

THAT NIGHT IN PALMA

I KNEW THERE WOULD BE trouble the moment I reached the Shamrock Fun Place. I had never wandered that far from the safety of my gloomy apartment. The oddly named Irish pub was completely uncharted territory. I had always turned back as soon as I reached the Hard Rock Café. *Always*. That night, however, I walked in a darker mental fog than I had on most of my other melancholy nights in Palma, and I had foolishly ambled too far.

My trouble came in the form of two Swedish beauties who spilled out of the live-music bar and staggered toward me. And, no, their approach wasn't to be taken as a compliment. I was less an object of their interest and more of a handy target for their inebriated attention.

The brunette in the tight white dress tripped on her heels and reached for my shoulder to steady herself. She giggled and picked at her shoe to determine what possible obstruction had suddenly made feel her so unbalanced.

She was twenty-six, maybe twenty-seven. Every man standing on the sidewalk patio desired her. Every woman was begrudgingly impressed. Even her trailing blonde friend was enthralled. "Look at her! Look at her!"

While the brunette was aggressive, the blonde was softer and more seductive. Her flowery sundress disguised her figure, but her smiling face and piercing eyes were enough to demand one's full devotion. And while the brunette left no doubt you could never satisfy her impulses, the blonde teased you that anything was possible as long as you held her attention for more than a fleeting moment.

The Swedish beauties were a deadly combination and best to be avoided at all costs, unless one had a strong stomach for what was sure to be fast-approaching heartbreak.

I was trapped in the brunette's grip until she regained enough balance to walk away and consider her options. Two men burst out of the Shamrock and approached her. The thin man in the ponytail and his husky friend with one too many necklaces marked off their territory by standing as close as possible to the uninterested brunette.

The blonde remained with me, sizing me up with mischief in her eyes.

"It's our first day in Palma."

"You're making quite an impression."

My own impressions of Palma had been rather limited thanks to my bouts of depression. My nights of melancholy exhausted me, although I was still an alert and functioning human being. No one had detected that I was heavy-hearted and morose. I lived in a shared apartment above the Plaça de la Drassana, where I never *completely* shut out the outside world. Even while I was lying flat on my back in the middle of the floor, I kept my window open to listen to the hubbub below.

And whenever I summoned the strength to get off the floor, I would connect with the activity in the square by watching the various cliques converge and scatter: the indecisive dinner dates studying the patio menus, the packs of Euro-boys grabbing one last beer before heading off to the town's nightclubs, and the marina millionaires hoofing it among the middle class while the crew stayed on board to stock up their ships with champagne and caviar.

When my room above the Plaça de la Drassana finally felt too stale and confined, I would join the mob in the square in search of a meal and a drink. Or several drinks.

Since I had already made the effort to leave my apartment, I inevitably ended up in the appropriately named Corner Bar in the far corner of the plaza. It was a recruitment pub for the

unemployed eager to find work aboard a boat. Crew members posted their business cards on the crowded bulletin board while their potential maritime masters advertised job openings.

I just thought it was a great gathering place to hear English—even if it was only from the bratty British bartenders swapping sexist insults with the naughty yachties, dressed in their nautical whites as though they had just gotten off the court at Wimbledon. Other times the mariners talked of the sea and boasted about their adventures in exotic ports like St. Tropez, Capri, and Santorini as though they were subway stops on a typical commute around the Mediterranean.

Whenever I felt particularly adventurous, I would lumber down the bustling Carrer del Apuntadors, dodging the college kids munching on cheap pizza, and avoiding the African salesmen cluttering the corner of Carrer de Sant Joan as they hawked their GSFC (Glowing, Squeaky, Flying Crap).

If I was desperate to escape the foot traffic, I might reach the tree-lined promenade, Avinguda d'Antoni Maura, and slip into the Lennox Pub for English ale served by Spanish locals with lisping Balearic accents. The thing I liked most about the Lennox was the small sitting space across from the bar, where I could tuck myself behind the wall and hide from the chatty tourists and the club kids fortifying themselves with one more drink before they headed to the clubs.

The final frontier of my Palma wanderings would be to join those kids for the long walk west on Avinguda Gabriel Roca. Some were heading home to their posh waterfront hotels; most were sobering up a little before sampling the more fashionable bars and EDM clubs west of the city center.

The busy boulevard was good business for the touts. Artisans sold their cheap jewelry. Gorgeous club girls peddled their low-price nightclub passes. Musicians offered weed and beat their bongos.

I just watched. It was the closest thing to human contact I had—apart from pointing at menu items and nodding at beer-tap handles.

It was only a thirty-minute stroll, but it was enough. It was a shame I had never completely explored the enchanting city. My calculated misery prevented me from inspecting the massive Gothic cathedral or wandering the medieval neighborhoods to feast my eyes on the sixteenth-century mansions or sample the bustling shopping areas.

No, my exploration typically ended after a ramble along the boulevard before I turned back for the secluded safety of my apartment. Anything longer and I might be tempted to try out one of the superclubs. Or visit one of the expensive beach hotels. Or . . . talk to someone.

I always turned around once I reached the Hard Rock Café.

That night, however, I had wandered closer to the colossal hotels and the sleek sailboats at the end of the harbor. I was mesmerized by the patchwork of languages bombarding me on the sidewalk: the slurry Spanish, the drunken German, the fractured French. I had walked past the Hard Rock Café, past the small casino, and past the Three Lions pub, finally reaching the Shamrock, where the pretty boys on the patio watched the inebriated mannequins stumble along the sidewalk.

The Swedish blonde introduced herself as Selina; her brunette friend was Evelina. They were staying for only a few days on the island before they moved on to London, where both girls had studied for a year at university.

“My English is terrible.”

“It’s perfect, and you know it.”

Selina purred when she talked and seemed embarrassed about her shiny white teeth. When she listened to my replies, she would grab her strands of long, shiny white hair and press them against her lips. The gesture might have implied timidity, but it also strengthened the implication that she was actually interested in what you had to say.

“It looks like Evelina isn’t going home,” Selina noted.

Ponytail and Too Many Necklaces were in heavy negotiations

with the beautiful brunette on where to head next—although they did all the talking. Evelina was too busy gazing up at the moon or staring down at her feet. Occasionally she would laugh and touch Ponytail's arm. Her gestures only infuriated Too Many Necklaces, who now realized he was no longer included in the next stage of the party.

"If she goes, I will be stranded here," Selina sighed. With one glance around the sidewalk patio, I could predict a dozen suitors stepping in to save her from her lonely predicament.

"Maybe you could walk with me home?" Selina asked.

When I hesitated, she added, "It isn't far. Only a short walk."

She slipped away and gestured for Evelina to join her in a private conversation. They spoke to each other in Swedish and punctuated their discussions with bursts of giggles and glances back in my direction.

Too Many Necklaces stared at me with contempt.

Their minds now made up, Selina slinked back to me while Evelina explained her decision to her two suitors. Ponytail was in; Too Many Necklaces was out.

"Is she going to be all right?" I wondered out loud.

"She'll be fine," Selina said as she locked her arm into mine and waved at the oncoming traffic. Two taxis parked outside the Hard Rock Café darted toward us.

"I thought it was a short walk."

"It's even faster with a taxi."

The first taxi stopped in front of Evelina and Ponytail. He held the door for her while Selina pulled me into the back of the other cab. Too Many Necklaces, out of taxis and out of luck, thrust his hands into his pockets and retreated into the Shamrock.

Selina rattled off her hotel's address for the driver, collapsed back into the seat and smiled at me. Then she grasped my hand and nodded, as if to say "This is good; this is happening. Relax."

Without prompting I blurted, "I'm married."

I waited for a sign of attitude adjustment from my gorgeous captor, but Selina continued to nod and hold my hand. In fact, her grip tightened a little.

Eventually she asked, "Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, you don't know." She said it like a confirmation. I was with her now. It didn't matter where my wife was.

"She left me."

"Your married wife left you." Another confirmation. However, the addition of the redundant word, "married," somehow demanded a further clarification.

"We're separated. But, technically, still married."

"Technically."

It sounded like a hidden proposition. *Technically*, I was married. *Technically*, I was also free to do whatever I wanted with a strange woman in the back of a Palma cab. Selina broke eye contact and stared out the window at the retreating hotels as the taxi approached the old city center, the illuminated Gothic cathedral gleaming from its ominous perch overlooking the harbor.

"My wife left me back in Toronto. There was no conversation. No personal note. No . . . nothing. She just one day picked up her stuff and left me."

Selina kept gazing out the window.

I continued. "She quit her job without telling me. She didn't mention a thing even to her mother. Not at first, anyway. She just . . . left. You understand that, right?"

Selina looked back at me and smiled. She finally released my hand, but only so she could rub my neck.

"I understand."

"She apparently went traveling. Alone, her mother said. Do you know how long I've waited to hear from her? Ten months. It's almost June, and I haven't seen or heard from her since last September!"

"Ten months is a long time."

I slid farther into the corner of the cab, complicating Selina's access to my neck. No worry. She simply slid her hand onto my knee.

My fractured explanation was only adding to her desire and

confusing my own. I wanted to walk again on the street, to bolt in any direction, but Selina's indifference to my wounded words and her constant touch were weakening my resolve.

"Ten months," I repeated. "Ten months of not hearing from her. We're supposed to be *separated*. That means living apart, not leaving the country! How are you supposed to work things out if you're not even in the same country?"

"You cannot work things out," she repeated.

"She came here, you know. Her mother finally told me. She came *here* to Mallorca. So, I quit my job and I followed her."

"And did you find her?" Selina's hand was off my knee and cruising up my thigh.

"No."

"Maybe you did not look hard enough."

"No, I looked, I looked," I snapped.

Selina finally released her grip and sat upright. We were close to her hotel, and she wanted to ensure the driver didn't take any wrong turns. She said teasingly, "You talk a lot."

"The truth is, I never talk about this."

"Maybe you make up for it today, I think."

I certainly had been an exhaustive talker as a high school teacher in Toronto. I primarily taught history, although I was often saddled with another class or two, like Media Studies or PhysEd, to justify my slight salary and fill my days.

I was popular enough in the classroom, thanks to my opening-day speech each semester. "If you give a shit about history, sit in the front and participate. If you don't, sit in the back, shut up, let the students who need this class to get into college do their work, and I'll give you a passable D+." It bought me some peace in the classroom, but those who sat in the front of the room weren't exactly riveted by my lessons. I tried, though; I really did.

My favorite assignment was always the first one: pick a current world conflict from the newspaper and trace it back to its origin—namely, the singular historical moment from which the

roots of unrest had since reverberated. The drafting of the Sykes-Picot Agreement was always handy for any dispute in the Middle East. The development of Canada as a resource economy built to supply its European conquerors worked well for any foreign trade dispute.

I used to award extra points for every additional century that a student could trace back a particular conflict's roots. That is, until a Grade 11 smartass cited the biblical story of Jacob and Esau battling over the family blessing from their blind father, Isaac, as the reason Israel and Palestine were still at odds (because Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, later warred with Esau's descendants, the Edomites, who lived near the Canaan border).

I didn't award the smartass the thousands of bonus points he thought he deserved, and his mother wrote letters to the school calling for my resignation, since I was an anti-Semite and presumed Holocaust denier.

It was irritations like these that eventually made me loathe teaching. If it wasn't the alarmist parents, it was their apathetic teenage children.

"But, sir, that happened before my time! Who cares?"

"Before your time? What are you, sixteen? *Everything* happened before your time! The construction of the pyramids was before your time. The painting of the Sistine Chapel was before your time!"

Students heard that outburst more often than I would have liked to admit. It also generated more letters from the alarmist parents calling for my resignation, since I was a bad influence on their kids and a presumed pervert.

"The past matters, people! How many times do I have to tell you this? The past informs you of the present. The past influences your future. 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'"

Why was I so desperate for the approval of a sixteen-year-old nuisance anyway? Teach the lessons, assign the tests, mark the papers, and call it a day. But I couldn't. *Somebody* had to care.

It became a miserable daily existence, made worse by a George Bernard Shaw quote that singly gnawed at me: “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.”

George was right. I had to *do* . . . something. Anything! Teaching teenagers wasn’t fulfilling me; I needed to find a more creative outlet—and I thought I had found it when I started writing novels.

I tried several genres. My young adult novels only reminded me of my apathetic students, and my science fiction books always morphed into *Star Wars*. My dystopian novels were too depressing. My horror novels gave me nightmares. My political thrillers gave me headaches. I settled on detective novels starring rugged private eyes and leggy dames.

I wasn’t very good at it.

In fact, I never came close to completing any of them. I wasn’t clever enough to conceal the credible clues. My attempts at misdirection were too misleading. I was heavy-handed when I needed to be charming, and I was lightweight when I needed to be conclusive. And anyone who read any of my early chapters always deduced the killer right away.

I even gave my early chapters to my brightest students as an extra-credit homework assignment.

“So, what did you think?”

“Sir, I didn’t finish it . . . ”

“Never mind that. What did you think?”

“What is this, a murder mystery? Am I supposed to guess who the killer is? What does this have to do with my history project?”

“Never mind that. *What did you think?*”

“I don’t know . . . Was it the chambermaid with the stutter?”

“Damn it!”

I then gave my early chapters to my dimmest students.

“So, what did you think?”

“Sir, why are you giving me this? You said that if I kept my mouth shut in class, you’d get me that D+.”

“Never mind that. What did you think?”

"I don't know . . . Was it the chambermaid with the stutter?"

"Damn it!"

My literary stabs at writing another *The Big Sleep* had induced only big yawns. At my lowest literary point—clearly after spending too many rainy afternoons playing the board game *Clue* as a child—I once wrote that Colonel Dijon did it in the conservatory with the Menorah. And I didn't even know what a conservatory was!

All of this—the drudgery of my school days coupled with the failures of my nighttime literary efforts—made me difficult to live with, I guess. All I know is . . . it made my wife, Pamela, miserable.

We had to get out of the cab now. It was parked on the one-way street of Carrer de Sant Feliu and unable to reach Selina's hotel on Carrer de Vi. The lane was too narrow for vehicles; we would have to walk the rest of the way.

Selina paid the driver and motioned for me to join her outside. Carrer de Vi was more of an alleyway than a residential street, foreboding in its darkness and dependent on the moon to light the way. Because it featured no shops or restaurants, it was neglected by the city and left alone in its scars and blemishes with its chipping paint and exposed gray walls. Unlike the rest of the city center, which was so meticulously preserved, this street whispered, "Proceed with caution ye who enter here."

When Selina interlaced her fingers with mine, I didn't object. We walked in silence to the weathered wooden door that served as the unremarkable entrance to the Hostal Pons.

"Well, we made it," I said. "You're no longer stranded."

"Maybe you could walk me upstairs."

"I don't think so."

"It's dark inside. And a lot of stairs. I get so confused."

"You Swedes sure are fragile," I teased. "How did you even manage to find the Shamrock?"

"I had Evelina."

Selina let go of my hand to open the front door with her large key. She beckoned me to take a look inside.

I hesitated but followed, suddenly petrified that I was slowly slipping down a dark path into something I thought I'd never do.

I followed Selina into the building. The ground level was filled with wooden furniture and large ferns, linking the hotel with the first-floor apartments and making the area more of a community gathering space. Selina's bedroom was up the staircase.

Now that I was no longer standing on the street, Selina stood behind me and blocked my escape.

"It's not so dark in here."

"But you should see up the stairs. And the lock on my door is hard. I'm not strong enough to take it off, I think."

"I'm *not* going in your room," I murmured as I led the way up the stairs.

At the top of the staircase was an open doorway to the hotel. While the building now served tourists, it had once been the home of a large Mallorcan family. Every room was functionally furnished and subtly converted into a guest space.

We headed past a pair of sitting rooms filled with comfortable chairs and little reading nooks the former family might have used to entertain their visitors in. After another flight of stairs, we reached the first level of bedrooms and a small kitchen and dining area.

"We have to go to the top," Selina whispered.

We climbed several flights of stairs until we reached the top two rooms of the hotel. There was also an open entrance to the roof, where the tiled deck welcomed daytime guests who wanted to soak up the sun on a selection of patio furniture and reclining chairs.

"What do you think of the view?" asked Selina.

The overall view, at night, was minimal: just the residential rooftops and backyard patios of other stacked homes, complete with clothing lines and satellite dishes.

I shrugged.

"No. Me."

I shrugged again with a smile.

Selina swatted my chest in protest and backed away toward her room. Only then did I notice we were not alone on the roof. Against the wall were two exterior shower stalls with only flimsy curtains to keep out prying eyes.

Although I couldn't see her in the darkness, I could hear a female guest humming behind one of those curtains during her late-night shower. It was admittedly an open-rooftop concept, but I suddenly felt like we were shamefully intruding.

Selina led me to the door of her room, whose window opened up to the rooftop and whose front wall separated the room from the back of the showers.

She handed me the small key and I opened the padlock. It wasn't as difficult as she claimed, but there was a trick to it since the shackle looped though two hooks mounted on both the door and the frame. Locking it required two free hands; unlocking it was as easy as the turn of a key.

"There, I did my duty—"

Selina slid into the room and turned on the light. It was a simple layout with a single bed, a small closet for her clothes, a nightstand, a small table with a solitary chair, and a sink. Perhaps it had been a former servant's quarters or used as an attic for storage.

The other notable feature about the room: it was as hot as an oven. Selina opened the window, but it did little to diminish the insufferable heat.

"Evelina sleeps in here too?"

"She's across the hall. Are you going to come in?"

"No, I'm done here—"

Just then the shower girl entered the hallway carrying her shoes and her toiletry bag, her towel loosely covering her naked body. She shrieked when she saw me, and the towel slipped a little, exposing some cleavage.

I yelped a little, too, and instantly retreated into Selina's room—and then instinctively unbuttoned my shirt to fight the heat.

"That's better," Selina purred as she hiked up her dress and pulled it over her head in one swift motion.

Seeing she misunderstood my undressing, I buttoned up my shirt again and wiped away the perspiration developing on my brow.

"No, no, no—it's hot as balls in here. Don't you have a fan or something?"

Selina remained on her bed, holding her dress in her lap.

"Listen, I'm only in here because there's a naked girl in the hallway. I just need a minute."

I crept closer to the corridor and listened for a door slam.

"Why don't you sit down here with me?" asked Selina.

"I'm good up here."

Selina pouted. "Is this about the married wife again?"

"Yes, it's about the married wife again."

Selina tossed aside her dress and lay back across her sheets. If it was a sexy gesture, it also was an uncomfortable one. That single bed looked incapable of supporting two full-grown adults.

"She left you, no?"

"I'm sure she has a great explanation. She just hasn't told me yet," I snapped as I leaned into the hallway. Enough time had passed. The shower girl had to be inside her room by now.

"No conversation, you said. No note, you said."

"Well, isn't this convenient; you suddenly have an amazing memory for everything I already said. But you keep forgetting the part where I'm technically married!"

"*Technically*," Selina scoffed. And, then, with a rub of her tummy and an extended hand, she said, "I'm not going to leave you."