

The Brazen Bull

by Alex M. Pruteanu

Eustaquia Salvador Bustillos, Calle Ocho, Miami, December 2013. No. No. No. You see, the question is what Jesus *wouldn't* do. Like his Father, Jesus could be a wrathful man. That is what I believe, no matter what is written in that book. I know you asked about Xavi. It's related to him, have patience. I've always called him Xavi, you know. He was always Xavi to me, not James. James was his gringo name given by my gringo doctor who cut him out of my belly, did I tell you how that came about? I will in just a moment. And Reed, the name he took later. What a disaster. I always had disdain for James. James the name, not James my son, although there were many times when I would have murdered the son myself, mind you. No. To me, he was always Xavier. Ah, what a voice he had, too. You should have heard him sing. I called him the Nightingale of the Americas after Pedro Vargas. My tiny Xavi, the little thief. The little *putito*. Once when he was eleven he even talked me into shoplifting a Merlin electronic game. You know that Merlin? Back then it was something else, before all the shoot them up carjacking video games they have now. No. That Merlin was like a large, red telephone and you could play all kinds of games on it like tic-tac-toe and...those other ones. Checkers. Something like that. Very much fun for those days. And Xavi, with his mind and words somehow, got me to slip it inside my handbag and walk out with it. Just like so. He convinced me that thirty-two dollars was too much to pay for the Merlin. It was. He was right. So, instead, I just slipped it into my bag. That's what Xavi could do even when he was young, the *putito*, with that voice and that reasoning. It was all those books he read. *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and that one about the submarine. And then there was a really thick one about a conniving fox named Renart from France. I think it was that one that Xavi loved the most as a boy. In it, that conniving fox runs all sorts of tricks and grifts on farmers and even other animals as smart as wolves and pigs. But you should have heard Xavi do the voice of Jerry Lewis. He loved

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him. Jerry Lewis. He did that, that voice, you know? That one where he says: hey lady! Oh, it was just something else. And Chaplin. Xavi loved Charlie Chaplin. The moustache and that silly little walk. And sometimes he would combine the both Jerry Lewis and Charlie Chaplin, the *putito*. He had me holding my insides, on the floor every time. Remind me to tell you how the gringo doctor who delivered him named him James; don't forget, all right? Anyway, it doesn't surprise me about Xavi. I always knew he would find the trouble. In high school, he stole an identification card from a man in the military somehow. I don't know how he did it, but I remember the man's name, though, a strange name. Loren Michael Hund. That was the military man's name. Imagine that, a man named Loren. Xavi had a ponytail then, but this man's photo, you know, he was from the military. They don't have long hair. But Xavi didn't want to cut off his ponytail for anything, so he got into the bars by wearing a trench coat with the collar up. Inside of that, Xavi tucked his ponytail and that is how he went in. Yes, he looked just like this Loren Michael Hund, that is true. What a strange name. Hund makes me think of hound. And to think, I still remember it. But, anyway, Xavi kept his long hair. I hated that *raton* tail. From the years 1985 to 1989 I never showed anyone pictures of Xavi because of that ponytail. The *putito*. Another time I remember, still in high school, he stole his best friend's rare coin collection, sold it to another friend for very little, and went to the all-you-can eat buffet at Shakey's. The best friend's mother called me and told me what happened and I said: what do you want me to do about it? The coins are gone. What should I do about that? He took the money and went to the all-you-can-eat at Shakey's. How can he repay you? Make him throw up everything he ate? Like I say, it doesn't surprise me. I always knew Xavi was going to finally get caught by trouble. But I thought he would be in prison, that's the difference. I was for sure he would be locked up, and then I would have to come in every month with a long coat and salamis and cheeses stuffed into my pants, that sort of thing. It would be just like when he was a boy and I shoplifted the Merlin for him, only this time with salamis. The *putito*. That was the

destiny for him: jail. That's what I thought. Not what really happened. What happened to Xavi was more than terrible. He didn't deserve it. Not for his crime. He didn't kill or rape anybody or crashed his car drunk into anyone or anything like that, ever. The people who did that to him, they're savages. And so you see, the question is what Jesus *wouldn't* do. You see what I mean. He is a wrathful man, just like his Father. That is what I believe, no matter what the book says. Jesus is wrathful. Look what He let them do to my Xavi. But I forgot to tell you how that gringo doctor gave him his name.

James Xavier Reed, Toledo, August 2013. You know, P.T. Barnum never said that bullshit. People think he did, but he didn't. Barnum's biographer tried to track down when exactly Barnum said his famous phrase and all of his friends and acquaintances were like, shit bro: that's not our P.T. It's out of character. If anything, P.T. woulda said: "there's a *customer* born every minute," because the old fuck always believed people'd get bored so he'd have to expand the base of customers all the time, you know? The famous phrase, Barnum's biographer says, was probably spoken by some douche named David Hannum, who was criticizing both Barnum and his dumbfuck customers. I, myself, don't give a shit either way, 'cause they're all wrong, whoever the fuck said it. 'Cause it's more like: "There's a sucker born every *second*." And you're goddamn right there is. Now that's a whole lot of suckers. Especially in China. And I intend to scam as many of 'em as I can.

Anonymous group, no address, January 2014. The ransom letter was just a distraction. It doesn't take much to research nowadays, you know. You can find anything about anything or anyone online. We knew James Xavier Reed's mother could never get that kind of money together, no matter what the timeframe was. She was a grifter just like her son, only she was mindful of others, if that's possible. She had a conscience of some sort. Honor among thieves and all that. She was a deadbeat nevertheless; like son like mother. She clipped minor things from the grocery store: a small pack of Claritin, a handful of Jelly-Bellies from the bulk bins, dental

floss, hemorrhoid cream, that sort of thing. James Xavier Reed, however, went on to bigger and better things. America, the land of opportunity. Reed assumed different stolen identities and defrauded people and institutions. Bank of America was in the process of bringing charges against him in a huge case they had been building. It involved fraudulent transactions of devalued real estate to nonexistent family members. In our friend's case, Reed left him destitute and broke, down to the bare bones. He had nothing because of Reed. And so the ransom letter to Reed's mother was a vindictive ruse. It was a sliver of hope we gave her just to make this whole thing juicier, but we knew that even if she were to come up with that ridiculous amount, she would never get her son back. We would just keep upping our demands. It was comical, really. We cut out individual letters from magazines and everything. It was like in the movies, and we laughed while we put it all together and sent it to her. How we did Reed was by the Brazen Bull. It doesn't take much to research nowadays, you know. You can find out anything about anything. The search for the Brazen Bull came back in less than a third of a second with dozens of results, including manufacturing instructions and techniques for tempering the metal. So that's how we decided we would do him. One thing we could tell his mother is that in the end, James Xavier Reed was singing like a tropical bird flying through God's eternal paradise. Or hell.

The Brazen Bull, Acragas (now Agrigento Sicily), 565 B.C.

History is replete with brutally imaginative techniques of torture and execution, but I am the only death machine that doubles as a musical instrument. Oh, I am a majestic torture device that truly stands above the cross, the rack, the iron maiden, the wheel, the pillory...all of them. I am magnificent, made of all brass, and nearly twice the size of a real bull. I am hollow, allowing for the victim (whose tongue is usually cut out) to be placed and properly sealed inside of me. The sturdy brass is a fairly good thermal conductor, and so as the unfortunate, tongueless git sealed inside begins to wonder what will become of him, several fires are lit all around and below me. As the temperature inside begins to soar, the slowly

cooking victim commences to thrash about and scream in ghastly agony. The movements, effectively ameliorated and contained by my sheer mass, make me sway and shift a little among the fire, thus truly resembling a real bull. This effect creates additional amusement for the audience and serves the added benefit of distancing them from the brutality of the torture, since they cannot directly see the condemned; a guilt-free indulgence, you see. But, if I may use an intended pun, here's the kicker: the open holes of my nostrils allow for pipes to be inserted, facing outward into the audience. The horrifying shrieks and roars of agony coming from the inside magically move through the pipes and come out as the tenderest, most melodious of bellowings. The victim is punished, while the crowd enjoys the music. If I may say so, I am truly a spectacular work of art, wouldn't you agree. Would you like a tour of my insides?

