

LBRIS

We know
books

the Intrigue

Silvia Moreno-Garcia



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1943

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HE WAS GOING TO MAKE A CHOICE, EITHER THE WIDOW FROM MONCLOVA or the spinster from that town in Veracruz. Puerco Ahogado, that was the name of it. A little place on the slopes of a mountain; picturesque, he supposed. Dull. He much preferred large cities.

But he was running low on cash. The guest-house where he lodged did not have the best of clienteles, which meant that despite its central location it remained something of a steal. Yet between his weekly room and board, his lunches and dinners—the lodging house provided a meager breakfast—the dry-cleaning bill, and the like, he was down to his last few pesos.

His father would have known what to do. Even when all the old man had in his pocket was scraps of paper, he understood how to pull

a con. He always got them out of trouble, got them a warm meal and a new place.

He had his father's seductive eyes, but he'd been spared his wit. This flaw, this lack of a certain spark, a certain criminal talent, had not struck him as tragic until he'd had to battle the world on his own. But after three years now without his father, he was rudderless, hardly able to remain afloat.

He knotted his tie and smoothed it, peering in the mirror. He inspected his face with care, attuned to the most minimal flaw that might mar his appearance. When he was twenty, his hair had started to gray prematurely, and at twenty-nine, his temples were now streaked a lush silver. Otherwise, time was being kind to him: the silver served to enhance his features. Yet how long would that last? He looked at his hairline, at his gleaming eyes, and remembered the jaundiced skin of his father during his last, painful days.

He wasn't old. Not yet. Not for a long time.

Quickly he finished getting dressed. There was no need for pomp and ceremony that afternoon. He was meeting with Moisés. Nevertheless, he was in the habit of dressing well, of good grooming, of fine colognes and shirts cut to fit his frame. It had been inculcated in him by his old man. It was a costume he donned to play his part.

He went down the narrow stairs and crossed the interior patio of the house with quick, determined steps. He was trying to avoid encountering Don Pánfilo, the owner of the rat-infested lodging house. But, as usual, the bastard was hiding behind his door and strolled into the courtyard carrying a battered watering can at the exact moment he was about to reach the front entrance.

"You have more letters, Mr. Linares," the man grumbled. He wore a shirt that had been white at some point in time but was now a pale yellow. His teeth matched the shirt: they were the yellow of dirty urinals. "They arrived a few minutes ago."

"Thanks for letting me know," he said, tipping his hat in greeting.

"I got them right here," the man said, slipping a hand into his back pocket and producing the envelopes. "More news from Veracruz, eh? Three days ago you got that other letter. Might be something important, no?"

"I suppose so," he replied irritably. Don Pánfilo liked to gossip and know everyone's business. Ulises was sure he sometimes even opened the mail of the residents.

To conceal his identity Ulises created aliases. Although he was fond of Ulises Linares as a name and employed it frequently in Mexico City, in other towns he was other people.

Don Pánfilo held the letters up but didn't hand them to him. "The rent was due yesterday," he said. "You're late again."

"You must forgive me, I'm scatterbrained these days. Tomorrow. I'll have the rent tomorrow."

Don Pánfilo frowned, but he handed Ulises his correspondence. Soon, Ulises was strolling down Paseo de la Reforma, which was bursting with cars, buses, and taxis. His old man had loved this avenue. It looked like Paris, his father said. Like les Champs-Élysées, which was one of the great wonders of the modern world. His father, now dead and buried, pointing at pictures of exotic locales in magazines and books.

He bought a paper and a box of Luckies. At a cross street, he palmed the letters into his pocket. Rather than taking a cab, he walked to the Lady Baltimore, for he was dreadfully troubled when it came to money and couldn't spare the fare.

A grubby beggar stretched out a hand as he turned a corner, surprising him. For a few seconds he stared into a pair of eyes still crusty from sleep, into a strained face lined with deep wrinkles that were caked with dirt. He did not have a coin, and he sped up his steps, trying to avoid the sight of misery.

When he reached the coffee shop, he grimaced. The place was packed, filled with its usual mixture of wealthy Mexicans and silly American tourists. Boy, there were a lot of American tourists these days,

and everyone was fascinated by them. There was gringo fever in the air, and all because of the war. Young women were wide-eyed at the thought of the GIs fighting in Europe, and young men were proudly talking about how Mexicans must join the fray, knock out the teeth of a few Nazis. This enthusiasm even had fashionable youths tying red-white-and-blue flags to their vehicles to show how much they cared for their northern neighbors.

Yet not long ago, the Germans had held the hearts of some of these dazzled men and women. More than one socialite had flown swastikas together with the Mexican flag on the antennas of their cars, and the esteemed scholar José Vasconcelos wrote in *Timón* about the virtues of Hitler.

Ulises couldn't understand what they'd seen in that rotten bastard. Perhaps the thought of lucrative German contracts had muddled their senses. Who knew? What a miserable, unnecessary war this was; even from afar its violence spooked him.

War and war efforts and him without a proper con to pull, having to order coffee and cake at the loud, overpriced Lady Baltimore. He would have never picked this spot for a meeting. He liked more anonymous places, a Turkish restaurant down Correo Mayor or a discreet tea parlor tucked away in La Roma.

He was able to navigate the narrow maze of tables, walking past women who dyed their cigarettes red with their lipstick as they smoked and paused to take sips of their coffee, past a small group of high school students giggling in their blue-and-green uniforms, past the blond heads of foreigners in shorts and sandals who looked like they had wandered in from a beach rather than the streets of Mexico City.

At last, he found an empty table and sat down with a sigh of relief, ordered a coffee, and unfolded the newspaper he'd been carrying under his arm. He ignored the front page with its headlines about war—he'd woken up late and had not had a bite yet; he could not read awful news

on an empty stomach. There were plenty of soirées at the Churubusco Country Club, “Ladies’ Teas” with delicious canapés, “Folkloric Fiestas” where the elites dressed in indigenous costumes, famous jai alai players who visited exclusive nightclubs, to fill the society pages of the newspaper.

How he loved to look at the pictures of beautiful debutantes and glamorous middle-aged women in their designer gowns, the men matching their refinement with their black “smokings” and bow ties. Only after he’d feasted upon the dazzling photos and the inconsequential headlines that spoke of the charming wives of the members of the Rotary Club and their gardening activities did he unfold one of the letters and begin reading.

He knew Moisés would be late, which was why he’d brought his work with him. One letter from the woman from Monclova, the other from the one in Veracruz. When he was done reading them, he twirled his pen between his fingers, still unsure. He’d been unsure for days now.

The woman from Veracruz was fortyish, never married. She owned a guesthouse but was vague about her full financial position and had mentioned a niece who lived with her. He’d been equally vague about his finances, assured her he was a gentleman, and told her he was thirty-eight. He regularly aged himself up or down, depending on what circumstances necessitated, depending on his target. He painted his hair black and shaved clean when he wanted to look younger. For now, he’d let the silver return to his temples and sported a mustache, thinking he might need to pretend to be older.

In his defense, women also fibbed about their age, and the woman from Veracruz had initially written that she was forty only to later admit she was in fact turning forty-three.

The woman from Monclova was thirty. His peer. To her he hadn’t fibbed about his age, though he had made up a pack of lies about wanting and loving children because the widow had three of them, ages eight,

six, and four. He thought she offered more solid possibilities than the woman from Veracruz, but he was struck with a superstitious fear about bilking a widow again.

After all, Cornelia Aguirre had been a widow, and look where that had got him. He'd had to run out of Jalisco with barely a suitcase clutched between his sweaty palms. And she'd been a fine mark too! Wealthy! Gullible! If it hadn't been for her sons, he would have secured a small fortune.

Or maybe not. His father had always cautioned him to go for the small cons, never the big ones. Small and steady, you could build a nest egg. Of course, there was no nest egg left now. Not after it had been drained dry by his father's illness. Alone, he'd done what he could. Alone, he had zeroed in on the widow Aguirre and lost.

"What are you doing here, tucked in the corner? You can't see the pretty girls walking by," Moisés said as he pulled over a chair and plopped himself down without ceremony.

Moisés wore a striped shirt and too much Vaseline in his hair. He was a gigolo who made his money conning tourists. He'd sweep a woman off her feet with a few well-placed lines, then make off with cash or jewelry, promptly removing any real diamonds or rubies from their settings and selling them at obscure shops in La Lagunilla.

Moisés took off his sunglasses and tossed them on the table. "How are you?"

"Fine," Ulises muttered. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "Here. Have a look," he said, without bothering with more chatter, eager to simply seal the bargain and get the hell out of the coffee shop.

He took the camera from his shoulder bag and handed it to Moisés. Moisés turned it between his hands, examining it.

"What do you think?"

Moisés rattled off a figure. When Ulises protested, Moisés laughed. "Now, now, you know how it goes. Hot goods—"

"It's not stolen. It's mine."

Moisés looked at him in confusion. "Really?"

It was true. The camera had been a gift from the widow Aguirre.

"Then why not pawn it?"

"It's all the same, isn't it? Why bother with pawn tickets? Besides, I'm too busy to be haggling with those clowns," he said, although the truth was he was trying to lie low; he didn't want to show his face around Monte de Piedad or any of the shops his father had frequented. He felt a little paranoid.

There were scant threads that connected Ulises to Jalisco. He'd used another name there and spun a fake background for himself. But he hadn't been able to collect a few letters, a couple of postcards, which in his haste he'd left behind in his apartment. Two of those postcards tied him to an address in Iztapalapa and might offer a muddy path to his current whereabouts: he'd used his landlady there as a reference for the rooming house where he now lived when he'd been unable to secure his old room upon his return to Mexico City.

But it was unlikely anyone would be thorough or driven enough to make that connection, and the postcards were, at any rate, innocent enough in their content. They had been mailed by his father and were simple greetings from five years back, when his old man had taken a seaside vacation to try to improve his health.

He was safe. Perhaps.

Moisés raised an eyebrow at Ulises, clearly unconvinced by his words, but he pulled several bills from his wallet and handed them to him.

"I could use a guy like you," Moisés said. "You have the looks, and you speak English."

French too. His father had taught him everything he knew, and that included languages. He was particular about his son's education, making sure he didn't grow up to become a cheap thug from a bad neighborhood. His father had made himself into a gentleman through force of

will and smarts. It was hard to picture his father growing up in a dismal vecindad, though that was where he'd started his life, an uncouth nobody who managed to escape his past. At least for a while.

Ulises knew where the work Moisés offered led: nowhere. And there was something seedy about those operations, about the men who entrapped the unwary tourists. He thought the business of lonely hearts letters was cleaner. More dignified. If he played well, he didn't even have to fuck his target. In Moisés's line of business, the fucking was necessary. An essential component. The sneaking out of the room in the middle of the night, without making any noise, with a woman's pearls and her change purse tucked in one's pocket, struck him as obscene.

It was cheap. He and his father had worked the small cons, but they had never been cheap. Yet here he was, and if he didn't tread carefully, he might wind up a beggar on the street like the one he'd bumped into that morning.

"I thought you already had boys working for you. That fellow with the curly hair, and the other one—"

"David? He's retired."

Doubtful. The police had likely caught him. That was the trouble with being the guy with the sticky fingers. He was the one the cops went after with their nightsticks.

"What are you going to do, then?" Moisés asked, and his expression struck Ulises as a tad mocking. Snide. As if Moisés were thinking, *What makes you so much better than us?*

He bade Moisés a curt goodbye and stepped out of the coffee shop. He took his time walking back to the guesthouse, pausing to look forlornly across the street at the bank where his father had once rented a safety-deposit box and kept his valuables. All of that had been sold.

Once he neared the guesthouse he quickened his steps, thinking he might be able to evade detection. No use. Near the staircase he bumped into Don Pánfilo, who smiled his yellow smile at him.

"I dropped a telegram underneath your door," his landlord said.

"Thank you. I swear I'll have the rent tomorrow."

"You make sure of that. It's a disgrace what the world has come to. Tenants always in arrears, and the price of everything keeps rising."

"I know, sir, I know."

By the time Ulises slipped back into his room and took off his jacket, night had fallen. He was rereading the telegram when the lights went off. It was another of the drills President Camacho had organized. Apagones. As if German bombers really were going to cross the Atlantic and bother with Mexico City. Unlikely, and yet the thought of bombed-out ruins ran through his head, and the images he tried to ignore in the newspaper lodged behind his eyelids late at night. Hitler's panzers advancing across Europe, turning palaces into rubble. Corpses littering empty fields, as abundant as wildflowers.

He thought about Moisés's job offer and grimaced. He lit a candle and lay on the bed, his right hand behind his head, staring at the ceiling while he smoked his second cigarette of the day.

Why had he been stupid? Why had he gone after the widow Aguirre? She had three sons, after all. Three fuming, thirtysomething sons who didn't appreciate that a young man had latched on to their mother, that she'd bought him cuff links and the new camera and even a car.

If only she'd signed the papers. He'd thought she would do it. She'd seemed interested in his business proposition; she'd been ready to hand him a sizable check as a deposit. But then she had the audacity to ask one of her sons for advice, and that son called the other sons, and the scheme came tumbling down.

When the widow Aguirre discovered that there was no hotel development in Acapulco, she'd promptly gone into hysterics. He couldn't be blamed for that. He hadn't even been in the room when it happened. It had been her sons, badgering the poor woman, who pushed her to the edge with their questions and their recriminations. But no matter. Afterward, there was nothing to do but to flee with only a few possessions.

He took another puff of his cigarette, let the smoke trail up from the