

Guillem Frontera

SICILY MINUS THE CORPSES

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He could see that the secretary had been crying, from the mildly concerned frown on her face, that was always coated in cosmetics, and her almost imperceptibly hunched body. He reckoned she was about to start sobbing again, but would check herself before doing so.

"Rosa, what's the matter?"

"President, please do answer your mobile. I don't know what's got into her, but she's absolutely livid." Then she realised that that was no way to talk about the president's wife.

He had realised that too, and glowered in disapproval.

"I beg your pardon, President."

"Leave me alone, please."

The mobile went on ringing. He had shut it off four or five times. His wife still didn't understand that the president of the Autonomous Community couldn't concern himself with her all bloody day. He took a deep breath, and decided he would be neither too abrupt nor

over patient. He gave himself a mental order: "Two minutes".

"Hello?"

The wailing on the other end of the line didn't sound like it was being made by a human being, and might well have come from some wild, panic-ridden nightmare. Was it, indeed, a wail? It was a ripped, abysmal sound, feverishly desperate, which begged and demanded help for something that was beyond repair.

"Elvira, if you can't talk like a person, I can neither find out what you want, nor what I can do for you," he wanted to make that clear right from the start, "Calm down, if you want us to have a proper conversation."

She was in no condition to understand that it was necessary put a semblance of order in the words that she was hurling into the air as if they were burning her throat. "Filth!" "Dead, don't you understand? dead!" "n'worms, yes, n'worms!" "Stink!" "Damn thing!" "What're they trying to do to us?" "What've you done?!"

Finally, he managed to stitch together a rough draft of intelligible speech from all that panic and all those wild complaints: his wife wanted him to go home, afflicted by an attack of hysteria caused by something to do with a

dead rat. He knew his wife well enough to realise that this wasn't going to be solved by any kind of compromise. If he didn't go home to exercise what he thought of as his protective authority, anything might happen. A dead rat...There are rats everywhere, you put rat poison down to kill them. And that's how they become dead rats: simple as that.

He made some changes to his schedule, informed his secretary of them, and got into his official car, which had already been urgently summoned to the gate of Government House.

It was a funereal day, sourly lit, with needles of drizzle tossed about by a bewildered, twirling wind. Cold, too. A smell of cold and rain. This was precisely the day that some South Korean (or were they Chinese?) business people were visiting Majorca, after he'd told them the island had an ideal climate, just like the old tourist posters used to say, with a temperature which only varied by a few degrees through the entire year. Four degrees at most. He had to meet them in the afternoon. Would it be better to apologise for the weather or just not to mention it at all?

In his official car, with its smoked glass for better protection, heading home where a woman suffering from

an attack of hysteria of the type he had put a drastic end to so many times, José Antonio Bergas, the president of the island's local government, took a moment to congratulate himself on his successful career so far. Forty-one years old – thirty-nine when he won the elections, thirteen months ago –, regional president of the Party, with ministerial contacts in Madrid, envied by two generations of militants over whose heads he'd been promoted – two generations burnt out by political corruption – the man with whom Majorcan, Spanish, and various German, English, Korean (or were they Chinese?) business people wanted to get to know; like the ones arriving today, who he would sweet-talk with promises of unlimited facilities when it came to investing in the island. This weather?, believe me, gentlemen, it's never happened before and it'll never happen again, it just doesn't fit in with our usual climate, he'd say, absolutely sure of himself, as if the power to determine the general functioning of the universe had been conferred on him by central government.

Observed from his official car, the world seemed more orderly than it did from his office. It also seemed to be more *his*. He'd banished the destination and purpose of

this particular journey from his mind. He had no difficulty in removing his wife and any domestic problems – or anything else, for that matter – from his field of vision. Now, however, as the car scurried smoothly along the motorway in an easterly direction, leaving behind the buildings of the See of Majorca and the Almudaina Palace high up there on the left, perched above the old walls, he couldn't shake off an occasional niggling that he'd had since his teenage years: he had a vague dream of living in an aristocratic home near the See, in the neighbourhood where the island's nobility lived – that solemn silence, the incense from the Corpus procession... Right now he didn't have all the time he'd have liked in order to get closer to the members of those families and introduce himself into their society. All in good time, he was sure of that. As he was of eventually having a large palazzo, with a courtly open-air patio.

He lived on a failed housing development. It had been intended to provide homes for upper middle class families. When he bought a lot on it, the promoter had read out a list of the personages who would be his neighbours: successful business people and professionals, most of

them well-known people from Madrid who wanted to have a home in Majorca worthy of their stature. This possibility struck him as being as attractive as it finally turned out to be disappointing, because no sooner had he sealed the deal in the notary's office, towards the end of the 'Nineties, than the promoter went bankrupt, which left the buyers' investments in a lamentably ambiguous state: the lots which had been reserved - or had they been? - by the prominent people from Madrid soon became a stretch of land covered in scrub and inhabited by ticks and mice. These sites ended up being sold to lower middle class families at a lower price than that paid by the owners of the first ones. The latter stuck to and still stick to a forever unwritten pact according to which they will have nothing whatsoever to do with the families who arrived after the original sites' price boom. And they make sure, above all, that their children don't mix with those of the others, especially with kids who tend to speak Catalan, as if this aberration were the most normal thing in the world. The housing development has no private security, given that most of the owners can't afford it. But since he became president of the Autonomous Government, not two hours

go by without a police car patrolling this remote urban conglomeration sitting in unprotected isolation.

He knows that the first thing he needs to do is immobilise her. This he does with a simple grip hold - he studied martial arts, he's a brown belt. If, even after that, she continues to grunt and to try and shake him off, then nothing works better than two sharp slaps in the face - as an old school chum, now a psychiatrist, had once advised him. She then goes on crying desperately for a few minutes, but soon calms down and grows friendly, which he interprets as a gesture of gratitude for his having remedied the situation.

But today, all of this isn't enough. The president sent the maid off to her bedroom so he could be alone with his wife in the kitchen, the largest room in the house. He gave her three chances to regain her composure, and finally applied a more forceful version of his usual remedy, until she collapsed into a chair, still moaning and pointing all the time at the door which gave onto what they have nicknamed the engine room: the air conditioning regulators, the pool vacuum, gas canisters...

What José Antonio Bergas, the president of the Autonomous Government, saw behind the door turned his stomach and made him empty its contents without giving him a chance to choose where. The vomit splashed on his Italian shoes and the bottoms of his trouser legs, while a few drops of a whitish juice stained his jacket. And he could wave goodbye to the Hermès tie he'd bought in Madrid's Ortega y Gasset Street. God shouldn't be letting this happen, he told himself, believing vaguely, as he did, that God should be more considerate with the earthly authorities. The sight that had so disturbed his wife and that was now affecting him in body and soul was the work of a rogue who had no right to be a member of the human race.

The first thing he saw was the movement. Restless, eager, hurried, voracious, the white worms were moving over the carcass of an animal which, as he could see after a moment, was not a rabbit but a rat that he would never have imagined could be so big. The stench, he surmised, was going to get stuck in his nostrils so fast, he wouldn't ever be able to forget it. He also surmised that those worms, twisting and weaving their way, ingesting the rotting rat, was going to form a diabolically dynamic

image which would become locked into his nightmares and would never ever leave them. Could this be done to the president of the Autonomous Government? Was there no respect for the institutions, in this bloody country? A fresh whiff of the stench blew all these rhetorical questions away.

He shut the door and went back into the kitchen. His wife was looking at him in vanquished desperation. She silently asked herself if her husband was like the corrupt politicians who had held power in the last government, two of whom had been sentenced to jail. In a thin, broken voice, she managed to ask him:

"Why are they doing this to us? What have you done, José Antonio?"

When he entered the office of the *El Diari* newspaper, Mateu Llodrà saw quite a crowd – six journalists and the editorial secretary – standing around the desk of Andreu Miranda, the editor in chief, and he thought, with some relief, that it would be better to come back another day, tomorrow or next week. But Miranda glimpsed him through a gap between the bodies of two journalists and called him over:

"Mateu, get over here, you'll like this!"

Shiftlessly, Mateu Llodrà joined the pack of journalists. Would he like this? He doubted it. It had been quite a while since he had liked anything these young people came up with. He was sixty-five years old, and had thus retired from the Barcelona publishing house where he'd worked, and for much the same reason was vaguely thinking of retiring from his second job, that of columnist for *El Diari*. He felt a vaguely defined need to do something else, he didn't know exactly what, but he felt strongly that no one should hurry him into anything. He had come back home to Palma just two weeks ago, leaving behind his little study on the same floor as the Barcelona

flat where he'd lived for the last forty years. In reality, though, he'd been in Palma for fifteen years longer than he had in Barcelona, given that the bulk of his work was done on a computer. He'd been contributing to *El Diari* for twenty years, but now he felt he deserved a break so as to enjoy what he called – or at least so he had described it in his diary – a state of daydreaming ataraxy.

Once he has joined the crowd, Andreu Miranda asked for his attention:

"This is fantastic, Mateu, listen up," and he went on, "This was on Tuesday, two days ago. Poor Elvira Campanario, she could never have guessed that that wine gift box would turn out to be the coffin of a dead rat! She has long suspected something, things being said behind her back, she thinks José Antonio has a lover or something odd is going on, which is why she made him take on Rosa Palop as his secretary; and that's also why she intercepts his mail and opens his presents. She must have been looking for a note, some indication of the sender's name. And that gift box, so beautifully presented... Of course, she must have thought, it must be a bottle of the most expensive wine in the world. She needed a hammer and chisel to open that box. And, once she had done, it gave

her the biggest fit of her life. Screams that could be heard on the other side of Majorca, tears, threats...a proper scandal."

He dwelled for a while on the description of the dead rat and the greediness with which the worms were feasting. "Poor Elvira," Andreu Miranda repeated, "the stink stunned her, she vomited up everything right down to the breakfast she ate before her First Communion." He described her attack of nerves in detail and president José Antonio Bergas's reaction.

"Looks to me like some kind of mafia code," said the editorial secretary.

"Majorca is Sicily minus the corpses, that's what Andreu Manresa says. Yes, this is a mafia job. Which mafia, we don't know, or better said, we do know or at least we can make an educated guess," Miranda was telling this to Mateu Llodrà, "But we haven't got any proof at all; so we can't so much as hint at anything specific."

"It's always possible to hint at something," said Mateu Llodrà, to everyone's surprise, not least his own.

He immediately regretted what he'd said. They'd never paid any attention to any of his suggestions for improving the newspaper and increasing its circulation.

They always asked his advice after things had gone wrong, and for some time now he had lost all hope of doing something for the paper that went beyond his regular column, if that, indeed, was still of interest to anyone.

"Always?" asked the editor-in-chief. "For example, right now, how would you point a finger at someone without getting it burnt?"

Mateu Llodrà promised to kick himself for having spoken up. But now he had to satisfy the curiosity he'd aroused, and that felt too much like hard work.

"The gift box," he said.

"The gift box?"

"You said it was made of lead. It must have been made with the help of someone in the undertaking business."

They all stared at him, puzzled. Looking back at them, Mateu Llodrà's eyes settled on the face of a woman - thirty, thirty-five? - with faded blonde hair and eyes of leaden blue. Andreu Miranda thought that Mateu Llodrà's comment made some kind of sense, but still couldn't see how it could be put to some practical use. His golden rule was that copy had to be filed instantly. Besides, Mateu Llodrà had a reputation for living with his head in the

clouds. As far as the newspaper's editor was concerned, all the proposals made by this particular contributor never failed to have a poetic air about them which was completely unsuitable for the paper.

He'd asked Llodrà to come over today to talk about keeping on with his regular column. Incomprehensible though the editor found it, Mateu Llodrà had a readership. Personally, he, the editor, found these articles too...fuzzy? Yes, fuzzy. Llodrà hinted at things, but never made himself clear, Andreu Miranda would confess to his immediate circle. Subtleness was not considered an asset in today's journalism. But there were still readers who felt closer to Llodrà's style than to the editor's own view of journalism. Which is why he'd called Llodrà over. And also because he felt a slight but undeniable emotional link to the man. Like that of a nephew to an uncle. And also because he suspected that any of the rival papers would want him as a contributor.

The discussion about the putrefying rat that had been sent to the president of the regional government had come to an end. He'd decide how to deal with the story, later on. Of course, the line of enquiry suggested by Mateu Llodrà

- the link to the undertaking business - had been abandoned at once, without anyone explaining why.

"You know why I asked you to drop by," said Andreu Miranda, "As you're retired, you'll find yourself with a lot of free time on your hands and we thought that you might want to increase the frequency of your columns. So far you've been writing three weekly columns...so you could maybe do one a day. That wouldn't be too much of a burden, not for you; you toss those articles off in five minutes."

"Take note that you couldn't have got off to a worse start, dear editor-in-chief of *El Diari*. Did you really ask me to come here to tell me that you don't appreciate the effort I put into each and every text that I write? Let's start again, Andreu Miranda. Let's pretend that I've just arrived. Good morning, Andreu."

"Well, er, yes, sorry, you're absolutely right. A very good morning to you, Mateu Llodrà."

They were alone now in the glass cage which was the editor-in-chief's office. They spoke for a long while. Or rather the editor spoke, while his contributor did his best not to show his timid astonishment or his open consternation at the opinions of Andreu Miranda

concerning the world in general and the newspaper in particular. It's all going to hell in a handcart, Llodrà told himself, it's going to hell in a handcart and I haven't been able to make them understand that. Or perhaps they don't want to listen to me. I'm old and for that very reason they think that my experience isn't worth anything, what a paradox... What kind of experience is appreciated these days, then? That of a twenty year old kid? On the other hand, who am I to place a value on my own opinions? Experience isn't necessarily the be all and end all.

"Well, let me sleep on this, say for a month, and then we can talk about it again," Mateu Llodrà made an attempt to sum the conversation up, "The fact is, I was about to tell you that I wanted to let the column go for a while. I'm tired."

"But you must understand that we can't do without you," the editor said. Mateu Llodrà found the routine courtesy in the tone of this overblown phrase a little irritating. "Whatever you do, please don't let yourself be tempted by the competition," the editor warned him in a friendly way.

"You know that that just isn't going to happen. What are you reading?"

"What you mean, what am I reading?" The editor felt he'd been caught off-guard.

"It's not that difficult: the author and the title of the book you're currently reading." The age difference allowed him to adopt a certain minatory tone.

"Oh, you're talking about books...To be honest, recently I've been so rushed off my feet that I don't even get much sleep."

"Sure. But remember that it's essential for journalists to read: it's the only way they can broaden their global perspective. By the way, how did you find out about that worm-eaten rat?"

"We have a confidential source."

"That sounds very *Washington Post*. Who is it?"

"No...I can't tell you. It's not that I don't trust you, but..."

"Is it a local government minister?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"It must be Miquel Bassa, from the Presidency committee. Goodbye, editor-in-chief. We'll talk later." And Mateu Llodrà turned to leave.

But then he took a couple of steps back to ask:

"Who was that young lady with the greenish-blue eyes?"

"I'll tell you, and I'll also tell her to make sure you don't get within a kilometre of her."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you think that you should risk making a fool of yourself, at your age?" Andreu Miranda had a habit of gently teasing him about his supposedly licentious lifestyle.

"With her, I'd love to make a fool of myself."

"It's your funeral," said Andreu Miranda, who, despite the distance between him and Llodrà, admired some aspects of the older man's life, paradoxically, the ones which he knew no more of than what he could infer from vague rumours. "Know then, that her name is Liudmila (we call her Mila) Bokova. If you were thirty years younger, you might be in with a chance: she's Russian and has something enigmatic about her which makes plenty of pricks twitch, mine included."

Llodrà noted the name down in his mental address book - later he would jot it down for real. As he headed for the exit, he sneaked a glance at Liudmila, who was concentrating on her computer screen, and mentally

disapproved of the silly abbreviation of a first name which had a certain distinguished je-ne-sais-quoi about it.

Once he'd left the editorial office, he realised he still felt nostalgic about the smell of the editorial offices of an earlier era, the smell of the print shop inks, of piles of paper, of machine oil; and of tobacco, thousands of cigarette butts spilling out of the ashtrays onto the desks, or crushed directly on the floor; and of the coffee which journalists used to drink by the bucketful; and of cheap liquor. Of the sweat accumulated under the dirtiest armpits. How can feel nostalgic, he asked himself, about a stench like that?

On his way back home, he stopped for a moment to watch a sparsely attended demonstration of workers in Joan Carles I Square to protest against the closure of a company which had made a profit last year. Almost two hundred workers more on the dole. The middle classes were slipping into poverty and the poorly off were becoming penurious or homeless. Mateu Llodrà thought about this with a discouraging feeling of impotence. Years ago, things were clear and from that clarity, equally clear conclusions could be drawn, affected only by random factors such as fear or cowardice. Now, the current free-

for-all made it necessary to analyse the facts with far greater accuracy, to distinguish justice from injustice, which now shared common ground and common frontiers thanks to the sophisticated instruments of camouflage with which they had endowed themselves. Why, he asked himself, does all of this seem to me to be so anachronistic if, in reality, it still forms part of the on-going workers' struggle?