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A real Bogart

'You despise me, don't you?'

'If I gave you any thought I probably would.'

From the film *Casablanca*

Physiognomically speaking, Emilio, a secondary school music teacher in Barcelona, was a creature marked by eccentricity and fantasy. His colleagues seemingly respected him but suffered him in silence. His pupils, those candid recipients, overcoming their initial stupor and contempt for the little man now accepted his vehement and ostentatious interdisciplinary way with words with feverish loyalty.

Somewhat stooped with a subtle hunch below the nape and a swollen neck, he had bulging blue eyes and exaggeratedly fleshy lips — a bestial relief with an improbable silhouette. The plump cheeks and still young face lined with wrinkles lent him the sculptural quality of a beardless satyr in an indescribable interplay of planes. When he smiled his face curled into an excessive and painful sneer for the observer, two lines slicing the flesh somewhere between complaint and condescension: he was an ode to 3-D.

Scrupulous and systematic at work, he was rooted in a spotless and somewhat rigid order essential for his very survival. Always impeccable and almost always wrapped in a light blue college shirt and dark trousers,

he smelt of shampoo and subtle cologne: a bourgeois uniform for the least gregarious corps ever imaginable.

As homage to Bogart's tough guy in Casablanca (everyone at the school knew about his great film hero and his corner cupboard covered with posters and stills from the film) he always wore a grey raincoat over his grey blazer, even in the classroom. His carrot-top and swollen neck atop such an impeccable and ever-present wardrobe, with the added touch of the up-turned collar on his mac, inspired pupils to whistle in admiring irony. He would start his classes with Rick's line to Renault at the end of the film, 'I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship': it was all part of the ritual.

The first time the new maths teacher Julia saw him in the staff room he struck her as a true prodigy of ugliness and such oddity that she couldn't help but be attracted to him. She had always gone for men with strong features and, within her moderate snobbery, looked more for the asymmetrical and unruly than classic ephebic harmony.

Emilio was a mine of information, a non-stop announcer of cultural events and references; opera at the Liceo, theatre and film premières, new books, modern and classical works. At changeover between classes or at break time he could usually be spotted with his head in a paper in the staff room or spouting off to a group of half-enthused, half-mocking pupils. He had an opinion on everything and was able to give long sermons about the importance of eating fruit in the morning, whilst unceasingly espousing the declining quality of farm produce. He

would take in a piece of fruit to school every morning to devour after his sandwich in his own spectacular fashion, doing justice to the grandeur of his persona. Julia eagerly awaited the moment he would unwrap the bread and chomp down in a synchronised deafening and splendid flush of mouth, lips and teeth. And then the fruit...

Emilio was a respectable and committed man. One of the things he most hated was outsiders and social misfits. He didn't know how to be alone — Man wasn't made that way. Those who avoided contact with others, who didn't make any effort to relate or share their desires, longing, or small everyday mishaps struck him as miseries. He always tried to involve other people in his discoveries and fixations; for example, at school he insisted on photocopying any article he found interesting and leaving it in everyone's pigeon hole, even keeping a copy back for the caretakers and secretaries. If he'd been to the cinema or theatre he made sure nobody went unawares, telling anyone he happened to run into the reasons for criticising or applauding the event: for favourable reviews he would include overblown gestures with emphatic and guttural remarks; the unfavourable would be dismissed with a couple of disparaging comments and a vehement slogan summing up the fiasco. From time to time, and whenever he thought he'd been witty or incisive or subversive, he would burst into both a gruff and shrill laughter, spattered with jokey turns and stentorian guffaws. He wasn't aware that the bundle of words and gestures he at times became clashed head-on with the type of laconic and mysterious man he himself advocated from beneath that ineffective raincoat.

For this reason, as he aspired to be a respectable and committed man in spite of his singular physicality, it was extremely important and significant to have a wife — in other words, an object offering social acceptance, a tool of social integration. Of course, he no longer desired his wife Encarna as he used to; if truth be told, secretly, deep down, loving her was an effort. And not just this, he profoundly scorned the attachment women — both his own wife and women in general — had to all things material. This did not, however, stop him from adoring his home — Encarna's home; not that he would confess to this of course as, in addition to a wife, he had a reputation to uphold. They had lived there for the past seven years, the last three, with his adorable little boy Pablito. He would pat himself on the back for how well everything had turned out: he was a great partner, not a husband as they weren't married (marriage being an antiquated and oldfashioned institution) but the perfect partner doing whatever needed to be done.

In his own way, Emilio made himself out to be a tough guy. In response to a feminised society governed by extremely feminine and inhibitory conventions, Emilio wanted to go back to a masculine, politicised discourse focused on the outside world. He liked suits and ties, Havana cigars, conversations around the dinner table about current affairs, art and literature. He spoke at length about this and many other things with Julia, the only teacher at school he managed to interest and who, in turn, hardly ever listened — waiting merely for his maxillary movements and facial distortions whilst regurgitating his discourse.

Julia was lonely and had a great sense of personal freedom and

camaraderie. She was a woman of mathematical certainties and, otherwise, fairly impressionable. It was easy and even fun bewildering her with philosophic, literary and musical gems in a torrent of quotations, titles and aphorisms — the secret lay in coming across as confident. Emilio made great efforts to inspire her, overacting in a grotesque rather than tender display. He was a confident guy (his success rested on it) and she, a quiet girl with no more baggage than lots of formulas and a passed teaching-training exam. She lacked metaphysical truths but he could fill that void with unorthodox, unquestionable and engaging ideas.

It started with smiles and jokes in the corridors and staff room, exchanging articles and books and coffee after class. One day, a hint of a caress, another, a confession; intimate suggestions, portents or traces of a relationship, of an incipient adventure — that's how these things begin, no?

From a certain predictable moment at the beginning of this whole pas de deux, Julia agreed to him coming-by some afternoons. Set to a preferred routine of alternate Wednesdays and Fridays, this ritual lasted for nearly eighteen months. It didn't entail very much: a mere half an hour a week. Julia had at first taken to his physical oddity and arsenal of information enthusiastically. But then, once weariness and disappointment started to set in, she could barely stomach it.

Emilio would arrive at his lover's house, the other woman, his *amant*, his concubine (terms he secretly liked using to refer to Julia) awarding himself medals and congratulating himself for his bravery as lover-hero.

Life was so complicated and tiring and he had to overcome all sorts of obstacles — work colleagues, meals with his wife, domestic and paternal commitments. The relationship, for want of a better term, that Julia and Emilio had was far from, very far from, light years away from being a passionate affair. Truth be told, it was becoming more and more a testament to non-communication and mediocrity.

The rare Saturdays he could get away when his wife was meeting her Tai-Chi pals for lunch or for some other reason, Emilio would take Julia to a restaurant and make the most of dressing suavely in a suit, white shirt and tie or bow tie; on those days he felt most daring and in tune to his masculinity as clandestine and handsome lover, he would put on a 1940s hat to go with the ever-present raincoat that conveniently sloped over his forehead and cast a shadow over his face. He would order the food he thought most succulent and make himself out to be a wine-expert, winking and joking with the waiter. After coffee with a glass of cognac, he would solemnly and ceremoniously flourish a Havana, nibble the end using that phenomenal jaw and proceed to smoke it. All this believing he had sensed the psychological type Julia secretly longed for: the incorruptible tough guy, the leading man attuned to the rules of seduction, the unrepentant *machista*.

Women, Emilio thought, go for tough guys even when they won't admit to it. 'Dames are simple', Bogart's ghost noted to Woody Allen in *Play it again, Sam*, 'I never saw a dame yet that didn't understand a good slap in the mouth or a slug from a .45'.

What Emilio didn't seem to understand was that, in a mythical imagery privileging Bogart as the virile fetish object par excellence, there was no room for substitutes. You can only be a Bogart by giving up on a suitably affable humanised image. We all know it — not just anyone can do cynicism and indifference in the strictest sense and not everybody can scorn human life and grimace to such an extent as that celluloid imprint that is Rick in Casablanca. You can't have it all.

Casablanca isn't just a movie, it's a state of mind; a reference of manliness; a journey into the myth of singular virility. It was clear Emilio was incapable of adjusting to the imbalance between that intellectual fantasy and crude reality, between the harmoniously weather-beaten features of that Casablanca exile and his own clumsy appearance. In reality, what most fascinated and, at the same time, repelled Julia about Emilio was the vulgarity he adhered to with the ferocious desperation of a leech (or of a closet suicide case); the tenacity he struggled with so as to appear normal and, above all, virile — an unachievable goal. His course, his way of standing out, was not the same as for others: the repetitive hackneyed gestures, the prosaic submission to cultural cogs, the exhibition of cheap but exhaustive intellectualism just made the long hours of study and composition before the mirror too obvious.

In one sense, he acted like a tough guy. But, in another, he wanted to be a good and compassionate creature. This should not be confused with charity: the idea of charity, just like marriage, appalled him. He was critical of the Church and all forms of exploitation and demagoguery. He would have liked to have been a man with a dark and rebellious past, a

champion of just causes as well as a modest fence of intrinsic nobility and commitment.

He went out of his way to avoid fights. To him, shouting and swearing, never mind coming to blows, were degrading. If his wife felt down because of problems at work or with friends or because she was going through an existential crisis or, even, because she no longer felt attractive, he was proud of knowing how to console her, stroking her hair as if she were a poodle and not a woman — following the care manual for beginners. And it was with this same provocative and flagrant ignorance that he would treat his lover. Ah, lover, how great that sounded to him, that big secret he kept to himself. She also benefited from his advice and warm words of comfort. Arrogance is nothing but the other face of cleansed rusticity!

He took himself for a great companion, lover and father. At weekends, he would break his neck carrying little Pablito on his shoulders through the crowded streets or taking him along on demos. Emilio saw himself as a left-winger — he hated anyone who supported those in power; of course he also hated marginal groups outside the system. He'd never have admitted to hating them as that would go against his own ideology (and he was very proud of his ideologue status) but they made him very suspicious. He just didn't understand why some people preferred to isolate themselves; why they would stay in a corner in total silence; why they would stick to the shadows; why they would systematically flee from all company — or, better still, his company. He wouldn't have known how to be on his own, ever. He needed to share things: music, books, ideas...

In his opinion, he was a philanthropist, for everyone else — from the outset — an insecure conceited manchild hiding behind a front of false, arrogant and blind security.

Emilio had better be careful, as where now his clumsy paws touched upon excitable and receptive skin, they would one day find a poisonous swamp full of barbed snares.

Julia would have liked for Emilio's scent to have lingered on her like a trace of all that is odd, strange and adorably crippled, like an exotic bird's pride wounded by leading a grey sparrow-like existence. But the truth is she ended up loathing him and his way of deluding himself, of selling himself and failing in the attempt, so much so that she lost respect for both him, and herself — for being weak and giving in to his ludicrous requests of reject-lover.

Emilio would have liked for his scent to have lingered on her like a heroic trace fighting on two fronts, everyday domesticity and passionate adventure. All neatly knitted together. When his lover banished him from her life, Emilio decided to bear no grudge, to not give way to vulgarity. Pride is paltry, he thought, making a noble mental gesture. And with this gesture worthy of the greats, he went home to his 120 m² adorned with, amongst other things, a familiar, educated and conscientious wife, and a son who had fortunately failed to inherit his features. Women are all the same, he repeated to himself. In the end, it's not worth risking marriage over a disturbed and ignorant girl like Julia. You had to be careful: it's a well-known fact that women like to curtail a man's freedom. They are

inherently more conservative — Encarna would never have forgiven him for being unfaithful and he didn't know how to be on his own.

On that Saturday like any other, when his secret life vanished, Emilio went home with head bowed and, holding back the tears threatening to erode his fleshy cheeks, hung his raincoat up on the stand, gave his wife a chaste and timid kiss and went on to do his share of the chores as per usual.

'It seems that destiny has taken a hand', ironised Rick in the mirror.