

THE LAST FIESTA

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RedDoor

Published by RedDoor
www.reddoorpublishing.com

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Previously published in paperback by Thistle Publishing

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ISBN 978-1-910453-15-5

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Cover design: Rawshock design

Typesetting: www.typesetter.org

Printed in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

DEDICATION

To Dad, who never got to read this
and to Mum and María

In memory of Moncho Burgues Mogro

I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death.

Ernest Hemingway, *Death In The Afternoon*

Matthew Peter Tassio, a twenty-two-year old student, bled to death in minutes after being gored in the penultimate bull running of San Fermín. Tassio became the first victim of these fiestas, as he sought to live the literary myth created by Ernest Hemingway in his celebrated work, 'Fiesta'.

El País, Friday 14 July 1995

I'd always reckoned talking to the dead was for those close to the edge, or for those who'd already taken the leap. But I don't feel myself near the danger sign, let alone the drop, and yet I had to talk to him. He'd left me with a wide choice of places from around the world where we could start; mostly exotic, dangerous places where he forged his reputation and became a legend. But, try as I might to change the setting, to mix it up a bit as I lay in bed having our imaginary conversations, we always ended up in the same place.

And so I see him in a bar in Cuba, in his last few years, with that white beard, surrounded by fishing friends, sycophants, cigar smoke; alone in his drink. I cut through them all and join him, and wonder what to call him. Mr Hemingway? Ernest? I choose Papa though, because the amount of drink I need to get near to him has given me the courage to be that familiar.

At this point our conversation can go several ways. Maybe he'd ignore me. Maybe he'd cut me down with tongue or fist. Maybe he'd let me in.

I decide on the last option, and we talk. I tell him why I've called him by his nickname, that it somehow brings him closer and makes it harder for me to round on a dead man who can't defend himself. But I also let him know I've listened to him for weeks, months, without him knowing, and now it's his turn. There are things I need to tell him, things he needs to know because unwittingly he had a hand in this too.

I'm not saying he had anything to do with their affair, nor with the carnage that followed. Besides, he didn't even know them; he was dead long before. But it was his book *Fiesta* which prompted Billy to come out here in the first place and head for Pamplona, and for that reason alone, he's involved in this too.

So I buy the drinks, mojitos, one after another, and I tell him the whole thing as he listens patiently, intently. I tell him about their affair, of Billy's ultimate desire to escape and of hers to keep him forever, and how it all ended up in Spain. At last I finish, he nods and I shake his hand. I thank him. I thank him very much. I fight off the urge to hug him, the lovely bastard.

FIVE DAYS TO PAMPLONA JULY 1995

‘Got a bit of a limp there, Billy.’

‘Yeah.’

He didn’t explain.

Even with the limp, I’d recognised him straight away as he stepped out from the customs hall across the black marble floor. He was as lean as ever, tight and defined under a plain white T-shirt, though his blond hair was shorter and the stubble darker. He wore red Converse boots that were faded and scuffed, and strapped to his back was a beaten-up army rucksack.

Eleven years had left few marks. The odd line on his face was sharper now, but those metallic blue eyes were just the same. I put my arm round his shoulder. ‘Great to see you again!’

‘Yeah. Good to be here.’

‘On manoeuvres, are you?’ I patted his rucksack.

‘That’s right,’ he said, then smiled. His was a real smile; it almost closed his eyes.

‘Good flight?’

He paused for a moment. ‘So-so,’ he said.

He’d tell me later that week, as we drove back through the Hermida gorge, that he’d nearly turned back at the departure gate because he’d sensed what I’d done. And I can see him

now, eyebrows drawn together as he looks out of the window at the trawlers cutting through a choppy Bay of Biscay. I can see the plane banking right and Biscay turning to clear blue skies, and by the time it's levelled out, the bay has been replaced by rolling wooded hills as they make their final approach. I can see Billy looking out of the window again, down at the huge cemetery, row after row of family sepulchres slipping by under him, seconds before landing in Spain.

A long line of yellow and black taxis waited in the sun, like a giant basking snake. We took the one at the front.

There was heavy traffic just outside the airport. 'I think there's a road block up ahead. Probably an ETA thing.'

'Well, we're not in any rush, are we?'

'No,' I said, eyes on the meter.

The taxi driver sighed and lit a cigarette as we crawled forward a few feet before stopping again. The smoke curled up and out of his open window. He mumbled something I didn't catch, but it sounded Basque and negative.

On the hard shoulder, two Guardia Civil were checking out a beaten-up red Citroën 2CV with a Bilbao number plate. One was looking under the dashboard, the other was questioning the driver, who leaned against the car, his arms folded.

Through the road block, we picked up speed. A jet rumbled in the distance, climbing steeply out over the Atlantic. To our right, in the valley below us, factory after factory blew out smoke. Along the river, huge derricks stooped over rusty water.

‘So how was Paris?’

‘Fine. Didn’t sleep too good.’

‘Was she nice?’

‘There was none of that,’ he said, then smiled, his eyes almost closing.

‘I don’t believe you!’

I couldn’t believe he was here in Spain! When he left for the States after school, I didn’t think I’d ever see him again. Billy was the sort of person that moved with the world and travelled light, shedding all his old baggage behind him. It always seemed to me that for him, friendships were disposable.

In the city centre, the taxi driver lifted his arm at a boy on a moped with a girl riding pillion. Her crimson hair flowed behind her as they swung stylishly in front of us, just inches off the bumper. They made the lights, we didn’t. ‘Cabrón!’ our driver shouted.

‘So what are you up to these days?’ I asked.

‘This and that.’

I waited for him to expand. At last the lights turned green.

‘Such as?’

‘Different things.’

We passed the couple on the moped. They’d parked up and were standing on the pavement, kissing. ‘Like what?’

‘Various stuff.’

He was still annoyingly vague when he wanted to be. Mind you, at school he never really talked about himself

much, or his family. I knew his father was a colonel in the US Army and his mother took care of the house back in San Francisco, but not much else. He did tell me once though that his father could be a mean bastard, and that was where the six-inch scar that ran across the base of his back came from.

The bus took us west on the new motorway out of Bilbao, past the factories, the dismal high-rise flats and sprawling suburbs, then around the front of Petronor, a huge oil works, with its twisted mass of tubes and its smoking pipes and flames. At night, all lit up, it takes on an awesome and grotesque beauty.

He fell asleep soon after. I woke him as we reached the bus station in Santander.

‘Like I was saying yesterday when you called,’ I said in the taxi, as we passed the statue of General Franco too fast to see the red paint of protest on the side of his horse, the spattering of bird shit on his helmet, ‘we’re going to be meeting up with a few people.’

‘So you said.’

‘With Simon and Eddy. And Simon’s coming out with his fiancée.’

Billy smiled, but his eyes didn’t close this time. ‘Great,’ he said at last. ‘I had a feeling it was him.’ We slipped along the dark, narrow side streets. The driver drove over some finely broken glass as if it wasn’t there. ‘What’s she like?’

‘I’ve never met her.’

The taxi stopped just past the tiny corner shop on my

street, where the usual group of old men were playing cards, drinking, smoking, shouting under a tired row of hams.

I held the lobby door open for Billy and we climbed the steps then crossed the courtyard. As always, the Airedale on the balcony two floors up started barking. Its bark bounced and echoed off the damp walls.

Three flights of stairs later, I opened the door of my rented flat.

‘Let me take your rucksack.’

Billy passed it to me. I was surprised how light it was as I put it on the scuffed parquet floor.

‘I didn’t realise Simon and Eddy were good friends.’

‘They knew each other fairly well.’

‘I know he fancied Eddy’s sister. Quite fit if I remember right.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Laura, wasn’t it?’

‘Lisa.’ Quite fit? She was gorgeous. ‘I thought it would be good to get Eddy out too.’ I had my own reasons for inviting Eddy. Things I needed to know. Things I wasn’t going to reveal to Billy, not just then, anyway.

I showed him into the lounge. He didn’t seem to notice the crack at the bottom of the glass door, the tape recorder with the play button missing, the tear on the arm of the fake leather cherry red sofa.

He looked out across the bay to the mountains on the other side. ‘Nice view.’

I took the compliment personally, like I was somehow responsible for the hills and the sea, like I’d put them there for him to see. ‘Smart, isn’t it?’

He yawned loudly.

‘So if it wasn’t a woman, what kept you up?’

‘The bed,’ he said, still looking out towards the mountains. ‘The bed in the hostel was shot.’

I stepped up beside him, respecting the silence, like we were viewing a large canvas in a gallery.

‘So are you looking forward to seeing Simon and Eddy again?’

‘Of course I am,’ he said flatly, at the dirty panes ahead.

As Billy showered, I sat picking at the foam under the tear on the fake leather sofa, wondering why he hadn’t seemed that excited about seeing Simon and Eddy again. Billy had stayed several times with Simon in the Easter holiday, down at Simon’s parents’ place in Hampshire, or at their cottage in Cornwall. And in our final year they’d shared Simon’s library of Revolution and Billy’s stash of drugs. I imagined lack of contact had pushed them apart. But it didn’t worry me. Billy was the magnet who’d draw us all in once more, if only for a week.

The sand was warm as we walked along the crowded beaches past the Magdalena peninsula. What cloud there was, hung high and wispy. A cool breeze from the north had died away the night before and the chances were a south wind was on its way, bringing nothing but dust and hot air for the next few days. They say it drives people crazy if it blows long enough.

‘You don’t mind me inviting Simon and Eddy along?’

‘No.’ He shook his head and chuckled.

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I tried getting a few others out, but none of them could make it. Andy Melville’s in a forest somewhere in India, trying to save the world. And Paul Turner’s just bought a house.’

‘And Simon? What’s he up to?’

‘No idea. I imagine he’s sitting up some ivory tower somewhere, plotting the Revolution.’

Billy smiled. ‘Didn’t keep in touch then?’

‘No, I haven’t seen him since his twenty-first. Didn’t even know he had a fiancée. That was the last time I saw Eddy, as well.’

‘Could be an interesting week.’

The surf was big for a windless day. We carried on up to the lighthouse and stopped in front of the memorial cross on the edge of the cliff. At the bottom of the cross, a carved stone figure clung desperately to the plinth, looking down in horror at the fall that awaited him.

‘What’s this about?’

‘Republicans pushed some of Franco’s supporters off the cliffs here, during the Civil War. It’s to commemorate the dead.’

‘I thought it was Franco’s lot that did that sort of thing.’

‘They were all at it. Hard to believe what people will do to each other once you put them in an army.’

We climbed onto the wall by the statue and looked down the craggy cliff face. Waves thundered against rocks below, fine spray rising in thick clouds and falling delicately, like

flour exploding from a dropped bag. 'I was in the army, you know?' he finally said.

'Yes?'

'Yeah, I was.'

Even though he came from a military family, it was about the last thing I'd expected. At school he'd found his niche amongst the girls and drink and drugs, and I'd always felt that that lifestyle would stay with Billy for life.

'You're about the last person I'd have imagined in the army, Billy.'

'Well, there you go.' He filled his nostrils with sea air and breathed out through his mouth. 'You must get great surf out here.'

'Yes,' I said, wondering why he'd changed the subject. 'We do.'

We sat out on the terrace of one of the cafés in the main square, a burgundy parasol offering protection from the smothering sun. I held out a packet of Lucky Strikes to Billy. He shook his head. I lit one myself and watched Billy's eyes follow a beautiful girl with silk black hair and a short, hip-hugging skirt crossing the square. The bow-tied waiter came out with two beers and glasses on a tray and placed it on the table.

'Gracias,' I said. I handed Billy the bottle and took one myself. We didn't bother with glasses. 'Cheers, Billy.'

'Cheers.'

'So what made you join the army?'

'Thought I'd do something different, I suppose.'

‘It’s different. That’s for sure.’

He sipped his beer, played with the label round the neck of the bottle. ‘And what made you come out here?’

‘I was working in London doing my Articles and just fancied a change. I decided Law wasn’t for me, and I was tired of London.’

‘What’s that saying? Tired of London, tired of life.’

‘There’s much more to life than London. Just look around.’ Now wasn’t the time to reveal the messy stuff, the rotten wood under the paint and filler. Now was a time for the varnish. ‘It’s beautiful here.’

‘Yeah, you’ve got the life out here, all right.’ He looked out across the busy, sun-struck plaza. ‘That’s what counts.’

‘You wait till we get to Pamplona. You’ve seen nothing yet.’

‘So I’ve heard.’

‘Are you going to run then, Billy?’

‘No. And you?’

‘No chance.’ Call it what you want, but I’d already run away from England all the way to Spain. That was enough running for the time being. ‘I bet you change your mind.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No way.’

I didn’t believe him though. His love of adventure and his reckless spirit ran too deep. And he had balls, real balls; you could see them in his eyes. I remember going to see The Clash with him once, up in Brixton one holiday, and we were stopped by these four huge black boys. First they asked for a light, then our money.

‘We’ll settle this down the nearest alleyway if you want,’ Billy told them, and you could tell he meant it too.

‘You’re safe, man,’ one of them said, before they walked on past.

I remember thinking ‘safe’ wouldn’t have been the adjective I’d have chosen for Billy. Anything but.

Later on that afternoon in the flat, I got a call from Welsh Richard inviting us to his party that night. It felt good as I hung up. His parties were the ones I wish I could have thrown myself – loud music, a flow of drink, bunches of beautiful women – and as far as Billy was concerned, it would look like I knew a lot of people, had a lot of friends.

The truth of it though was very different. I couldn’t speak the language when I first arrived and so I hung around the ex-pat community. It was a mixed bunch, ranging from the interesting and integrated, to the misfits and escapees. Of course the interesting and integrated were normally off doing interesting and integrated things so I hardly got to meet them, and I naturally fell in with the other lot. New country, bars open all night; at five, six, seven in the morning, I’d be hanging around some real bitter losers, pissing my money away.

They soon had him surrounded. Richard’s studio flat in the attic was packed, but they still found Billy quickly. He was standing next to the window that looked out over the deserted market with three Spanish girls around him.

‘Your friend looks like he’s enjoying himself,’ Richard said.

‘I bet he gets off with Enara tonight.’

‘I think the book’s closed on that one, mate!’

Enara was exceptionally beautiful, the pick of a very nice bunch. She had deep brown eyes and jet black glossy hair which flowed halfway down her back. She was firm-bodied, her back curved like an unflexed bow. We’d got very close at one point and I’d tried it on.

Enara left the group and inspected the drinks on the table that we were standing next to.

Richard winked at her and tilted his balding head back. ‘Having fun, are we?’ He nudged her in the ribs with his elbow and laughed. His laughs were fast and infectious, like a machine gun. Enara tried her best to keep a straight face but a trace of a smile broke through. She chose not to answer. Instead she opted for water – cool, bottled agua – before returning to Billy and her friends.

‘Lovely, mate. Lovely,’ Richard said, eyes on her tanned legs.

‘I know.’ I thought about all the chances I’d blown through what I was holding in my hand. I lifted the bottle and drank.

The party went on till just past twelve, ending with Richard playing the keyboards and his neighbours downstairs joining in with saucepans on their ceiling. Soon after, some of us headed out to the bars and clubs in town. The place was throbbing, swelled by hordes of Spanish tourists, keen to escape the oppressive heat further south.

A few hours later, a handful of us stepped into ‘La Havana’, a club with low lighting and crimson walls, which smelt of

cheap talc and black tobacco. The music was techno and the dance floor was busy with people moving in minute robotic ways under a strobe, like actors in a silent movie. It was too loud to talk. Enara was trying to though, mouth up at Billy's ear, as they stood on the edge of the dance floor. His head cocked towards her, and he occasionally smiled at whatever she was saying. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I looked round, saw those glazed eyes, the way they always were before trouble. It was Declan, from Belfast, a rough powerful man with a shock of red hair and a habit of fighting. It would come from nowhere as well, without warning, nothing in the way of a raised voice, or wild gesticulation. But I'd seen enough of his antics to be able to spot it in his eyes.

'All right?' he asked, standing by my side up at the bar. He seemed to think we were friends, just because we were part of the same ex-pat community, just because we happened to share the same language, just because I had spent one night too many with him pissing my money away until daybreak. He too was looking over towards Enara and Billy.

'Yeah. Not too bad. Anyway, see you later,' I said, hoping he'd take the hint.

But he followed me over, pushed his big rounded shoulders between Enara and Billy. She turned her back on him and folded her arms. Billy didn't seem concerned. He looked at Declan and smiled.

Declan turned to Enara. He tapped her on the shoulder and she stiffened. She didn't turn round. He tapped her

shoulder again and when she didn't respond, he tried pulling her round to him. Then Billy stepped in. He put his hand between them and moved Declan away, the way a referee does in a boxing bout.

The strobe fractured his movements into tiny jerks, made it seem unreal, as Declan kicked Billy hard in the thigh and swung a hay-maker with his left. Billy ducked out of it. He straightened up and pummelled sharp, venomous fists into Declan's stomach – one, two, three, four times at electrifying speed. Declan fell to his knees. Billy said something to us which I couldn't hear above the noise. He nodded towards the exit as he clutched the top of his thigh, and we left straight away, leaving Declan doubled up on the stained red carpet.

I couldn't sleep that night. The drink and adrenalin were racing through my veins and all I could hear was the beautiful, torturous sound of Enara moaning – they hadn't wasted much time. I'd heard Billy's door close about ten minutes after I'd turned in and I didn't think they'd ever stop. It probably only went on for half an hour or so, but it seemed like all night.

Hearing her made my stomach knot. It reminded me how close they were and I felt envious and alone, like a sailor on a raft at sea cut adrift from his mates. I also felt betrayed by her somehow, as if it were her knife that had severed the rope, even though we'd never got that intimate.

I wondered how many people that night had had sex when they shouldn't have done. Illicit lovers, MDs with

their secretaries, or just casual one-night stands. How many people that night had left their stains on strange sheets, on office desks, on car seats, and then returned home to spin stories. Had to work late, darling. It was an exceptionally long dinner; the speech just went on and on. The traffic was terrible. At that moment, the whole world seemed shot through with lies.