

PACO NEVER FAILS

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Adaptation by Andres Laszlo Jr.

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PART I

Francisco Garcia – Francisco León García Linares, to be more precise - was an honest and God-fearing citizen in Generalissimo Franco's Madrid of the 1940s. That could well be one possible explanation for the feelings of guilt and regret that overwhelmed him, the very instant he put the revolver that he had just purchased into his pocket. The cold metal that could be felt through the worn lining of his pocket deformed the crease in his trousers and made his gait awkward as it banged uncomfortably against his thigh every second step he took. Francisco slowed down his pace and immediately experienced some relief, something that he took advantage of to examine with more care the situation he was facing and his purchase. The truth was that he was already starting to regret that he had bought the weapon. He had a feeling that his bulging pocket was attracting the attention of everyone he passed and that he at any moment was about to be confronted by some upholder of the law.

When he turned the corner of the street harboring the market, he stopped, hesitating a few moments before a tavern he sometimes visited. From within he could hear the humming sound of a radio transmitter, broadcasting the daily news: as always, these focused on the war. Overcome by a sudden urge, he entered the tavern, ordered a glass of red wine, passed the counter, and continued to the men's room at the end of the corridor.

There he took the revolver out of his pocket and examined it carefully, something he had failed to do as he purchased it. The transfer of ownership had taken place in the flea market; out in the middle of the street with a

crowd of sellers, buyers and passer-byes, surrounding and quite possibly observing them.

Aside from the old double-barrelled rifle he had used thirty years or so ago, Francisco García had never held a weapon in his hands, and if asked, he would until a few minutes ago have answered that he never again expected to. This lack of experience was one reason why he was quite clumsy when he now fiddled with the ejector rod and a cylinder that was so dirty from lack of maintenance that it needed a lot of prodding before it would let go of the cartridges inside it. He pointed the weapon at a light globe full of flies and droppings that hung above the washbasin. He did not dare touch the trigger of the old German gun until he had checked twice that there were no cartridges left inside it.

He repeated the maneuver several times, coughing loudly, to camouflage the clicking of the trigger, in case the noise of the radio was not loud enough. He wrapped the revolver in his handkerchief, put the packet back into his pocket, and returned to the counter where his glass of wine was now waiting for him.

Though it was true that he in a way felt quite exhilarated, the emotions that filled him were contradictory. His self-respect had been satisfied, as it had turned out that the strange youth who had sold him the weapon had not tricked him. Apart from the dirty chambers - that he had now cleaned, using his handkerchief and that he planned to lubricate with a drop of olive oil once he got back home - the weapon seemed to be in perfect working order, and that was good. For eighty pesetas, he now held in his hands the lives of six men. Six was the number of bullets inside the rotating thing, and there was no doubt that he experienced an exhilarating feeling of power. What made the emotions inside him contradictory was not so much any precise feeling of having done something wrong, as a vague sensation of remorse; something that Francisco García had begun to feel only minutes after he had paid the young man. *Thou shalt not kill, it's a commandment*, he recalled to himself. Then he paid his wine and set off towards home, lunch, and siesta.

The sun was bearing down heavily, and in the middle of the summer, there are no shadows in Madrid to offer shelter from its rays. The asphalt had been so softened by the heat that that in places it had almost melted and

Francisco García took great care to keep his worn-down heels from getting stuck: in places he was quite literally walking on his toes. As every respectable Madrid male citizen of the times, he wore a black suit, a matching black tie, and a white shirt with starched cuffs and collar. It was the outfit of the *petit-bourgeois*, and it would have been a waste of time to try to explain to any *Madrileño* the inappropriateness of such apparel in the middle of the scorching Spanish summer.

In the window of a restaurant, Paco stopped to watch a richly illustrated poster, announcing a bullfight the following Sunday. He noticed the names of the three *matadors*: second division *toreros* all of them, if that. *Even the good toreros have the good sense to stay away from Madrid in this heat.*

“Three novices in Spain’s leading bullring and that at the height of the season! That’s simply not right!” an elderly gentleman standing next to him commented indignantly.

Francisco García shook his head in agreement and continued on his way.

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If at least I knew why I bought the bloody thing... he thought to himself on the stairs leading up to his apartment; he climbed them in a slow and measured fashion for fear of ruining the collar of his shirt with a rash movement. There simply was no valid reason. He did not believe he had any enemies for the moment, and - again, so he believed - he had never had any real serious ones even in the past. With no fortune, he wasn’t in a position to be envied, he had never harmed anyone, nor had he done anyone much good either, because Paco had early in his life understood the terrifying consequences such initiatives can so easily bring about in sunny and hot-blooded Spain. He had never participated in politics, not even during the Civil War, which he had managed to live through without having to wear a uniform for more than a couple of hours, even though he had lived in Madrid. Like most of his compatriots, he had initially felt some sympathy for the Germans. However, in May of 1935, on the terrace of a café, the employee of a German travel agency had made him aware that everybody from the area surrounding his hometown of Toledo was considered suspect

by the National Socialists that assumed most or all of them were of Semitic origins. Francisco, who initially had believed that the man telling him this was pulling his leg, was astounded to find out that his surname, Linares, really and doubtlessly was Sephardic, and that he thus would be considered at least half-Jewish, according to the Nazi laws that defined what it meant to be a Jew.

This revelation swiftly ended his Germanophile sentiments, and after this, he had swiftly changed his position. The burnings of the first few churches and convents had incurred in him such intense disgust that it had cured him of any political interest, or, more precisely, immunized him against such. It was not that he felt attracted to priests – rather, the opposite was true, as these had always inspired in him a certain aversion - but Francisco loved churches.

Towards the end of 1938 - when there were practically no youths left of age to wield a weapon in the capital because by then all were enlisted by one side or the other - he had been conscripted to the Armed Forces despite his delaying tactics, and the fact that he was no longer a young man. However, he had barely put his uniform on when he had managed to obtain an audience with his colonel. Lacking any better argument to get relieved of his new duties, he had simply confessed to his superior what he did for a living. After first having burst out laughing, the colonel had invited him to lunch, and the next day Paco had been returned to civilian status. The honorable colonel, though fascinated with Paco as a person, was not attracted by the idea that the name of himself and his regiment should be associated with that of a recruit with so risqué an occupation.

Francisco García was a famous man, and he had been so for many years. He had turned into a character so legendary that songs were written and sung about him, and endless anecdotes told throughout the country. Everywhere – among young and old, in the countryside, in the towns and in the capital - people called him by his nickname: “Paco.” The claim of Paco, or of “*Paco El Seguro*,” to fame was that he never – or, at least not very often – failed, i.e., “The Paco Who Never Fails”.

He lived on the third floor of an ancient building: a flat with one room and a kitchen. As the years had gone by, he had been forced to stop to catch

his breath on his way up the stairs ever more frequently, but he always tried to make sure that there were no witnesses, and if someone surprised him while catching his breath, he would rummage in his pocket, pretending to be looking for his keys.

*

Maria's husband had barely crossed the threshold of the kitchen, which also served as a living room when she realized that something was wrong: that Paco was in a bad mood. Her husband had dragged his right leg as he entered, and that virtually unnoticeable dragging sound never failed to signal his state of mind.

"Hello, Maria!" Paco said curtly, while his wife hurried over to remove his jacket.

He put his hands beneath the faucet, changed his shirt that was soaked in sweat, put on a pajama jacket, and sat down at the table before a smoking hot plate of stew. The husband and wife did not exchange a single word: not when Maria brought the cold fried tuna that was relatively fresh and which they shared in equal portions. Not even when she served him the steak with French fries, an event that Paco rarely missed to comment upon, did he say anything. Paco ate the meat and Maria the fried potatoes. For the past five years - in other words, since the beginning of the Civil war - she had renounced eating meat, a habit that at the time had affected their modest budget so much that it had threatened to disturb the harmony of their union.

Maria would have liked to talk, but when she noticed that her husband did not even touch the *Cabrales* cheese that she had managed to acquire only with the greatest difficulty, she decided that it would be wiser to hold her tongue.

While she removed the things from the table, Paco took off his shoes and went to the bedroom where, thanks to the drawn curtains, there was a fresher feeling despite the suffocating heat outside.

Unbuttoning his trousers, he suddenly felt himself overwhelmed by sudden and overwhelming sleepiness. His hands let go of the garment and

as they did, his trousers, with the revolver in the pocket, fell to the floor, making what to Paco seemed an ear-shattering noise.

Maria poked her head into the bedroom, "What was that?"

Paco pulled his trousers back up, "Nothing," he said, and for the first time in his life, he started his siesta without removing his trousers.

*

Paco would have had a siesta if only he had been able to sleep, but now the problems that had tormented him before lunch returned and as he pondered upon them, the situation was becoming even more complicated. To the issue of him not knowing why he had bought the gun now were added another and potentially even more troublesome one: where to keep it? He looked around the room, inspecting every single piece of furniture and every nook and cranny in search of a suitable hiding place. The room was not large, the furniture just a bare minimum, and Maria's diligence as a housewife made things even more complicated. Finally, with extreme care, he pulled out the outdoor stove from under the bed, and he hid the weapon between the metal base and the wooden frame.

He still had a good half hour to rest, and eventually, he managed to nod off a few minutes, thus recovering, at least temporarily, some of his equilibrium.

When he woke up, he quickly got dressed and combed his hair. Though not in a very patient mood, yet he managed to spare enough time to remove half a dozen or so of white hairs that had somehow managed to sneak into his small mustache where they tried to escape detection by hiding among the overwhelming majority of black hairs.

"Anything new?" he asked his wife, as he was about to leave.

"Pacita has sent a message saying she will come at half-past six."

"What Pacita?"

"The lawyer's Pacita."

"Oh, fine! Paco answered as he recalled, "if I am a little late, just tell her to wait."

*

It was no more than a few minutes past four when Paco entered through the revolving door of *Eldorado*. Gutierrez was seated at the *peña*'s usual table; Ambrosio was there too, fanning himself with a newspaper, even though he was sitting right in front of the fan. When he noticed that Gutiérrez was there, Paco wrinkled his nose and frowned: he considered this self-proclaimed artist too young to be worthy of the friendship of any serious man. He did not like the man's origins either: Gutiérrez had been born in the Canary Islands, and his father was a filthy rich banana exporter. What Paco liked even less was that the man, loud and clear, proclaiming himself a painter and that he acted as if he was a consummate artist. On the other hand, Paco felt great sympathy for Monsieur Ambroise, whom he held in the greatest esteem. Monsieur Ambroise had been living in Madrid for ten years, and by now, he spoke better Spanish than any of the rest of them, although he still did so with a slight French accent. Sometimes in a distant past, Monsieur Ambroise had been a history teacher at a provincial school in France and historical magazines in Paris still sometimes referred to, or quoted, scholarly articles written by him. Then one fine day Monsieur Ambroise had resigned his position at the school, finished all his business and taken a train to Madrid. He had intended to stay only for a few weeks, or a month at the most. However, the Madrid lifestyle - leisurely and with things temporal being of no or little importance - had seduced the Frenchman to the point where he had decided to settle in the Spanish capital.

Paco had hoped that he would be alone with Monsieur Ambroise and thus be able to have a private conversation with the man. However, that had been an unrealistic hope, because at this hour there were virtually always several people at the table.

"It's so hot!" the so-called painter exclaimed, just to say something, and not at all particularly indignantly, because of the three of them, his shirts were the only that was not soaked in sweat, "Thirty-eight degrees in the shade!"

Paco corrected him with a dry voice, "It's only thirty-six."

"I just saw thirty-eight on the thermometer over the pharmacy."

"In the *Retiro*, it's only thirty-five," Monsieur Ambroise, informed them. They just said so on the radio."

“Yes, but the *Retiro* is a park and full of large trees,” the painter replied, “not to mention a lake.”

Ricardo, the old eccentric waiter, and Paco’s good friend appeared with a coffee on a tray and a glass of brandy half-full. His free hand was outstretched to greet Paco before serving him, “Don’t forget that the pharmacy is in the *Puerta Del Sol* and it certainly wouldn’t occur to anyone to compare that to a freezer.”

“You’re right, even the children know that the *Puerta del Sol* is the hottest place in Madrid,” Paco said, as he slapped the tabletop with the palm of his hand. He talked in a peaceful manner, rather impersonally, but by his intonation and his slap, he had made it clear that he had no wish to pursue the subject any further.

Through the midst of the already dense smoke that flooded the room, Paco tried to locate Ramón, the bootblack, whom he expected to come along with his daily cigar. He eventually spotted the man who was busy at work at the other end of the large room. Ramón, who was on his knees in front of a customer at the first table facing the entrance, signaled that he would be over as soon as he finished with his present client.

Aided by another man Ramón, expertly and with great energy, was shining the shoes of a young Andalusian wearing a wide-brimmed hat. The spectacle of this young man – drunk as a skunk and leaning back into a red velvet couch - with two elderly men at his feet was an unusual one in Madrid, and probably in Andalusia as well. It seemed to Paco that Ramón must have created this scene quite intentionally; that his purpose for some reason must have been to catch the attention of Paco and the other clients in order to emphasize the originality of his customer and the situation.

The thought of a cigar did not appeal to Paco all that much, especially as he really had decided to deprive himself of this luxury for three or four weeks; the amount of time it would take to recover the money he had spent on buying the revolver. Doing without a cigar was not really a big problem, he smoked them mainly because any self-respecting man in Madrid is supposed to smoke a cigar together with his after-lunch coffee. One smokes a cigar in the same fashion as one has brandy or anisette, and the fact that he really liked neither brandy nor cigars was something he kept to himself.

Further analysis of the situation could well have made him ask himself another question: Why did he spend one-third of his income in this place full of insalubrious and downright disgusting smoke? *What a silly question!* Everyone did it; at least everybody who knew how to live.

During these reflections, Ramón had come over with the cigar box, and Paco did not hesitate. If he had been alone at the table or with Monsieur Ambroise – who, after all, was only a foreigner - he might have told the bootblack that he had an itchy throat and would rather pass. However, in front of this so-called painter, he could not expect to get away with so naïve a subterfuge. Expertly, without looking, he fingered the cigars in the box and chose the best, imported from the bloody Canary Islands. The purchasing of a cigar was much more than a question of selecting the best; it was a ritual. With a grand gesture, the payment was then handed to the seller, who in this manner obtained a small but regular income. At the tobacconist, the prices were, of course, a little bit lower, but who buys a cigar at the tobacconist. That would be tantamount to filling one's pockets with nuisances that said pockets had never been designed to hold and which in consequence could be damaged. Thus, one did not buy cigars from the tobacconist, and the same went for matches. One buys matches on the street - even if this, again, means that one will have to pay a surcharge - rather than at the kiosk, the tobacconist, or the newspaper stall. Only miserly old women are the exception to this rule. *If I could only understand why I bought that gun.*

His gaze stopped wandering as it reached Monsieur Ambroise, who was immersed in reading the daily paper. Paco continued with the ritual he had started; he removed the cellophane wrapper from the cigar with nimble fingers and crunched it into a ball. He then put a match to it and tossed the small torch into the almost empty coffee cup. He lit his cigar from the torch amidst the coffee-vapors that now emerged from the cup. The reflection of the thick solitaire on his little finger served to enhance the splendor of the ceremony. Yet, Paco was not attempting to provoke any form of reaction to his behavior; as far as he was concerned, this was nothing more than a display of good taste and respect for tradition.

Paco had nurtured a slight hope that he eventually would be left alone with the Frenchman, but when the painter ordered another coffee, Paco settled his bill, got up, and left.

*

In the square of *Plaza Mayor*, he entered an employment agency. He told the drowsy-looking clerk behind the glass partition that he wanted to see the director; he then sat down on a long wooden bench next to a maid who also was waiting for the director. Paco crossed his legs and tried to prepare himself properly to express the matter he had come to talk about.

The director of the agency - Don Federico, who, although only as an intermediary, was Paco's employer - sat in his office chair, leafing through the Sunday issue of the ABC newspaper; on the wall, there was a yellowing photograph of Belmonte. A stuffed file cabinet, a desk, a chipped ceramic inkwell, a leather-backed armchair, and an old safe - one that Paco from experience knew normally would contain at least one bottle of brandy - were the accessories that together gave this tiny room something of an office look.

Don Federico, finishing reading the obituaries section, carefully cut out the crossword puzzle, folded it neatly, put on his jacket that was hanging on the back of the armchair, and requested his latest visitor to enter.

"How are you?" he asked, "What's up?"

"Everything's fine and how are you doing?"

"Likewise."

Don Federico smiled pleasantly, revealing several gold teeth and then sat up in his armchair with the sort of authority that becomes a company director, "I hope you haven't come to ask me for money."

Paco, a little bothered, sat up in his chair, "I know," he said, "that we normally don't square our accounts until the day after tomorrow, but what can I do: I'm a bit short."

"And, do you think," the director replied, not without irony, "that I have the cash to stop a train, as they say? Please don't try to take advantage of me, my dear Paco."

"I would never dream of such a thing," Paco protested, "and I don't even think like that, you know that." Then he added in a conciliatory voice, to lighten up the situation, "But you also know that for people like me, Tuesdays always seem much longer than Mondays."

"Very well," Don Federico said, magnanimously and resignedly reaching for his wallet. "However, I trust that this is the last time you mistake me for the Bank of Spain. What do we owe you up to today?"

"Six times fifty pesetas," Paco answered without having to calculate, "three hundred."

"I think you are mistaken," the man answered, as he opened a register. "Let's see: Friday it was Lola, right?"

"Correct."

"Saturday... Saturday... Concha, am I right?"

"You are."

"Monday... Monday... Maria Dolores."

"Exactly."

"Tuesday, the other Concha."

"Yes, the fat one."

"Wednesday... Wednesday... I don't see anyone listed here. I beg your pardon, my mistake. Wednesday, Blanquita, right?"

"Yes."

The director closed the register, and he put on a serious face, "In total, five, and not six, my dear Paco. And, five times fifty no matter how many times we add it up, will come to no more than two hundred and fifty."

"It's that I..." Paco replied, uncomfortably, "I had also included today's work."

Don Federico considered several arguments that he could have used, some of them quite powerful and at least one even close to conclusive, but arguing tired him and he preferred to get rid of his inopportune visitor. Thus, he paid Paco the three hundred and was rather surprised when his visitor, instead of getting up to leave, started to explain the real reason for his visit.

"I have wanted to talk to you for a long time now, Don Federico, but I've always left it for some better moment. I am a man of my word and don't usually break my commitments once I have made them. However, you know

very well that prices for everything are increasing. Not a week goes by when the prices of this or that do not rise. For months now the price of fish - I mean, edible fish - has been exorbitantly high. And as far as chickpeas are concerned, it seems as if the people growing them must be using manure mixed with gold."

"Just a moment, I have lots of people waiting for me," Don Federico answered. "If you are telling me this because you want to ask me for a raise, you are wasting your time."

"Well, that's the precise reason," Paco replied, frowning a little. "I am sorry you won't let me finish because I am not a stonemason. I cannot settle for just anything to eat. My work is very delicate, and if I was to see myself forced to renounce my share of meat - and, by meat, I mean first-grade steak - I would have to look for employment elsewhere."

"And, what do you expect me to do? Have the wages for wet nurses increased since the last time we talked? No. What about me? Have I increased my commission? No, I have not, so what do you expect me to do?"

"I haven't come to beg from you," Paco said with indignation, "I am only asking you to understand. Let us talk about this man to man, I mean..."

"Doubtlessly you are right! I am perfectly aware of the fact that you are a hundred percent correct from your point of view. However, I also feel the pinch due to the increased costs of living and the war, as do the nurses. So what do you think I should do about your dilemma? I cannot even offer you any advice... Except, perhaps... Perhaps you could work a little harder."

Paco's face, virtually instantly, turned red as a beetroot, "I am not twenty years old anymore, or thirty. I passed forty some time ago. Most men my age, Don Federico, are quite happy if they can piss properly."

"I wasn't trying to give you any advice," said the director. "I was simply thinking out loud and..."

"Besides, apart from anything else, it isn't the quantity but the quality that counts in my profession. I suppose you do agree with me on that point?"

"I totally agree, but what do we gain by that? Let me think things over. I do not promise you anything because at the moment I cannot see a solution; the only thing I can promise you is that I will consider it seriously."

He accompanied Paco to the door and, reaching the threshold, he added, "There's one thing I have always wondered, but I have always been too... too embarrassed to ask."

"Yes?"

"How can a man carry out a profession like yours and be married at the same time?"

Paco desperately searched for a conclusive and at the same time witty answer, but the other man closed the door behind him before he could think of something appropriate to say.

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As he left his employer's office, he did not have anything in particular to do: it was not yet six o'clock, and he did not want to return home too early. He strolled over to the nearby handball court, a women's court, where the door attendant was a pleasant and understanding fellow. At this time of day, there were always empty seats, and, even if there were not, this was the time of day when Rodríguez, the half-blind antiquarian, would leave. Rodríguez had a front seat permanently reserved for himself, a seat that he invariably and as regularly as a clock vacated at this time. Paco was a regular visitor to the court too, and he had been so for many years. He knew it like the back of his hand, because for some reason that he could not comprehend this was where he could think the best. Every time he entered the place his bet was the smallest possible, and he virtually never gambled more than the two pesetas he had saved thanks to his free entrance. He always gambled on the first match, and his wager was always a 2:6 combination. Though he normally lost his deposit, this was money spent more providently than having a beer, and occasionally he would even return home with a small profit.

"Twenty red! Twenty red! Forty red!"

As he reached the stairs, he could hear the shouting of the punters intensifying, something that meant that the main game was about to begin. It would last three-quarters of an hour until a score of one hundred and thirty-five was reached so he would not have time to wait long enough for

it to finish. However, if he had, and if he had gotten lucky, he could have won enough to recover the money he had paid for the revolver.

Paco sat down in the sweltering court. The air was humid from the sweat of the athletes and the enormous old fans that probably had been manufactured sometime during the previous century increased the noise level without supplying the least bit of freshness. As he sat down in the old antique dealer's newly vacated chair, Paco was still searching for the answer he should have had ready to give the director earlier. However, the answers he now was coming up with were all, doubtlessly and thankfully, much more conciliatory and friendly than any answer that could have popped into his head that short moment before the door had closed behind him, and Paco congratulated himself for not having had the wit to come up with an impromptu answer. Such an unpremeditated answer would have been motivated by indignation, and perhaps he would even have ended up having an argument with the director. He had indeed felt furious at the time - boiling inside, even, actually - but now that rage had been replaced by nothing more than a slight wound to his self-esteem. He still felt humiliated by the remark about his wife, especially as a proper gentleman never alludes to the wife of another man; or, if he does, do so be purely out of politeness and without any allusion to intimate relations. Jokes about that subject, as well as unconsidered remarks, constituted definite breaches against good manners. Though Paco wished it was not so, a question such as the one posed by Don Federico could not be ignored; it could not be allowed to pass without further action. Yet, it was not a question of breaking up with Don Federico, as that would have made no sense at all. They had been working together for thirty years now, and they had done so without the slightest hick-up, at least without any significant such. A real disagreement between them would cause Paco to lose his livelihood. Besides, the matter could wait. Had the man been serious when he promised to consider Paco's situation? *God knows!*

The game was over. He glanced at his watch that suggested it was a quarter past two. Paco was familiar with his watch's daily rhythm, and he calculated that it must be about half-past six. He cautiously got up and left.

*

By the time he reached home, his wife was not alone in the kitchen. Pacita had sat down at the table and was helping peel potatoes while gaily chatting away. Maria must have warned the girl that her husband was likely to remain in a bad mood because the young girl did not seem one bit surprised when Paco did not answer her greeting.

The girl went directly into the bedroom where she started to get undressed. However, a glance at the bed, which Maria had covered with a dark rubber sheet, was enough for her to realize that she did not have to take anything off, not even her shoes.

“Come on!” Paco told her, “Hurry up!”

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“Now stay right there without moving,” Paco instructed, a little later, “and wait for Maria to call for you. If it doesn’t take, come back next month. Don Federico will let you know the date. Good luck.”

Paco was halfway through the doorway when he suddenly noticed big tears rolling down his wife’s cheeks. “What’s the matter?” he asked anxiously, walking over to Maria who was standing in front of the kitchen bench.

As he approached his wife, a violent whiff of onion reached his nose, and he immediately regretted this sudden and uncalled-for display of tenderness. Maria, surprised, held out the kitchen knife that she used to chop the raw vegetables.

*

He was in the *Puerta del Sol* - the center of the world, as every *Madrileño* knows – and he glanced at the newspaper headlines the street-sellers were displaying. He was walking towards *Café Granja el Henar* on *Alcalá*. Two gynecologists, both acquaintances of his, frequently visited this establishment at this time of day, and there was a good chance that at least one of them would be there. He did not enter but settled for walking along

the sidewalk between the entrance of the establishment and stairs leading to the nearby underground station, a tactic that would enable him to, should the opportunity arise, bump into one of the doctors as if by accident.

He did not like *el Henar* very much, as it was a bit too rustic for his taste. Besides, at this time of day, he would not have been able to order a coffee or a glass of wine but would have had to ask for a costly glass of vermouth. After a while, tired of walking back and forth like a caged animal, he gave up and headed back towards *Puerta del Sol*.

He felt a need to talk to someone and this urge was becoming ever acuter. Such a need for expression was very unusual in Paco, but having nobody to communicate with weighed ever heavier on him. With nothing to do and time on his hands, he made two tours of the square, a square that even at this late hour of the day was infernally hot. The small purple-colored clouds at the horizon seemed to suggest the possibility of some much wanted and needed rain, but that was an often-suggested possibility that hardly ever materialized, especially not at this time of the year.

Paco glanced through the windows of *Eldorado*, but nobody of his *peña* was there. The only familiar face was at the entrance to the underground where his friend Ricardo, the old waiter, was standing. "Cigarette-paper, matches, cigars," the old man repeated.

Paco was a faithful client, and he bought a packet of black tobacco cigarettes and paper while making a mental note that Ricardo would finish his work at nine. *What if I waited for him?* However, it would not do to catch him right at the underground exit... Maybe a little further on, by the tram stop... Paco would treat him to a drink, and the risk of being declined would be negligible since Ricardo was single and would not have any particular reason to rush off home. Paco pulled out a cigarette, rolled in a paper almost as bad as newspaper, opened it up, and rolled the tobacco into a leaf of the finer paper that he extracted from the small book of cigarette paper he had just purchased. Then he decided he'd go back to the handball court because though he could have returned home, of course, there would have been no good reason for doing so, as dinner wouldn't be ready until 10. Poor people's places are the homes for women and children; the poor husband only goes there to eat and sleep, and that only in the best of cases. As far as

trying to have a proper conversation with Maria, this was an enterprise surrounded by almost insurmountable difficulties, and Paco had given up any such attempts long ago.

Despite his bad mood, Paco had to smile when he envisaged the look on Maria's face if one day he would show her the object that now lay hidden under their bed. Obviously, he needed to talk to someone about the darn gun; there was no doubt about that. "Bloody hell!" he burst aloud.

His walking had taken him to *Calle Victoria* where he found himself standing in front of a tavern where he was a long-time client. The red wine they served was young, and at a *peseta*, a glass a portion of fried shrimps was included. After the first glass, he found the heat unbearable and left.

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No, the truth indeed was that he did not have any doubts; he indeed wanted to have a chat with Ricardo. The man, who was older than Paco and, if not more intelligent, at least much wiser than his occupation suggested. In addition, he was discretion personified, the proof of which was that he could not be provoked even by the nosiest and most unpleasant of clients. In addition to all this, there was another reason why the waiter could be trusted: Ricardo and Paco were both from Toledo, and being from the same town constituted a tie. They had known each other since times immemorial, and today they continued to be close, and even though they were not intimate pals, Paco considered Ricardo to be no less than a friend. Though he did not really feel indebted to Ricardo, yet in a way, it was thanks to the old waiter at *Eldorado* that Paco had been able to prosper and lead the carefree life he still to some extent enjoyed.

Paco had arrived in Madrid during the First World War and had started working in the capital as an apprentice locksmith. It should be said that he had not chosen that particular trade himself, nor was it his parents who had taken him to the capital. It was pure chance that had brought him to Madrid and left him there. One day, because of the wedding of a relative, a master locksmith had come to the village, declaring that he would be willing to teach the secrets of his trade to "a village youth." Paco, who ever since he

was a toddler had dreamt of going to *El Capital*, had not hesitated a second. In exchange for his work, he had been fed and housed. The food was not bad, and there had been plenty of it; the problem was that the young apprentice had not been given a *centimo* to spend.

That made life difficult, because – though at that time he yet did not smoke, and drank water rather than wine – there was one thing he simply could not do without. Women. This basic physical need in him was much stronger than in other men: Paco needed women in much the same fashion as other youths of his age needed to talk about them, and Ricardo was the man who had solved his dilemma. At the time, he had worked as a waiter at *El Habanero* that was located in a ruin of a building on *Calle los Leones*. The establishment where Ricardo worked had been a place of a singular nature; one where female clients of an adventuresome disposition could have themselves served a dish euphemistically described as “coffee” after lunch or dinner.

The male clientele of *El Habanero* was constituted mostly by youths, many so young that they still were growing in both body and mind. The women would either meet their young admirers there or come there to look for a date. Despite its explicit nature, this trafficking could not really be considered immoral: the consoled youths did not receive any remuneration for the services they rendered and if the women paid for the room and whatever their companions had consumed during their hour together, so what.

Inside the century-old walls of this honorable institution what had been the only obstacle between Paco and total contentment had been dealt with in a manner that was more than satisfactory. It was made all the easier by the fact that he was not hard to please. In addition, he was discreet; he never asked any inopportune questions of his woman friends, and soon he became the darling of the establishment. Paco was delighted with life and wished from it nothing more than that this pleasant situation should last for as long as possible. Unfortunately, only a few months later that hope was dealt a fatal blow.

The women, of whom most were not stunning beauties, normally were not young either. Though they could not really be considered old, yet they

had reached that age at which physiological complications arising from a brief encounter become as rare as snow in the month of May. Nevertheless, it became known, only a couple of months after Paco's discovery of the place that three of Paco's admirers - three serious, no-nonsense, well-paying clients of *El Habanero* - were in the family way. Events of this nature aren't easily kept secret, and one day the owner of the establishment - who didn't like the reputation of "his place" to be tainted by events such as these - had asked Paco for a private conversation. The owner had described the consequences of the young man's lack of carefulness and had suggested he would be more cautious in the future. The tone of the owner's words had lacked any measure of friendliness or respect and Paco, sharply stung, had replied that he did not enjoy being cautious nor was he able to. The meticulous patron, conscious of his responsibilities to his clients, immediately banned the young and proud cock from entering his establishment.

Though Paco had never again put his foot in *El Habanero* yet, years later, he had visited the district. Having recalled the events of his youth, curiosity had led him to go back to his first hunting grounds, but the café and even the entire street it had been located at had been demolished.

Paco ordered another glass of red wine that he found rougher and stronger than the first. It was becoming dark, and in the establishment, they were turning on the gaslights. After a merry burp, a lively flame sprung up. Paco smiled; he so preferred gas to electricity.

*

Ricardo had solved Paco's women-problem not once but twice because he was also the person who unasked had looked into Paco's new and problematic situation the second time he had encountered women-difficulties. Once again, Ricardo had succeeded in solving Paco's problem, and this time the solution had given a new direction to the young man's entire existence.

Asked to distance himself from *El Habanero* - "distance" a word far from harsh enough to describe the exchange that really took place - Paco

was not able to find his way in life. He had swiftly grown used to both comfort and women; now he had nothing of that, and he no longer knew how to spend neither his leisure time nor his energy.

Then on a memorable October afternoon, his friend had introduced him to Don Federico. Paco had never understood how Ricardo had managed to find the man, nor had he ever asked. Paco remembered that day as if it had been yesterday. His friend had at the time worked in *Fornos*, a café frequented mainly by artists and the sort of people that gravitated around such. There the two men were introduced to each other. It should be said that at that time Don Federico did not own any property, so his office, so to say, he was carrying along with him. In addition, at the time, people called him simply Federico, and it was not until much later that he decided to add the “Don” before his name. More specifically, it was the very same day as he opened his office that he had given in to that temptation.

At that time, Federico had been searching for a collaborator: someone who could help him increase his income by performing a very special and delicate job. The reputation Paco had already acquired, together with the fact that he in all aspects seemed to be a trustworthy man, seemingly made him a perfect candidate for the job Federico had in mind.