

BIRDS OF PRAY

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Chapter 1

He went away to forget her but the further he went the more he remembered. He travelled far and wide on what little money he had until he arrived at a place he might one day call home. On the second day he felt the pain of arriving somewhere new just as he knew the joy of leaving and during this sabbatical from his church he delved into his new family wholeheartedly seeing in them a passion that was not unlike his own. His new home was Spain and it was to the south he drifted like a mendicant where the hills were brown and the sky was blue and such a place of warmth and mirth soothed him and tried to make him whole. Spain offered him succour, a respite, she slowed his pulse and helped him rest. He lived in the barrio near to a church but not within it and he assembled himself about his room, a candle here, a blanket there, his Book and he took to reading every hour as he slowly sloughed his skin. On the third day he glanced in the mirror of his basic tenement and the more bearded face of Father Ray Cassiel looked back at him with more lines, less grace. Fair hair surrounded a thoughtful face and his smile was cracked through the heat. Age had crept up on him and while he thought about this she suddenly appeared to him in his mind. Later that day he made himself known to the local padre; Jose Ortega; a man with a long moustache and eyes that gave little away. They shook hands and Father Ray was grateful for the companionship, the dark nights might be a little lighter from now on.

When it came to friendship Padre Ortega was true to his word sensing in Father Ray a chasm. He was careful not to probe too deeply, he instead circled the sadness as a hunter will a beast hoping to wound it and force it into the open. It was Padre Ortega who suggested to Father Ray

that he work in the fields, ministering to the sun darkened labourers who toiled in the fields at the back of the church. Perhaps by bringing them into the bosom of the church he might too allow some of his sadness to breathe. And if not Padre Ortega thought, at least some good might come from the experiment.

It was a vivid sun that raised him early as he pulled at the brown curtains and felt the shafts of light as they dappled his floor. He allowed himself the chance to think about her and what she would have thought about his new self. She would have laughed at him and become his shadow he knew, going everywhere he went while sitting at the table in the shade.

Apricot trees lined the road and children threw sticks at nothing. The air had a brilliance that had little to do with the time of year and a gentle haze pleased everyone about him. Elderly men leant on implements and studied him in the casual way that old men have knowing much yet allowing little to fall from their lips. Blankets of rape lay in front of him and reached far and he counted when he stopped thirty or forty men who even at this early hour dripped with sweat, already thinking of their women and of the sweet reconciliations that would later come their way. Because he knew he had to be accepted by the workers in the field he rolled up his sleeves and set to work as they did, copying them, drinking as they did, stopping only when they did and trying to laugh with them as their day crept by laboriously. They tossed rape into long barrows and sucked on soft fruit with the petulance that comes with heat and tiredness. He thought of other things as they did and studied the pattern of their day as they worked alongside him. The work was long and hard but when it came time to eat he could talk with them a little in the bastard tongue he used with them and he tried to open them as one might an oyster, keen to see the pearls beneath their reticence. He spoke

only a little of his God and of his workings wrapping and lacing his words with other things. They in turn welcomed him to their flock of beer and lust and made him one of them. How easy he thought it is to become someone else, to hide so much of yourself that soon beneath such camouflage little of the old remains. He liked his new life and Padre Ortega told him for no reason; distance is the best medicine, letting his words hang in the air long after he had left the room. Days passed by, he spoke to the workers in the field who eschewed the half broken machinery the landowner had hired for them choosing instead to work with their hands relishing the heat upon them, not liking the smell of rape seed, hating their employer because they chose to, not for what he was. Disliking him for the fact that he was he and they were they and things would always be like that. And even as Father Ray spoke to them of the good things that come when peace is in your heart he saw the echo in his words and they saw it too.

“Father Ray, today you seem a little distracted?” Padre Ortega remarked as Father Ray rubbed at a stain that had appeared on his old shirt. “You seem troubled...”

“Troubles are different to all men Padre Jose. What seems trifling to one man is a disaster to another. I’m fine...”

“A trouble shared, Father Ray, isn’t that how you say it?” And Padre Ortega smiled at Father Ray. “You seem to like us Father Ray and as a fellow man of the cloth I welcome your company. But I sense there is something in you that eats away.”

“Yes Padre Ortega, there is, but it’s history now. I’ve buried it. It is gone.”

“Nothing stays buried my friend, it never did, it never will.”

Chapter 2

The road to the bodega was short, ending abruptly at an intersection where olive coloured creeping plants hijacked a row of bougainvillea. The barmaid who looked no older than thirty was plentiful and was desired by eight of the ten labourers who finished their working days in her company. She told them each day she was betrothed to put them off and each day they would forget what she said and plague her over. A collection of low tables and wooden chairs leant against a wall and the smell of citrus kicked about the place. Drinking was one of his newer experiences and he was still not wholly used to it and the first draw of beer was both welcome and unpleasant. He had sand between his toes and the novice in him had straw between his ears but he had to learn and the field hands admired him for trying. The blue espadrilles he'd been given were a size too large and they blistered him. He looked at his feet, then at the wall, at a picture of the land as it was. He staggered and swayed with the beer in him and they smiled together at him then he shuffled over to the corner of the room as one of the field hands waved at him to join them, then at the barmaid Lola. The glint of sunlight off the ring she wore on a chain about her neck was like the gleam of a cutlass. Father Ray reached into the pocket of his corduroy trousers, fingering his crucifix as he did so, and reached for the photograph which he flicked over, twice checking the date on the back. He smiled a smile that was not empty then lifted his head again to see her face. How brave he was, looking at her picture now; she the sum of his emotions and his equator. He allowed himself a glance as a drunk might do knowing that he'd finish after that next beer. He was testing himself against the battalion of thoughts that welled inside him. Padre Ortega sat on the chair next to him and clinked a

whiskey tumbler in his direction. Padre Ortega didn't look at the picture as if he knew that the face was irrelevant.

“Was she important to you, Father Ray, special in some way?”

And despite the restrictions of their vocation still the human passions stirred like serpents, they shared that understanding. Their silence was like a glove at first, then they forgot their divinity for a second and spoke as men.

“Yes, I'd never known anyone like her. She was the storm to my ocean if you like and I had no idea what to do. We do what we do as men of God but God doesn't instruct us in everything.”

A wind picked up and cast things around outside. The sun abated and the heat that burnt them suddenly gave way to chill. Father Ray tried to calm the sadness inside but as is the nature with storms, he could only hold on and ride the tempest.

“What happened to her Father Ray? I'm here to listen.”

“She vanished one day. I was about to swap the Church for her, to leave behind the only good thing I've ever known when she disappeared. No warning, no words, just a vacuum where she had once been. And there are no words for the pain her going made me feel.”

He drew on the beer and appreciated it. It was a lever that lifted the seal. He would not tell Padre Ortega about how they had met, that would come later, better he knew the good inside him before meeting up with the devil. It was enough that Padre Ortega understood his sadness. There had been no sweet parting, no chance to say goodbye. She had raised something in him then left him with no anchor and the pain of that, he told Padre Ortega, was bigger than life itself.

Padre Ortega had seen this before. He'd seen the symptoms and while the cure was not the same for all men he knew that time nullified the pain eventually. Yet in Ray there was something beyond this, in his

eyes there was such loneliness. An emptiness that could not be filled with work, with drink, with talk. Padre Ortega listened as Father Ray spoke further but his words were normal again, stripped of their sadness. The barmaid waved at the men as they left, flashing the ring about her neck as she did so, and as she did so the world picked up again.

The barmaid Lola smiled at Father Ray and went to fill his glass. She wiped foam from the top of the beer then wiped her hands across her apron. A tenderness passed from her to Father Ray as if she recognised his pain and knew the depths of his suffering. Her kindness did not compensate him, but he accepted it for what it was and passed it back to her. Then as the beer lifted its grip on him he struggled to his feet and went back to his work in the fields.

He scratched his name into the wall, then joined it with another, the name Padre Jose Ortega. Blood dripped from his nails as he did so but he didn't feel the pain. Instead, he absorbed it. He mouthed the name 'Ortega', repeatedly grinding his teeth and hands as he did so. His name was Narciso Torca, he had done things that made the devil weep.

Pink trees shimmered in the Andalucian hills, their almond smell perfumed the air mixing with the blanched leaves of other lesser trees. Padre Ortega stroked his, by now, fine moustache and watched the broken figure of Father Ray Cassiel as he worked and then try to pray in the stubborn heat. Sweat that was more than just heat collected about Padre Ortega's shirt. The sun worked them both hard. As he stood on the steps of the Iglesia d'Encarnacion, he studied Father Ray and felt concern for him. It was rare for men of their age to relate to each other; their profession was chaperone and the base of every thought. In Father Ray Cassiel he saw the good within, the good man and he could only imagine the sorrow that grew in his heart. What Father Ray needed was an event, something to shock him from his torpor and as if God overheard his

thoughts, one of the men in the field collapsed clutching his chest. The man gestured upwards, his eyes weeping with both pain and the realisation. Others realised too and went into action, one to fetch Hector who doctored in Santa Cruz, not far. Others unsure what to do, milled about the victim clutching both their hands and then their rosaries. It was Father Ray who assured him and comforted him using his parochial tone and the basic Spanish he'd accrued. He massaged his heart, praying as he did so, then took the man's willing confession and he smiled when the man came to, and seeing the finite work of his God, saw himself as both his vessel and his voice.

They finished work earlier that day, it is hard to labour after a miracle, one of them said. They met up at the bodega where Lola, still unwed, passed over ice cold Alhambra beer and listened to the chatter of that day's events. She smiled at him again. They gathered about a long table with a bench either side and as one they declared to him.

"We will name a street in your honour Señor Ray. 'Calle Ray', we will call it..." And excited by this they raised their glasses to him before talking of other less exciting things. He studied Lola, her walk, the way she passed through the world, the calm and assured way she held her audience with the sun and the moon balanced on her every breath. Then he realised it wasn't her he was studying. As he looked about the room he saw the man he'd saved, Luis, who looked beyond the talk of the fieldhands and stared at Father Ray devoutly. He smiled, then walked about the table and sat next to Father Ray.

"You must come with me Señor Ray, my wife she will cook something good for you. My daughter she will meet you. We will get to know you. Later, yes?"

And because there were not a thousand other things he could be doing Father Ray Cassiel said yes, he would be honoured to.

A little further south where Luis lived with his family the streets were ripe with construction. A Grupo Galco truck passed by followed by another. He passed through the old town, then he saw the green and white of the Andalusian flag draped over a wall. Old women walked by in black mantillas. A lonely faucet sprinkled the middle of the street. Because he was still melancholic and not sure he was up to company he held his breath and could feel his anxiety through his shirt. He need not have worried.

Luis' wife and daughter were as spick and span as Luis himself. The house was as clean as Father Ray had expected and a bunch of Cazorla violets, picked that day he knew, sat on the windowsill. Beyond the window was a vast expanse of tessellated fields. The Spanish, Father Ray knew, understood the need for space, allowing things to flourish often. They fawned about him early on, treating him as a saviour and the role suited him. It was soon welded to his martyrdom. After a while though he had to brush off their words and he asked to be treated as the man he was, not the version of earlier that day. They went and sat out on the veranda on plastic chairs under an orange awning flicking at a litany of insects after a meal of grey fish and then plantains. It was Luis' daughter who stood transfixed, a copy of *El Sur* in her hand as a flyswat. Unabashed love poured from her, she understood what Father Ray had done for them.

She'd picked some flowers from behind the green and blue bodega and gave them to him. Then she took him on a tour of the small house, her tiny hand lost in his.

Father Ray sat with a bottle of Alhambra beer, alone on the veranda and wondered if he was part of a grand design he was too mortal to recognise. Had he been guided here to save Luis, the idea rolled about

his head like straw in a wind. He studied the vista that played out in front of him. Luis sat next to him and stretched his longer legs.

“Luis do you believe in destiny, in things being ordained. Being in the right place, at the right time?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean Father Ray.”

“It doesn’t matter Luis. Can I have another beer?”

“Of course my friend, of course.”

Chapter 3

Within a few days a pattern emerged. Luis' wife took to cleaning for him and cooking and worshipping in that order. Luis' daughter tried to teach him Spanish but the words were too hard, they tumbled from his lips. He felt like the local cripple with his crutches stumbling over a landscape of words. It all became overwhelming, he was used to solitude, as a priest he had much thinking to do. He needed the spiritual room in which to manoeuvre. One day he sat on the steps of the church silently. Padre Ortega had gone to Seville to see the bishop. There were few people about save two old men doing their ecclesiastical duties and a cleaner who cleaned. The church glistened. Luis came and sat with him and smoked hard on a cheroot. He welcomed Luis' company this time as a distraction. He was having trouble taming his thoughts. The village of Las Palomas went about its business proudly. The laughing and crying, the births and deaths, the noises and the silences. As they sat, clouds played above them for the first time since his arrival. Rain punctuated the air and they both enjoyed the respite from the incessant heat. The fields and roads lapped up the rain as it fell like dogs and Father Ray and Luis shrugged themselves further against the church door, using its archway as cover and delighting in it.

“We need this weather Father Ray, it is necessary. Much as we like the heat so we can do our things, when the rain comes it is like a friend. We would like our friend to come more often.”

“Too true Luis.”

“But not too often, no, Father Ray.”

They smiled, then fell to silence.

The cripple with his hat and long black hair shuffled past them, Father Ray called out to him but he hobbled on, his crutches clicking on

the ground. Father Ray knew that the cripple was destined to walk those streets alone, a life of solitude opened before him save for the fantasies of night time when his dreams might clothe him healthily and he could walk and talk amongst the best of them. Father Ray knew that the night was the cripple's friend and sleep was his ally, the day was cruel to him and would always be.

“He should go to Ubeda Father Ray. After what happened there. Ubeda is a good place to be if you are lame, or ill, or both.”

“Why Luis, what happened?”

“Something special Father Ray, L'Amarilla.”

Luis knew he had reeled in a fish and would enjoy telling the story. He also knew that Father Ray would prove a good listener.

“L'Amarilla was a young girl in Ubeda. She had yellow skin and was close to death. The doctors and the church, they all said that she was going to die soon and that they should prepare her coffin and her last rites. They prepared her coffin with what gold they had, then decorated her in garlands where she lay and set about their sorrow. They lay L'Amarilla in her bed and kept the window open so she could see the birds that entertained her, and the clouds and the trees. Then they sat about her and waited for the sad event. The local padre was about to give her to God. It was a very solemn time...”

The rain pelted down and crashed about them welcomingly. Father Ray listened intently. Suddenly the rain passed to nothing, it dissipated with the heat.

“One day a woman came to Ubeda. She settled into the town near the church and slept in the fields whatever the weather. The villagers tried to take her in and give the stranger a roof over her head, but she was happiest outside amongst the creatures and the plants she said. One day she was passing beneath L'Amarilla's window when she heard the most

poignant singing. She went inside and asked to see the girl who lay very sick. The woman sat on the bed and spoke to L'Amarilla who smiled back through her pain. They say that the women in their mantillas tried to stop her but L'Amarilla allowed the woman to sit next to her and place a hand upon her head. The other she placed in her left hand. L'Amarilla lay back and slowly closed her eyes. The townswomen in their sadness thought that the stranger had done something bad to L'Amarilla, they attacked her and drove her from Ubeda. It was only the next day, after a long sleep that L'Amarilla stood for the first time in weeks. The next day she was walking and now she is back, the girl was with her family. A miracle it was. The pity is that the woman who cured her was never seen again. It was a miracle but as you see there is sadness in this story too."

"And what happened to the woman, the stranger Luis. Was she never seen again?"

"No Father Ray, not as far as I know."

As is the nature with miracles, people gorge themselves upon them. Father Ray thought that was what happened here. He hoped it was a miracle. He was pleased for L'Amarilla Of Ubeda and even if the idea might thrash around in the minds of some, it sat easily within him. He would ask Padre Ortega on his return. He knew that the story would intrigue them both, theologically, and as men. He was becoming enamoured of Las Palomas; of the man who walked the streets wearing his accordion like a carbine, singing his way through the war in his head; of the woman swinging melons in a basket to and fro every day since he'd been there. They were all part of the fabric of the town watched eagerly over by some celestial weaver.

Chapter 4

The sun erupted again. Heat rose and a wind tousled the crops as they worked. Luis worked slower since that day, he was more careful now but that, thought Father Ray, was not a bad thing. Since that day and the badinage that had followed things seemed less thrilling now, not that he craved it. He thought more about the story that Luis had told him and something stuck in his head, a fragment that licked at the roof of his mouth but would not reveal itself.

In the dark hours, early morning, sometimes later, he would find himself full of her. Imaging her there with him. He would sit with his Bible, fingering his beads. He recalled people from his home lands, from the Holy Name in Tumin, County Meath. His thoughts would ramble over each other but the wild and thorny path his mind took would always lead him to her.

Padre Ortega returned in buoyant mood. He brought with him an infectious smile and the promise of a new monstrance for Santa Semana. Father Ray recently noted that when Padre Ortega, whose moustache was indeed resplendent, was in good spirits then so was Las Palomas. And in his absence the town suffered; the signs of his going were there in the poor crops and the poor weather and the towns malaise. On his return after a week the town revelled again. Padre Ortega had come back with wine and after Evening Mass they retired to the rear of the church to the old oak table that had seen the ministering of more than one priest. The smell of garlic was pernicious. Upon his return Padre Ortega enjoyed the many foods he'd missed. Padre Ortega's palate was more demanding than the bread and cheese reveille he'd endured in Seville. He enjoyed the meat and garlic dish that Luis' wife had cooked for him on his first night back. He was happy to be back amongst his good four walls. Padre

Ortega placed two small glasses; they would abstain from abstinence, on the table and sat either side. Ecce Homo had been partly engraved into it, scribbled by the last holder of his post who had died of a strange malaise that had more to do with the mind and less to do with the body. They navigated their way through their talk like soldiers on the battlefield. Padre Ortega told Father Ray about Seville, about the Iglesia de San Pedro where Velazquez himself was buried. The image of St Isabel of Hungary Curing The Lepers and of the beautiful iconography of the place. He'd taken himself to a bullfight cheering with the rest of them. It was his humanity that made him a good priest, he said. He related to people as he related to his God. In the story of his life, Padre Ortega said suddenly, this was the final chapter and it would prove to be his best.

After the wine and after helping one of the local women clean the azulejos, the yellow and blue ceramicised tiles at the front of the church, and happily remonstrating with the two small boys and their smaller dog, Father Ray uncorked the bottle of wine and helped the conversation towards the subject of L' Amarilla. Padre Ortega told him that the girl had indeed suffered from a degenerative liver disease and was close to death. The dark haired woman had indeed gone to see her and the women of Ubeda had beaten her with sticks and driven her away. Padre Ortega had studied the events through both the eyes of his faith and through those of the pragmatist but in no way could he explain what had happened through the eyes of the latter.

She awoke afraid, not knowing who she was, or where she was. Her feet were shredded with the miles she'd walked and her simple dress was pungent and marked. She shrugged aside some flies then studied her environment. She saw a train as it bullied its way through the hills, she saw the pockets of civilisation and the reams of smoke that rose far in the distance. She saw people who passed her, never close to her, moving on

quickly. Thorn bushes had proved both pillow and blanket for her and she brushed at herself as the day grew. Perhaps there was freedom in such anonymity, Father Ray would have welcomed such oblivion, but with such anonymity also comes great fear. She walked miles about the place trying it on as one might try on a jacket or a pair of shoes. A toothless woman smiled at her and offered her words of comfort but nothing more substantial. Then she was alone again, and hungry. She was light headed for lack of food and saw a stall; the vendor of which was arguing with a girl beneath a white peaked hat. Lust prompted the vendor to try his luck with the girl and as he did so she reached for four apples then limped towards the railway sidings and hid in a doorway. She almost choked she ate so fast. She pulled at the hem of her dress that was torn like ribbons then ripped it aside instead. She struggled towards an abandoned railcar. She saw straw matting and relished the luxury. She curled up in the corner and slept again, feeling replete after the fruit yet terrified for both herself and her future.

It was late afternoon the following day. The town woke from its siesta, shop awnings lifted like black eyelids. Father Ray's sadness was back, he'd carried it from Ireland, kept it hidden and smuggled it through the last few days as best he could but now in all its glory it was back. Once haunted, always haunted, Father Ray thought. And what was it that Padre Ortega had said to him – things never stay buried – how right he was. He had tried to quell his depression but that hadn't worked, he knew he had to confront it and slay it somehow. The smell of fresh bread from the panaderia wooed him and the biblioteca was full that day where the clever men went to learn and read and the fools, Lola said, did not. Each day the sun tried to bring back the man he was with no success. They sat drinking coffee and it was Padre Ortega who suggested the trip to Ubeda,

to see L' Amarilla for himself. It would be a good distraction for him. He needed it.

Trees lined the road ahead like florets of broccoli. They had to get the bus and then the train to Ubeda but it gave Father Ray the chance to see more of the countryside than he had so far.

“No two parts of Spain are the same Father Ray. No two, as you will see, they are as different as the seasons.” The landscape passed by too quickly to be appreciated.

“Padre Ortega, can we talk? I need to.”

“Only if you call me Jose and you let me call you Ray. This formality sometimes makes life so difficult.”

“I can feel the darkness again Jose, it went for a time, what with Luis' heart attack and the time I spent with his family, but last night I felt it kicking to be let back in, entreating and I was powerless to stop it. I have no control over it. I really need to talk”.

Birds spoke overhead on a cable as the train came to a halt at a desolate station. People got on and off and meandered in the heat. It made you like that thought Father Ray, he could see an airport in the distance and he cringed because to return to that airport would signify his going back to Ireland and he was in no way ready for that. Not yet. The sun reached its zenith and he welcomed the train's cold ventilation as it struck at his back. He was picking out his words, if there was to be an unburdening then it would have to be done right.

Padre Ortega stepped up from his seat to get the brown satchel he travelled everywhere with. He limped slightly and it was the first time Father Ray had noticed. As if so consumed was he with his own world that he failed to see the others about him.

“Jose, what's wrong?”

“Nothing, just a slight limp, I’ve had it years. Since Franco and those dark days. It isn’t that painful and anyway, what is pain apart from a reminder that you’re alive and that is something to be grateful for. It’s a small price to pay.”

He pulled fruit from his satchel and some white cake. He took a small knife to the fruit then placed two napkins upon the table between them. Then he shared the fruit and the cake giving Father Ray first choice. The seats were comfortable, the seats in which to dream, Father Ray thought, he could travel forever like this, escaping everything, always one step removed from the people about them and always one step down from God. The train began its routine again and so did they. They sat in silence at first eating and drinking and watching the land rush by them, some images lingered and he saluted them in his head; three brown horses in a parched field flaunting themselves over whatever pasture they could find. A flock of birds resting on the washing line of a run down tenement, the heads of their young peering out like the children they were. Pylons reaching onto the horizon like protecting sentinels.

A girl sat across the aisle from them in an apple green pinafore. She too battled with fruit the rind of which was scattered over the napkin at her knees.

“Before you begin Ray, let me tell you something. We, you and I, inhabit two worlds, do you agree? And we move between the two like ghosts. It is a privilege to do this, to walk in the metaphoric gardens of those we care for, giving advice and doing what we feel we do best: listening. And we can walk in their shoes too, do much of what they do. But like ghosts we cannot spend all our time in either world. You wear your sadness like a cloak, my friend, a dark cloak, and of all the ghosts I have met, you are the most ghost-like. Take care you do not become too ghost-like. That would be such tragedy.”

Ray studied the girl in the pinafore, a startling memory came, then went.

“I knew a man once, a priest like us who took on all the woes he came upon and absolved them. His parish loved him, they worshipped him for his martyrdom. But one day he reached his limit and a bad thing happened. What I am trying to say Ray, is remember the good that has gone on and imagine the good that will come. You cannot be totally in awe of misery and its dark designs. You must come up to breathe.”

If you would like to read the remainder, email us at contact@mybooxite.com and we'll put you in touch with the author.