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from *Myra*

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Translated by Beth Fowler

Chapter 8

The following day, in the dark of night, already far from the estate, Myra stops at the edge of a town, badly lit, yellow. She is far from the road, mountains and valleys and the mud of the first benign rains, showers that don't even de-crack the earth. She must already be far from the confines of Dona Mafalda's property. Once more, she saw and smelt mimosas, which the good lady had ordered to be pulled from the ground because they are invasive. The shrill cry of that death remains in her ears. Yet she didn't hear the voice of Kleber, who must have thought about her, Myra, and therefore wouldn't follow her, or try to catch her, the dog and her.

She's hungry. The items she brought in the rucksack are few, a change of clothes, a roast chicken, morsels of martyred lamb from the chest freezer. They are still as hard as stones. No bread.

An order of lamb stones won't make for dinner today, Rambo, she says to the dog. What shall we do to add to the value of the world?

And she laughs, Myra, standing at the edge of the town of dying light, because she realises that she talks like an open book, one of the many that she read at random with no one to comfort her.

Rambo, because she has spoken and laughed and because they are at the edge of a place with people, a chance of warmth and food, wags his tail. He has been trotting along for many hours, linked to her hand by the leash and for this reason he feels neither cold nor hungry.

Myra does. Tired, hungry and cold, in spite of her long white hooded parka, a gift from the time of delights. Cold is a hunger for something warm, she says to the dog. The body exists from the inside outwards, and the soul, with its circumvolutions and convulsions, exists through the head and the guts. Guts in the soul, that's what makes crime and punishment. That's what happened to

Lady Macbeth. Her viscera rose to her hands, in a bloodshed that no one could see.

You talk too much, Rambo told her, trying to wheel round on his bulky haunches. Then he sat down on them, in the expectation that she would know, in essence, what to do.

Let's try, Myra said to him, but don't bite anyone.

And she didn't take the muzzle from the rucksack, which was the latest thing whenever they went to people, to human places, not to muzzle him. Rambo was convinced of the seriousness of the matter, but he didn't stop wagging his tail as they walked towards the weak lights and the growing clamour that came from the only open doors on the sloping, potholed alley of gravel and paving stones, raised by the rain showers.

It was a tavern, a bar, a café, very poor indeed. It smelt of fried meat, pork fat and reheated fish. Nothing but men at the formica table tops, on red plastic chairs.

All heads turned upwards to a television set fixed in the corner of the wall. All silent now, as a crucial shot is taken. A free kick.

Some glanced up at the arrival of the girl and the very ugly dog, then rose to their feet in the synchronous shout of goal. Some chairs knocked over, celebratory palms slapped together. Fans of varying ages, who must have shared one same single passion, the anoraks and clean shirts of those who have no job, or who have lost one, but who still have a wife, or a mother-in-law, or a mother. Other cheers came from behind the closed doors that Myra had passed, that same convulsive sound of the commentary, somewhat muted, the voice of some wife about to show her anger, through collisions of crockery, at the slightest sign of inattention from the man hidden at home. Low lights, penny-pinching, only the reverberation of the screen.

On the wall at the entrance to the bar, a picture in chalk, *Oje à pipis*. On the men's plates, pieces of bone, gizzards, pork crackling, the nibbled toothpicks of tribal emotion. On the tables, beers, emptied glasses of red wine. On the walls, moth-eaten bullfighting posters, earthenware swallows and dishes, strings of garlic and onion, plastic chorizos and sausages hanging from the ceiling.

Déjà vu, thought Myra to the dog, we've already seen so many.

And the dog, still wagging his tail, said,

Forget it, they're humans, what could be better? And they eat meat.

The threat came from the counter of the bar and he didn't see this, until he saw her fear become real, he saw with his bowels through the contraction of hers. Or he judged for himself that which, linked to her hand by the loving leash, he didn't dare.

At the counter were two individuals with their backs to the game, backs to the door, almost with their backs to each other, speaking from the corner of their mouths, chins raised, hostile, a pair of quarrellers. The man was standing, in a dark blue raincoat, his hair white and thick. In front of him were two empty brandy glasses and a plate with smoked sausage, cod cakes and a bread roll, untouched. The woman, skinny, was sitting on a high stool, in trousers and a black leather coat that grazed the floor full of sawdust and dead scraps of paper. She was blonde and her hair was long, cut in layers that tumbled over her features, her face, seen in profile, stretching forwards towards the hissed exchanges, very pale. She was drinking beer, halfway through the glass. She wasn't eating.

Myra saw and heard quickly, and she could smell danger, like dogs. Like Rambo, who had stopped wagging his tail, until he was able see. All his senses focused on Myra.

Beneath the celebratory roar around the pitch on screen and at the tables, the couple provoked each other, they seethed. His voice deep, hers increasingly shrill.

'... you don't see, you don't listen, you never see anything through, you have no staying power, no humility, you're a spendthrift, an incompetent.'

'You don't have money to throw in my face, that's what you mean to say.'

'You've got no personality, you're a fraud.'

'Look who's talking, swine to all women . . . Wretch.'

Wealthy folk, well-spoken in their fury. Travellers on their way South. The big black and silver jeep outside must have been theirs. The threat.

The men at the tables resumed the arduous task of watching, swallowing and cheering on. Myra approached the counter. Struggling with the fresh waves of demands, the landlady, on the other side of the counter, saw her. She was short, and her chest, wide as if it were one single bosom, forced her to outstretch her arms in her tasks. Her mouth was a small strip, like that of a character in a Japanese animation, no lips. She was mild-mannered.

Mild-mannered, her voice hushed.

Hey, my love, no doggies in here.

Myra felt the need to laugh or to urinate. This wouldn't be so bad. She was well-dressed with good shoes. The *my love* was more of an inquiry, hardly an admonishment. Smoking wasn't allowed and yet the quarrelling couple were smoking. Elegantly, from their fingertips. They turned round when the innkeeper

spoke. Myra drew on her best impression of a German accent. All she had to do was bring to mind the twang in Kleber's speech, when he was drunk.

I sorry, mrs. I come only to look for some hot pork and steak rolls. Papa said to bring dog to stretch legs and make pee. If you like, he wait outside door. Papa stay waiting at corner in town. Mercedes broken with these roads.

The landlady stretched the gill-like crack into a smile. The other woman didn't.

The men at the tables froze, open-mouthed, at the immensity of a goal by the opposing team. They couldn't see, couldn't hear, the scenes taking place in the intimacy beside them, at the counter.

The white-haired man said sarcastically, laughing insincerely, snapping his fingers in the air as if addressing the dog.

So, my good lass, you came to walk the big bad wolf?

Without approaching, Myra realised that he was one of those men who's afraid of a pup of just a few months. And who tries to hide it.

It's a Pit Bull, said the woman calmly. A Pit Bull Terrier. A dog that's banned everywhere. You'd better be careful. You can't stand dogs, especially these.

You should be banned, said the man, humiliated and offended. But he took two steps backwards, almost knocking over the woman on the stool. He wouldn't let it lie.

And your little rucksack, are you scared your daddy's going to search it?

Not understand, said Myra with a celestial smile.

She paid. It was her only twenty euro note. She hadn't had the chance to steal any more. As she put away her change and the plastic bag with the greasy victuals, she said to Rambo in English, *Sit Fritz*, and Rambo sat, his nose disappointed.

I thought you were German, said the man, so as not to lose face, his swollen face. Do you want me to see you to your Daddy's car? From a distance.

He seduced, he teased, to counter his fear, to counter the woman, upon whom he was almost leaning now and who was laughing, shaking with soundless laughter, victorious, made ugly with hatred.

Dogs obey better in English, said Myra. *Mutti* bring him from America. Good nights.

And she thought quickly, moved quickly. Car? Daddy? Either he was high up in the police, or a politician. People are the words they say, Ernst Kleber had said.

Except to themselves, Mafaldinha had corrected, ink on her jawbone, thinking of something else.

Especially to themselves. Great care must be taken with what one thinks to oneself, Sónia Sophia.

Kleber, poor Kleber, had been a master of disguise. Like her distant grandmother, her brutal parents, now barely discernable.

Is not necessary, sir, to accompany me. Dog Fritz very safe, papa on corner. Good nights. *Many thank yous. Komm Fritz.*

She began to run up the hill ten metres from the exit of the bar, away from the waning lights and cries, out into the night of the fields. Rambo was galloping, heavy and ill-at-ease. Why did they leave a place with warmth and good food? Why were they running scared?

Panting, because he didn't like running, he ran and sulked. Later, Rambo, later, Myra shouted at him, run. You can eat later.

And Rambo obeyed. He understood her fear, he didn't understand the reason for it. He didn't understand why her fear hadn't incited him to destroy whatever it was that threatened her. He, Rambo, afraid of nothing. Offended, perplexed, he ran as far behind her as the taut leash would allow.

He was trusting, ever since that night on the run to the dark sea, to the dark road. Reluctantly, he followed the drunken steps that now crunched on the parched ground, muddy, covered with gorse and clover. They slackened their pace. They were far from the town. Lights shimmered only in the distance. Myra stopped.

They both scented an uninhabited hovel, the door plainly dismantled. Nobody had followed them.

Maybe here, Rambo. Here Rambo. For the night, and then we'll see. But Rambo didn't sit down, his tongue hanging out, breathless, watchful.

Looking behind him, like her, penetrating the pitch black of the hovel making use of the gifts of smell and hearing that she didn't possess. There must be modesty, ceremony, contained anger, even – especially – with our unique love.

The hovel smelt of rot and the excrement of unidentifiable birds and beasts. There was an owl on a beam, eyes like the August moon, impassive. It smelt of long distant abandonment. There was a folding bed, a large iron pan, scraps of sheepskin and torn blankets, burnt candle stumps. Myra made fire and light with Kleber's lighter. The owl flapped, but stayed put. It was there that they ate and slept, amends made.

Wicks and cinders extinguish. I was snoring against beams that her dreams disturbed, domes of gold and ceramics, her grandmother's arm, a leash, cut short

and close. In the dreams of slumber we transmuted. She, lupine, loping over steppes, me, hearing bells of portent, of bronze and gold. The man in the dark blue raincoat leading us through the dawn, my milk teeth and jaw dependent on my mother's nipple, useless. The fraternal nightmares, the tender miscellany.

All loves have their disputes. I sigh. I break off my snoring. Her neck is lukewarm like a belly with ten teats.

Chapter 9

Under the sun, Myra walks towards the South. She follows an instinct and Rambo's measured trot, re-quenched with puddle-water and meat and bread. She continues towards the South. There must be a Mediterranean Sea on the way to the East. Kleber said. Other seas, other airs. She raises her head and with her thumbs and index fingers she frames a cloud that looks like the greyish head of Dona Mafalda Ivens, the deceased. As if in a film, the cloud breaks up, a blue opening where the mouth was, it's laughing, it stretches, it's mocking her. Artists are immortal, the ghost says as it fades.

You wanted that, replies Myra to the heavens where Mafaldinha, her ghost, is vanishing.

Myra feels neither remorse nor blame. She's afraid, because ghosts can haunt whenever they want to. She halted, put down the rucksack. Rambo lies down on the dust of the track between the olive trees, his head between his paws on the rucksack, now much lighter on promising odours. Myra blesses herself, in the Russian way. Three fingers on the forehead, on the chest, on the right shoulder and on the left. Her fingers are soiled with dust, the ochre dust of the plain. She pulls out the parka and shakes it out. In defiance of his short, coarse hair, she uses the cuff to clean the white stain on Rambo's head; the rest of him is brownish-grey.

Rambo doesn't like being brushed the wrong way over his scars, tender forever more, but he settles down, with a kiss on his healed but still pink lower lip. Myra always asks his permission to kiss him, either before or after displeasing him, or on some form of transport. In return he licks her face, which tastes of human salt, and of dust, mostly out of courtesy.

In the distance, still well in the distance yet moving ever closer, a cloud the colour of red terracotta advances along the track, inside which, now it's here, and it stops and sits, is a black station wagon, an all-terrain vehicle that rocks, ignition running, on top of fat, mismatched tyres. It's criss-crossed with the marks of old dents, corroded by verdigris and rust. The engine cuts out with a cough, human phlegm.

'What are you doing here, my girl, with that weary pup? Would you like a lift, if you happen to be going the same way as us?

An elderly man, almost bald, his remaining bright white hair winging his temples, a white dog collar around his grey shirt. A priest. Next to him, a woman with a veil, also grey, a rosary in her hands, the beads, incongruously, made of pure cut crystal. She seemed, and was, annoyed at the stop. She was looking straight ahead, she didn't seem to see, but Myra felt she was being appraised, the dog too, by the polyhedral eyes of the beads that she held in her lap. She could see, askance, more than the priest could face on.

'Let's go, Brother Bento, or this sinner will keep us here.'

In the back, on the last of three rows of decimated nappa leather, there was a girl, half sitting half lying, dressed poorly but cleanly, with pustules at the corners of her mouth and bald patches on her head.

'Sinner, Maria Augusta? We're all sinners. She's confessed and received the sacraments. And this poor girl with the puppy is tired like a fish out of water. Now, tell me, girl, where are you headed? If the Hospital de Lagos isn't too far out of your way, I can drop you both on the way. Get in, this poor soul is diseased, but it's not catching. Not even for dogs. Is your pup tame? St. Francis of Assisi knew how to elicit tameness from animals. What's your name, child? Where are you going? Where have you come from? And your Christian name?'

'Those dogs are never tame,' said Sister Maria Augusta categorically. 'Let's go, Father, or this poor unfortunate will have her dark hour here. Hang on, Cordelia. The President of the Council was interested in your case. You won't give birth on this demonic plain, these dogs are demonic, Brother Bento, and the girl has a haunted face. Take it from me, I have experience of evil, pure evil.'

'Be careful, Maria Augusta. That doesn't exist, except where there's a lack of love. It strikes me as a good omen, this girl with the dog. Tell me, my child, will you both come?'

His eyes on her, on Myra, compassionate, as if they could see the past lives, the indescribable sorrow. She made to get in next to the patient in labour.

'The dog goes in the boot,' said Sister Maria Augusta.

'No, not there, he suffocates and has panic attacks,' said Myra, her foot on the tilting step, Rambo taking stock, tail flapping.

'Let them, Maria Augusta, the Scriptures say that the breath and saliva of dogs relieve pain, they heal.'

The pious woman, still looking into the distance, took offence. She blessed herself.

'Our Lord Jesus Christ didn't have a dog.'

‘That was a shame,’ said Brother Bento. ‘Anyway, how do you know? How much of the glory of the gospel is in its omissions. Tell me, girl, where shall we drop you?’

Myra sat down, Rambo rested his head on Cordelia’s knees, the concave tip of his snout adjusting to the protuberant stomach, like a tumour implanted in the cadaverous figure. Cordelia had her eyes shut, but she rested her bony hand, its nails gnawed to the quick, on the sweet weight of the dog’s big ugly head.

Grinding twice, Press the clutch harder, Father Bento, commanded the sister, rolling her eyes in indignation, the car got moving.

Cordelia, lobelia. Flower, flor in Portuguese.

Myra, courageous, took up a story once more, using Ishmael’s stammer as the model, the phonetics and semantics adjusted to an innocent brutality.

Much obliged, Father, Sister. It’s not very far, it’s beyond those hills, it’s really very close. My name is Maria Flor and the dog is Pilot, he’s my godmother’s dog, one of them, but the best loved, he’s a guard dog, at her feet. And I’m going to get him vaccinated on the estate of the veterinary doctor, which is over there behind the crests of those hills and then my daddy is coming to get me because he’s my godmother’s driver and my mother is a personal maid and she’s also in charge in the kitchen, even though my godmother, Dona Eulália, doesn’t much like Romanian food, but I like it, it’s my heritage, my mother told me, she’s a personal maid, which is the most important, and tonight we’re having meatballs with peas and sausage, which is my favourite, and Pilot’s too.

‘Maria Flor, what a pretty name you have,’ said Brother Bento, driving slowly to avoid obstacles on the track. ‘And do you go to school, my child?’

‘I used to go, I did, yes. But I didn’t have the head for it. It’s a kind of retardation that I have. But I’m good enough to work in the house, I know how to set the table with nine pieces of cutlery and the *candelabias*. And polish the silverware. Does this lady have Aids? I heard that you only catch it from underpants. But I don’t know about the dog. He licks everything, whatever he takes pity on. Sometimes he only takes pity on dead things, dead animals. But Dona Lobelia is alive, isn’t she?’

Brother Bento was laughing. Myra realised that he didn’t believe a word and that, to him, this was of no importance whatsoever.

‘She’s alive and terminally pregnant. Perhaps the child can be saved. Do you believe in miracles, Maria? Her name’s Cordelia. Dogs don’t suffer that evil.’

‘I believe, Father. But miracles are like the wind, and *the wind blows where it wants.*’

The friar turned to look behind him. Myra had neglected her role out of respect for the holy father. Myra put on her foolish face again for the benefit of Sister Maria Augusta, much more stupid, who was precipitating from disdain to a predatory pity.

'Are you Romanian, child? Do you have gypsy ethnicity? They never examined you, were you born at term?'

'I think so,' said Myra blessing herself, in the Catholic way, 'I was born right here, in the Hospital de Setúbal, completely perfect, and my mother is more scared of gypsies than of the devil on the cross.'

So easy, lying to the fatuous.

'At the cross, the devil at the cross, child.'

The girl, Cordelia, whimpered.

It would arrive soon, the child born with evil, who might possibly be saved. Dona Maria Augusta was inattentive. A lost cause is a lost cause.

'Brother Bento,' she said, 'Perhaps it would be best to take Maria Flor with us. This could be a case of abuse of a minor, a handicapped girl, poor thing, a case to take to the President of the Council, the police.'

'Father, I can get out here. The veterinary doctor's estate is just behind the crest of that hill. Here's just fine. My mother was a doctor too, in her homeland. Lobelia is going to give birth at any minute. She's already purple. The seat is covered in Lobelia's waters.'

'Stay, child, stay here. Sister Maria Augusta, power, even that of the Bishop of Rome, won't resolve the mysteries of a strong soul, there's nothing gregarious, or even ecumenical about it, a soul that is free as it comes into being. Go, child, go, and may your faith go with you. Pilot, although he comes out of defeat, must be your resurrection. Have faith, child.'

Myra opened the door. She got out with the dog. Sister Augusta shouted. Contrary to her instructions, Myra was leaving, the precious Cordelia had just expired, the foetus struggling for an exit.

'I don't have that faith,' said Myra.

'Never mind,' said the holy father. 'It has you. The spirit, the indomitable, has you.'

Myra bound her rucksack to her back, checked Rambo's leash, already resigned to resuming her solitary drifting.

'And chastity, Father, abstinence, wouldn't they put an end to all this, to this horror? Won't you advise the girl to avoid this? Abstinence worked against evil in Africa. It worked!'

Mother Maria Augusta was shouting. She was losing her precious Cordelia, she was losing Maria Flor, the abused simpleton. She was losing subjects.

Brother Bento tended to the ignition's catarrh. If they hurried, there would still be time to carry out a caesarean on this dead-living girl. He nodded at Myra, already heading for hills and valleys. He smiled sadly.

'Chastity, Maria Augusta? That's one of the Lord's more boring things. The mysteries of life are pleasurable. Chastity is rotten.'

'That's blasphemy, Brother Bento.'

'Blasphemy is not living, not seeing, not feeling. Blasphemy is the delirium of ourselves, without worlds, without others, without pity for what we don't know. That's blasphemy.'

Dona Maria Augusta seized her beads, precious after all. Nothing would dissuade her from her habits. And the pious gesture of shutting Cordelia's eyes wasn't necessary, they'd been shut well before her long foreseen ending.

'Put it another way,' said Brother Bento, more priest-like, 'the pretension of saving without merit. That's blasphemy.'

Vade retro, shouted the sister to the dusty figures of the girl and dog.

'Dogs don't obey in Latin, Maria Augusta.'

'And look, Brother Bento, it's not about saving without merit, it's about saving *yourself* without merit.'

'It's the same thing, august sister. Only those who save can save themselves. You're a true doctor of the Church. Except that the law isn't the principal commandment – *Love, and do, what you want*.

'Listen to the engine groaning, Father!'

'Look, my august lady, you'd be better sorting out the dead girl on the back seat and saying an Our Father for her soul, while she's still warm. Come on, *my speckled donkey*.

He talked to the old banger, which got going tremulously, its spirit disturbed.

The sister moved to the back seat, stiff with repugnance.

Brother Bento accelerated as hard as he could.

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