

LEONARDO PADURA

HAVANA BLACK

'A GREAT PLOT, PERFECTLY EXECUTED WITH HUGE ATMOSPHERE.'
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Leonardo Padura

Translated from the Spanish
by Peter Bush



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Leonardo Padura was born in Havana in 1955 and lives in Cuba. He has published a number of novels, shortstory collections and literary essays. International fame came with the Havana Quartet, all featuring Inspector Mario Conde, of which Havana Black is the second to be available in English. The Quartet has won a number of literary prizes including the Spanish Premio Hammett. It has sold widely in Spain, France, Italy and Germany.

For Ambrosio Fornet, the best reader of the history of
Cuban literature.
For Dashiell Hammett, because of *The Maltese Falcon*.
For friends, near and far, who are part of this story.
And, happily, for you, Lucía.

Author's Note

In 1990, when I started to write the novel *Pasado Perfecto*, Detective Lieutenant Mario Conde, the protagonist of that book, was born. One night a year and a half later, after the novel had been published, the Count whispered something in my ear that, when I'd thought about it for several days, seemed in the end like a good idea: why don't we write more novels? And we decided to write three other works that, together with *Pasado Perfecto* (which took place in the winter of 1989) would make up the four season tetralogy of "The Havana Quartet". And thus were conceived *Vientos de cuaresma* (spring), *Máscaras* in the original, *Havana Red* in the English edition (summer) and this *Paisaje de Otoño* or *Havana Black*, which we finished writing in autumn 1997, a few days before the Count's and my birthday, for we were indeed born on the same day, if not in the same year.

I want to note just two things via this confession: that I owe to the Count (a literary, never real, character) the good fortune to have meandered through a whole year of his life, following his every hesitation and adventure; and that his stories, as I always point out, are fictitious, although they are quite similar to some accounts of reality.

Finally, I must thank a group of reader-friends, for their patience in absorbing and analysing each of the versions of *Havana Black*, an exercise without which the book would never have been what it is - for better or for worse. They are, as loyal as ever, Helena Nuñez, Ambrosio Fornet, Álex Fleites, Arturo Arango, Lourdes Gómez, Vivian Lechuga, Beatriz Pérez, Dalia Acosta, Wilfredo Cancio, Gerard Arreola and José Antonio Michelena. My thanks also to Greco Cid, who presented me with the character of Dr Alfonso Forcade. To Daniel Chavarría, who inspired me with the story of the Manila Galleon. To Steve Wilkinson, who saw the mistakes nobody else had seen. To my publishers, Beatriz Moura and Marco Tropea, who forced me to write with an axe, as Juan Rulfo recommended. And, of course, my gratitude to the person who sustained and tolerated this whole endeavour more than anyone: Lucía López Coll, my wife.

Autumn 1989

She reflected. "I prefer stories about squalor."
"About what?" I said, leaning forward.
"Squalor. I'm extremely interested in squalor."

J. D. Salinger

Hurricane, hurricane, I feel you coming

José María Heredia

“And get here quick . . .!” he screamed at a sky that seemed languid and becalmed, as if still painted from October’s deceptive palette of blue: he screamed, arms crossed, chest bare, bellowing a desperate plea with every ounce of strength his lungs could muster, so his voice would carry and also to check that his voice still existed after three days without uttering a single word.

Punished by cigarettes and alcohol, his throat at last felt the relief of creation and his spirit thrived on this minimal declaration of freedom, soon to bubble up in an inner effervescence leading him to the brink of a second exclamation.

From the heights of his terrace roof, Mario Conde had surveyed a firmament devoid of breezes and clouds, like the lookout of a lost vessel, morbidly hoping his crow’s nest would allow him to glimpse, at the horizon’s end, two aggressive crosses he’d been tracking for several days as they journeyed across the weather maps, as they approached their prescribed destination: his city, his neighbourhood and that very terrace from which he was hailing them.

Initially it had been a distant, anonymous sign on the first plotting of a tropical depression, heading away from the coasts of Africa and gathering hot clouds before entering its dance of death; two days later it won promotion to the worrying category of cyclonic disturbance, and now was a poisoned arrow in the side of the mid-Atlantic, hurtling towards the Caribbean and arrogantly claiming its right to be baptized: Felix; yet, the previous night, swollen into a hurricane, had appeared in a flux grotesquely poised over the archipelago of Guadalup, which it crushed in a devastating, one hundred and seventy mile an hour embrace, advancing, intent on demolishing trees and houses, diverting the historical course of rivers and overturning millenary mountain peaks, killing animals and humans, like a curse descended from a sky as ominously languid and becalmed as ever, like a woman ready to betray.

But Mario Conde knew none of those incidents or illusions could change his destiny or mission: from the moment he saw it born to life on those maps, he felt a strange affinity with that freak of a hurricane: the bastard’s coming, he told himself, as he saw it advance and swell, because something in the atmosphere outside or in his own inner depression – cirrus, nimbus, stratus and cumulus rendered by lightning, though still unable to transform themselves into a hurricane – had warned him of the real needs of that mass of rain and rabid winds cosmic destiny had created specifically to cross that particular city and bring a long anticipated necessary cleansing.

But that afternoon, tired of his passive vigil, the Count had opted to issue verbal summons. Shirtless, his trousers barely secure, with a skinful of alcohol fuelling his hiddenmost energies, he clambered out of a window on to the terrace and encountered an autumnal, pleasantly warm twilight, where, however much he tried, he couldn’t detect the slightest trace of a lurking cyclone. Beneath the cheating sky, and momentarily oblivious to its designs, the Count began to observe the topography of his neighbourhood, populated by aerials, pigeon-lofts, washing-lines and water tanks reflecting simple, rustic routines from which he

however, seemed to be excluded. On the only hill in the area, as always, he espied the red-tiled turret of that fake English castle his grandfather Rufino Conde had laboured to construct almost a century ago. He thought how the stubborn permanence of certain works that outlived their creators and resisted passing hurricanes, storms, cyclones, typhoons, tornadoes or even whirlwinds seemed the only valid reason to exist. And what would remain of him if he threw himself into the air there and then like the pigeon he had once imagined. Infinite oblivion, he must have reflected, a rampant emptiness as lived by all those anonymous individuals weaving along the black snake of the Calzada, weighed down by the bundles or hopes, or emptyhanded, minds a mess of uncertainties, probably unaware of the inexorable approach of an awesome hurricane, indifferent even to death's void, with nothing to remember or look forward to, now alarmed by the desperate cry he unleashed at the most distant point on the horizon: "Get here quick, you bastard . . . !"

He imagined the cork's possible pain as if it were live flesh he was penetrating with his implacable metal corkscrew. He sunk it in as far as he could, with a surgeon's precision and determination not to fail: he held his breath, pulled gently, and the cork surfaced like a fish embracing the hook that was its perdition. The alcoholic vapour rushing from the bottle rose full and fruity to his nostrils and, not a man for halfmeasures, he poured a large dose into a glass and downed it in one gulp, with the panache of a Cossack haunted by the howls of winter.

He gave the bottle an anguished look: it was the last from the stocks he had hurriedly assembled three days earlier, when Detective Lieutenant Mario Conde had abandoned Police Headquarters after he'd signed his request for a discharge and decided to lock himself in to die of rum and cigarettes, grief and bitterness. He had always thought that when he'd achieved his wish to depart the police he'd feel a relief that would allow him to sing, dance and, naturally, drink, but without remorse or pain, for he was after all realizing a desire for emancipation he had postponed for far too long. At this late stage in life he told himself he'd never really understood why he'd said yes to joining the police, and then that he could never fathom at all clearly why he'd deferred his escape from that world where he'd never really belonged although he'd found it infectious. Perhaps it was the argument to the effect that he was a policeman because he didn't like bastards getting off scot-free that had seemed so convincing he'd eventually believed in himself. Perhaps it was his inability to be decisive that had guided his whole erratic life, tying him into a routine crowned by satisfaction at his more than dubious successes: catching murderers, rapists, thieves or fraudsters who were already beyond redemption. But he was in no doubt whatsoever that it was Major Antonio Rangel, his chief for the last eight years, who was mainly to blame for his almost infinite postponement of his wish to make an escape. The relationship of feigned tension and real respect he'd established with the Boss had functioned as an overactive delay tactic and he knew he'd never find the necessary courage to go up to that office on the fifth floor clutching his release papers. So he rested his hopes of making a break for it on the retirement of the Major, now fifty-eight, with possibly only two years to go.

But all the real and fictitious parapets fell at a single stroke that last Friday. The news of Major Rangel's replacement had spread around the corridors and Headquarters like wildfire, and, when he heard it, the Count felt fear and impotence grip and score his back, spread to his brain. The Boss's much debated and always inconceivable departure wouldn't be the last chapter in that history of persecutions, interrogations and punishments to which detectives at Headquarters had been subjected by other detectives entrusted with the unnatural act of spying on other police. The long months of that inquisition had seen apparently untouchable heads roll, while fear thrived as the protagonist in a tragedy that smacked of a farce prepared to see its three obligatory acts through to the bitter end: an unpredictable end dragged out to a grand finale, and the sacrifice of something everybody had believed invulnerable and sacred.

Mario didn't have to think twice before he decided to go once and for all. He refused to listen to any of the poisonous explanations going the rounds in relation to the Boss's departure, wrote down his request to be discharged on personal grounds, waited patiently for the lift to take him to the fifth floor and, after signing his letter, handed it to the woman officer he met in the lobby to what had been and would never again be - the office of his friend, Major Antonio Rangel.

But, rather than relief, the Count was shocked to find himself overcome with sorrow. No, of course not: that wasn't the path to the triumphant, self-sufficient escape he had always imagined, but a reptilian slithering out of sight that not even Rangel would forgive. And so, instead of singing and dancing, he simply decided to drink himself silly, and on the way home spent all his savings on several bottles of rum and twelve packets of cigarettes.

"Hey, you giving a party?" asked the Chinese sales assistant in the liquor store with a knowing smile, and Mario Conde looked him in the eye.

"No, friend, a wake," he retorted, and back he went into the street.

While he got undressed, drinking a glass from the first deflowered bottle, the Count noticed how the death foretold of his fighting fish, Rufino, had been enacted: he was floating in the middle of water a dark, sickly ink colour, his gills open, like an aged flower about to drop its petals.

"For Christ's fucking sake, Rufino, what made you die now and leave me alone . . . just when I was about to change your water?" he asked the motionless body, before gulping down his drink and casting corpse and liquid down his voracious lavatory.

Already clutching his second glass and unaware that he wouldn't say a word for three days, Mario Conde took his phone off the hook, picked the folded newspaper up from under the door and put it next to the lavatory in order to give that ink-stained paper the use it deserved when the time came. That was when he spotted it, tucked away on a corner of page two: it was an as yet unnamed flurry, drawn west of Cabo Verde on a map whose cold latitudes sent an electric shock of prescience through him: the bastard's heading this way, he thought immediately and began to desire it with all his might, as if he could mentally attract that catastrophic, freakish engine of purification. And he poured himself a third glass of rum, and waited calmly for the cyclone to hit.

He woke up sure the hurricane had arrived. The thunder resounded so close he couldn't fathom how he'd seen such a becalmed sky only a few hours before. The short-lived autumnal evening had given way to darkness and, convinced it was thunder he was hearing, he was surprised by an absence of rain and wind until a voice came on the heels of the last rumbling echoes: "Hey, Mario, it's me. Come on, open up, I know you're in there."

A flash of lucidity pierced the hangover fogging his brain and a warning light winked in his consciousness. Not thinking to hide his naked parts reduced by fear, the Count rushed to open his front door.

"What you doing here, wild man?" he asked, the door open, feeling uneasy in his heart. "Something happened to Josefina?"

An explosion of laughter brought the Count back to the idea of his irrevocable acts, and skinny Carlos's voice alerted him to the magnitude of the disaster he just committed: "Fuck me, you animal, you've got a right titchy cock . . ." prompting more laughter, which was boosted by Andrés and Rabbit, whose heads had peered round the corner to check out Skinny's observation.

"And your mother's is even titchier," was all he could manage, as he beat a retreat, mooning a pair of incongruously pallid buttocks at his adversary.

The Count had to swallow two analgesics to see off his impending headache, which he preferred to blame on his scare rather than the rum: skinny Carlos's unexpected appearance, in his wheelchair, had made him afraid something must have happened to Josefina. His best friend hadn't been to his place for a long, long time and he thought that the visit could only be triggered by some unhappy event. The morbid vision he'd had that evening, when he'd seen himself cast into the void unsupported by any wings, seemed definitely out of reach: could he go and abandon his friends like that? Leave Carlos alone in his wheelchair and kill off old Jose with an attack of sadness? The water running down his face washed away the last cobwebs of sleep and doubt. No, he couldn't, least not for now.

"I thought the worst," he said when he finally returned, cigarette between lips, to his living room and saw that Carlos, Rabbit and Andrés had helped themselves to the mortal remains of his last bottle of rum.

"And what do you think we thought?" rasped Skinny swigging away. "Three days not knowing where the fuck you'd got to, your phone out of order, not giving any damned warning . . . You went too far, you bastard, you went too far this time."

"Hey, hold it, I'm not a kid." The policeman rallied to his own defence.

Andrés, as usual, attempted reconciliation. "That's enough, gentlemen, nothing dire's happened." And looking at the Count: "The fact is Josefina and Carlos were worried about you. That's why I brought him here. He refused to let me come by myself."

The Count observed his best and oldest friend, transformed into an amorphous mass, overflowing the sides of his armchair, where he vented his anger like a

animal destined for sacrifice. Nothing now remained of the lean figure skinn Carlos once was, because a mean bullet had mangled his destiny, had left him a invalid for ever. But there also, intact and invincible, was all the goodness of man who increasingly persuaded the Count of the injustices of this world. Why did it have to happen to a guy like Carlos? Why did someone like him have to fight in a dark and distant war and ruin the best of his life? God cannot exist if such things occur, he thought, and the policeman's distressed soul felt moved, almost to the point of splitting in two, when Skinny said: "You only had to ring."

"Uh-huh, I should have rung. To tell you I resigned from the police."

"Just as well, my son, you had me really worried," sighed Josefina, and gave him a kiss on the forehead. "But look at your face. And that smell. How much rum did you drink? And you're so thin it's scary . . ."

"And guess what we found out," interrupted Carlos, his fingers pointing up the Count's visibly reduced virility, and he laughed again.

"Conde, Conde," interjected Rabbit anxiously, "you who are at least half a writer, please: elucidate a problem of meaning I have, tell me, what is the difference between pity and pithy?"

The Count looked at his interrogator, who could barely hide his outlandish teeth behind his upper lip. As usual he couldn't decide whether the grimace hid a smile or just his buckteeth.

"No idea . . . the aitch, ain't it?"

"No, the size," replied Rabbit, releasing his dentures to laugh long and sonorously, and inviting the others to join in the joke.

"Don't take any notice of him, Condesito," said Josefina, coming to the rescue and holding his hands. "Look, as I imagined these three who claim to be your friends would bring you here, and as I also imagined you would be hungry, and because anyone can see you are hungry, I started to think hard, now what can I cook these lads? And, you know, I couldn't think of anything special. The fact is it's really difficult to get things . . . And there and then a light went on and I chose the easy option: rice and chicken. What do you reckon?"

"How many chickens, Jose?" enquired the Count.

"Three and a half."

"And did you add peppers?"

"Yes, for decoration. And cooked it in beer."

"So three and a half chickens . . . Do you think that'll do for us?" The Count went on with his questions, as he pushed Skinny's chair towards the dining room, with a skill acquired from years of practice.

The final judgement from those round the table was unanimous: the rice could do with green peas, although it tasted good, they added, after ingesting three big plates of rice transfigured by chicken gravy and juices.

They shut themselves up in Skinny's room for their after-supper rum and chat while Josefina dozed in front of the television.

"Put something on the deck, Mario," insisted Skinny, and the Count smiled.

~~"The same as usual?" he asked, purely for rhetorical pleasure, and got a smile and a nod from his friend.~~

"You bet . . ."

"Now then, what do you fancy?" asked one.

"The Beatles?" responded the other.

"Chicago?"

"Formula V?"

"Los Pasos?"

"Credence?"

"Right on, Credence," they both chorused perfectly as in a routine rehearsed thousand times, over countless, knowing years. "But don't tell me Tom Foggerty sings like a black. I've told you often enough before that he sings like God, haven't I?" And the two nodded, revealing a deeply rooted accord, for they both knew that was right: the bastard sang like God, and started to show it when the Count pressed play and Foggerty, with the Credence Clearwater Revival, launched into his unique version of "Proud Mary" . . . How often had he lived that scene?

Sitting on the floor, a tot of rum by his side and a lighted cigarette in the ashtray, the Count yielded to pressure from his friends and told them of the latest developments at Headquarters and his irrevocable decision to leave the force.

"I really couldn't care less what happens to those sons of a bitches . . . Every day there are more of them. Battalions of sons of bitches . . ." "Regiments . . . armies" was the opinion of Andrés, who extended the quantitative, logistical power base of invaders, more resistant and fertile than roaches.

"You're crazy, Conde," concluded Carlos.

"And if you leave the police, what will you do?" came the question from Rabbit, a viscerally historical individual, always in need of reasons, causes and consequences for the slightest incident.

"That's the least of my worries. I want out—"

"Hey, wild man," interrupted Carlos, putting his glass of rum between his legs. "Do whatever you want, whatever, it'll be fine by me, because that's what friends are for, you know? But if you're going, enjoy, don't hide in a cloud of alcohol. Stand bang in the middle of Headquarters and shout: 'I'm going because I fuckin' well want to', but don't slip out the back, as if you owed something, because you don't owe anybody anything, do you?"

"Well, I'm happy for your sake, Conde," commented Andrés, looking at the hands he devoted three times a week to cutting open abdomens and sickly voice boxes, with a view to repairing what could be and excising and ditching what was worn out and useless. "I'm glad one of us is prepared to call a day on this load of shit and sit it out and wait for whatever shows up."

"A hurricane," whispered the Count, taking another gulp, but his friend carried on, as if he hadn't heard him.

"Because you know we are a generation that obeyed orders and that is our sin and our crime. First, our fathers gave us orders, to be good students and citizens. We were ordered around at school, also to make us be good, and then we were

ordered to work where they wanted us to work. But nobody ever thought to ask us what we wanted: we were ordered to study in the school they thought best, to pursue the degree it was our duty to get, to work at the job it was our duty to do, and the orders kept coming, nobody ever asked us fucking once in our damned lives if that was what we wanted. Everything was pre-planned, wasn't it? From playschool to the spot in the cemetery assigned for us, everything decided for us and they didn't even ask what disease we wanted to die of. That's why we are a pile of shit, because we don't dream, we just exist to carry out our orders . . ."

"Hey now, Andrés, don't exaggerate," said Skinny Carlos, trying to salvage a crumb of comfort, as he poured himself more rum.

"What do you mean 'don't exaggerate'? Weren't you ordered to the war in Angola? Wasn't your life fucked up and you stuck in that shitty chair because you were a good little boy who always said yes? Did you ever dream of saying you wouldn't go? They told us that historically we had to obey and you didn't even think to refuse, Carlos, because they always taught us to say yes, yes, yes . . . And as for this fellow - " he pointed at Rabbit, who had performed the miracle of hiding his teeth and for once seemed really serious at the threat of the imminent lethal salvo - "apart from playing with history and changing women every six months, what has he done with his life? Where the fuck are the history books he was going to write? At what point did he give up on everything he said he wanted to be and never got to be in his life? Don't piss me off, Carlos, at least grant me the right to believe my life is a disaster . . ."

Skinny Carlos, who had long since ceased to be skinny, looked at Andrés. Their friendship existing between them had been cementing for twenty years and there were very few secrets between them. But recently something had turned inside Andrés's brain. That man they'd first admired when he was the best college baseball player, applauded by all his comrades, with the manly merit of losing his virginity to a woman so beautiful, so crazy and so desirable that they all would have loved to give up everything, even their lives, to her. The very same Andrés who would become the successful doctor they'd all consult, the only one who had managed an enviable marriage, two children included, and had been privileged to have his own house and private car, was now revealing himself as a man full of frustrations and rancour, which embittered him and poisoned the atmosphere around him. Because Andrés wasn't happy, was dissatisfied with his lot and made sure all his friends knew it: something in the projects he held most dear had failed, and his path in life - like all of theirs - had taken predetermined undesirable turnings to which they'd never consented as individuals.

"All right, let's assume you are right." Carlos nodded resignedly, drinking a long draught and then adding: "But you can't live thinking like that."

"Why not, wild man?" the Count intervened, puffing out smoke and recalling that afternoon's alcoholic suicidal impulses.

"Because then you have to accept it's all a load of shit."

"And isn't it?"

"You know it isn't, Conde," declared Carlos, looking at the ceiling from his wheelchair. "Not everything, right?"

He collapsed on his bed, head thick with alcoholic vapours and Andres's lameness for a generation. Lying there, he started to undress and throw each garment on the floor. He could already predict the headache he would have at daybreak, just punishment for his excesses, but he felt his mind racing along enjoyably, strangely active, spawning ideas, memories and obsessions endowed with a feverish fleshly quality. With a supreme physical effort, he abandoned his bed and went to the bathroom in search of the analgesics that could thwart his recurrent migraine. He reckoned two would suffice, and dissolved them in water. He then walked to the lavatory, where he piddled a weak, amber trickle that splashed on the bowl's already stained edges and made him consider the proportions of his member: he'd always suspected that it was on the small side and now he was certain - pitifully so - after the strip show he'd offered his friends that evening. But mentally he shrugged his shoulders at its nonimportance, for, even as it was the currently moribund strip of meat had always been an effective companion to his binary or solitary erotic outings, even rising up rapidly when necessities required it to be on a war footing. Ignore those sons of bitches, he told it, looking at it head on, right in the eye: don't feel pathetic, because you're a good'un, aren't you? And he gave it a last shake.

He was pleasantly surprised when he realized he didn't have to go to work the following day, and, lungs full of the air of freedom and cigarette smoke, he decided to waste no more time in that lonely bed. You are going to change your life now, Mario Conde, he reproached himself, and decided on a useful wakefulness. The exercise of independence was one of the privileges of his new situation. He quickly went into the kitchen and put a flame under the coffee pot ready to drink his morning infusion in order to trick his body and restore the energy necessary for what he wanted to do: sit down and write. But what the fuck are you going to write? Well, about what Andrés said: he would write a story of frustration and deceit, of disenchantment and futility, of the pain of discovering you had taken the wrong turning at every point, whether you were to blame or not. That was the great experience of his generation, which was so secure and well nourished that it grew with every year, and he concluded it would be good to put it in black and white, as the only antidote against the most pathetic oblivion of all and as a practical way of reaching once and for all the diffuse kernel of the whole unequivocal equivocation: when, how, why and where had it all begun to fuck up? How much were they each to blame, if at all? How much was he? He sipped his coffee slowly, now seated in front of the white sheet, bitten by the platen of his Underwood, and realized it would be hard to transmute those certainties and experiences, twisting in his gut like worms, into the squalid and moving story he needed to tell. A tranquil story like that of the man who tells his child about the habits of the bananafish and then blows his brains out because he can't find anything better to do with his life. He looked at the unpolluted paper and realized that his desires alone wouldn't suffice to defeat that eternal eighth

and half by thirteen inch challenge into which the chronicle of an entire waste
life should fit. He needed an illumination like Josefina's, able to provoke the poet
miracle of extracting something new from a daring mix of lost, forgotten
ingredients. And so he started to think of the hurricane again, still only visible in
the newspaper: something like that was necessary, ravaging and devastating
purifying and righteous, for someone like him to regain the possibility of being
himself, myself, yourself, Mario Conde, and for that deferred state to be
resurrected that could beget a little beauty or pain or sincerity on to that muted
empty, defiant paper, where he finally wrote, as if overcome by an irrepressible
ejaculation: "The youth slumped to the ground, as if pushed, and rather than pain
he felt the millenary stench of rotten fish issue forth from that grey, alien land."

“What are you doing here, Manolo?” asked the Count when he opened the door to see the unexpected, skeletal face of Sergeant Manuel Palacios, his companion in detection over recent years.

Something about his face revealed a state of shock – the squinting eye more lopsided than ever behind an ample nostril – and the Count knew immediately that his own face was the cause.

“You ill, Conde?”

“Like hell I’m ill. I was up writing all night,” he replied, and felt an aesthetic well-being as he offered that explanation: he imagined the marinated bags under his eyes and the exhausted eyelids, but was happy to have the poetic justification, even if it wasn’t altogether true: various badly scarred sheets of paper were the only real fruits of hours of application.

“Ah, so you’re back on that track. So be it,” declared the sergeant, wagging his finger at him.

“And might one enquire what brings you here?”

Manolo smiled sweetly.

“I came to get you.”

“But I left the force three days ago.”

“That’s what you think. The new boss says he wants to you to come in and discuss your departure with him.”

“Tell him I can’t today, tell him I’m writing.”

Manolo smiled, broadly this time. “He told me not to accept any excuses.”

“And what will they do to me if I don’t go? Kick me out of the police?”

“Or put you inside, for lack of respect. That’s what he said . . .” went on Manolo, spelling out the details of his orders before finally finding his own voice. “Do you really want out, Conde?”

“Yes, I really do. Come in, I’ll make us some coffee.”

They sat in the kitchen waiting for the coffee to percolate, while Manolo recounted recent events at Headquarters. Only eleven out of sixteen detectives remained and it was like an angry hornets’ nest. The files of all those who survived were under review yet again, and there was talk of a fresh round of interrogations of each and every one of them: it was a merciless hunt to the death, as if someone had decreed the necessary extinction of a dispensable species.

“And what’s the line on Major Rangel?”

“That he did nothing, and that’s why he’s guilty. I don’t think he’s been back there, but I heard he’ll be retired with full honours.”

“He won’t want that kind of honour,” rasped the Count.

Finally, Manolo related, the new chief had gathered them together that morning to ask them to make an effort until the situation returned to normal. What was happening at Headquarters didn’t stop life on the outside from going on the same – more or less the same, perhaps worse – and all manner of crimes were being committed . . .

“It never will be normal,” said the Count, pouring out two big cups of coffee. “A

least as far as I'm concerned."

~~"But come with me, Conde, talk to him and then do what you want. Don't throw overboard what you've achieved in ten years. Didn't you like people saying you were the best detective at Headquarters? Don't fuck about, Conde, show them what you're made of . . ."~~

"And what do I get out of it, Manolo?"

The sergeant looked at his friend and attempted a smile. They knew each other too well and the Count was perfectly well aware of the scares Manolo had suffered in the recent months of investigations, purges and expulsions, during which they all been questioned several times, and the most unexpected hares had been flushed out: colleagues of twenty years, bitter mutual betrayals, old policemen beyond suspicion revealed to be outright scoundrels, cases buried under incredible piles of loot, favours exchanged for the most unlikely goods: from youthful, throbbing sex to a university degree awarded to someone who never went to class, via a simple handshake from Somebody able to repay a favour at an opportune moment, and the fuse was still lit, apparently set to burn everybody in its path. Manolo looked at the Count, downed his coffee and gave the best possible reply: "You get to leave without being kicked out. You get to leave the shirt smelling of roses. You get respect. And you get a bonus when they find out that Major Rangel wasn't wrong about you . . . or me."

The image conjured up of the lonely Major, gazing at the twilight in the backyard of his house, in his slippers, smoking a long cigar and deciding on the best way to spend his enforced leisure, once more shook the Count's sensibilities. After working so hard the man didn't deserve an end like that.

"All right, I'm coming . . . but tell me just one thing: Where's Felix got to today?"

"Felix? Felix who, Conde?"

"Felix, the hurricane, my friend."

"How the hell should I know?"

Manolo shook his head after drinking the last drop of coffee.

"What kind of policeman are you if you don't even know where that bastard has got to! You're a disaster. Manolo . . ."

He could be forty-five. Maybe slightly older. The grey hair aged him, but his smooth waxen face - mulatto white or bleached-white mulatto, carefully, even frenetically shaven - suggested a subtraction might be in order. He sported a uniform that looked made to measure by a tailor and not off the peg: the bolero neatly shaped to his chest, descended over his flat belly to cover the belt to his fine cotton, elegantly hanging trousers, which were in the wrong time and place . . . And then there was the smell: he wore a delicate but very definite scent creating around him a dry, manly, exquisite aura ten inches from his oh-so-stylishly uniformed silhouette. As he observed him, the Count thought this man could lead him to bury all his prejudices : he had expected to meet an ogre, not this fragrant, preening fellow; he had wanted to see a despot who refused to

grant him his independence and found a man of pacific mien; he was sure he was going to meet an irate prosecutor in the spot now filled by this human being ready to disarm him with a smile and a question: "Do you smoke, Lieutenant? Ah, good, so I can smoke as well," and he took a cigar out of his export box of H. Upmann after first offering one to Mario Conde.

"Thanks, Colonel."

"Colonel Molina. I'm Alberto Molina . . . But please take a seat, as I think you and I have lots to talk about. But first let me order two coffees."

"Lieutenant, I don't think you slept very well last night, did you . . .? Well, I can tell you I didn't. I tossed and turned in bed till my wife got angry because I wouldn't let her sleep and she sent me to the living room. I threw the bedspread on the floor and started to think about everything that's happening and the situation they've landed me in. Because to be honest I don't know whether I'm going to be able to go through with it. I almost think I can't . . . And it's very disagreeable to know one is replacing an officer like Major Rangel, the man in the country who knows most about investigations, trials and the work you people do. And I don't know where I come from? From the Executive for the Analysis of Military Intelligence, and that has nothing in common with what you do. And you know anything else? For years I dreamed of being a spy. But a real spy, not like the ones in John Le Carré novels, who seem genuine but are only fictional. It seemed the best possible future, and I spent twenty years with this dream, office-bound, processing what the real spies found out: in a word, I was the bureaucrat who seemed like a character out of Le Carré . . . But if you start playing this game, you soon learn you're obliged to obey orders, Lieutenant, and when you're under orders, you have no choice but to belt up and obey. That's why I'm here and not in Tel Aviv or New York, and that's why I decided to talk to you, for it can't be through choice that you have such a reputation as a detective, although there's the odd rumour . . . Not that these things bother me, I swear: I didn't come here to judge anyone, but to ensure things keep working more or less the same way they did under Major Rangel . . . The others out there have come to pass judgement, and let me tell you that I, personally, deeply regret that several of your companions have done the things they did and provoked the investigation that led to all this and to Rangel losing his post. And though I regret it, I fully understand the need to proceed in this way: because a corrupt policeman is the worst of criminals, and I think we must be agreed on that, mustn't we? The fact is that recently the most peculiar things have been happening . . . Besides, Lieutenant, if you ask to be discharged in the middle of all this business it may give rise to suspicions, and you should be aware of that. Although I must say I'm not here to suspect anyone and that's why I want to hear your reasons for asking to be discharged. This place is no longer what I imagined it to be, although it should continue to be what it used to be: a headquarters for criminal investigations, and that's precisely why I've called you in. Right now I've got all the detectives on the payroll, old and new, on some job or other, and I need you, Lieutenant. And you won't think what I'm about to say is very orthodox; I brought you in to offer a straightforward deal: solve this case for me and I'll sign you off . . ."

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