

MARC CERDÓ

*BAD COMPANY*

Translated by Peter Bush

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*This first novel by Marc Cerdó (Majorca, 1974) recounts the misdeeds of a prickly, anti-social youngster on the island of Majorca and his subsequent move to Barcelona. Inspired by a fragment from Seneca to the effect that travel doesn't necessarily broaden the mind the first-person narrative etches a portrait of a teenager's mind that hovers between the casual insouciance of Camus's Meursault and the brazen cheek of Salinger's Holden Caulfield. Cerdó's incisive, colloquial dialogues and clipped, ironic descriptions of non-family life, non-friendships, rave parties and home-grown hooliganism – including arson – introduce readers to the scary charms of a Joan you would prefer not to meet while holidaying on the Costas or walking up the Ramblas. And bring a new frisson to literature written in Catalan.*

Peter Bush

## I

### *A hasty getaway*

I packed my bags without more ado and left home eager for a different life. Shaving for the first time and making a quick escape from the island all happened at once. My head was buzzing with new projects.

I needed someone I could trust a hundred percent. Someone I could share secrets with.

The euros I'd saved from the hire-car business where I worked – and the small change Grandma gave me – would allow me to cross the strip of sea separating the archipelago from the Peninsula.

Who the hell could give me a hand? I wondered. What would it cost me? Nobody does anything gratis these days.

I lived in a two-storey house with my parents and grandparents. My mum and dad lived upstairs and the grandparents downstairs. And underneath them a lumber-room – a diaphanous space – crammed full. Dust everywhere from the useless objects piling up there for years on end.

If they left me on my tod, I never missed an opportunity to get up to my tricks...

And the fact is they'd left me in charge on that particular day. My folk had gone out on various errands and I didn't expect them back until late.

When I went downstairs, I filled half a dozen empty Coke bottles with petrol. Rather ham-fistedly I cut up old dusters with gardening shears. Later I bolted the garage door that was open because I'd gone out to chew sunflower seeds at the break of day by our water tank. I found the way the fat, brightly-coloured fish swam slowly around fascinating: one was red, another, red with white patches, and an orangey one, a white one, a red and white specimen, even a black one...

The nature of the *Cyprinus carpio* species (its adaptability to a variety of habitats and hardiness in terms of extreme temperature, low concentrations of oxygen, tepid water, and other kinds of pollution) led Granddad to catch several with a hand-net, one day when we went to eat a paella on the banks of the Pareis. And a week after we'd

lodged these fish in their new abode, I bought a few more, goldfish this time, in a nearby shop, to cohabit with the ones we already had.

Àngel and I got on very well and had interests in common; we'd swap our lasses on the eve of local fiestas and share bog paper when we went camping with the Mountaineering Brigade. In a word, we were friends.

Friends? Let's hope for heaven's sake that we're never forced to put their loyalties to the test when they're most sorely needed. If you ask them for help in a dicey situation and they don't lift a finger, they go all maudlin: if they help you at a critical moment and don't turn their backs on you, they soon want a favour in return when it's most untimely, and with interest added: "Friends?" Granddad would say sarcastically, "They last till you're seven – if you're lucky!"

## II

### *Making contact*

I'll get dressed quickly. And get weaving. Then I can breathe easily. I'll ask Àngel to help. One fine day we'll set the lot on fire. We won't scarper until the sky's clear. They say who laughs last, laughs the loudest.

"Àngel, can you come here?" I rasped tensely.

"When?"

I immediately recognised Àngel's broken voice and responded curtly, "Right now."

"What's up?"

I could hear him panting above the background noise on the line. I imagined the flashing light and my friend's skin reacting to the set of vectors in constant movement.

"Àngel, we need to talk."

"And does it have to be this minute?"

"Right away. It's urgent."

"What the fuck's bugging you?" he bawled.

"It's a long story."

"You mean you can't tell me over the phone?"

The obstinacy of long-suffering youth is one of the few traits of his character he can't control when under pressure.

"You hit the nail on the head."

"But..."

"You've got to come now."

Àngel thought long and hard.

"Hey, stop giving me hassle," he muttered.

"Can't you see there's a hell of a lot at stake? Don't be such slow cuss."

"I can't come today."

I had no choice but to postpone our meeting, “I’ll pull the shutters down and get everything sorted. By the time you get here, everything will be ready. See you at my place, right? Come here at daybreak. I’ll be by myself until six. Got that?”

He answered aggressively, “Scratching a pimple on your arse is easier than being a friend of yours.”

“How come?”

“We have to be at your beck and call, and jump to attention.”

“Don’t whinge so.”

All he could manage was, “I’m really curious about what you’re plotting...”

Then he hung up.

My friend probably didn’t realise I’d have him in my pocket sooner than he feared, “Fish hooked”, I thought gleefully.

### III

#### *The encounter*

When dawn broke, Àngel reached our place. He'd arrived at six on the dot as agreed.

Before carrying out my plan, I had to take one last look at the building that was giving me nightmares. It was perched on fertile, cultivated land. Mostly clumps of green, spiky vines. The leaves were growing around wooden stakes. Fields of almond trees were next door.

When I heard the bell ring and went to open the door to my friend, I saw a card on the dining table.

My mother had left me a neatly written message,

*Joan,*

*We've gone to the doctor's with your grandad. We'll see to other business while we're at it. I've left your lunch. You just have to warm it up. Try to leave some rice for your father, as he'll have to eat your leftovers. You'll find green peppers and capers in the fridge. Give me a ring, if anything's wrong. I'll leave my mobile switched on. Be good. See you soon.*

*Magdalena.*

"Come in, Àngel. What do you fancy?"

"Got any beer?"

"Of course, Heineken. In the fridge. Help yourself and make yourself at home."

It was dead silent apart from the hum from the freezer. An overcast day was dawning outside. Àngel gripped his glass and asked, "So what's all the mystery about? What's the big rush?"

"Let's go downstairs," I answered, smiling as engagingly as I could.

We stood opposite the trapdoor, lifted it up in one go and went down the spiral stairs. The darkness covered us like a second skin. Apart from the light of day, the basement had a dusty bulb still flecked from the last whitewashing. I switched on the light.



## IV

### *Creating a dangerous society*

Theatre runs in my family's blood. Father always acted up and mother reacted unpredictably. I inherited traits from both sides and this expressed itself in the huge difficulties I found in adapting to the world around me. Most people described my behaviour at best as peculiar. Examples? There are loads...

"I need your help," I told him, suddenly in serious mode. "All the help you can give and more besides.

Ángel was wearing frayed jeans held up by an old leather belt, a shabby cotton sweatshirt he'd slung on, after he'd rescued it as a last resort from the dirty linen pile and ankle high trainers done up with double bows. In contrast, I'd go out much smarter: I'd wear hiking boots, Gamo Adventure trousers and a harness belt to help me climb the outside wall, a long rope and crampons.

There were containers along the basement walls we no longer used: relics from the past, obsolete junk my sentimental grandma had preserved and refused to ditch. There were also old covers and bags of seed in a drawer of the console where I wrote my diary, all duly labelled and tied up.

There was a can of petrol next to that piece of furniture and, parked close by a John Deere covered with a layer of grease that it was better to leave well alone. It was sleeping the sleep of the just under a metal sign attached to the wall: SAVE A HORSE, RIDE A TRACTOR.

"Is that all? Is that why you're in such a state?"

"Just be patient, Àngel. Don't jump the gun."

"You want to get me into trouble?" asked Àngel, looking for excuses.

"Let's go, we'll take my boss's Hyundai Tucson or better still, a Hummer that came a few days ago and park on a bend in the road, close to the entrance to the woods."

"So far, so good."

“We’ll have to camouflage it some way or other. So it doesn’t give us away.”

“I don’t see why you need me to go with you. Can’t you do it by yourself? Besides, what’s in it for me?”

“...this machete and can of petrol will make it plain sailing.”

“For fuck’s sake! Go on then!”

“We’ll walk through the lavender patch and the field of sweet-peas between the road and...”

“Go on, nothing’s stopping you. But, as I said, what do I get out of it?”

“...the barrier will be locked, so we’ll have to knock it down. Then we’ll use the rope to climb the perimeter wall. This one here.”

A coiled rope stretched up a yard. Like a fakir’s snake. It was one of those coloured elastic ropes people use for climbing.

“What crazy ideas you cook up!”

“Sure, I’ve had time to plan this. So, you going to help me? You going to give me a hand, Àngel?”

Àngel was sizing up the escapade I was trying to get him to join. He shook his head and waved his index finger at me as if aiming a pistol my way.

“Not even if I was plastered, right? No way do I want to be part of this.”

“How come?”

“I know you can really talk the talk. But don’t count me in; I’m in no mood to chance my arm today, Joan.”

“*Talk the talk...* You’re crazy. Why are you so half-hearted? What’s got at you?”

The cat came down the steps and over to us. She stretched out. Purred. Her little mouth kept yawning and mewling sweetly. I grabbed her by the neck – her glass eyes flashed in the half dark.

“Look here, my dad has warned me time and again against doing things with you, “Keep clear of that rotten apple!”

“You mean you’re not making this up as you go along just to cop out?”

“That’s right. He’s always said, “Keep well away from that no-gooder!”

“I reckon he went over the top. I’m not that bad. You are only making excuses so you can do a bunk,” I retorted sarcastically, as I stroked the cat’s neck, “weasel arguments, to put it bluntly.”

“Did I hear you right?” Àngel had seemed on edge from the moment he’d got here. “Did you say a can of petrol? You mean you want to start a fire?”

“Don’t be a cowardly cat, superman,” I rasped, trying to rile him.

“Or dog. You want me to help you with a spot of arson! You want me to be your fall guy! Why choose me for the chop? I’m not going to be your little plaything. You want to soft-soap me into helping you so you’re not on your tod, right?”

I burst out laughing.

“Do you want to know why I suddenly feel like laughing? Do you want to know, you monkey?”

I appealed to the noble sentiment of helping a friend in need. I got very heavy: you show your mettle when the chips are down; individual courage is tested in situations when you stay calm and collected; at the end of the day he had come in good faith to help me; if he wavered, if he fell by the wayside...

I finally won him over. I shouted out gleefully in front of the cuckoo clock when Àngel made his exit like a robot, tail between legs, slamming the gate behind him. The chrome tubes hanging down by the post greeted him with a silvery tinkle.

## V

### *Early escapades*

They say – naturally I can't remember – that I was very naughty as a kid.

I gave my family lots of headaches. I was rowdy and a misery. As I've always been prickly, nobody could ever shut me up. They tried to keep me on the straight and narrow, as a shoot can only take when it roots. My brothers rewarded me with a sweet when I behaved myself; and if I didn't, they beat me. But I hardly helped myself, because I'd take pot-shots at the rear-ends of wild cats with my pellet-gun or throw rocks at street-lights and shatter the bulbs.

"Honest, polite folk don't smash streetlights, Johnny," Grandma would lecture me. "I mean, they've not done *you* any harm."

We'd use a catapult we made this way: we'd slice off the top of a plastic mineral water bottle (with a fretsaw we used in handicraft at school); we'd attach a balloon to the end with a strip of rubber like a sling, and hey presto! our weapon was ready.

Àngel and I had great fun torturing the boss's poultry in Xesc: turkeys cooped up in cages. We acted with the greatest sophistication; there was lots of method to our madness.

As I grew up, I was so clever at annoying everybody that I'd get threats daily that I'd be sent off to boarding school. That's when my brothers started to chorus, "Next year, you're off to Lluc!"

After a few months, I even ended up liking that place. Horrible long corridors. A huge building. A lonely life. Such are my memories of the years shut up in Lluc. I never had visitors and was only let out for the main holidays. I was so isolated I almost started to feel nostalgic for my parents...

Commonsense and experience showed it wasn't at all a bad solution for me. In the middle of winter in Lluc, I'd slide over patches of ice in my mountain boots and blow clouds of breath from my mouth. "I preferred not having any nearest and dearest and being able to live like this", I'd think after a while in that peaceful backwater.

My parents were bullies and hardly bothered to hide the fact when I was with them. Up to the age of twelve I got more beatings than a miller's ass. As it stuck out a mile that no love was lost on me at home and they never looked me in the eye, I grew up thinking I was a pariah. I was so obsessed by the idea that inevitably it later filled the space where my heart ought to have lodged.

My parents were so crazy about discipline I concluded they only wanted to put the brake on me. And I was always being battered and sidelined.

Once I'd finished secondary school in Lluç, they forced me to do school certificate in Pollença. I'd go by bus everyday from Guillen Cifre de Colonya to the esplanade in the Port: seven kilometres on that winding road, with the broken lines and telephone posts whizzing monotonously by... A metal strip on the floor of the vehicle vibrated endlessly. When the driver turned the engine on, the whole thing rattled and the engine's movements shook our seats; we jumped up and down this way and that until we could breathe peacefully again when the coach reached the garage and the engine was switched off.

I finished school cert with reasonable, if not brilliant marks. My parents kept hounding me to go on to university. I'd set my stall out. Anything was fine, except pleasing them.

Do I need to add, by way of conclusion to my time as a less than model student, that I'd decided to give up my studies as the best way of securing a gratifying revenge? I was only happy when upsetting them. That was what most appealed to me in life.

I wanted to earn money. I thought if I had some sort of responsibility it would help me to forget that world of shouting and beating where I'd been brought up.

It pains me to admit this, but the moment my time was up in Lluç, I began to miss being shut inside, the daily co-existence with the other students and the healthy isolation from the world outside.

The father of a school friend was finding it difficult to employ someone to help run his car-hire business. The news reached me and I soon organized things and got everyone on my side. And as I'm pretty smart it was easy to win the trust of my boss.

I don't think I've ever been in danger of being kicked out. Not a single day passed when he could have sworn at me for messing up.

## VI

### *The beer lorry*

As I was such a sleepwalker, they always strictly controlled my freedom of movement. They had to lock and bolt the doors at home so I couldn't get out on the road and run the risk of being knocked over and killed. I'd often roamed as far as the high road that twisted and turned by our house and nothing had ever happened. But one night I did get in the way of a lorry. It was transporting barrels of beer and, because the driver suddenly had to swerve, the lorry crashed into a concrete wall. It slid, skidded and ran off the tarmac.

The lorry turned on its side with the driver's cabin up in the air, teetering on the edge of the abyss. The lorry's wheels were still running round when we got there. The driver had lost consciousness. His colleague – oh wondrous safety-belt! – was suspended from the ceiling and looked like a rag-doll. They'd been thrown together like tinned sardines: head to tail.

"Feliu? Speak to me, Feliu?" the injured mate spoke to his companion, poking his biceps with the toe of his shoe. From the road we could see he was kicking him inside the cabin, but he showed no signs of life.

The injured mate rapidly recovered and struggled out of that hole. After Grandfather and Uncle helped get him out, he fainted and slumped on the ground.

A way had to be found to rescue the driver. My mother and Granddad went over, on tenterhooks, to see if he was still breathing. Blood was trickling down his forehead, streaming over his eyes and matting his beard.

"Don't touch him! Ring for an ambulance this minute!" bellowed Granddad. He looked me up and down. "You don't realize what you've done, you idiot," he barked.

"What's wrong?" I asked Granddad, timidly.

"Fucking hell!" he retorted. "You only walked out on the road as this lorry was driving by..."

“You’re on to your second life!” said mother, sobbing. She’d followed us, feeling it was ominous the way her father had shot out of the house. She’d feared the worse when she heard the beer lorry’s brakes screech.

She was wearing her nightshirt – the breeze was rustling its frills – and unlaced canvas sandals. Granddad shouted at me, then gave me a hug, “You fool, can’t you see you’ve just caused a serious accident? You’re cursed!”

In the meantime, barrels had started to roll down the slope. You could hear the vegetation crunch at it was squashed to smithereens by the load tumbling over it.

Soon after emergency service nurses climbed out of a mobile life support unit and lifted the injured mate on to a stretcher – Uncle Arnau had contacted them. They checked his vital parts, raised his eyelids and shone a torch into his eyes. The guy had a broken neck and jaw.

“Get him in here, at once!” shouted a nurse who wasn’t in a joking mood.

They slid him inside the ambulance. Days later, in the Clinic, they had to connect him to an artificial respiratory machine. But the guy was lucky. He improved quickly and they soon transferred him to a different floor.

“I wish my skin scarred as quickly as yours,” muttered the doctor, a week before discharging him.

Feliu had no lasting damage; everyone said it was a miracle. Nonetheless, I’ll never forget the look of hate his wife directed my way the day I turned up at Son Dureta flourishing a bunch of white roses.

That dramatic accident marked a turning point in my life. While Feliu was convalescing, everybody conjectured about the disaster: was it the driver’s fault, did some object fall on the road, had some suicidal lost or injured animal decided to come down from the mountain and cross the road? *Chi lo sa*. In any case, we’d all become moving targets.

“It’s obvious that one of *them*,” a lady leading a fox-terrier on an extendible lead said to her companion, “almost killed a man the other day.” As she spoke, the sly bitch pointed at our place. And that same night, someone with a good aim broke my window by throwing a single stone.

We had an emergency family meeting and agreed temporary measures to defend ourselves against being lynched.

These were the decisions we took: father would immediately refrain from his daily tittle with his friends in the bar; mother would stop going to the literary chit-chat sessions held every Friday in the village library; Granddad would vanish from the Cultural Circle where he played chess with a couple of war wounded, survivors from the Battle of the Ebro who'd married girls from Majorca; Grandma turned her back on the grocers where she'd always shopped and went to the big supermarket... They closed ranks around me.

My parents demanded a show of filial love from me. They banned me from leaving my bedroom, except in an extreme emergency: as I was the rotten apple, it was all about damage limitation. Grandma brought me meals at the agreed times. After a while she'd remove the dishes, knife and fork and glasses, barely saying a word.

Regrettably, this situation of house arrest lasted for a whole month. My summer holidays were halved at a stroke.

One night when everyone was asleep, Granddad came upstairs to see me. He told me my parents felt they were guilty for what had happened and that mother, as soon as she'd eaten her dinner, rushed to the bathroom and vomited.

"What was wrong with you?" I asked mother a year later, when everything was back to normal.

"One day I received an anonymous telephone call," she replied.

Someone had threatened her, telling her not to let me out of her sight. It was a woman's voice. I'd never have imagined it would be possible to hate so relentlessly. She'd said nothing to my father.

"I'm relying on you to keep this secret, Joan."

"Don't worry. Now I understand what the family pow-wow was about."

"Lots of other things happened that your ears are still too young to hear."

Father had started to be an insomniac. He'd often go out to the porch for a smoke, and stay there into the early hours.

He'd even fallen asleep more than once by the water tank. He'd only show signs of life when the first ray of sun touched his forehead. The fact was I'd only just started on my life off the rails.



## VII

### *Save a Nazi and...*

I've always been fascinated by marbles. They prompted the irresistible attraction I feel towards gems encrusted in any kind of jewel.

I'd channelled my craving by gouging out the eyes of crated fish ever since I'd been a kid. This was much more of a come on than stealing precious stones or selling them illegally on the international black market. And the fact is when I saw Uncle Arnau drive up in his Berlingo Citroën from the Smoked Fish Company Ltd – to the cold store with piles of plastic crates, where the goods were flapping their tails on a bed of ice – I couldn't resist the temptation to dig out the eyes of creatures that had been swiped from the sea.

The flapping of the live fish whose eyes I deliriously gouged out has remained imprinted on my memory, as if with a red-hot brand. I'd ease their glass marbles out with a deft hook-like movement of my fingers. It was crazy feeling the rubbery texture of those irregular spheres on flesh that was red and stiff from the cold.

"You're a sadist."

"It's only fish, uncle."

The face of the man I was talking to looked as if it had been hammered and chiselled out, and his eyes bulged like a crab's.

"You bastard, I don't know how you have the guts to gouge their eyes out like that. You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"I am."

"Shut up, you're disgusting!" spluttered that live, bronze Giacometti. "I forbid you to do that ever again."

But, as I turned a deaf ear, he was forced to rehearse the same litany every week. The temptation was too strong for me to resist...

The town had coastal marshland that was in the flight path of migrating birds. It attracted legions of ornithologists from all around the state. However, last year, the

swamp was unfortunately dried out on the orders of Don Víctor Palau, “That act alone is more than enough to put him in my sights” was my thought on the matter.

The financier was up to no good building apartment blocks under multi-ownership deals. People speculated that a number of councillors’ pockets had been lined in exchange for their turning a blind eye to these construction companies. There have been mysterious fires in conservation areas where it was illegal to build. Naturally, the new situation forced the Town Hall to re-think such controversial measures...

The old art workshop is now a pizzeria. And the beach, that had inspired seascapes in so many generations of art students, is now a filthy hole infested with rats, plastic containers and orange peel. We owe all that to the model management and exploitation of resources directed by a silver-tongued gangster by the name of Víctor Palau.

“Kill a Nazi, and save ten Jews”, Palau advised the mayor, seated at a table in the Nautical Club, crunching a lobster pincer between his teeth.

“Kill a Nazi, and save ten Jews,” he repeated perversely: the other man listened, agog at Don Víctor’s table-talk; “Kill a Jew, and save ten Palestinians.” – the mayor was losing the thread. “Conclusion?”

“I’ve no idea, Don Víctor, You tell me...”

“Save a Nazi, and save a hundred Palestinians.”

I once dreamed a snake was shedding its skin in a desert of white sand. The vision of the serpent and its triangular head stunned me. I suppose the source of the dream was a premonition of the danger I would face one day when I went for a stroll with Granddad.

## VIII

### *Out for a stroll with Granddad*

I'd gone for a stroll with Granddad. We'd got up at dawn, our rolls cling-filled, our potato omelette hermetically sealed in Tupperware, our flasks full of water from the tank, our bottle of firewater ready in the bread bag and our spirits high, because we were about to set out. We'd walk along a goats' track.

But just as we were about to enter a myrtle wood, the scent from which perfumed the air, I decided, for some reason or other, to turn over a stone with a walking-stick Granddad had shaped for me, working with the patience of Job on an olive branch with the bent blade of his bone-handled knife. The knife didn't leave a single knot. I lifted the stone with the end of my crook. A snake immediately coiled itself around one of my legs. It was hissing loudly. Its jaws opened wide in the shape of a delta.

Time has passed and I can now analyse the incident objectively. I see it as a warning sent by Providence because I'd disrupted the harmony of its cosmic order.

Granddad shouted, "Hell, what a beast!" For my part I felt the weight of the sticky creature tightening around my leg. My feet were sweating inside my walking boots.

The reptile's head was a rhombus, its eyes, two gimlets of fire.

The pebbles on the beach, the rocky crags plunging down to the coves, the shoots on the trees, the worm-eaten branches piled up on the soft grass hanging over the sides of the fields and the pine-needles carpeting the paths – dry as tinder in the summer, covered in frost when whipped by an icy winter wind – brought a diffuse, inscrutable meaning to the unfathomable Book. And that day a wretched boy had uncovered their pet in that country.

Nature rarely punishes those who hurt her. The innocent always pay. I can consider myself fortunate I emerged unscathed.

The snake left a sinusoidal print on the red clay as it slithered towards me.

The fact is the experience paralyzed me. I didn't try to jump to one side to avoid contact, but stood there stiffer than an Easter candle.

When the reptile slid away, after savouring the still air with its forked tongue, Granddad and I breathed a sigh of relief and chorused a "phew". We hugged each other in the middle of the field, not saying a word, after holding our breath for seconds that seemed eternal and whimpering like little kids.

"You've got a Guardian Angel looking after you when you're asleep and protecting you by day," he told me, "that's the only way I can explain that you're still alive."

The snake had been drawn away by the smell from a sparrows' nest high up on a nearby tree branch. It had nimbly slipped up the trunk. As soon as it reached the nest, it devoured the birds.

We looked up when we heard the uproar in the branches and were shocked when we realized what was happening... We could hear the dry sound of ribs cracking when we listened hard. Feathers fell from a nest and the wind blew the fluff everywhere.

"It's had a tasty snack."

"Shut up, you idiot! That's broken my heart," he declared, horrified.

I heard Granddad's guts retching. He immediately bent down and vomited. He wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve and said, 'I've brought my guts up.'

"Do you want to go back?"

"No way. You go on in front, you rascal."

Walk on, walk on and progress you will make.

We came upon a group of teenagers dancing in a clearing in the woods. They'd set up loudspeakers and spotlights.

A tall, strapping lad with dreadlocks and sunglasses was in charge of a turntable.

Lots of teenagers were standing around the disc jockey scratching over the pre-recorded rhythms and mixing sound with the samplers.

A crowd of people were going in and out of a hut that was apparently abandoned, a totally austere, stone and mortar effort, and that was the scene.

The techno music coming from the sound boxes and the computer drum loops reminded me of the big rave party the Florida disco in Fraga organized every summer on the wastelands of Los Monegros.

Huddles of boys and girls were dancing to the spasmodic, electronic rhythms bellowing out. They'd erected a table top on metal legs riveted together. The paper cloth and pile of plastic cups looked a real eyesore.

A trailer, cars and motorbikes and a caravan were wreaking havoc in the barley field. The farmer would register his disgust the day after when he spotted the tyre ridges patterned on the disturbed earth. Granddad knew the owner of the plot.

"I wouldn't want to be here when he sees what's happened. Tià's a devious bugger."

"What do you mean?"

"You never know how he will react. You never know how to take him. The best is to go the way his whim takes him."

There were piles of flyers wherever you looked. And balloons with psychedelic images. We stopped for a second to watch a young woman: she wore a black Lycra tank-top that revealed her bra straps and was gulping down Coca-Cola from a two-litre plastic bottle, her breasts pert under her tight-fitting clothes.

She started dancing in fits and starts, as if she'd been electrocuted. She was a shameless exhibitionist doing the splits waving her arms in the air, her bum as sinuous as a carefully drawn lemon pear. Her bracelets jangled. The other girls gave her poisonous glances and were looking her up and down.

"Look at that tart? Who does she think she is?"

A handful of young lads slavered in excitement and circled round her. It was their way of vying with her in the celebration of a festive ritual that was as ancient as the world. The most daring went crazy trying to get a touch of her flesh and worked themselves up in the process. But she nimbly eluded the grasping hands and her sharp tongue lashed out, "If any of you touch me, you'll get it."

Now and then she stuck her tongue out at us and showed off her little metal stud. She was holding a joint of marijuana in one hand. And staring at us rudely. The moment she saw me, the girl gestured to me to go over to her.

She shouted, "Hey, kid!"

Granddad tried to make out he was acting dumb and not looking at her performance. But the truth was he wasn't missing a thing. I knew he was pretending.

"Don't go, Joan," it was as if dark clouds and forked lightening were flashing over his forehead. My fellow stroller had changed his attitude the instant he heard her.

“Why? You can be sure that firecracker won’t reduce me to tears.”

“Don’t go. Listen to me.”

“Granddaddy, this is a rave party.”

“What?”

“This is what’s called a rave *festa*.”

“Right. You mean these teenyboppers have danced the night away?” he asked, scratching his chin with two fingers. “If I were their father, I can tell you this band of no-hopers would have sore arses.”

“Don’t be so old-fashioned, granddaddy.”

“Crikey! They must drink more than a sandpit to keep at it until daybreak. And they’re probably on drugs as well.”

“May be. People usually drink over the odds in this kind of party. But I’m not sure they’re on drugs.”

He looked at me out of the corner of an eye.

“OK. There are often people tripping on acid. Or snorting a line of coke.”

“Holy smoke!”

“Sure, a little bit of this and of that. But it doesn’t necessarily mean everyone is at it. You can’t generalise.”

“A right gang of hooligans...”

“It’s just that times have changed, grandpa. Nothing we can do... I don’t reckon they’re going to change their habits.”

“If I were their father I’d put them on the straight and narrow. Do you go to this kind of party?”

“Now and then. I go when I get an invite.”

I had received an e-mail days ago. They’d sent me an on-line invite. In theory I had the green light to send it on to whoever: “Don’t break the chain!” was their parting shot. I’d completely forgotten about it.

But Granddad stubbornly launched another of his salvos.

“They’re just lazy bastards. I can tell you I’d rather see you dead than bumming around like them. Bear that in mind if you want us to stay *friends*.”

“It looks like that young woman wants a word with you. I didn’t realise you had a steady.”

“Agh, it’s nothing serious.”

“That little bitch can’t keep her eyes off you,” he persisted, having a go at me.  
“And it’s not as if she’s not in demand.”

It was true Antônia had a queue panting after her.

“So I see.”

“I reckon she’s *a man-eater*.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“You just watch out and listen to me: right now I’d put my hands in the fire and wouldn’t burn myself if I were to say she’s about to lead you up the garden path.”

“What makes you think so, Sherlock?”

“She’s a real Eve. You only need to look at her: one eyeful is enough. Besides, at your age it’s no surprise if you go loopy at the first on offer. Anyone would go crazy the way she shakes her mangoes!”

When Granddad put his mind to it, nobody could rival his colourful vocab.

“Just be so fucking good as to shut up.”

“You just see how you’ll regret turning a deaf ear to the advice from your grandpappy.”

“Amen.”

“She’s having you on. Women are all the same at this age.”

“You’re the crazy one, grandpa. You’re stark, raving mad.”

“Jesus. I’m afraid I am right about this.”

“The real world isn’t like in your stories. You’ve got too much imagination.”

“You’ve not killed any Fascists like I have. You don’t have a clue about the real world. You must be a real ass to think you can start teaching me lessons.”

“Fair enough.”

“Listen to what I’m saying: I don’t think strutting her stuff is a big deal for her. Look how she move her arse. She’s a real troublemaker.”

“Fair enough.”

“Don’t be duped and let’s get out of here.”

“You do what you want. But don’t tell me what to do. I’m not having any of that shite today.”

“All right I’m staying put if you are. What time is it, by the way?”

“It’s time to strike... if you haven’t struck!”

As a youngster my Granddad was one of many who made ends meet by resorting to smuggling.

Sailors used to distribute liquor and tobacco among the locals on the sly: to people they could trust who'd lived in the village from time immemorial. The customs people turned a blind eye to this traffic with the help of a few small backhanders.

Granddad joined the Republican side. Although it was well known he didn't belong to any political party, some said (and you never knew what was really true) they suspected he was plotting against the regime, that he was a left-winger. The fact was Granddad had *fallen out with the regime*. One night two blue-shirts came looking for him – the yoke and arrows embroidered in red on their Falange uniform, shiny boots and belt. They banged noisily on the window shutters: “Open up! Quick! Open up!”

Grandma forced him to hide inside the tank in the yard before she opened the door. The Falangists left empty-handed even though they searched every corner of the house.

At night Grandma would park her rocking chair on the street and enjoy the cool with the neighbours. Which of the women she was chatting to had wanted her to be a widow, she wondered.

Grandma had brought along a handkerchief full of finely chopped onion. Its edges were stuffed with the bits and, when somebody asked her if she'd any news of her husband (who'd officially run away, and in a few days had become a renegade from justice), she'd lift the handkerchief to her eyes. And with that ploy of hers the tears soon flowed.

“Oh, I still haven't had any news!” she sighed.

Nobody could imagine that Grandma, with those big tears streaming down her cheeks, was pulling the wool over their eyes. She put on a good act.

In a word, this incident was a new starting-point for my grandparents: they'd both looked death in the eye on that nightmare of a day.

I've always been brilliant at stirring it when I'm in the mood. I'm clearly a past master at turning things upside down when I need to, “There's no need for you to pretend to me. What's the behind this sermon of yours?” I asked feeling irritated, “how come you know *her* so well you can say such things? And how come you send out the heavy artillery so quickly when you've only had a brief sight of her? It's all very unfair, Grandpa.”



“I gather from the way you’re prattling on that you are keen on *her*. And only a minute ago you were saying there was nothing between you two...!”

“You’re quite right.”

“What’s more: we might even say she’s your steady. Right or wrong? Answer, please!”

“You’ve guessed right. You’re so smart, Grandpa.”

“And, you’ve turned out to be such an ace, haven’t you, *muchacho*. You’d better end this now, if you don’t want a punch in the neck from me. Let’s beat it and don’t argue. You got that, shit-face?”

“Aghh.”

“Say goodbye to this crew! At least for today. Let’s be off before the alarm bells go up. Remember: shut your door and keep the devil at bay. And remember that’s not a law you can impose by force, Joan.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Turn back now. Go on, you go first.”

“No way.”

“That’s up to you. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The girl started walking towards us when she saw I wasn’t going over to her.

“You’re done for now,” Grandpa declared, running a finger across a grey eyebrow.

“Shush! Don’t spoil it for me now.”

“So you got nothing to say?” she asked, flashing her eyes at me.

“Hello.”

“*How*,” came her response, greeting me like a tame Indian from the Wild West.

“Lads and lasses, with your permission I’m off to make myself a shandy with that lemonade over there. Then I’ll go for a walk to clear my head and you can have a quiet chat. Without this old kite listening in. Your company is very pleasant. But as I fought in a different war...”

“That’s enough of that, Grandpa...”

“In the meantime, you get what you can, you rascal”, he muttered sarcastically in one ear, sticking an elbow into my ribs.

The bastard put on a remarkable show. Antònia kissed him on both cheeks.

“I’m Antònia. Very pleased to meet you. What’s your name?”

“Si...Sion, darling...” he whispered.

And, cupping his hands by my right ear, he added, “It’s too late to beat a retreat now. Get what you can, but take care,” he advised me grudgingly, “Don’t take advantage of the lady and remember how all excess brings retribution, you scoundrel.”

Granddad smiled at my friend, winked at her and scampered over to the table.

“I suppose this nice guy is your grandpa?”

“How ever did you guess?” I replied, grinning back at her. “That rascal’s always very perky. Did you see the way he was staring at you...?”

“And what was he mumbling in your ear-hole?”

“Nothing much. An old guy rambling.”

“Mmm... You mean?”

“Natürlich, Antònia. Why don’t you believe me? When have I ever lied to you?”

“Bah! You’ll soon be coming out with that cliché about ‘Doubt is insulting’? You’re hardly a spring lamb. How come you didn’t tell me that you were coming to the party?”

“It completely went out of my mind. You didn’t tell me either, darling?”

“You’re only interested in yourself. You’re only in it for what you can get out.”

Grandpa was holding a long glass and chatting to two girls who were eating in the shade from a real pine-tree.

“What’s that over there?” asked Antònia brusquely.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like the look of it one bit.”

I whistled to alert Granddad.

“I can see. We’d better climb up that pine-tree,” he shouted, grabbing the girls by the wrist. “Whatever happens, they’re heading straight for us. And don’t look like they’re going to stop.”

We climbed up the tree trunk where Granddad had settled down.

“What did I tell you?” he rasped.

We pushed and shoved our way into the thickest part of the foliage. His two new acquaintances followed him, laughing loudly. I helped them climb up.

Whatever the danger threatening us, we were now unassailable. And we could survey the whole scene, from our perch among the pinecones. We had panoramic views.

“My God!” exclaimed Granddad. “Tià has gone barmy... This will turn into a massacre if nobody stops him!”

Five mastiffs – pointed faces, ears pricked back, eyes bulging – jumped on the line of parked vehicles parked and attacked and bit a young lad. Antònia smothered a cry with her hands.

The owner of the plot was just parking his four by four by the side of the other vehicles.

“You’ve got it coming to you, you bastards! Take that, you hooligans!”

And from that minute on it was a mess of bloodied bodies piling up on each other, sobbing and shouting, and people racing across the fields, calling for help.