massana passed his glance over the crowded turbulence in the plaza searching for the reason for the commotion and didn’t find it until it occurred to him to look at the balcony of the palace. The insignificant figure of Ruiz de la Barca-Fery could be barely seen between the ancient balustrades. The man had materialized when Massana was not looking, probably when no one was looking, like some damned hobgoblin. “I will get you now,” he said between his teeth while accepting a cigarette that Lòpeç Mendonça offered him.

De la Barca opened his arms as though he wanted to embrace every single person in the plaza. On the third floor were outlined other figures, human or semihuman, born of the same sorcery that had given life to the wizened gnome. A booming voice that seemed to surge up from the bottom of his lungs thundered in the megaphone.

“COUNTRYMEN! HERE I AM!

To Massana the phrase seemed so banal as to be an affront to the enthusiasm of the crowd, which spent several minutes waving their banners and shouting: “Director! Director!”

“TO SHARE YOUR PAIN, YOUR SACRIFICE, YOUR JOY AND YOUR DREAMS FOR CASTELLA, COUNTRYMEN! HERE I AM!

A new and deafening ovation; new and multicolor fluttering of the banners. Nauseated, Massana looked away from the plaza and returned to the matter that until a little while earlier he had been attending to with Lòpeç Mendoça. He remained thoughtful for a couple seconds and then shook his head.

“No, I just don’t see it. This is a very big deal.”

If you want to do it, you can,” Lòpeç Mendoça said. “I’m not saying it would be easy, but it can be done.”

“But why not out in the open, or from a distance?”

Lòpeç Mendoça roundly shook his head.

“We are playing in the opponent’s field, Ermengol. This bastard is better guarded than the British crown jewels. Out in the open is impossible. And if we went ahead with the sniper plan, we would have to be completely certain of the shot, renting a flat, etc. And we don’t have the time for this.”

“Nor the cash,” admitted Massana. “But even so, there is the *estadi*...”

“The stadium is our only chance, believe me. There is a weak point in the building security. I know because for a while I was on the service staff. “

“But everybody in the world has to know that. This time they will take extraordinary precautions.”

“Don’t you believe it... The Pucelano stadium is not exactly known for its in-house organization. A lot of people work there because of connections, and there is a lot of discontent. And beyond that, I have some friends who can lend us a hand if we need it.”

“COUNTRYMEN! WE HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO LIVE IN AN IMPORTANT MOMENT. IT IS THE MOMENT THAT, AFTER HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF DARKNESS, A LIGHT SHINES AGAIN OVER CASTELLA. THAT SAME LIGHT THAT HAS LONG SHONE OVER THE MOST ADVANCED AND PROSPEROUS NATIONS OF THE EARTH. THE LIGHT OF LIBERTY!”

Massana exhaled a puff of smoke while he meditated, looking upon the roof. If there was no other way...

“What does this flaw in security consist of?”

“It’s basically an access corridor to the V.I.P sky box. You can get there from one of the electric control rooms, via a small steel door that hasn’t been opened in years. The key has been lost and nobody is worried about finding it, because the room has a second door, the main one, that opens to the bleachers, where the staff of the *Manteniment* get access. Everyone supposes that the other is impossible to open.”

“From the way you say it, I would guess that it can be opened.”

“*Equilicuá,*” Lòpeç Mendoça smiled. “I have the key. I found it by accident in a spot where never anybody often looks. It was one of the souvenirs that I took with me when they gave me the boot.”

“...FOR THIS CASTELLA WE HAVE TO GET TO WORK TO MAKE IT STRONGER AND MORE PROSPEROUS THAN EVER, SO THAT IT WILL SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE FOR ALL THE PEOPLES OF ESPANYA...”

“They threw you out or you left?”

Lòpeç Mendoça gave the last drag to his cigarette and then ground out the stub in the plastic ashtray.

“They threw me out,” he said. “I got in a fight during a game against Sporting d’Hispalis, a freaking Andalus disrespected me. I sent him to the ICU for his foolish stunts. Obviously they didn’t want to report me for that and do I know what else? They said I was being fired for ‘excessive zeal in the prosecution of duties.’ What’s your story?”

“*Collons* I say,” Massana responded. “Something similar happened to me. The thing is fucked up, very fucked up. Look, what did you want that key for?”

“I would go to the little room to have a smoke when I didn’t want to run into anyone. One time I took a Southern lass up there.”

“Are you sure that it still opens the door? Wouldn’t they have changed the lock?”

“I would have to test it,” admitted Lòpeç Mendoça. “It’s been months since I used it. But that’s out of my hands.”

“And this corridor is not under surveillance?”

“No. They once put a watch at the entrance when some celebrities passed through. At the exit to the box there is a security grating, which you open from the inside using a

lever. From the outside, it opens with a key, but that won't be necessary, because a gun barrel fits between the bars and it's no impediment to shooting. When you get there you'll be breathing down their necks. You could even kill three or four, if you felt like it."

"And the escape, what about that?"

"You turn back, jump in the control room and out the other door, head down the stairs and mix with the crowd. Out there it will be very difficult for them to catch you. There is a fucking million ways to leave the stadium without anyone seeing you."

"...THE SEED THAT THEY COULD NOT WIPE OUT AND THAT NOW, AFTER 35 YEARS OF DORMANCY, COMES AT LAST TO HARVEST..."

Massana silently and thoroughly chewed over the plan proposed by Lòpeç Mendoça, trying to illuminate its possible unknowns. He could not permit himself the luxury of acting *a la babalà*. There were few resources to compensate for the idiotic situation into which they had put him.

"And the bodyguards?" he said. "These people will have bodyguards. How am I going to get to De la Barca with a gorilla in between?"

The look on Lòpeç Mendoça's face demonstrated that had not thought about this, but then he suddenly snapped his fingers.

"The Almogàvers."

"What?"

“The Almogàvers, the youth group of the Brotherhood out here. In fact, they’re already preparing protests against De la Barca. I can ask them to raise a ruckus during the game with Ilerda. If they position themselves in front of De la Barca’s box and begin to shout and throw things when the moment arrives, it’s logical that the muscle will gather in front of the big shots to protect them. Especially when they won’t be expecting any trouble from behind.”

“More people? This is beginning to seem like the set of a Marx Brother’s picture.”

“Don’t worry. The Almogàvers are a band of sharp lads, not one a dullard. I’ll speak with the Sentinel who runs the chapter and explain to him what we expect from them. He will be happy to lend a hand and he will not ask questions.”

“*Bé*,” said Massana. “As things stand, we will have to do it. We have a week-and-a-half to finish planning this. We cannot leave any loose ends, *d’acord*? It would be good to know where exactly De la Barca will be in the box. Also, I want to go over every step that the boys will make from their entrance into the *estadi* until they arrive at the box.

“I’ll do what I can,” Lòpeç Mendoça said.

“All that’s left is to pay a visit to the field, without anyone watching, to survey the terrain.”

“...OVERCOMING THE LONGSTANDING DIVISION BETWEEN  
CITIZENS, THE DOOR TO DEMOCRACY AND LIBERTY, THE NECESSARY  
AND DEFINITE STANCHING OF A WOUND OPEN FOR THIRTY FIVE YEARS...”

After draining the contents of their cups and Massana putting out his cigarette in the bottom of the ashtray, the two left the establishment and reentered the plaza, where the inflamed crowd continued, in a divine madness, to hang on every word of De la Barca's speech. They slipped through the multitude, pressed against the wall of a building, saying '*perdó*' or '*sisplau*' every few steps. Massana would have liked to use other language on those interfering with their advance.

"Excuse me, '*sisplau*'?" said Lòpeç Mendonça.

A man turned to look at him. He was tall and thin, twentysomething, bearded and long-haired, dressed in alternately in woolens and corduroy. "The proto-typical Red baby," Massana said to himself. "Here the Reds are the only ones who don't overdress." Beneath a fur-lined jacket, stamped on the back, the usual Castilian tower topped with a sickle and hammer peeping over. Behind him more lads and lasses, more woolens and corduroys, a pair of bell-bottom jeans. The bearded one grasped by the neck an almost empty bottle of cheap wine and looked like he might have drunk it all by himself.

"Man, if it's not Saturnino the Fascist!" he said in Castilian. "We're going to kick you in the ass, you sonofabitch, *cabrón*."

Massana's hand instinctively reached for his armpit, where he hid his gun, but he stayed it out of fear of giving himself away and jeopardizing the mission. He wanted to stay put, unnoticed. El Sadurní would have to handle this alone.

"...WE SHALL MOVE OUR PEOPLE FROM THE DANGER OF DENATIONALIZATION AND THE INTERNAL DISCORD, WE WILL OVERCOME THE DARK PERIOD OF MORTAL THREAT..."

El Sadurní handled himself very well, one had to admit. Without giving the other a chance to react, Lòpeç Mendoça shot out his hands on the chest of the Marxist, grabbed him by the lapels and, despite the fact that the other was six inches taller, threw him through the air against the wall. Then he used such brute force that the beardy's shoulders would know well the hardness of the stone wall.

“What are you up to, loser?” he cried, his breath in other's face. “Don't you know who you are messing with? You want me to go looking for you at your house, *pòtol*, you redshit?”

The bearded one looked down and away from that of Lòpeç Mendoça. His figure seemed to shrink and dissolve. The five or six youths who accompanied him watched the scene unfold in a fearful silence.

“Hicks” Massana said contemptuously. “For them this is all a game. Only sometimes they have to play without their mommies.” Upon realizing that some eyes were turning toward him, Massana considered dissimulation, but he did not resist the temptation: with a steely smile on his lips, he cast a glance that made them scatter in fear.

“You're lucky I can't waste any more of my time on you, boy. But after today, sweetheart, you had better not let me catch you,” said Lòpeç Mendoça, giving the guy a couple smacks in the face, but not so energetically that they might not seem friendly. “Come on. Get the fuck out of here.”

The group departed quickly. Massana followed the track of Lòpeç Mendoça's gaze and discovered it locked on the ass of one of the departing girls. The Castilian's

eyes danced to the rhythm of those young gluteals, constrained in her jeans as like pork sausage.

“Did you see that chick? That’s what happens when you lose you manners, customs...everything.”

It seemed that he had forgotten all the recent unpleasantness, but when he looked at Massana the irony in his gaze gave way to concern.

“They’re getting bolder, those Reds, Ermengol. Even though they are afraid of us, I just don’t know... With Feliubadaló this sort of thing never happened.”

At the end of the plaza the flood of humanity dispersed, flowing in both directions through an ample street closed to vehicular traffic. At the street entrance, four riot police kept guard along with a van of the Guardia d’Esquadra, well supplied with helmets, shields and clubs. One raised his hand in recognition of Lòpeç Mendoça, who returned the salutation.

“They don’t know the big part they have to play”, Massana said.

“You said it,” the Castilian replied. “*Bé*, the moment has arrived to go our separate ways. I’ll get in contact with you as soon as I have something.

“It better be soon. We don’t have much time.”

They didn’t dare make the salute, limiting themselves to a handshake.

“*Avant Espanya*, Ermengol.”

“*Avant.*”

The amplified voice of Ruiz de la Barca blasted, morosely and solemnly, to his conclusion.

“AND FOR THIS I SAY TO YOU: COUNTRYMEN! FEEL PROUD OF BEING CASTILIANS! LONG LIVE CASTELLA AND ITS COMMONWEALTH!

The plaza melted into a unanimous, thunderous ovation.

The vestibule of the city hall received a circular tide of politicians new and old with institutional posts validated and discredited, hierarchies of the Church, top military brass whose inexpressiveness was a kind of warning, print reporters, security staff and private bodyguards, a whirlpool that seemed excessive given the physical meagerness of its center of gravity: Ruiz de la Barca. Immersed in the periphery of this galaxy, Dr. Aznacod played the role of a rising star with all the dignity that he was capable of secreting. Dazzled by the flashbulbs, in the custody of two members of the leadership level of Christ and Castella, Aznacod kept busy with the task of shaking hands known and unknown, fraternizing with political rivals and repaying with a friendly smile the interest of the mass media in attendance. Neither more nor less than any other politician who had shown up, he was making payments on his electoral estate with an eye towards mortgaging it in the near future. Aznacod was not one of those diminished by exposure in the media. Reporters sought him out more than he pursued them.

When they met, Ruiz de la Barca did not avoid him. They reached out their hands below the flare of flashbulbs, smiling with the complicity of gladiators who, as the hour to dismember each other in the arena draws near, behave like allies. Allies against the

Phoenician Power, Aznacod told himself. They separated and a little later Aznacod found himself in conversation with the Bishop of Madrid, a man of milquetoast features and manners who had never distinguished himself standing up to the Feliubadalista regime, but who had in recent times converted to the new faith of democracy. To judge from the way he spoke to and looked at him, his Excellency must have considered Aznacod to be the great white hope for Christianity. For Castilian Christianity, at least. The politician wanted to tell him off, but he was impeded by his religious convictions, the dignity due ecclesiastical office and the stupidity implicit in antagonizing an influential ally.

He took leave of the prelate by just as the gates to the Palacio finishing opening. The sunlight poured in streams into the carpeted vestibule, making electric illumination superfluous and bringing back to life the centuries-old tapestries covering the walls. With the old ex-president at the head, the group began to gravitate to the exterior, where there awaited the official cars parked on the stone pavement. A little beyond, past the barricades and police cordon, remained a multitude that burst into applause at the appearance of Ruiz de la Barca. The old man smiled and waved the hand not occupied by the walking stick, before dissolving into the interior of his vehicle.

Aznacod crossed the threshold when Ruiz de la Barca had already departed covered in public adulation. There was clapping directed at him and the other political leaders who left with him at that moment from the Palacio. At his side, Ortonobes, secretary general of the communists, saluted with his fist in the air. Aznacod opted to raise his right hand in a salutation deliberately devoid of solemnity. Unexpectedly, the applause broke into booing. Aznacod and the communist traded disconcerted looks. Presently they figured it out: Roger Taraçona finished making himself visible. He was an

ex-minister of Feliubadaló, currently the leader of the Aliança Nacional in Castella. Frightened by the reaction his appearance had prompted in the crowd, the ex-Feliubadalista backtracked towards his car, consuming the scarce reserves of dignity he yet retained and rashly detaching himself from his bodyguards. This created a fissure in the political dike so that some uncontrolled onlookers spontaneously jumped into roadway and reached the car at the same time as Taraçona. Aznacod and Otronobes silently asked themselves whether to intervene or let the people avenge 35 years of oppression and repression upon the person, no doubt culpable, of the ex-minister. With a mute assent they agreed to intervene. They arrived as the first blows were raining down. Taraçona, who had managed to get half of his body in the back of the automobile, was fighting to close the door. Someone was trying to hang on from outside, impeding him. Aznacod pushed his way in trying to calm the passions, putting himself between the aggressors and the ex-henchman. Taraçona was able to close the door and Aznacod saw him zoom off, lashed by the booing and insults of the crowd. He smiled. Tomorrow all the papers would speak of the fearless democratic leader of Christ and Castella who protected a pathetic representative of the regime from the unhinged ire of the masses.

He heard a familiar voice from behind.

“Papa! Hey, Papa!”

He turned around, his eyes wide open.

“Rodrigo! You’re here! You were one of the ones beating on Taraçona?”

“I got here a little too late – though not for lack of trying!” the twenty-year-old laughed. He then turned suddenly serious and said, “Papa, can we speak with you for a moment?”

“Now?” Aznacod said, realizing that his son was not alone. He was accompanied by another lad of similar age and of not very neat aspect. I don’t get this mania kids these days have for confusing progress and filth, he said to himself. “Very well, come with me.”

He took them to the interior of the city hall vestibule, as a precaution against indiscrete eyes and ears.

“Alright?”

He was surprised when his son changed to Catalan.

“*Aquest* is Jordi, Papa. From Lleida, affiliated with the Socialist Revolutionary League.”

“Right. And since when have you been associating with *fenicios*?”

“¡*Venga, papá!* Not all Catalans are alike,” Rodrigo defended himself in Castilian. And then he returned again to Catalan. “*El Jordi* has come from Lleida to celebrate the return of Ruiz de la Barca. He has introduced me to a colleague at his college, a Trotskyite like himself. He passed on something to Jordi and I thought we shouldn’t waste any time telling it to you. Jordi’s really shook up about it.”

As Rodrigo was speaking, Jordi seemed to be recovering from the worst shock of his life.

“You say it.”

“I saw someone I know, *senyor*,” the Catalan began in a tremulous voice.

“Someone from the Brotherhood of the Sentinels of Our Lady of Montserrat.”

“A ‘Montse’. Yes, unfortunately in Valladolid we have a few. And?”

“The one that I’m talking about is not from around here. He’s from Lleida. A dangerous guy, very well-known over there. The kind that would carry a gun. He beat me up once so I had to spend two weeks in the hospital.”

“Aha,” grasped Aznacod. “Did he come alone?”

“No, Papa,” his son interjected. “He came with Saturnino the fascist, who used to be a security guard at the Pucelano before he was fired for beating up that Sevilliano, remember?”

“Right, right. How could I not remember? I voted to kick him out of the club.”

“My father is on the board of directors for the Pucelano,” Rodrigo clarified for his companion.

A thug on the payroll of the Brotherhood has come from Lleida, seen in the company of someone no less thuggish and violently fascist. What to make of all this? A coincidence, perhaps? That Saturnino the fascist might be an ex-member on the field staff of the Pucelano reminded Aznacod of the match that would be played against Ilerda in the coming week. Sellout crowds, the obligatory attendance of Ruiz de la Barca-Fery presiding in honor over the event... Almost without trying, Aznacod found himself musing about the likelihood of a convergence of the destinies of Ruiz de la Barca, the

fascist thugs, the Castilian Communities and his own. He was ashamed that the idea was not completely repulsive to him and forced it out of his mind.

“Don’t worry, you two,” he told the young men. “It’s too late for Feliubadalism. There is nobody who can change that.”

Field of the Pucelano Athletic Team, Valladolid, May 2, 1976

Rain was expected to coalesce out of the threatening gray skies. The evening clarity that the defective lights of the stadium sprinkled over the field and stands, the deafening background roar of the noisemakers, the sibilant and swelling humanity pouring down the stairs, all contributed to create a brooding and harsh atmosphere that forebode some imminent cosmic collapse. Aznacod did his best to keep his attention on the game, one which in other circumstances would absorb his attention to the point that he would forget he was in the V.I.P. box. A Pucelano vs. Ilerda game. When had he been distracted at a Pucelano-Ilerda? Never. And the game was exciting. Ilerda had advanced at 1:13 thanks to the assistance of Deulofeu to the Dutch star of the Catalan team, Baartman, who, after escaping the pursuit of two defense players, beat the goalkeeper, Recaredo, with a unstoppable shot. Just ten minutes later a brutal tackle by Miquelet had sent centerfielder Berroqueny sprawled in the grass. The Valladolid public had roared as one being, demanding retaliation in full from the Castilian’s teammates, which Berroqueny took upon himself to deliver.

Near the end of the first half and with the score tied, the team got some momentum. A pity that from time to time Aznacod’s mind strayed to other game plans, not precisely concerning sports. By its own will, his head kept swinging around every

two or three seconds to check on the web of security that protected access to the VIP box. He did not know how they would do it, nor did he even know whether they would do it. But his intuition told him the attack could only happen here.

“No, they’re not going to do it,” he told himself. Not a chance...Of course, he had made some discrete inquiries. Yes, Saturnino the fascist had been hanging around the field lately. And yes, he had been at times accompanied by an outsider, a Catalan probably, maybe even the “Montse” that his son’s friend had referred to. And he was pricked by regret that had not raised the alarm that there could be a plot afoot to assassinate Don Emeterio. So then he tried even harder to repeat to himself that they couldn’t do it, that his suspicions rested on very flimsy evidence and that he would have made a ridiculous spectacle denouncing a non-existent plot.

A ridiculous spectacle was unacceptable for somebody, like him, who hoped to go far in politics.

Aznacod leaned forward, startled by the inexorable way that Baartman once again pressed the ball toward Pucelano’s territory. His heart shrank as the Dutchman penetrated the Valladolidista penalty area, slid diagonally through the defense, and blasted a shot with his left foot. Aznacod slid to the edge of his seat when Recaredo majestically dived in and managed to deflect the leather sphere out for a corner, barely grazing it with his fingertips. What a play! Aznacod leapt up from his seat to applaud the save of the local goalkeeper and joined his voice to the chorus that was now rising from the stands: “RECAREEEDO, RECAREEEDO”. “They won’t do it. They won’t do it.” A noisy fluttering of local flags, striped in purple and white, of standard Castilian banners, of Castilian banners with the political symbol of the red star, of combinations of one another

and others yet, extended over the heads of the gathered fans from one extreme of the stadium to the other. In the minority Lleidista camp, the checkered flags in green and blue, accompanied sometimes by that other Spanish sign, hung in expectation of the next turn of fate. A tense silence vibrated in that purple-white travelling support as Shrinkl took the corner kick. The football flew towards the inner goal area to be intercepted by Cienfuegos, who with one energetic “choot” kicked it toward midfield. The home fans exhaled in relief.

Aznacod edged forward to check on Ruiz de la Barca, who occupied the place of honor four seats from his. Sandwiched between the prodigious bulk of Giménez Galeano and the hardly smaller figure of Palafolls, presidents respectively of the clubs Atlético Pucelano and Imperial Ilerda FC, the old man looked even more tiny and wrinkled than he really was. It was a while since Aznacod had looked at him. Regardless of what happened in the game, he had never changed his initial posture, hunched over his walking stick with his spectacles fixed on some unclear point on the grass. Imperturbable, unmovable. Not rejoicing in the actions of what one would suppose to be his team, el Pucelano. Even when the game was really exciting, he limited himself to restrained clapping as one who, at the ballet, applauded the performance of the orchestra. His expression remained unchanged in those moments when the Phoenicians besieged the Castilians’ territory. He didn’t twitch, didn’t suffer, didn’t shift in his seat. His interest in the game seemed more a matter of courtesy than anything else. As the most important personality in Castilla, he was obliged to attend the game, but that did not mean that he enjoyed soccer or felt anything toward the Pucelano and its pennants. “A fellow who doesn’t get excited at the goals of the top club in Castilla cannot be a good Castilian, and

much less a good president. It's like not being a Christian." Aznacod's eyes returned again to the security detail. "Maybe it would be better for all concerned if...Just a joke, just a joke!" he corrected himself, smiling with indulgence.

The purplewhites were trying now to break the Phoenician resistance and force their way into the opposition's rearguard. A slow but intelligent attack that shortly bears fruit. Taking advantage of the green-blue defense being caught out of position, Caminal drove the ball with his feet and ploughed like a battering ram toward the enemy goal. "Come on, come on, come on!" Aznacod cheered, rising over the railing. Just before arriving at the goal zone, the player was intercepted by two opponents in a typical example of Phoenician cheating. The double entrance sent the forward down to the turf, a clear violation, but already Caminal had passed the ball irretrievably to McAlistair, tucked into a perfect position. The Scotsman received with his breast, dodged the defense and, by getting the ball over the head of the powerless goalkeeper, sent it into the rival net.

GOOOOOOOOOOOL! Gol, gol. Goooooooool! Aznacod leapt up out of his seat and thrust up his clenched fists in a gesture of uncontained and uncontainable euphoria. In an instant the bleachers would become covered in pennants, cries, bullhorns and other demonstrations of Sunday joy. Various firecrackers went off. Lifted onto the southern goal post, a Bengal light for nautical use opened a breach of light and blood into the leaden belly of the sky. The arbitrator consulted with the line referee. "Hey, hey, hey," Aznacod said angrily to himself. Finally the officer turned toward the Valladolidista team players, especially McAlistair, who was already celebrating the deflowering of the enemy net, and made an eloquent gesture with his arms. "But what did he say? Out of

bounds? OUT OF BOUNDS?! Come on, man! This guy is a sellout!” Once more, Pucelano was a victim of arbitrary arbitration. The joyfulness of the bleachers had transmuted into harsh rebuke, interlaced with shrill whistles and catcalls. As if nature itself wanted no less than to demonstrate its indignation, the clouds lit up and a first thunderclap rent the sky from one end to the other. The first thick drops of rain fell together with the items the spectators were flinging out on the field. Aznacod, making a self-conscious show of his self-control as a public figure, kept his anger confined to a stony expression. Something caught his attention: “What is going on?” There was a disturbance down there, cries and rude outbursts nearby that punched through the general disorder. Peeping over the railing, Aznacod saw the lone Spanish eagles and the banners of the Brotherhood of the Sentinels unfurled impudently some few yards below the balcony. He saw 15 “Montses”, more or less, all lads, vomiting in Phoenician denunciations and insults against Ruiz de la Barca. He saw red-blue scarves, effigies of the Black Virgin, and he saw their arms extended, four fingers spread at the end of each one, the vernacular version of the fascist salute.

Something small and hard bounced on the back of the seat in front of Aznacod and stopped at his feet. The politician picked it up and examined it in the palm of his hand: a Tudor battery of medium size, a fat one. “This could have taken out my eye...” He turned to peep his head out in time to warn hailstorm of small objects that, coming from the lines of the “Montses”, were at the point of falling upon the occupants of the balcony. His instinct told him to duck. An egg smashed on the floor and obnoxiously spilled its viscous contents. He heard the dark thunk of other projectiles on the floor and seats. Some of the women present – amongst whom María Sonsoles was not included:

soccer bored her – screamed hysterically. Next to him, a masculine voice interjected a “*¡Me cago en la hostia!*” indicative that its proprietor had been hit, perhaps by a missile more solid and wicked than a mere egg. “And this is what they prepared? Four babies with throwing stones?” he asked himself between relief and disappointment.

Nevertheless, it would require a meeting of the board of directors of the club, one of top urgency, in order to address the intolerable failures of security that made possible the present situation. Some members of the security detail broke out to the first role of the balcony. Soon a wall of gorilla flesh was interposed between the aggressors and the VIPs. Aznacod began to understand: that could be nothing other than a distraction maneuver. His eyes went again to the grillwork, only to verify that they continued to be so locked and mute as the maw of a sleeping dragon. He remembered Ruiz de la Barca: the old man had moved from his spot. He looked about like a hallucinating little bird, blinking through his coke bottom bottle lenses as if he did not realize that the target of the attack was precisely him. “They couldn’t do it,” he said to himself. “Too many people in the box, too many lumps of clay. If they tried to shoot him from the gate, they could not hit him. If they got into the box, it would have difficulty reaching him and retreat would be impossible. They would have to be complete bunglers...” O perhaps they might do it another way. O perhaps there might be no conspiracy whatsoever and it was all his imagination. Be it as it may, Ruiz de la Barca would survive. And if they made a failed assassination attempt, he would use it as a hedge against his rivals in the struggle for the presidency. The voting masses would begin to consider him a hero against whom their enemies could do nothing, an invulnerable being, chosen by God. Aznacod already saw the old timer ensconced on the presidential chair, behind an enormous and lustrous table

that almost hid his tiny figure. Maybe the anarchists were right when they described him as a puppet manipulated from the most obscure shadows of Lleida. A docile and pusillanimous governor would spread his debility to the governed country. When what Castella, subject to centuries without end to Phoenician dictates, needed most was leader who was patriotic, young and strong.

“Don Emeterio, come with me.”

The ex-president barely looked at the hand of support that Aznacod has placed on his arm. His voice sounded unsuspectingly firm and lucid.

“What are you suggesting, Aznacod?”

“They are coming for you. You are not safe here. Come with me.”

After a moment of vacillation, Ruiz de la Barca acceded to standing up and preceding Aznacod to the ascending stairs. There was in his countenance a certain stupefaction toward the populist aggression of which he was an object; he seemed to be reproaching himself inwardly. “Why did I leave França, and my chair at the University?” Before opening the gate, Aznacod shot a glance through the bars. The corridor descended in a light grade until the view was lost at the first bend. Not a soul. He lifted the lever of the lock and pushed it also to invite Ruiz de la Barca to cross the threshold.

“And now what do you want me to do?”

“Two levels down is the elevator. Take it, get out a ground level and put yourself in the hands of the security staff.”

“Aren't you coming?”

Aznacod mumbled something that seemed an excuse. “For Castella,” he said to himself. “For Castella.” He relocked the gate.

Massana could not understand how Sadurní could have availed himself of a whore in that pigsty, in which only with great difficulty could one sit on the floor. Or it was bluster or they would have teaseled to the right, with their asses supported by power cables, a heartbeat from electrocution. Knowing the *castellà* character, surely it was the former. Sadurní was a good guy, if a bit out there. It was late, too late, when Massana realized that he may have rushed to be convinced by him. Too many unknowns in the plan, too many things that could go wrong. What if, contrary to what Sadurní assured, the gate to the stadium box is kept under surveillance? What happens if the Almogàvers fail in their objective of grouping before the box and unfurling their signs? Or if the security service of the stadium disperses them too soon? Or if the bodyguards don't move from their posts? Or if Ruiz de la Barca does not make a good target? Or if those in the box get scared and call in the troops? Or if...

*Bé*, already there is no turning back, he told himself. Matters would come to a conclusion and things would happen as they might happen. If once at the gate he could not make out a clear shot, perhaps he could retrace his steps and leave it for another day. But that is only if strictly necessary: each day that passed there remained to them less time and less opportunity. He looked at his watch: two minutes from the agreed upon time. The Almogàvers must already have played their fragment of the score. He sharpened his ear by trying to read in the ominous roar that arrived to him through the masonry, an effort that he himself recognized as futile. A little afterward, the ambient noise experienced an unforeseen increase, the word “goal” clear and audibly

superimposed on the background sonority. Then a thunderclap. Then a cry that made him confused again. Impossible to discern anything in it.

It was time. He kicked aside the gray Maintenance uniform with which he had disguised himself in order to reach the miserably little compartment and from which he had disrobed. With his left hand in his pocket, he fingered the red-blue foulard and pressed the pad of his thumb against the miniature *Moroneta* wrought in the bone broach. He always carried them with him as a sort of talisman. Both were mementos of his first years with the Brotherhood. After putting on his gloves, he unsheathed the Tigermantic, his old partner, which he had cleaned and oiled scrupulously for the occasion. He checked to see if the loader was correctly inserted into the handle and the silencer well attached to the barrel. The key that Sadurní had provided him had to overcome some corrosion in the lock before turning the tumblers. With a rusty complaint, the door opened. "To St. George, *avant Espanya*," he said. He made the sign of the cross.

Like a shadow of himself, Massana slid down the reinforced concrete corridor. Just beyond was the turn that began in the passageway, ending in the balcony box. He was a few yards before the turn when he heard the clack of the barred gate shut and some footsteps approaching. "Jesus fucking Chr.." He pressed up against the wall and grabbed his gun, getting himself ready for the job ahead.

"Are you from Secur...?" the old man interrupted himself, his gaze caught in the sight of the weapon that the man dressed in a dark shirt and athletic pants grasped in a gloved right hand. The surprise that his face reflected was only comparable to what in that moment Massana felt. It was Ruiz de la Barca. The Ruiz de la Barca, his victim, whom Destiny had served him on a silver platter. He was going to be able to finish the

job in a much cleaner and more secure way than he ever could have imagined. He took aim at the old separatist while peeping over his shoulder to avoid surprises at the last minute. No one was seen, no one was heard.

“*Adéu*, redshit.

Massana smiled. His finger squeezed the trigger.

He did not reckon the action of the old man. With a face red with anger, a pure anger, without mixture of fear, he swung his walking stick over Massana. The fist of carved marble encountered the Catalan’s wrist, deflecting the shot while the firearm, unknown to the hand that had been holding it, hit the ground. The lethal spit resounded softly in the corridor. After a momentary disconcert a new situation was revealed to Massana’s senses: Ruiz de la Barca knocked down, his shoulder to the wall, below the left knee a red breach by the errant bullet. The old Castilian grasped his shot leg with his left hand while his right continued to hoist the walking stick. His features radiated an infinite and convulsive hatred. The Tiger lay on ground, a couple yards behind the man who could have been its victim.

Ruiz de la Barca intercepted the glance and intentions of Massana. He waved his stick in the air.

“Come on tough guy! Come and find out if you have bones! *Fenici de merda, fill de puta!*”

He had to admit that the geezer knew his moves. While he rubbed his wrist, Massana decided to regain the pistol and definitively liquidate the matter. In that moment, the metallic clack of the gate returned to agitate the air, followed by some rapid

steps that made him change his plans. “What starts bad, ends bad,” he told himself. All was lost. He would gain nothing refusing to accept the fiasco.

He gave a half turn and fled.

Tranquility had returned to the balcony. Even the personal bodyguards had returned to their posts, the aggression having already ceased and its duration having been so short that the panic was dispersing. Board members, celebrities and their spouses returned to their seats, chatting animatedly about the event. Critical opinions about the poor state of the facility’s infrastructure and the internal organization of the field: “The stadium’s days are numbered”; “It’s falling apart – 32 years are too many”; “The top team of Castella deserves a better field”; “Look, there were 15 of them at least!” “How could they have gotten in here?”; “How could they have let them in with batteries and eggs?” Conscious of their responsibility, the board members limited themselves to sitting down quietly and making reference to the project, already approved by the city council, the New City Sports, which would put Valladolid at the level of the principal European cities in terms of soccer teams and athletics. For the moment, nobody seemed to notice the absence of Don Emeterio. So poor was his stamp that there was not much difference between his presence or absence. Aznacod looked out at the bleachers. Some police and members of the service staff had taken pains to toss out with shoves the “Montses”, supported by a part of the crowd that raged at the fascists from a prudent distance, and by rain that fell with a torrential intensity. To Aznacod’s ears arrived the first stanzas of the Spanish national anthem that the “Montses” had begun to intone while they retired in resignation: *“Enlaira’t àliga espanyola! endavant i vola que vola! Amb tons dos caps,*

*dos senys! Venceràs enemics ferenys.*”<sup>\*</sup> In the field the 22 players, not knowing what had happened in the bleachers, splashed down in the grass while Aznacod looked at the black sky and wondered whether play would continue or be interrupted to see if the weather might clear. Soon they would warn of the disappearance of Ruiz de la Barca. Then someone would leave the balcony, go down the corridor and, if all had gone right, find the body... Aznacod interrupted himself. It was as if someone had lit light bulb in his soul and made visible the black cobwebs that infested it. He lifted both hands to his head. “My God, what have I done?” What he had done was push Ruiz de la Barca, his political rival, to a death if not certain, then at least probable. Coming from a deep personal place, his mind was filled with vivid scenes of his own descent into the eternal flames of Hell. Then, they were displaced by another image that was likely more terrifying: Ruiz de la Barca wounded and surviving, the suspect fingering Aznacod, ruining his earthly career. Who but himself had advised the old man to leave the balcony? They would not be able to prove anything, but the electorate would hardly fail to retract its support. The people were like that about such things.

“Lord, I have sinned against Thee and against Castella!” he said to himself. With determination to right the wrong, he opened the gate and dashed down the shaft into which he had flung Ruiz de la Barca few moments before. At the end of the corridor, on the floor, a black and silver object. “A pistol. It’s a pistol.” And around the bend, Don Emeterio on the ground, leaning against the wall. Wounded, alive.

The spiritual light bulb of Dr. Aznacod relit itself.

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<sup>\*</sup>Arise Spanish Eagle / fly on who flies / with your two heads, two wisdoms / vanquish fierce foes.

County highway C-251, 42 kilometers, jurisdiction of Salamanca, May 3 1976

The neglected highway wended its way through holm oak groves, black and even though the clouds overhead were shredding and the rosy fires of dawn broke through the multiple breaches. Massana yawned and rubbed his eyes with his right hand while the left continued to grasp the steering wheel of the Simca. Those were the worst hours, those of dawn. He had driven all night, with the sole exception of the stop he had made at one to stuff food in his mouth, in the shelter of an obscure grove, a pork sausage sandwich that he had bought the day before, just before “the job.” A Castilian snack, without tomato, without oil, without any condiment to mitigate the gumminess that bread had acquired with the passage of time. A monument to cheapness that, far from killing his *gana*, had settled in stomach into an indigestible knot.

His right hand hit the button to turn on the radio. Then, in response to the chorus of static emanating from the speakers, he turned the dial bit by bit, that the reception and language permitted him to learn something. He had been trying all night without success. He was curious to know what they would say about his disaster, but in the depopulated hills radio waves did not penetrate well. Throughout the night he had only been able to tune in four of five stations that broadcast Moorish music or languid Portuguese Fado, and other than the three voices chatting, in the *castellà* dialect, about sheep, fantasms and suchlike. Not a word about his failed assassination of Ruiz de la Barca. In the few instances where he had seemed to hear a voice in Spanish, the emission was too suffocated in static to be intelligible.

Massana was driving west, toward Portugal, making his way whenever he could by little traveled local roads. It was nothing more than a safety measure. His plan was to arrive at the frontier between Extramadura and the neighboring country. Once there, it would not be difficult to find a place to hide. He had comrades on both sides of the border, if not patriots then Lusitanian Salazarians who would give him shelter. It was a matter of spending some time out of circulation, only until he could see how things were developing or until Oriol María might give him new instructions.

Massana sighed. This was the second time in a short space when he saw himself obliged to fall off the map. He was going to end up as a mole.

“...the condemnations that followed the event,” declared a voice loud and clear in Catalan, as the dial hit the right spot in the frequency. The Prime Director Ciril Bernau did not hold himself back. In an impromptu televised press conference, the President of the Directorship, beyond condemning without reservation the attack, which he labeled a “vile and cowardly crime,” last night beseeched the Castilian populace and the Spanish people in general to remain calm, assuring that the road toward democracy and freedom that the nation had embarked upon is irreversible and criminal actions will hinder it not one whit. Ciril Bernau finished his address making reference to the efforts already undertaken at that moment to apprehend the criminals and affirming his certitude that the hammer of justice will fall upon them without delay.

“In the same spirit, the leaders of the principal Spanish and Castilian political parties have declared themselves untied in condemning the assassination, calling for prudence and tranquility that we not fall into the trap of responding an eye for an eye to this brutal provocation from ruffians. Likewise as Director Bernau, all have given their

condolences to the family of Emeteri Ruiz de la Barca-Fery, and as well as to the party for which he served as Secretary General, the Left Communal of Castella...”

Condolences? The party that Ruiz de la Barca was the secretary general? Massana did a double take.

“...the mortal remains that were the President of the Castilian Communities between 1939 and 1941 can still be found in the morgue of the Princeps d’Espanya National Hospital in Valladolid, where they await transfer to the Palau Gerencial to lie in state in the chapel so that all citizens who desire can bid their last *adéu...*”

Yes, yes, yes! Dead! Ruiz de la Barca is dead! How could that be possible, if the shot only hit him in the leg, far from a vital organ? Obviously, he was really old. Perhaps the bullet severed some sort of important vein or artery. Perhaps he bled there, in the corridor, before anyone could come to his aid. No. That’s not possible. Massana had gotten out of there precisely because...

The tires screeched, leaving marks on the asphalt. The Simca slid and twisted before coming to a halt perpendicular to the roadway. Massana, holding the steering wheel tightly, trying to control his excitement, relaxed his foot over the brake pedal. El Ruiz de la Barca was dead. And it had not been by him – someone else delivered the coup de grace! But *who*? Who had it been? Massana maneuvered the car to the side of the road. He did not want another car to suddenly appear and crash into his. He looked about for a path into the forest where he could hide his presence in its thick foliage. He abandoned the car to enter into the chill and pure air of the woods that made the hairs on his skin stand up beneath his shift as though they had seen ghost. Through the open door

of the car, the radio announcer continued to disperse kernels of information as his voice poured forth over the earth.

“...as disturbances this night after news broke of the assassination, in many streets in the historic center of Valladolid, where Castilian nationalist and left-wing militants clashed with officers of the *Guàrdia d’Esquadra* and presumed members of extreme right-wing organizations.

“Another voice that managed to make itself heard was that of Prince Carles Frederic d’Hapsburg, aspirant to the Spanish crown and Captain General of the Air Force, Navy and Army, who, via an official announcement, has thrown his complete support behind the shift to democracy begun by the *Gerencia*, moreover warning that he will not tolerate subordination within ranks of the Armed Forces nor initiatives or activities by seditious military groups, contrary to the laws and interests of the Spanish people. In these forceful terms, His Highness Carles Frederic d’Hapsburg has quieted rumors that...”

Massana was not in any condition to pay attention to the news. Who was it? *Who?* He raised his hand to his stomach, where the miserable sandwich was mouldering inside, provoking a wave of nausea. He had left the job half done because someone had come down the corridor from the balcony, preventing him from recovering the pistol. It must have been that person, without a doubt. Had Sadurní managed to install a comrade in the VIP balcony? Massana would have been informed. Supporting himself on a nearby tree trunk, the Catalan doubled over with the first wave of retching. By the third, a rain of bile and half-digested sandwich drenched the weeds near the tree.

In a better mood, and even a little hungry, he got back into the Simca and returned to the road. He could not know who had finished the job, but of one thing he was sure: he could only have been a patriot and Christian, someone willing to kill and die for God and Country. Just like himself.

“...Rui Gonçal Aznacod i Berjusa, secretary general of the nationalist party Christ and Castella and member of the board of directors of Atlètica Pucelà, the man who discovered the corpse after becoming alarmed about the absence of Ruiz de la Barca-Fery in the balcony during the commo..” Massana switched off the radio.

Whoever you are, thanks, comrade.

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