

**THE
ANGST-
RIDDEN
EXECUTIVE**
A PEPE CARVALHO INVESTIGATION

**MANUEL
VÁZQUEZ
MONTALBÁN**
TRANSLATED BY
ED EMERY

MELVILLE INTERNATIONAL CRIME



PRAISE FOR
MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN'S
PEPE CARVALHO SERIES

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“Pepe Carvalho’s greatest concern is with his stomach, but when not pursuing delicacies, he can unravel the most tangled of mysteries.”

—*THE SUNDAY TIMES*

Born in Barcelona in 1939, **MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN** (1939–2003) was a member of *Partit Socialista Unificat Catalunya* (PSUC), and was jailed by the Franco government for four years for supporting a miners' strike. A columnist for Madrid *El País*, as well as a prolific poet, playwright, and essayist, Vázquez Montalbán was also a well-known gourmand who wrote often about food. The nineteen novels in his Pepe Carvalho series have won international acclaim, including the Planeta prize (1979) and the International Grand Prix de Littérature Policière (1981), both for *Southern Seas*. He died in 2003 in Hong Kong, on his way home to Barcelona.

In addition to Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, **ED EMERY** has translated Mohamed Choukri, Antonio Negri, and Nobel Prize-winner Dario Fo.

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MONTALBÁN

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THE ANGST-RIDDEN EXECUTIVE

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One day the member of parliament Sole Barbera asked me: ‘When are you going to write another of your cops and robbers novels?’ I have taken him at his word, and would like to dedicate *The Angst-Ridden Executive* to him.

He'd not so much requested as demanded a window seat. The girl at the Western Air Lines check-in desk looked at the card he flashed, and complied, albeit with an air of puzzlement.

What reason could there possibly be for a CIA agent to insist on a window seat on a flight from Las Vegas to San Francisco? The girl had heard rumours about special training camps that were supposedly located somewhere in the Mojave Desert, but surely the CIA had their own reconnaissance planes. Carvalho sensed a battle of conflicting logics raging behind the girl's artificially tanned forehead as she checked his ticket. Then he had to produce the card a second time, when two policemen came up to search him. They let him pass, with a gesture that represented either total subservience or total contempt.

As Carvalho settled into his seat, he felt a sense of pleasure that was on a par with that of a child awaiting a treat. A settled sort of contentment, in which your body is master of the situation but your legs want to run to meet the experience head-on. Carvalho concentrated on the takeoff, on Las Vegas as it disappeared rapidly into the distance, looking like a cardboard cut-out sticking out of the desert, and on preparing himself for the moment when they would fly over Death Valley and Zabriskie Point. Carvalho had made repeated pilgrimages to this part of the world. He was drawn by the aesthetic appeal of the blunt, white hills, which turned slowly to purple in the evening light, and he was attracted by Death Valley's reputation for treachery, and by its sulphurized waters and the glitter of its salty crust. From the plane one could appreciate the absurd grandeur of this landscape, which may have been a geological leftover, but which had always made a profound impression on Carvalho. It would be wonderful to jump out with a parachute, together with a knapsack filled with the kind of wonders that came out of knapsacks in Hemingway: tins of beans and smoked bacon. Something, however, was preventing Carvalho from indulging his secret and solitary vice. Something in his immediate vicinity that was like radio interference. Something that was being said, or sounded like it was being said. The source of the disturbance was very close. Right next to him, in fact. The passengers in the seats next to him were talking about Spain, and one of them was speaking English with a heavy Catalan accent.

'I find it strange that you could spend eight years at the Rota base and not learn Spanish.'

'The bases have a life of their own. We only use local people for cleaning the place, and for . . .'

With a knowing guffaw, the American made a lewd gesture that he had probably picked up in some bar in Cadiz. The Catalan chose to ignore it and continued with the conversation as between two businessmen. The American was apparently the boss of a small sports goods factory, and was discussing his franchises. For him the world was divided between people who bought from him and people who didn't. He even had a high opinion of communist China, because they bought his hiking gear, importing it via Hong Kong. On the other hand he couldn't stand the Cubans, the Brazilians, or

the French. As he praised the ethical and consumerist capacities of each individual nation, the American accompanied his observations with a clap of his hands and a shout of 'Olé', evidently intended as a linguistic homage to his traveling companion. The Spaniard, for his part, gave a brief résumé of his circumstances. He was a manager working for Petnay, one of the biggest multinationals in the world. His main area of responsibility was Spain and part of Latin America, but he often came to the US in order to talk with head office and to get an update on the latest techniques in marketing.

'We Americans know how to sell.'

'I don't agree. The truth is simply that you have the political power to force your products on large numbers of people.'

'That's history for you, friend! You people used to have an empire too, as I recall—and whatever became of that?! Not to mention the Romans. And what about the Apaches—they had a little empire too, didn't they? One day maybe the whole of American civilization will disappear, and our whole country will end up looking like that out there. . .'

The American gestured towards the arid Death Valley landscape. At this point Carvalho spoke up in Spanish.

'Imagine the number of drink-flasks our friend would be able to sell then!'

The Catalan spun round to see where the voice was coming from. He chuckled.

The world's a small place! It seems I'm sitting next to a Spaniard. Allow me to introduce myself—Antonio Jauma—I'm in management.'

'Pepe Carvalho. I'm a traveling salesman.'

The Catalan introduced Carvalho to the American, who shook his hand and launched into a string of ad hoc Hispanicisms:

'Espana. . . Bonita. . . Ole. . . Manzanilla. . . Puerta de Santa Maria. . .'

'Si, señor.'

'What's your line of business?' Jauma inquired.

He was a thin man, medium-built, with the unmistakable features of a Sephardic Jew. The nose of an Istanbul antique dealer; dark, shiny eyes that suggested a measure of ruthlessness; and a shock of thick, black hair, with a wide parting that hinted at incipient hair loss.

'One-armed bandits. That's what brings me to Vegas so often.'

'Do you live in San Francisco?'

'Berkeley. I'm doing a part-time urban studies course at the university.'

'What part of Spain are you from?'

'Born in Galicia, but spent most of my life in Barcelona.'

'Well, we're two of a kind! This gentleman and I are fellow countrymen. . .'

He conveyed this information to the American, who received it with an air of comic gravity.

Jauma gave Carvalho a potted account of himself. He had studied law at university. Then a trip to the USA, where he'd spent his time building highways and serving hot dogs in snack bars in the

Bronx. He'd married a fellow student from his university days. They had come through hard times together.

'Some nights we had to make do with an omelette and a finger of whiskey between us.'

All of a sudden—via one of his wife's relations who was a military attaché at the Spanish embassy in Washington—Jauma had landed a job with Petnay. Within a few months he'd become the representative in Spain.

'And, as Groucho Marx might say, that's the way my career has gone—from absolute poverty to nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all?'

'Exactly. Nothing at all. A manager never makes enough money to just pack his bags and quit. What's more, he's always at the mercy of last year's trading figures and people trying to stab him in the back. I've had enough of it. Last night I had to attend a fraternity dinner for managers from all over the world. You can imagine the scene—America in full dress. The jewelry at that gathering would have put Ali Baba to shame. Anyway, on the one hand you've got this rabble sitting over your head. And on the other you've got the pressure of the workers from below. You have no idea what it's like trying to run a business with the present labour situation in Spain and Latin America. You need nerves of steel.'

'How are things going?'

'Well, for the moment. The company pays salaries that are a bit higher than the prevailing local rate, and in return it earns dollar-level profits. The only thing that worries me is the idea of a crisis looming, and my having to start behaving like a foreman. You know what I mean?'

'You have the morality of a pinko.'

'Does that bother you?'

'Not at all. I used to be a bit that way myself, but all I'm left with these days is a set of bowels in rather good working order.'

'Bravo, Carvalho—you're a hell of a man!'

The man obviously had a histrionic streak. He waved his arms enthusiastically, thrust his sharp-featured face forward, and shouted:

'We have to celebrate this meeting! Tonight I'm inviting you to eat out at Fisherman's Wharf. You know the place?'

'Yes.'

'I'm staying at the Holiday Inn on Market Street. Why don't we arrange to meet directly at the restaurant—say at nine? Ha! Carvalho! This meeting is all the better for being unexpected. Who knows, maybe we even have friends in common, although looking at you I'd say that you're a bit younger than me. Did you study in Barcelona?'

'Yes. Philosophy.'

'And now you're a traveling rep for one-armed bandits! You're a prophet! My friend here is

prophet!’

The American nodded agreement, gave Carvalho an approving look and leaned back to take a more thorough view of him, as if searching for external signs that might give evidence of his hidden powers.

‘Just imagine the things we might have in common. Let’s make a list of the women we’ve had and then compare them. Who knows, maybe we have a parallel sexual history.’

‘Or convergent.’

‘That’s right—or convergent. Last night the company mobilized all the best-looking call-girls in Las Vegas, and there was a farewell party in grand style in the poolside apartments at the Sands Hotel—Sinatra’s hotel. I shut myself in a bedroom with two black girls. They were a sight to see, Carvalho. What would I do if I couldn’t go on one of these binges every once in a while? These Americans are superb at squeezing the work out of their personnel, and then, moments before they collapse from exhaustion, stimulating them so that they pick themselves up and carry on producing. That’s the fundamental principle of Taylorism and Fordism. And I prescribe it for myself. Otherwise I’d never survive the wreckage of my everyday life. The angst. The angst of a senior executive.

It was as if the smoke of ancient volcanoes had turned into a cold, wet fog. Every morning during the winter, damp vapours rise from the grey earth and envelope the big, ageing houses on the outskirts of Vich. Driven out of the town by the breath of people’s front doors opening, the fog takes it out on the whitewashed adobe houses that marked the transition between the old city and the surrounding dusty grey countryside. At this time of the morning you didn’t get a full view of the scenery of the landscape of ancient prehistoric disaster, of the limited end-of-the-world that must have happened here. What you see is what today is known as the Plain of Vich, an ash-coloured terrain dotted with small chimneys and petrified lava. Nor do you see the hamlet of bare, dark stone, covered by beetle-browed roofs whose purpose is to offer protection against the rain, or to emphasize the gravity of a city which one local writer has described as ‘the city of saints’. The priests have not yet come out of their infinite lair, the air is fragrant with wax and marzipan. The only humans in sight are countrywomen on their way to market and workers leaving the town on their way to sausage factories, furniture factories, warehouses and artificial stone factories. Zigzagging bicycles are nervously observed by the steaming eyes of cars with headlights and by the enormous bulk of a lorry, like some great cuboid animal, with only its front showing through the fog.

The fog is not the only obstacle on your way to work. You have little chance of avoiding a more or less long wait at the level crossing, and regular commuters treat the red traffic light as an acceptable risk which they calculate into their working day. Those traveling on bikes or motorbikes put their feet on the ground and hold their machines between their legs like sleeping animals. Those in cars switch

on the demister, or turn up the heating to clear their windscreens. One or two leave the safety of the vehicles to clean their windows or to pull up their aerials. It's always amazing to discover that there are programmes at this time of the morning, with some radio announcer, his mouth full of coffee at the small hours, attempting to maintain a degree of enthusiasm sufficient to sell the latest hit single.

'What's the temperature like in La Coruna?'

'Two degrees below zero.'

'Granada? Is Granada there? Do we have Granada on the line?'

'Bilbao?'

'Two degrees, and a wind coming in off the Bay of Biscay.'

'That's one for the seafarers—a storm on its way.'

'Barcelona? How's the temperature down there?'

'Four degrees and a relative humidity of eighty-seven per cent.'

'What about Vich?' the man wonders. 'If Barcelona is four degrees, I'll guarantee that Vich is below zero.' He is surprised to find himself blowing on his fingers like when he was a boy, and he chuckles to himself as a wave of nostalgia brings back to him the taste of bread soaked in milk and coffee. The memory is an amazing thing! The slightest thing is capable of setting off a whole chain of fragmented images.

'Juan, will you stop playing about and drink your milk!'

That's what his grandfather used to tell him, in just the same tone that he now used with his own children, particularly Oriol, the lazy one.

'Oh, one day I'm going to lose my patience, and I'll give you a thick ear.'

He begins to laugh. The boy puts on the superior look of a person bowing to force majeure, and downs his milk with a technical perfection that also seems to express scorn. Drinking milk, in the morning, with your hands cupped round the bowl, enjoying that mysterious warmth that seems to come right from the centre of the earth. 'No, I don't want cups like that: he had told his wife on the day she brought home a Duralex tea-set. 'I don't want that kind of cup for my milk.' 'You're full of nonsense.' 'Look, I don't know why, but if I don't drink my milk out of a bowl it doesn't taste right, especially in the mornings.' 'I'm the one who has to wash them, and the glaze always comes off earthenware, and it's a breeding place for germs. . . and I'm tired of waiting on you hand and foot . . .'

'That's enough! I'm having my milk in a bowl, and that's an end of it.'

Every now and then you have to make a stand, because if you don't people take advantage of you. I know it's a bit of an obsession, but everyone's got so many manias that one more won't do any harm. His bowl of milk was a means of re-establishing a link with his childhood, and the distant faces that were almost beyond recall. His aunt: 'Juan, you'll be late for school.' His grandfather: 'Juan, will you stop playing about?' The weak light of the first light bulbs in Valles—fifteen and twenty watts apiece—which were carefully switched off as soon as the first daylight appeared, in the daily battle between the electric current and the country folk who were scared to waste the stuff. Nowadays people don't

care. They leave their lights on, ten at a time, and damn the expense. They don't worry any more. Instead he takes it out on her because she gives him stick for wanting to drink his milk out of a bowl. His grandma used to tell them to lock the larder properly, because the radio announcers would come out at night and eat everything in sight. He began to laugh, and laughed till the tears ran. The red light was still showing through the fog, and he roused himself sufficiently to notice that he had a hard-on. He felt his cock with a degree of pride, and noticed a tickling sensation. He needed a piss. There was no sign of the train yet, and beyond the roadside verge he saw that the fog and the undergrowth were thick enough to conceal a man's slow, steady piss from the gaze of the cars, motorbikes, bicycles and lorries that were waiting for the train to pass. The knowledge that it was cold outside, and the possibility of the train arriving at any moment, led him to one last test. He made as if to piss, and then tried holding back, to stop the hidden flow. He only just managed it, and some drops of urine emerged like beads of golden water onto the Y-front of his underpants.

He had no choice. He got out of the car, hunched his shoulders as if shoring up his body against the weight of the cold, and crossed the verge with what he imagined was a spring in his step. He plunged into the undergrowth, looking back as he went, to check whether the people waiting on the road could still see him. The hidden stream was demanding to be liberated; it seemed to take a sadistic pleasure in the domination it was able to exert over a man who was both its master and its slave. 'There you go, there you go,' the man murmured to himself. He spotted the substantial bulk of a lime tree, and reached to unzip his fly. His hand went into his fly as if trying to get hold of a soft, living creature that was hard to get hold of. He fumbled for the slit in his underpants and grasped the warm, fleshy substance of his penis. Once again he looked to the front and behind him, then to right and left as he extracted his appendage and dangled it with two fingers of his right hand while the other fingers made a kind of roof, or rather a canopy, for the almost religious devotion with which he pissed. As he relieved the weight on his bladder, he felt a sense of euphoria, and no longer cared whether people could see him or not. He was trying to trace a pattern with his piss on the bark of the tree, but his eye was suddenly caught by something odd on the ground—something that seemed to have been buried there, and which was slowly being uncovered by the jet of piss. Like an electric probe, the urine slowly washed the shape clean, and before the staring eyes of Juan de can Gubern there finally appeared the shape of a hand. His eyes rested on the hand momentarily, as if trying to make sense of it, and then passed to the muddied sleeve of a jacket, which seemed to contain a man's arm, and then to the entire jacket, and then to the man himself, face downwards, and half hidden by earth, hoarfrost and weeds. Juan Gubern's member turned limp as the cold got to it, and then swiftly retracted. He thought: 'I should shout,' but he didn't, because he suddenly heard the sound of the train approaching and remembered that he had left his car blocking the road. He hurriedly retraced his steps, struggling to return his penis to its rightful place as he went.

'I was just on my way to the office. Was your business really so urgent that you had to come up to Vallvidrera?'

As he asked the question, Carvalho pointedly did not invite his visitor to sit down. The detective was irritated by the feeling of having been caught unawares in his lair, and his eyes traveled across the various signs of disorder in his household: the unwashed plates on the dinner table; the record on the turntable and its sleeve lying on the floor; the overflowing ashtray next to the sofa; and the open book on the floor, covered in ash. He first resolved the problem of the book, by shutting it and tossing it onto a shelf on the other side of the room. He kicked the ashtray under the sofa while at the same time piling up plates and glasses, and taking them to the kitchen. When he returned he found that his visitor had retrieved the book from the shelf and was flicking through it, blowing out the ash from between its pages.

'Don't worry, it's only a book.'

His visitor smiled a smile of enigmatic complicity. Forty years old, Carvalho thought to himself but looks younger. Wearing a sweater, with the tabs of his shirt collar sticking out like little wings. 'Judging by the way he moves, he must be hooked on James Dean,' the detective decided, as he watched his visitor put his hands into his pockets, raise his shoulders and smile boyishly as he scanned the room with eyes that were shrewd and calculating.

'There are worse things in life than books, señor Carvalho. Nice place you've got here. Does it cost much to rent?'

'I think I bought it.'

'You think. . .?'

Carvalho went over to the big glass door, and as he looked out to check that the Valles countryside was still where it had been the night before, he noticed a car parked at the bottom of the garden stairs and a man, waiting there, leaning against the bodywork.

'Have you come with a chauffeur?'

'I don't even have a car, let alone a chauffeur. What I have in this world amounts to more or less nothing. A sweater or two. A girlfriend every now and then. One or two friends. And some languages. German, for example.'

'What do you take me for—an employment agency?'

'No. I've come to see you about a mutual friend—Antonio Jauma.'

'He may be a friend of yours, but he's certainly no friend of mine. I've never heard of Antonio Jauma, although I did know a Jauma once—a fellow student of mine. . . ended up as a teacher; a tall, skinny type, a Christian socialist. . . quite unforgettable. He wasn't an Antonio, though.'

'Antonio Jauma wasn't tall. He wasn't a teacher, either. He was a top executive in an international company. He wasn't a Christian, and if he was progressive it was in a human rather than a political sense. It appears that Jauma had a high opinion of you. I'll remind you when and where you met: the United States, on a flight from Las Vegas to San Francisco.'

‘The executive!’

The amused expression that appeared on Carvalho’s face prompted no particular reaction from his visitor. His repeated glances in the direction of an empty chair forced Carvalho to offer him a seat and, once seated, the visitor slowly and deliberately lit a cigarette, took a deep breath, in order to get his narrative started, and gave Carvalho a detailed resume of his encounter with Jauma miles above the Mojave Desert. Carvalho began to wonder whether he was in the presence of some kind of ornate novelist, a habitual monologist with a taste for performing to gatherings of Trappists, a cultured leftist who had fallen on hard times, and he sensed that the story was probably going to end with a coup de theatre, a carefully weighted punchline which would tie up the threads and give meaning to the whole.

‘So anyway. . .’

A thick exhalation of smoke emerged from the visitor’s mouth and hung in the air like a greasy sheet.

‘. . . Antonio Jauma has been murdered.’ He had still not said his all, because his eyes had turned from mischievous to serious, and were searching for something—a suitable prop to enable him to complete his peroration.

‘Or at any rate he’s dead.’

‘I have to admit that I’d be more interested if he’s been murdered. The fact of his being dead is just a consequence. How did he die? When? Where?’

‘Shot through the heart from behind. A perfect shot. Then they dumped his body in a wood near Vich. According to forensic it hadn’t been there long—probably since about one in the morning.’

‘What are the police saying?’

‘That it was some pimp getting his own back. As you may know, Jauma was a bit of a womanizer in the oldest and least pleasant sense of the term. As far as the police are concerned, it’s an open and shut case. While he was out on the town, either someone tried blackmailing him and he resisted, or he fell foul of one of the hard men. The body smelt of women’s perfume—of toilet water, in fact. . . of personal hygiene fragrance, if you know what I mean. Eau lustrale pour l’hygiene intime. What’s more, it was dressed normally, but with one exception. No underpants. Instead they found a pair of women’s knickers in his trouser pocket.’ ‘

‘All of which suggests a night on the tiles. Seems clear enough.’

‘I don’t think so. Neither does his widow.’

‘That’s to be expected. She wouldn’t be the first widow to refuse to believe that her husband led a double life.’

‘In Concha’s case you could be right. She’s a proper lady, from Valladolid, and she’s never taken Antonio’s sexual inclinations very seriously. However, I too don’t believe that things are as simple as they seem.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, we’ve all seen enough detective films to know that criminals lay false trails to conceal the

motives of their crimes. . . Now, what's the classic false trail scenario?'

'Pouring a bottle of whiskey or brandy down the dead man's throat so that it looks as if he was drunk.'

'Exactly, señor Carvalho. And, if you ask me, something similar happened in Jauma's case.'

'Why? Did he smell of drink?'

'No. He smelt of women's cologne. As I say, intimate cologne. As if he'd been soused in a barrel of the stuff. You take my meaning?'

'Did you tell this to the police?'

'I prefer not to have dealings with the police. I spent many years in exile in the Eastern Bloc, and my legal status in Spain is not what you'd call clear. I persuaded Concha to tell the police, though, and to get a lawyer on the case. Neither the police nor the lawyer have shown the slightest interest. So she decided to look into things herself. At that point I remembered that Jauma had mentioned your name a few times—specifically with a view to bringing you in to investigate possible instances of industrial espionage. Jauma was a very important figure. Petnay is a vast multinational, and he was their number one executive in southern Europe. They also used to send him on inspection tours of Latin America.'

'What I don't understand is why such an important person should remember someone like me—pretty crazy chance meeting over Death Valley, followed by dinner at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. And then a trip up country. And what I find even stranger is the fact that you've been able to find me, and that you know that I'm a private detective. When Jauma met me, I was still living in the States.'

'Jauma made it very easy for us. We found your phone number in his desk diary, together with three possible addresses, and instructions for one of his secretaries to get in touch with you as quickly as possible.'

'Three addresses?'

'This one, the address of your office on the Ramblas, and the address of your girlfriend, Rosario Garcia Lopez, aka Charo.'

'Why did he want to see me?'

'That's another mystery. I suspect that it was probably something to do with his company.'

'Was he the jealous sort? Maybe he thought his wife was having an affair?'

'Concha?'

For the first time the middle-aged youth in the sweater showed signs of surprise.

There had been a third party at the San Francisco dinner, one Rhomberg—Petnay's general overseer in the US. Carvalho took the Power Street cable-car to Fisherman's Wharf, and arrived sufficiently early to be able to spend some time exploring pavements that were peopled with underground newsvendors, folk singers and long-haired practitioners of a variety of cheap and pointless crafts: manufacturers of sunflower seed necklaces, brass jewelry makers, Xerox poets, and spaced-out painters who ventured beyond the Golden Gate as if by an act of voluntary self-

immolation. Carvalho resisted the temptation to try a portion of crayfish from a street stall. He could feel the tension in his stomach mounting at the prospect of serious eating. There were all kinds of stalls offering the passer-by a variety of ready-packed seafoods, either as consolation for the fact that he was not being able to afford to eat in the plush restaurants that stood nearby, or by way of an incitement to move on to greater things. Carvalho didn't have time to decide. Out of a taxi stepped Jauma, in the company of a man who was clearly a German. His feet had barely touched the ground when he frightened the life out of the aforementioned hippies with a loud display of histrionics and a cry of:

‘Carvalho—For lobsters, and for the Love of God!’

The German was also introduced with a characteristic Jauma flourish:

‘Dieter Rhomberg. Petnay's number three man in the sectors that I'm involved with. In other words, a man who's more powerful than Franco. Tonight's meal is on him.’

‘It is?’

The German appeared more surprised than annoyed.

‘We should celebrate the fact that your people have won the elections. Rhomberg might look like one hell of an executive, but in fact he's a socialist. Left-wing, too. Supports the Young Socialist wing of the SPD.’

‘I can't imagine that your friend's particularly interested. . .’ the German exclaimed, in a tone that was half civility and half irritation.

‘Our friend's in the CIA . . .’

Carvalho's stomach gave a heave. He realized that Jauma was saying it for a joke, but he had still said it.

‘. . . Sure, the CIA. What other explanation can there be for a Galician who spends his time traveling between San Francisco and Vegas?’

‘Maybe he's a croupier?’

‘Sure. A CIA croupier.’

‘Why does he have to be CIA?’

‘Because in Spain the CIA only recruits Galicians. I read it in Readers' Digest.’

Jauma laughed at his own joke, and ushered them towards the restaurant. ‘For the love of God . . . ! For Lobsters. . . ! For Justice and for the Fatherland!’

Half an hour later there was still no sign of oyster soup and the lobster Thermidor that Jauma had recommended, or rather chosen on their behalf. During that time they drank two bottles of chilled Riesling, while Jauma and Rhomberg immersed themselves in an extremely technical discussion of the problems of the North American market and the necessity of adapting the packaging of some of their products to suit the taste of shop-windows in San Francisco.

‘I still reserve judgment until I've had a look round the Hollywood stores. In a couple of streets at the bottom of Beverly Hills you have the biggest concentration of luxury goods shops anywhere in the world. Even bigger than Paris or New York.’

‘What does Petnay make?’

‘Perfumes, alcoholic spirits and pharmaceutical products.’

The German seemed inclined to stop there. Jauma, however, continued the list.

‘Fighter planes, bombers, high-tech communications systems, all highly “sophisticated”, as the say. . . as well as newspapers, magazines, dailies, politicians, and revolutionaries. . . Petnay make them all. Even the lobster that we are about to eat, if it’s a frozen one, was very probably packed by Petnay. They own one of the biggest fishing fleets in the world, with operations in Japan, Greenland, Senegal, Morocco and the United States. In this restaurant there’s not a thing that couldn’t have been made by Petnay—from the fake French Californian wines down to Herr Rhomberg and myself.’

In Jauma’s opinion, the oyster soup was out of a packet. Carvalho corrected him: ‘Tinned.’

‘There’s no such thing as oyster soup out of a packet.’

Carvalho and Jauma stuck to the rules and refrained from drinking wine with the soup. Rhomberg made up for them by polishing off a bottle all by himself—one glass of chilled white wine for each spoonful of soup. Jauma justified his choice of lobster Thermidor on the grounds that this particular recipe best concealed the insipid taste of American lobsters.

‘Big, but tasteless. You, Carvalho, will be my guest at my estate in Port de la Selva on the Costa Brava. We’ll go to the fish market at Llansa. They sell terrific lobsters there—live, red ones, not very large, but properly fished—not farmed. Angry lobsters. To be cut up very carefully. Do you know why, Carvalho?’

‘So that they don’t lose their waters, in other words their blood. That’s what gives them the flavour. You also have to pull their stomach out in one piece. It comes away very easily if you pull out the intestine that comes out under the central fin of the lobster’s tail.’

‘Amazing!’

The German’s face had been turned bright red by the effects of the wine. He laughed.

‘It was only women and good food that saved us all from going mad under Franco.’

Jauma shouted this out loud, to the general consternation of the surrounding tables. He repeated the statement in English, directing it at a crowded table consisting of four married couples, all white with all the men dressed in green Prince of Wales check suits and the women dressed like Piper Laurie in a Hollywood comedy of manners.

By now Rhomberg was sufficiently drunk not to feel embarrassed. He—gave three cheers for socialism and drank to the forthcoming downfall of Franco.

‘I can’t believe that you Spaniards have put up with him for as long as you have.’

This last querulous remark was directed at Carvalho.

‘You should worry about the Watchdog of the West on your own doorstep—Willy Brandt.’

‘You Spaniards have nothing to say on the subject of our Willy. Spaniards have nothing to say about anything. After all, putting up with Franco for thirty years. . . !’

‘It was you Germans that landed him on us. You helped him win the war.’

Carvalho was annoyed with himself. He hated scenes. The natural masochistic inclinations of men and strong nations made it inevitable that the German would back down, and that Jauma, drunk and lascivious, would go onto the offensive, shouting:

‘Tonight we’ll sleep with five hundred women all at once! And Rhomberg will do the business. Have you seen the size of his organ?’

‘An experience I can live without. . .’

‘I saw it once, on a beach in Mykonos. The Super Paradise beach, it was. We were spending the Easter holiday there with our families. Where Rhomberg walks, the grass will never grow again.’

Rhomberg laughed and blushed.

‘It’ll be at the firm’s expense. We’ll go, and look out five hundred chicks. Four hundred and ninety for Rhomberg, five for you, Carvalho, and five for me. Best to find chicks with no front teeth because they do a better blow job. And if they do have their front teeth, we’ll hire a dentist to pull them out in a civilized manner.’

Rhomberg was seriously annoyed to find that he had left his Havanas behind at the hotel. Carvalho and Jauma concurred in observing that American cigars were unsmokable, but luckily the restaurant’s range of tobacco extended to a trio of Jamaican Macanudos. This prompted Carvalho to a brief sermon on the quality of their tobacco.

‘They’re perfectly made, but the flavour’s not a patch on a Havana.’

‘If you ask me, standards have fallen in Cuba. The best Cuban cigars these days are the ones that Davidoffs sell under their own label, but the traditional brands have gone way downhill. The quality of the tobacco’s still incomparable, though. The feel and weight of this Macanudo is excellent, but what about the flavour, Carvalho. There’s no flavour, no flavour!’

They moved on to post-prandial drinks. Rhomberg plumped for a black label whiskey, which Carvalho ordered a marc from Burgundy, and Jauma one from the Champagne region. Then they settled in for the night. In the years to come, Carvalho’s main memory was of opening his eyes several hours later to find himself in a cushion-filled room where Jauma was engaged in heavy petting with three naked black women and Rhomberg was lying asleep next to a white girl who was busy trimming her nails, with her legs crossed and her breasts almost resting on her knees. Carvalho had a woman under him. She was gazing at the ceiling and humming a slow fox trot.

Concha Hajar de Jauma had breasts that looked sad and were probably veined. The former could be deduced from the way that she compensated by wearing an excessively pointed bra. The latter could be concluded from the transparency of her skin, which revealed the blood flowing in her forehead, her arms and her hands. The sight of the widow’s veins, together with the dark rings round her eyes miraculously drawn by nature in the space of a couple of weeks, combined to produce a general effect

of mourning. She had been educated in English schools and in Spanish barracks, under the paternal eye and tactical prudence of a Spanish general who did little as a military man, and even less as a member of the boards of countless companies. The girl's upbringing had been wealthy and authoritarian. She then went to university, in Barcelona, to study medicine (Doctor Puigvert had removed a gall-stone for her father), and two weeks later discovered sex, thanks to a young student by the name of Antonio Jauma, and politics, thanks to his friend Marcos Nuñez. In fact neither Jauma with his sex nor Nuñez with his politics effected any fundamental alteration in the young lady, who only compromised herself in the most formal of senses with either one of them.

‘She’s absolutely and radically a virgin.’

Marcos Nuñez had just concluded his assessment when the drawing-room door opened wide to reveal señora Jauma. Carvalho savoured the woman's presence and imagined how many men must have fallen for her. While her husband was alive it must have been stimulating, fascinating, to invade this atmosphere of religiosity where every pleasure came tinged with a soupçon of sinfulness.

‘They told me you were here half an hour ago. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. My head must have been somewhere else.’

What she seemed to be seeking was not so much respect for her widowed state as respect for her right to lose her head. When Carvalho introduced himself, she looked him over, and was able to tell at a glance whether he was the sort of man who wiped his lips with a serviette prior to raising a wine glass to his lips, and also whether the detective viewed her as a widow with time on her hands. The discovery that Carvalho most assuredly would wipe his lips, and also that he was eyeing her with contempt but nonetheless voraciously, disconcerted the widow. She felt the need to take refuge in a more conventional role, so she introduced a moistness into her eyes, a tiredness into her hands as she pressed them together, and a note of anxiety into a soprano voice that betrayed a lack of sleep.

‘Are you up to date with the facts?’

‘He is. He knows everything that we know.’

‘You will help us, won’t you? Antonio deserves it. He was so loyal to his friends—even more than to his family or to myself.’

‘He wasn’t actually my friend. I think I ought to make that clear. I met him over a couple of days several years ago, and he certainly struck me as a remarkable man, but I wouldn’t say he was a friend of mine.’

‘You will help us, though?’

‘If you’re approaching me in my professional capacity, yes, I will.’

‘I have money, and I want to get to the bottom of this. It’s unbearable that everyone seems to be accepting the official version, and that everybody’s trying to hush it all up.’

‘Like who?’

‘Everyone from the Petnay management to my father. My father has been moving heaven and earth to keep everything low-key. Petnay don’t want to find themselves involved in some sordid

scandal, so they prefer to offer me money to keep quiet. I can't agree to that. I'm doing it for my husband—for his memory, and for the memory that his children will inherit.'

According to Nuñez's explanation during the drive down from Vallvidrera, Concha Hajar had been a political militant during her student days in the school of medicine. But at forty years of age she was speaking as her mother would have spoken at forty years of age, and as she would also expect her own daughter to speak at the age of forty.

'I want you to spare no expense.'

'Have no worries on that score. My rate is two thousand pesetas a day, payable within sixty days. In cases where the insurance companies are disputing claims, I generally take a percentage of what my client will receive. However, as far as I can gather from what you've told me, we have no problem with Petnay or with the insurance.'

'No.'

'In this case, in addition to the daily rate, I would expect a bonus of one hundred thousand pesetas if I solve the case within sixty days.'

'When can you start?'

'Here and now. With you. Tell me honestly—was your husband involved in a romantic liaison that might have made him a target for revenge?'

'People don't believe this, but we women are always the last to know. Antonio was very much of a ladies' man. They tell me he used to devour them with his eyes. But when it came to the real thing—absolutely nothing. He spent himself in words. People saw him as a womanizer because he was always talking about women, and with women, in a particular sort of way—"I want you. . .", "Don't play hard to get. . .", "Go to the dentist and get him to take your front teeth out. . ." etc, etc. I'm sure you know the sort. He was so predictable. He never talked of anything else. But words are one thing, actions another.'

'When you said that you didn't believe the business about the women's perfume, what did the police have to say?'

'I'd rather not go into that. It wasn't exactly nice.'

'Please. I need to know.'

'It was disgusting: "People like your husband, if you don't mind my saying so, get up to all kinds of kinky things. Some of them like to be beaten. . . some like, well . . . to be urinated on. So why shouldn't your husband like sousing himself in toilet water?'"

'According to the forensic examination, had he had sex that night?'

'There were signs of ejaculation, but they can't say whether this was due to sexual excitement or whether he'd actually had intercourse. The fact that he was not wearing underpants is more of a mystery.'

'And the knickers?'

'What about them?'

‘How were they?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask. They just told me that they were women’s knickers, that’s all.’

‘I need to know more about them.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. You want the brand name?’

‘No. I particularly need to know whether they’d been worn or not—in other words, when he put them, or when they were put, in his pocket had they just been used? Or had they been washed? Or were they new and not yet worn?’

‘And how am I supposed to find that out?’

‘Via his lawyer. Or your father. Or our friend here.’

Marcos Nuñez seemed to have lost interest in the business, and was sniffing around the books on the shelves. A dining-room-cum-living-room which would have held twenty rock and rollers and their partners with ease. A series of original paintings by artists who hadn’t yet made it—Artigau, Llimona, Jove, Viladecans, and one who was on the point of making it—an eight-hundred-thousand peseta Guinovart. Classical style for the seating and avant garde for the light fittings. A small stuffed crocodile and op art mobiles, and not a speck of dust in sight. From the living room you could hear the sound of a servant assiduously polishing the oak parquet. The widow Jauma was trying to imagine a pair of women’s knickers that were not her own. Carvalho was trying to imagine them placed on the more precise geography of some woman’s body.

Charo opened her eyes, the only part of her that was covered.

‘This is no time to be sleeping.’

In a reflex action, the girl pulled the sheet over her head, but Carvalho had already flung the curtains wide open, and the room was flooded with April light.

‘Pig! That’s hurting my eyes!’

Charo leapt out of bed. She rushed to the bathroom, but not before giving Carvalho a punch in the stomach.

‘I can’t wait till you’ve finished in there.’

‘I’ll be out in a second.’

‘I know you better than that. . . I’m leaving a photo of a man on your dressing table. I want you to try and remember if he was ever a client of yours. Maybe you could ask around among your fellow workers. Only people you know, though.’

‘What do you take me for, Pepito, darling?’

Carvalho leaned over to the talking door, gave it a playful tap, and replied:

‘An expensive call-girl.’

‘Thank you, Pepito. You’re so charming.’

‘If you find out anything, I’ll be in my office till one, and then I’ll take a stroll round the billiard halls. I’ll be lunching at the Amaya.’

He had no desire to hang about for a question and answer session with Charo. He left her flat intent on enjoying the morning’s sunshine and getting to the Ramblas as soon as possible. He let the road carry him down to the harbour, where the April morning light was beginning to get a grip on the city. If he stood still, the heat of the sun made him feel as if he was slowly cooking inside his winter jacket and he needed to cool off. Having drawn new energy from the heat and light, he walked back up the Ramblas. With a burst of energy he went up the wooden steps two at a time. The house that had once been a brothel run by a Madam Petula was now divided into a maze of offices belonging to a variety of small enterprises: wholesalers of eau de cologne, solicitors catering for small-time crooks, a commercial agent, a journalist bent on plumbing the depths of the Barrio Chino with a view to writing an urban realist novel, an ageing lady chiropodist, a dressmaker, a hairdresser’s with faithful clients who had been going there since the 1929 Exposition, and a few flats occupied by pelota players from the Colon club and girls from the Barcelona by Night troupe. Carvalho’s premises consisted of a small apartment measuring about thirty-five square yards. The office proper was painted green, and had a selection of nineteen-forties office furniture. There was also a tiny kitchen, with a fridge and a small toilet. The major domo of this establishment was an ex-convict byname of Biscuter, who had once shared a prison cell with Carvalho. The detective had never known his real name. Over the years he had occasionally told himself to ask, but the name ‘Biscuter’ seemed to serve well enough. Biscuter had had an unhealthy fascination with cars—other people’s cars. Between the ages of fifteen and thirty he had spent most of his time in prison. He was very short, with the head of a forceps-baby, and was bald in a comical sort of way, with a thick blond growth protruding from above his ears. He had red cheeks and a mealy complexion, thick pendulous pink lips, and cod’s eyes. He was proud of his fitness and the way his life was constantly being put to the test in Carvalho’s service. They had met in the street a few blocks from the Modelo prison. He’d asked Carvalho for twenty-five pesetas.

‘It’s for the bus, chief. I’ve lost my travel card.’

‘You’re going to get pulled in by the police if they find you hanging around here, Biscuter. Don’t you recognize me?’

‘Good God—it’s the student!’

That was what the prisoners used to call Carvalho when he was inside. He invited Biscuter for a meal, and they reminisced about the meals they had managed to concoct in Lerida prison, with a stew made out of a big tomato tin and a small red-pepper tin equipped with a wick and fuelled by methylated spirits.

‘You even managed to make a crab bouillabaisse, chief.’

From the end of Carvalho’s sentence to the present day, Biscuter had been in and out of prison many times. He’d been cured of his passion for stealing cars, but his record stuck with him. He would occasionally fall foul of a police round-up, and, being unemployed, would find himself charged under

the Vagrant Persons Act.

‘If only I could find a job. . .’

‘How would you fancy working for me? You’d be in charge of a small office. You’ll make me coffee or a potato tortilla every now and then, but apart from that your time’s your own.’

‘I also know how to make bechamel, boss.’

‘Fine. I’ll even risk eating it. You can sleep in the office. You’ll get board and lodging, and I’ll give you a couple of thousand pesetas a month for your expenses.’

‘And a letter of employment, so’s they don’t keep picking me up?’

‘And a letter of employment!’

From that day to this Biscuter had not left the little Ramblas world that Carvalho inhabited. Occasionally he came in useful for detective work, looking as he did like a down-and-out.

‘I’ll keep your coffee hot, boss. Brrrm, brrrm!’

Biscuter had the curious habit of accompanying his activities with the noise of a 750cc motorbike. His speciality had been stealing big cars and reselling them in Andorra, but the only thing that Biscuter now retained of his former glories was the language. When he was happy, his lips made a sound like a car exhaust at full throttle, and when he wanted to indicate that all was not well, the ‘brrrm brrrm’ turned into a disconsolate ‘piff. . . piff. . . piff’.

‘Give me three quarters of a cup, and then take a look to see if Bromide’s about.’

‘Straight away, boss! Brrrm, brrrm!’

Biscuter knew just how hot to make the coffee to suit Carvalho’s delicate palate. His boss didn’t like it over-hot. Carvalho drank the coffee slowly as he tried to get San Francisco on the phone. It appeared that Dieter Rhomberg was out of town, but he had an appointment for a business dinner at the Fairmont that night. The picture of the revolving restaurant on the top floor of the Fairmont, with its Scandinavian buffet and its waitresses who dressed like a cross between valkyries and the girls next-door in a rather dated musical, unfolded before him. He saw himself going up in the external lift, which looked out over the city, and which slowly unfolded its mysteries—a city seated on pine clad hills, a city whose downward slopes rushed headlong into the bay below.

‘Rhomberg is a lovely man, as long as you don’t get put off by his intellectual manner.’ So had said the ‘lady from Valladolid’. ‘He was very fond of Antonio. He’ll be able to help you.’

‘Bromide’s gone to the doctor’s, boss. He left a note saying he won’t be back before one.’

‘What’s the matter with him?’

‘I don’t know. He’s gone for a urine analysis.’

‘He must be trying to find out about the bromides that he claims the government’s putting in everything we eat and drink so as to keep us all off sex.’

‘He could have a point there, boss. I haven’t had a decent hard-on for months.’

Carvalho picked up the phone again:

‘Is that the Urquijo Bank? Can I have the research department. . . ? Colonel Parra, please. . . Sorry

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