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A PEPE CARVALHO INVESTIGATION

TATTOO



**MANUEL
VÁZQUEZ
MONTALBÁN**
TRANSLATED BY NICK CAISTOR

MI

MELVILLE INTERNATIONAL CRIME

PRAISE FOR
MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN
AND *TATTOO*

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“If Graham Green, P. G. Wodehouse, Raymond Chandler, and Anthony Bourdain all sat together in front of a typewriter, the result would be Pepe Carvalho.”

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Born in Barcelona in 1939, **MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN** (1939–2003) was a member of ~~Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC)~~, and was jailed by the Franco government for four years for supporting a miners' strike. A columnist for Madrid's *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 Grand Prix de Littérature Policière (1981), both for *Southern Seas*. He died in 2003 in Hong Kong, on his way home to Barcelona.

NICK CAISTOR's translations from the Spanish and the Portuguese include works by José Saramago and Paulo Coelho. He is the author of *Che Guevara: A Life*.

TATTOO

MANUEL
VÁZQUEZ
MONTALBÁN

TRANSLATED BY NICK CAISTOR



MELVILLE HOUSE
BROOKLYN • LONDON



MELVILLE
INTERNATIONAL
CRIME

TATTOO

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*Bold and blond as beer was he
A heart tattooed on his chest
Yet his sad voice was filled
With a song that was yearning for rest.*

'Tatto
Song by Rafael de León

The golden girl had dived off the pedalo. The olive-skinned bald man swam as fast as he could to get a closer view of her returning to the surface, to glimpse her wet body streaming with water in the bright sunlight. The noonday heat was scorching the beach. The bald man swung his legs down, realised he was hardly out of his depth, and tried to spot where his family was on the beach. A cube of a woman was busy washing a child. The man continued scanning the beach, saw he was in no danger, and turned back to get a good look at the golden girl. By now she was swimming on her back away from the unmoving pedalo, which was rocking gently in the calm sea.

That was when he saw the body floating in the water, a bobbing presence like the pedalo. It must be the golden girl's companion who he had not noticed before. But that did not mean he wasn't allowed look at her. Nobody could stop him gazing at her, filling his eyes with the solid flesh vivified by the salt and lustrous brightness. His gaze alternated between her as she swam strange bursts through the water and the body still floating obstinately alongside the pedalo. It slowly dawned on him that its position was too emphatic, and contrary to the laws of breathing. But some people can hold their breath for ages, he told himself, and I'm not going to be the fool who shouts for help and then finds the guy is as right as rain and has the girl laugh in his face. Now she was swimming crawl back towards the pedalo, in an exact straight line, as though in her own lane in the sea. She stopped a yard from the pedalo and stared, first suspiciously and then with growing alarm, at the body, which just went on bobbing up and down as the waves pushed at it. The girl looked round to see whether anyone else had noticed; her eyes alighted on the bald, olive-skinned man, who was no more than twenty yards away. Reassured by his presence, she swam closer to the body. When she reached out and touched it, the strange swimmer floated away from the pedalo as obedient as a dead dog. The girl turned to look at the snooper and shouted something in a language he did not understand. He waited no longer. He tried to swim showing off his style to arrive looking cool and composed alongside this wonderful girl. But the sight of the lifeless corpse won out over his appreciation of her beauty. The bald, olive-skinned man pushed the body to shallower water where he could stand, then dragged it towards the shore. Still screaming, the girl followed him. The noise burrowed its way between those who were swimming and those distilling or drying sweat on the sand. Several swimmers tried to steal the starring role from the bald, olive-skinned man, but he clutched his prize firmly, with one arm looped under the corpse's arms.

When he reached the water's edge, four of the onlookers hauled the body out. The bald, olive-skinned man directed operations. They carried it face down, just as it had been pulled from the sea. He was wearing only a pair of trunks. He was young and blond, his whole body suntanned. The four bearers turned him on to his back on the sand. A cry of horror expanded the circle of the half-naked crowd. The body had no face. Fishes had eaten his cheeks and eyes. They quickly turned him over again. It was then that a little kid noticed there was a tattoo on his back. A hand brushed away the wet sand. Somebody read out the motto tattooed on his shoulder-blade: BORN TO RAISE HELL IN HELL.

It could only be the doorbell. Pepe Carvalho's hand groped for the alarm clock, but the heart of this nervous animal was not beating loudly. Someone was at the door. He tapped Charo's naked shoulder where it protruded from the sheets.

'There's someone at the door.'

'Go and open it, then.'

'It's your flat. How should I know who it might be?'

'What time is it?'

By now Charo was almost awake, and seemed keen to know what was going on.

'One o'clock.'

'At night?'

Pepe Carvalho pointed to the shafts of sunlight pouring through the shutters on to the bedroom floor. Charo leapt out of bed. Her naked body quivered; she wrapped it in an embroidered silk dressing gown. She put on his slippers, tidied her unkempt hair, and left the room. Raised on one elbow, Carvalho listened to the typical sounds of a door opening followed by a short conversation, then the door shutting again. The slippers came slapping back across the wooden floor. Charo looked annoyed and disappointed.

'Fat Nuria.'

'Who?'

'Fat Nuria. The apprentice at Queta's hairdresser's. It's you she's looking for. Her boss wants to see you.'

'Why? How did she know I was here?'

'What kind of a neighbourhood do you think I live in? You can send her packing if you're not interested.'

But Pepe had already left the bedroom. He found himself face to face with a fat adolescent. Her rotund attractions could not hide the look of sly malice in her eyes. They surveyed Carvalho's only half-hidden bulk with an air of fellow-feeling.

'The owner would like to see you.'

'Who is your owner?'

'Señor Ramón, Señora Queta's husband.'

'What does he want?'

'He says you're to come. He says it's urgent. Here, take this.'

She held out a piece of paper. Carvalho pushed open a shutter so that he could read properly. 'I've got something that might interest you.' Carvalho dropped the note on to the hall table and went back into the bedroom. His clothes were draped all over a rocking chair. He sorted them out and put them on; Charo meanwhile was busy with her blackheads at the dressing-table mirror.

'I'll be back tomorrow. Are you very busy today?'

'Four or five of them, from seven on.'

'They all quiet sorts?'

'Hmm ... a bit of everything. But you can come to spend the night if you like.'

'I have to go home, to see if there are any letters. I've let things get into a bit of a mess.'

Carvalho headed off back towards the hall, then changed his mind and aimed for the kitchen instead. The fridge was as empty as it was brightly-lit. He stuck a finger in the cream on a dish of Lyonnaise potatoes, then licked it. He decided to drink some chilled water and eat half a slab of chocolate. He saw there was still some champagne in the bottle that Charo always kept in her fridge. He uncorked it and drank a little of the freezing, flat but welcoming liquid. He poured the rest down the sink, but as he turned round, he saw Charo standing in the doorway. Her face was covered in cream, and she was wearing a white dressing gown.

'Thanks for emptying it for me.'

'It was flat.'

'I like it flat.'

'Sorry.'

By then Charo had already disappeared from the doorway, leaving the way clear for him. He went back into the hall, where Fat Nuria was puffing and blowing impatiently. In the lift he gazed out of the corner of his eye at the adolescent's fluffy mountains of flesh; she accepted his survey through half-closed lids. Carvalho let her get out of the lift first, then followed her along the pavement. Fat Nuria walked along like a starlet, trying to flick her short, over-lacquered curls into the air. The city was entering its midday period of truce; the air was filled with the creaking sound of metal shutters being wound down for the end of the morning business. They walked through several cavernous streets of run-down buildings until they came to Calle de la Cadena. Fat Nuria speeded up and Carvalho soon saw the sign for Queta's hair salon. Beyond the frosted-glass windows he was greeted by the spectacle of the last clients under hairdryers, their faces distorted by the plastic bubbles and with white towels round their necks. Carvalho studied the hairdressers' legs. They all seemed to be wearing red plastic slippers. One especially pert backside beneath a blue overall caught his eye.

'Who was that fourth one?'

'That fourth what?'

'The hairdresser at the back of the room.'

'That's Queta,' said Fat Nuria without looking round as she climbed the wooden stairs up to a small office bathed in neon light. Behind an office desk that pre-dated the Korean War, a man raised his head when he saw them come in. He made the most of the sparse hair that grew round the sides of his head, while his white, freckled face allowed a few wrinkles to betray his age. He was wearing a grey suit, but he had a pair of leather slippers on his feet under the desk.

Fat Nuria left as soon as the man at the desk and Carvalho had acknowledged each other's presence with a stare. Carvalho accepted the other's silent invitation and sat in a narrow green plastic armchair. The man did not look the type to be in a business like this, or to be wearing slippers. Carvalho could sense that he was being studied, weighed up, assessed. The man finished his examination and looked away as though searching for something on the desk. It was a newspaper cutting, which he handed to Carvalho. The detective read it, and kept it between his fingers, but said nothing and went on staring at his host's peculiar complexion.

'Did you hear about it?'

‘No.’

‘Don’t you read the news?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘What do you make of it?’

‘What about you?’

‘I asked first.’

Carvalho shrugged. The other man had leaned back in his wooden swivel chair and seemed content to await developments. Carvalho took his time, studying this small office in a small local business, similar to any small office in any small local business. The only thing out of place was this elegant, well-preserved man sitting opposite him.

‘I’m interested to know who this man is, and what he did in life.’

Carvalho looked down at the press cutting.

‘I don’t think that would be too hard. The police must have identified him by now.’

‘I’m not interested in asking the police.’

‘That would be the quickest, cheapest and most reliable way.’

‘I’m not interested in how quick or cheap it might be. And everybody has their own ideas about what might be reliable. I prefer not to lie to you, which is why I prefer not to tell you why I’m interested in finding out who that man is.’

‘Perhaps you’re interested in collecting stories about drowned men. This one is quite interesting. You don’t see a tattoo like that every day of the week.’

‘If you need to know my motives, make them up for yourself. I want to know the identity of that body.’

‘I can’t go into this blindly. The cops take this kind of thing seriously, and if I stumble around blindly I’m bound to trip over them.’

‘I’ve heard very good things about you.’

‘I’m sure you have.’

Carvalho let the cutting fall on to the paper-strewn desk, and resumed his silent contemplation of the other man.

‘You know who I am. My name is Ramón, and I run this business with my wife. Let’s just say it’s aroused my curiosity, and I don’t mind spending money on a whim. I want to know who that man was. All we have to go on is that from the description he was a young man and he had that tattoo.’

‘Have you nothing else to say to me?’

‘Yes. I’ll pay you a hundred thousand pesetas.’

‘Plus expenses.’

‘So long as they’re reasonable.’

Carvalho was already on his feet. The other man had also stood up for the first time, and was leaning his weight on his hands on the desk. Carvalho saw he was wearing a huge gold signet ring in the shape of a Red Indian chieftain’s head.

‘Fifty thousand up front.’

No sooner had the word ‘fifty’ left his mouth than the man’s hand skulking behind the Red Indian chief delved into a wooden drawer and pulled out a bundle of notes. He counted out a thousand-peseta notes until he reached fifty, then pushed them across the desk at Carvalho. The detective stuffed them in his pocket and went back to the staircase. His feet brought out

the music of the wooden steps, and when he reached the salon he looked round for the same backside that had impressed him so much on the way up. This time, however, Queta was facing him: the round, pleasant face of a woman of about forty, perhaps a little too much make-up, the eyes perhaps a little large.

By the time he was out in the street again, Carvalho was thinking he had missed an opportunity. Señor Ramón had given him fifty thousand, but there were at least another fifty still in the desk drawer. Which meant he had been prepared to pay him the whole lot there and then.

The restaurant smelled of kidneys cooked in sherry. Carvalho went over to a corner table from where he could survey the whole room, and allowed the smell to invade his nostrils, mouth and tongue. He ordered a 'Castilian salad' and kidneys. He tried to imagine what on earth the adjective 'Castilian' might mean when coupled with the noun 'salad'. His imagination was far greater than the chef's. It turned out to be no more than a few potatoes in a vinaigrette with some chunks of marinated tuna strategically placed on top of the squares of soggy potato.

With one eye on the scarce chunks of tuna and the other scanning the restaurant table, Carvalho soon sized up the place and its customers. He asked the waiter:

'Is Bromuro around?'

'He's just finishing with a client down below. If you like, I'll tell him to come over.'

'Yes, do that.'

Bromuro arrived just as Carvalho was mopping up the kidney sauce with his bread. He was contemplating the chunk of bread smothered in brown gravy and then offering it to his expectant palate. A plate of kidneys is above all a pleasure for the senses of smell and touch, and Carvalho did not allow Bromuro's arrival to spoil his enjoyment. Bromuro knelt down beside him, then lifted one of Carvalho's feet on to his bootblack's box.

'Are you here to eat or to work?'

'Both. The body of a dead man has been found on the beach. He had no face. It was eaten away by the fishes. But he did have a tattoo on his back: *Born to raise hell in hell.*'

'Some people have all the luck.'

'You said it.'

'And was his sad voice filled with a yearning for rest?'

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

The bootblack's watery eyes sank still farther into the network of black lines that made up a face that was half wrinkles, half purple veins. He was laughing, or at least that was how Carvalho interpreted the seismic convulsion of the wrinkled mass down by his knees.

'It's an old song. It was called "Tattoo". Concha Piquer used to sing it.'

All at once, Carvalho remembered it too. With Bromuro's help, he started to hum it uncertainly at first, but then with more emphasis. The bootblack sang it as though it were flamenco, but in fact it was a waltz. Carvalho let him get on with it. When he had finished, he bent down as if he wanted to see the results of the work on his shoes.

'I need anything you can find out about this.'

'For the moment I haven't heard a thing.'

'But now you know I'm interested. Tomorrow at one I'll be in the Versailles to have my shoes cleaned again.'

'Are you going whoring?'

Carvalho gave him an ambivalent smile and lifted his other foot. Through the few remaining strands of hair, he could see the flakes of dandruff on Bromuro's skull. The bootblack made his living as a pimp, selling pornographic packs of cards or ingratiating

himself by telling stories about how the occult powers used and abused bromides.

‘I tell you, they put bromide in everything we swallow, just so that we won’t go crazy, so that women can walk in the street without fear. It makes me feel so bad! So bad! So many women and we have so little to satisfy them with!’

Bromuro knew he was on to a sure thing with his talk of the bromide conspiracies and the distance between reality and his desire. He had been entertaining the locals with his story for twenty years. He had started out using it as an example of his erudition, of how he knew a lot about the scientific progress of humanity. Then one day he discovered that people found what he was saying more amusing than troubling, and so he turned it into one of his main sources of tips. On this occasion, Carvalho slipped five hundred pesetas into the bootblack’s waistcoat pocket. Bromuro lifted his head to show his surprise.

‘Lots of dough involved?’

‘Enough.’

‘You don’t usually hand out five hundred pesetas like they were a glass of water.’

‘If you think it’s too much, you can give it back.’

‘No, I’ll see you tomorrow, OK, Pepe?’

He picked up his box and walked away down the central passageway of the restaurant, peering to left and right at the customers’ feet as though he were mushroom hunting. Carvalho left the money for the meal on the saucer and went out. He could not immediately remember where he had left the car the night before, but felt intuitively it must have been farther up the Rambla. He walked up the centre of the avenue, stopping here and there at newspaper kiosks and bookstalls, picking up envelopes with plant seeds in them, wondering about the fate of the birds and small monkeys in their cages. But the Rambla was quickly filling up with afternoon crowds, so Carvalho made his way under the hanging sign at the entrance to the Boqueria Market. He wanted to eat well that night. He needed to be cooking while he mulled over the problem of the dead body in the solitude of his own home, and he knew that the best way to end the day was with a good meal. He bought fresh monk fish and hake, a handful of clams and mussels, a few prawns. The white, treasure-filled plastic bag dangled from his hands as the market came to life again for the afternoon. A lot of the stalls were shut, and buying food this late in the day made it feel as though he were entering a different time zone, a strange ambience filled with almost total silence, disturbed only by the sounds of buying and selling.

Strolling aimlessly around the market was one of the few ways that this tall, dark-haired man in his thirties, who somehow contrived to look slightly dishevelled despite wearing expensive suits from tailors in the smartest part of town, allowed himself some spiritual relaxation whenever he left Charo’s neighbourhood and headed back to his lair on the slope of the mountain overlooking Barcelona.

To reach Carvalho's house you had to go up along a wide dirt road that wound between old, over-ornate villas, their white walls stained grey by rain over a period of fifty years. The house fronts were brightened up by a scattering of green or blue tiles, while clumps of bougainvillea or morning glory hung over their garden fences. Carvalho's villa was not of the same pedigree. It had not been built when Vallvidrera was in its heyday, but during its second wave of popularity, when some of those who had made fortunes on the black market after the war had retired to the mountainside for the splendid view it gave them of the scenery of their splendid achievements. They were small-time crooks who had got rich through small-time black-marketeering. People who saved their money and who still had the pre-war nostalgia for a house and a garden in the suburbs, if possible with a vegetable patch for their lettuces, potatoes and tomatoes, fascinating hobbies for those with free weekends and paid holidays.

Carvalho had rented a small villa built vaguely in the modernist style popular between the wars. The architects had obviously designed a starkly functional building, but the client must have wanted 'a bit more colour', or 'something to soften it', so they had allowed him a few courses of red bricks which looked like the gaps between teeth up on the cornices, and stuck some yellow tiles on the front, which had once been ochre but now after thirty years had acquired a greenish tinge.

Carvalho took the mail out of the box and walked across the bare garden with its loose paving stones that led up to the front door steps. Carvalho's neglect had allowed weeds to sprout everywhere, and on the porch rotten leaves from the previous autumn had formed a slippery light brown mulch that any visitor's shoes invariably brought into the house. Carvalho's feet trod their way across the geometric tiles of the entrance hall, and followed the trail of light his hand magically produced from the switches. July filled the evening sky with warmth, but Carvalho needed to light a fire if he was to be able to think in a relaxed mood. To compensate, he stripped off to the waist and opened shutters and windows to allow the drier outside air and the last sunlight into the house. As he pushed open the shutters, his eyes took in the green horizons to the north and east, as well as the urban geometry of the city laid out at the foot of the mountain. Today the cloud of pollution was reduced to a kind of polar ice cap hanging over the industrial, working-class districts down by the port.

Carvalho went to the basement to fetch firewood. He made several trips, and then had to clear out the remains of the fire from five days earlier. Four nights at Charo's were too many. Carvalho was in two minds. On the one hand, he felt bad about abandoning his own home and a regular, more routine existence. On the other, he remembered Charo's velvety skin and the softness of her more intimate recesses. She had even caressed him tenderly.

He searched in vain for some newspaper to help light the pile of firewood he had built according to the manual of good fire-lighters. From bottom to top, the wood formed a strict pyramid from smallest to heaviest. But he had no paper to start it with.

'I should read the news more often,' he said out loud to himself.

In the end he had to go over to one of the bookshelves that lined the room. He hesitated

but finally chose a big green book with lots of pages. As he carried it to the funeral pyre, Carvalho read some fragments at random. It was entitled *Spain as a Problem*, written by someone called Laín Entralgo at a time when it was thought that Spain's problems consisted simply of the problem of Spain itself. He pushed the open book under the sticks in the fireplace. As he lit it, he again felt torn: on the one hand, he did not like to see the book burn; on the other, he could hardly wait for the flames to shoot up and reduce it to a pile of obliterated words.

Once the fire was burning brightly and warmly, Carvalho went to the kitchen and laid out everything he had bought in the order he would need it to cook his meal. The first thing was to go down to his wine cellar. He had had the partition between two walls knocked down, which left the soil and rock of the mountainside exposed. In it he had dug a small cavity where the dusty sides of wine bottles gleamed dully by the light of an almost infrared bulb. Carvalho looked along the row of whites, and eventually chose a Fefiñanes that was one of the few Spanish wines in his selection. Clutching the Fefiñanes in one hand, he was tempted by a Blanc de blancs from Bordeaux. But his dinner was not even worthy of this second-rate great wine from France. Each time he came down to his cellar, he carefully picked up and looked at one of the three bottles of Sauternes that he was storing for his Christmas seafood feast. Sauternes were his favourite white wine, apart from the incomparable Pouilly-Fuissé, which in his opinion ought to be reserved exclusively for the last wishes of intelligent gourmets down on their luck. He sighed, still clutching his Fefiñanes, and climbed back up to the kitchen. He cleaned the fish and peeled the prawns, then boiled the fish bones and the pink shells together with an onion, a tomato, some cloves of garlic, a hot pepper and strips of celery and leek. This liquid was essential for Carvalho's *caldeirada*. While he was gently bringing it to the boil, he fried some tomato, onion and more peppers. As soon as the mixture started to thicken, he poured it over some potatoes. Then in a pot he placed first the prawns, then the monkfish and finally the hake. The fish took on colour and added their juices to the mixture. Then Carvalho poured in a cup of the strong fish broth. Ten minutes later, the *caldeirada* was done.

Carvalho laid the table in front of the fire and ate straight from the pot. The chilled Fefiñanes, though, had to be drunk from a tall, elegant wineglass. Each wine had to have its own special glass. Carvalho did not usually follow style diktats, but this was one he strictly adhered to.

After his meal he drank a cup of the weak American coffee he had learned to prepare in San Francisco, and lit up a Montecristo No. 1. He sprawled across two sofas so that he could get completely horizontal, and lay with cigar in one hand and coffee in the other, gazing dreamily at the flames wavering as they disappeared up into the sooty heights of the chimney. He was imagining the body of a young, blond man, 'bold and blond as beer' according to the song. A man capable of having that motto tattooed on his back: *Born to raise hell in hell*. Among the stories about tattoos he could recall, one stood out: the poor crook who had put *Death to all cops* on his chest. He had paid dearly for this open declaration of principles, spending almost thirty years in jail alternately for petty crimes and for being vagrant. Looking at El Madriles' tattoo had become a favourite pastime in all the police stations of Spain.

'Come on, Madriles, let's have a look at it.'

‘I swear it was nothing more than a mistake, Inspector, sir. I was drunk when it occurred to me. The maestro who tattooed me warned me at the time: Madriles, it’ll only bring you trouble.’

‘So another spot of bother won’t matter much. Go on, Madriles, take your shirt off.’

The tattooist. Somebody must have given the young man ‘as bold and blond as beer’ the tattoo. There weren’t many experts left, but was this a professional tattoo, or one out of the Parisian drugstore, the sort young girls went in for when they wanted to leave a mark on their flesh and in their minds. This one must have been done by a professional. If not, the same water that had given the fishes the time they needed to gorge themselves on the dead man’s face would have washed away the motto by now, and the body would have emerged from the sea not only stripped bare by death, but rendered completely anonymous – unless his fingerprints were in police records somewhere. His ID card, thought Carvalho. Of course they would be in the police records. He pondered on a possible link between the dead man and his client. There must be some connection between them. Carvalho tried to brush aside this hypothesis. He knew from experience that the worst thing to do in any investigation was to start from a hypothesis. That can only restrict the approach to the truth, and sometimes even distort it.

By the time he had finished his first litre of coffee for the night, the fire was crackling loudly and had turned the entire room into the backdrop for its wild but fettered dancing. Carvalho was hot; he stripped to his underpants. This lasted only a moment, just long enough for him to identify his own white body with that of the corpse: he shuddered, and rushed to get the protection of a second skin, his pyjama jacket.

He woke when he was tired of sleeping. Through the shutters of the half-open window he could hear the birds chattering among themselves about how bright and hot the day was. He looked out of the window and saw that everything was where it ought to be: the sky was up, the earth down. The electric heater and the Italian coffee-making machine helped him recover a sense of self. The shower and the coffee he drank forced him to recognise the here and now, and the idea that he had work to do that would help him get through another day, not that he had any better notion of what to do with it.

His cleaning woman was due that afternoon, so Carvalho made a rapid check to make sure there was nothing visible that Máxima should not see. It was while he was doing this that he realised he had not even looked at his post. He peered at the envelopes and divided the letters into those that were worth reading and those that were not. Almost all of it was junk mail, except for two items: one was from the savings bank, the other from his uncle in Galicia. Carvalho began with the letter from the bank. It was a current account statement: three hundred and seventy-two thousand pesetas. He felt in his jacket pocket for the fifty thousand Don Ramón had given him, and briefly wondered whether it would be better to deposit it in his current account or in his savings book. He looked for the book in a small money box he kept in the bottom drawer of a writing desk. Savings: three hundred and fifty thousand pesetas. Together with what he had in his current account, that made a total of almost half a million pesetas. After ten years' work, that was neither good nor bad. It simply meant that after another ten he should have reached a million, and would not die of poverty in his old age.

Carvalho decided to put the money into his savings account. Somehow money in a current account is always more ephemeral, more at threat from sudden splurges courtesy of a hand in a chequebook. It would be safer in his savings account. He counted the fifty banknotes again, then spread them out on the table like a gangster showing off. He picked them up one by one, stacked them in a careful pile, and fanned the air with them. After that, he put the notes in an envelope and stashed it away with his savings book. Next came the letter from his native village. His father's younger brother had written to him in his almost illegible handwriting with strange gaps between syllables and sudden bursts of high-flown rhetoric which made the meaning even more obscure.

Following a lengthy introduction covering health matters and memories of his father, Carvalho's uncle painted a not unskilful picture of arable despair: the harvests had failed. Then it was the turn of the unfortunate livestock: one of his cows had died after eating some grass it shouldn't have, or perhaps, who could tell, owing to poison administered by one of his neighbours. As if all this weren't bad enough, his wife was ill and he had sent her to Guitiriz to take the waters. A fortune! If Carvalho's father had been alive, he would surely have responded to such a dramatic situation, and so he and his wife were wondering whether he could perhaps see his way to helping out a bit, only if he could, of course, and without wishing to cause him problems of any kind. By the way, he was sending a dozen sausages, two cheeses and a bottle of brandy by a slow but sure delivery man.

Carvalho let out a string of curses in Galician against families and mothers who would have them. He thought about writing a tough reply in which he told his uncle straight out about how stupid his father had been to share the inheritance with them, to help them as much as he could throughout his life, and to die with scarcely anything to his name. And all because he had gone off first to Cuba and then to Madrid and Barcelona, which meant the rest of the family saw him as the black sheep.

But he did not do it. Instead, he scrawled a few lines telling them he was sending a money order for five thousand pesetas. He reckoned his father would have done the same, and that in so doing he was in some way reincarnating the poor old man. Carvalho's eyes grew misty when he remembered seeing him laid out cold and shrunken on the slab in the mortuary at Barcelona hospital after an exhausting journey back from San Francisco. This was the second five thousand pesetas his father had cost him, the second cow he helped his uncles pay for in posthumous honour of him.

Carvalho had a lot to do before he met Bromuro again, almost all of it connected to his Galician roots. He drove quickly down the highway from Vallvidrera, deposited the money at the branch on Carlos III, then sent the money order from the post office in Avenida Madrid. By the end of half an hour, he was at peace with himself and with his future.

He left his red Seat coupé in the car park in Villa de Madrid square. He liked to park his car near the top of the Rambla so that he could stroll down it to Charo's neighbourhood. Carvalho walked in a leisurely way under the plane trees, stopping now and then to allow himself to be distracted by the most unlikely attractions. Patches of white and yellow sunlight filtered through the leaves of the trees on to the rare morning passers-by. Carvalho walked under the arcades of Plaza Real and the eighteenth-century atmosphere gave him an immediate sense of peace and harmony. He headed for a wide porch and walked up some marble steps surrounded by unpolished wood. A little old man in a chequered apron appeared at a door also made of heavy wood that was varnished a chocolate colour. When he saw it was Carvalho he opened the door and ushered him along a corridor lined with wallpaper featuring scenes from Pompeii. They soon reached a dining room done out in a vaguely English style, full of small plaster statues, ships in bottles and a display of faded brown family photographs in front of which two wavering candles floated in bowls. The room smelled of wax and boiled cabbage, and reminded Carvalho of childhood summer holidays spent in Souto in Galicia, with cows' muzzles peering directly into the family dining room from the barn next door.

Don Evaristo Tourón motioned to him to sit down, and immediately launched into gossip and memories about their native region. Carvalho was afraid he was in for another exhausting and impossibly complicated story about the wolves on Monte Negro which caused havoc throughout San Juan de Muro and sometimes even got as far as Pacios in their pursuit of Manolo the tailor's sheep.

'I came to talk to you about tattoos, Don Evaristo.'

'Oh, I see. You want to get a tattoo. I don't do them any more. You have to have a steady hand. A steady hand and the desire to do it. Nobody ever became a good tattooist if they do not enjoy doing them.'

Don Evaristo stood up to get a photo album out of a drawer in the sideboard. It showed his greatest professional triumphs.

'Look. Here's one I did for a man from El Ferrol. A fisherman on the cod trawlers. Look at this.'

The tattoo was a leafy tree that completely covered the man's chest. Instead of fruit hanging from its branches there were women's bodies. In another photo, an apeman was showing his flexed biceps with a tattoo of the statue to Columbus in Barcelona, and the motto: *Merche, I'll find you wherever you hide*. A third was of a teenager proudly mooning the camera. Don Evaristo had engraved on his buttocks: *Exit only; no way in*. Don Evaristo sighed as he regretted yet again not having photographed the tattooed penis of a famous pickpocket. On the foreskin he had tattooed a cat. When it was pulled back, a mouse appeared on the tip.

'I'm telling you, Pepiño, I sweated as much blood as I spilt over that one. And you should have heard him howl. But he had balls all right.'

Carvalho asked him whether anyone was still in business.

'I tried to create a school here. But I failed. Who was it that used to want a tattoo? Sailors and crooks. Sailors aren't what they used to be, and the crooks don't want tattoos any more because they can identify them. I had an apprentice by the name of del Clot who was good. But he was a queer, and in that line of business he was constantly being threatened. The only one left now is a guy from Murcia. He lives up near the park. But there aren't many more in Barcelona. Tangiers: there are still a few there. And in Morocco in general. And some of the northern ports. Not Hamburg. Hamburg's got a big reputation, but there's nothing there since Rotterdam before the war. It had good tattooists then, very good ones.'

Carvalho asked him whether he had heard of the tattoo on the dead man's back.

'That sounds interesting. Before the war you used to get really educated people wanting tattoos. Once a kid from a good family who was in the Spanish Legion came to see me. He asked me to tattoo a motto in French for him.'

The old man went over to the sideboard again and came back with a notepad. In it he had written the best mottos he had come across.

'What does it say there, Pepiño?'

'*Ah Dieu! Que la guerre est jolie/avec ses chants, ses longs loisirs.*'

'That's right. He told me it was by a very good poet.'

Carvalho asked for the address of the tattooist who lived near Ciudadela Park. The old man could not remember the address, but drew him a map.

'You can't miss it. Besides, he's unmistakable. He's got a gammy leg and weighs more than a hundred kilos.'

Carvalho escaped as quickly as he could from the old man's effusive farewells.

'Tell me when you're coming and we can have pork shoulder. One of my brothers-in-law sends me the meat from Pacios. I'll keep it and you cook it, Pepiño. If only I could cook as well as you!'

Carvalho hailed a cab on the corner of Plaza Real and the Rambla. Ten minutes later he got out at the entrance old man Tourón had drawn for him. On the fourth floor a busy, irritable woman showed him into a small waiting room. There was barely enough room for Carvalho to squeeze in between a black plastic armchair and a table piled high with copies of the weekly *Semana*. A short while later, the tattooist's immense belly tried to make its entrance into the room. His head was still in the doorway, but his abdomen was almost pressed up against Carvalho's nose.

'Don Evaristo Tourón sent me.'

'Well now, that's good.'

'I'd like to talk to you about the tattooing business.'

'That's even better.'

The tattooist withdrew his belly and invited Carvalho to follow him. He disappeared into a small office that reminded the detective of the one in the hairdresser's where he had spoken to Don Ramón. The tattooist sat behind a desk and offered him a cheroot.

'They're mild. Perfect for this time of day. So you want to talk about tattooing. That's good. But the business itself is bad, real bad. Haven't done a thing since an Italian ship was port about six months ago. Everything good is disappearing. There's no time for anything these days. In the past all a man needed to do was show a woman his tattoo and he was made. Now he has to show her something else straight away.'

He began to laugh, coughing and spluttering as he did so. Carvalho echoed him politely.

'I'm looking for a man who has a very curious tattoo. The motto reads: *Born to raise hell hell.*'

The last ripples of the tattooist's laughter died away. He looked Carvalho up and down.

'You say you're a friend of Don Evaristo's?'

'We're from the same village in Galicia.'

'Well now, so you're from Galicia too,' said the Murcian tattooist without much

enthusiasm. He studied Carvalho and waggled his head as though he were facing a real dilemma.

'That stupid tattoo,' he said at length. 'The cops have already been here asking me about it.'

He did not take his eyes off Carvalho as he spoke. Carvalho did not flinch.

'The cops?'

'The guy with the tattoo is dead. And not a nice death.'

'Did you do the tattoo?'

'The cops told me not to talk about it without getting in touch with them.'

'Before or after?'

'They didn't say'

'Well then, you can get in touch with them after you've told me.'

'Yes, I did the tattoo.'

He realised that by saying this he was opening some kind of door.

'Who was he?'

'I can see you know nothing about the business. Nobody gives their name here. Particularly if it's only a simple tattoo.'

'But you must talk about something while you work.'

'When I work I don't drink or talk.'

He burst out again with his spluttering cough, which he seemed to switch on and off without warning. All at once his face became as solemn as if he were at a funeral.

'Is this a loved one you're trying to find?'

'Let's just say I'm beginning to warm to him.'

'Oh! I can't say my heart's in it any more. It's a tough job. I scarcely make enough to get by, and I have to charge so much it scares off the few clients I might have.'

'Talking wears out the tongue. I'll pay you something to compensate.'

Carvalho took a thousand-peseta note out of his wallet. The tattooist held his hand out as far as his belly allowed, and waited for the note to fall into it.

'He was a tall, blond kid. He seemed like a foreigner, but he wasn't. He had some sort of accent, but it didn't sound like he was from Andalusia or Murcia. I've heard similar accents from people from Ciudad Real. Or he could have been from the south of La Mancha. Or from Extremadura. It was very odd.'

'Did he live in Barcelona?'

'No, he was just passing through. He told me he had worked in Holland. At the Philips factory in The Hague. That's all I know.'

'How long ago was this?'

'About a year and a half.'

'Do you remember anything else about his face or body? Anything that struck you at the

time?’

‘Nothing, I swear. And the information I’ve given you is more out of friendship for Don Evaristo than for the thousand pesetas. Friendship is a good thing. Why are you looking for that kid?’

‘A premonition. I think he might be a friend.’

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