

CHAPTER I

THE CRIMINAL

‘Watch out!’

‘Non abbi paura.’

We were going at almost a hundred. The street was so long it disappeared into the distance; the buildings so tall we couldn’t see the sky. It was a true commercial boulevard, like New York’s famous 42nd Street of yesteryear where daylight scarcely penetrated and the eternal neon glared. Adverts for dentists and interplanetary journeys stood out amongst the countless billboards and we were periodically blinded by a slogan in huge glaring golden letters: PROGRESS CANNOT BE STOPPED. Though it was fifty metres across, the avenue felt like a narrow corridor and it reminded me of a boarding house I’d lived in as a student when King Alfonso XIII was on the throne. The proportions must have been similar and the light identical: subdued and artificial. The smell was different, though. The house at times smelled of not always unpleasant cooking and at others, when the El Dorado performers lodged there, of a perfumery. The smell of the avenue was impossible to pin down though it was, without doubt, an inhuman stench of heavy oils and humidity. A stench equivalent to a dull, indistinct cacophony formed of hundreds of different noises, of engines, music, news headlines, warnings, and advertising slogans. Mashed and blended into a purée.

The friend I’d made five minutes earlier – forehead adorned with golden hair, denim jeans – smiled.

‘Too bad,’ they said. ‘Better luck next time.’

I found the joke strange. We’d almost collided with someone.

‘The vehicle won’t overturn,’ continued my friend, ‘it’s a Rolls, the latest model. We could drive over an elephant and while the car might jump, it would quickly stabilise. And because

you can get fined for reckless imprudence, we'd earn ourselves a bag of francs.'

'We would?' I asked, confused.

'Of course. If a pedestrian crosses where it's forbidden, they're the one committing the offence. Some people make a living from hunting these offenders. Do you like hunting?' my friend asked. 'It doesn't happen so much these days.'

So it wasn't a joke after all. I looked at my interlocutor, trying to figure out what the words meant. His – or her – expression was joyous, ingenuous like an infant's, and it unsettled me. I noticed their physical, asexual beauty for the first time. Were they a young woman, or an effeminate man? If the latter, I should note that his effeminacy wasn't what some are accustomed to view as imposture, while if the former, her decisiveness and insensitivity were by no means defects.

'Are you serious?' I said.

My friend shrugged.

'I'm serious. That's the law.' There was a pause. 'Know what? I'm hungry. You?'

'Yes,' I replied.

'Reach into my pocket, you'll find a little gold box. *Ho molta fame*. Put a pill in my mouth, and take one yourself.'

I did as I was told. The effect was lightning quick and Andrea – I didn't yet know if this was their first or second name – laughed, let one hand off the steering wheel and ruffled my hair.

'*Ah, que je suis bien!*' they exclaimed in a measured tone, like a well-educated young lady.

I took my pill (*Aldous Huxley-Brand Soma* was printed on the box) and experienced the same sensations of intense, one might say almost agitated joy, as Andrea. My hunger disappeared instantly.

'Naturally,' Andrea said, smiling. 'Where have you appeared from then, hun?'

I should add that as I'm writing in an archaic language, I have

no choice but to attribute a gender to people but as I understood later, everything was neuter for Andrea. Andrea spoke a hybrid of Romance languages which I wasn't always able to decipher. Everything in that new language (and it's important that the reader bear this in mind if they want to understand this) such as articles, nouns, and adjectives, was without gender. My friend had said 'hun' without any intention of addressing me as a male, nor obviously as a female, but had expressed a sympathy or courtesy lacking any kind of allusion to gender.

I was an anachronism. On the 14th of May 1965, tired and feeling my age at sixty-odd, I began a cryo-cure from which I'd awaken in 2050. The doctor had told me that when I came round I'd be '30 years younger'.

Anaesthetized, I was placed in a plastic casket and taken to the basement of a clinic to be kept at 40 degrees below zero with another half-dozen patients including Mr Churchill, Mme. Vorey and Marlene Dietrich. Almost all of them died in the process. The only ones to come though were a diabetic full of sugar, and myself, a reactionary full of angst. It was only a few hours ago that I'd emerged from my casket like a butterfly from its silk cocoon, and I was flitting about the streets of the capital of Mallorca, the name of which was not now Palma, but Tourist Club of the Mediterranean (Turclub for short or, as the snobs pronounced it, *Turcloef*) finding it alien and unpleasant.

Whilst unpleasant, it was an admittedly opulent, surprisingly well-planned city with modern streets and the occasional newly built ancient monument. People's manners had improved, too. Contrary to expectations, loutish behaviour was almost a thing of the past, and no-one remembered Madrid *tremendismo* or Italian neorealism. Everyone was flawless, in both their dress and language. There'd been a return, perhaps, to eighteenth-century courtesy and affability. Why had that stranger, *garçon* or *fille*, with such a nonchalant smile, invited me to get in their car with them?

‘Vuol venire con me?’

I was just an old man, homeless and penniless, and this curious adolescent seemed to be something of a personage. People stopped in front of the red Rolls and smiled. Some quietly saluted my companion saying, *‘Addio, Andrea Victrix’* and raising their hand like Caesar’s soldiers saluting the goddess of love at the battle of Pharsalus.

No, it wasn’t altogether unpleasant. In a way it was beautiful, if disconcerting. Now that world, the bastard offspring of the most dreadful catastrophe the centuries have ever witnessed, has disappeared and I can look at it from the perspective of events gone by, dead in reality and transfigured in memory, I recognize that Turclub was, for a time, an earthly paradise. Of course, it’s only now that I fully understand some of its values as the only true paradises are those that are now lost. The reader will understand this as they grow to know the greatness and desolation of Andrea which left such a profound imprint on me. Feeling humiliated and helpless in the presence of that child of light, that goddess, that Apollo, I saw my face in the car’s rear-view mirror and didn’t recognize myself. My complexes had been scattered like a flock of pigeons. I was a young man of no more than thirty with a splendid mane of curly black hair. Even so, I couldn’t shake the sensation of strangeness my surroundings produced.

‘People are pretty alert round here,’ said Andrea, accelerating towards a couple who leaped agilely out of the way. ‘Are you a foreigner?’

‘Yes,’ I said, not knowing what to say. ‘I’ve just arrived.’

‘This is the commercial quarter. Do you like it?’

‘It’s very busy,’ I said. ‘Why are there so many dentists?’

‘It’s normal,’ said Andrea. ‘Everyone here has false teeth.’

It didn’t seem normal to me.

‘The displays are impressive,’ I said, searching for something to say.

‘That’s because people must buy more, and they’re too cautious at the moment... Jupiter only knows what’ll happen if we have a sales crisis.’

I thought for a second I glimpsed a superfluous frown, but Andrea neutralized it with a cheerful, kind smile.

‘Let’s head to the residential district now. Maybe we’ll get lucky there.’

We turned right and cruised down Pleasure, a dazzling avenue shaded by hundred-year-old trees, classical colonnades, luxury cafés, and terraces of hydrangea. For just a moment it reminded me of Paris in the Roaring Twenties. The terraces gave off a surprisingly intense perfume, which was strange because the hydrangeas of my day had no scent. Folk strolled, unhurried. Most wore Roman dress: older people sported ankle-length togas while youngsters wore short tunics. Some wore elegant capes draped across their shoulders and a minority favoured jeans like Andrea. The detail I struggled to resolve was whether they were men or women.

‘Why do you want to know?’ asked my friend, in a puritanical tone tinged with disappointment.

‘Aren’t you interested?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Andrea replied.

She (or he) paused and asked casually, ‘And so what are you?’

I felt my cheeks burning. ‘What kind of question–,’ I started.

Andrea stifled a laugh before becoming more serious when he (or she) saw my reaction.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘I don’t know why you’re so annoyed.’

‘Because I’m embarrassed,’ I said.

My new friend – perhaps male, perhaps female – blushed slightly and smiled enigmatically.

‘So where’ve you come from, hun?’

I need to remind the reader again that they’ll have to make an effort to strip my language of all allusion to grammatical

gender. I explained my story very briefly to Andrea's rapt attention.

'You knew the old world?' she said. 'From before the constitution of the United States of Europe?'

'I was born in 1898,' I said.

'You got to see horse-drawn carriages and wheat fields?'

'Certainly.'

Andrea kissed me inappropriately, and with no care for anyone who might see.

'Next time you'll have to tell me about these things in more detail. You're marvellous.'

Andrea looked up and the breeze played with his golden hair as she stared ahead. Thirty metres ahead of us a couple were about to cross the road. Andrea accelerated and the two slim figures were thrown into the air. The car came to a halt and a police officer approached.

'They're dead, Andrea Vicitrix,' he said, holding out a slip of paper. 'Is this your first time, Your Excellency?'

'No, that's nine.'

The officer stood to attention and saluted.

'You're eligible for a special award. Allow me to kiss you in the name of the Law, ahead of the formal recognition that will follow from our superiors.'

Andrea, with a courteous indifference, leant forward and allowed himself to be kissed before taking a look at the paper slip. It was a cheque.

'Ten thousand francs,' said the officer. 'Congratulations, Your Excellency.'

Andrea gave him back the cheque.

'Please cash this yourself.'

'If your Graciousness desires,' replied the officer.

I was stunned. We'd set off quickly and were touching a hundred again.

'That was appalling,' I yelled. 'Stop the car! You monster!'

Andrea slowed down.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘You just murdered two people!’

The car stopped.

‘Why are you shouting?’ she asked.

I’d launched into a moralising rant and Andrea was again looking at me the same way the Mona Lisa might have done. That enigmatic expression, however, suddenly changed and the person I saw before me was now a man. An ugly, angry man.

‘Get out,’ he ordered. I was so surprised I was lost for words.

‘Get out and be thankful I don’t denounce you for blasphemy!’

‘I’ve blasphemed?’

‘Against the Law. Against the State. Get out.’

He swallowed some soma, took a deep breath, and took hold of my arm in a vice-like grip. He was strong, as well as a murderer. I got out of the car. As I walked away, he uttered something that disturbed me:

‘You’ve displeased me.’

Publicity from a travel agent blared out: SPEND YOUR WEEKEND ON THE MOON.