

The Caganer

by Jeremy Holland

Jaume had just finished his dinner of a thick blood sausage and white haricot beans when a cold draft blew through the bar. His curiosity piqued by the chill, he sipped his cup of wine and looked at the stone entrance. A couple stood huddled by the door. The young man looked vaguely familiar, although he couldn't remember his name or how he might have known him. He'd never seen the girl before but she radiated a beauty that made it impossible not to stare. His eyes moved from her face down her long neck and he imagined a sculptor carving her features into wood. Her protruding belly reminded him to stop staring because he already had a wife with children at home. He took a sip of his wine to wash away the ashy taste from his pipe and continued to observe as the couple frantically made their way through the bar asking for the owner.

A portly man crossed the busy room and went to where the couple stood two stools down. "I'm Arnau, the manager," he said. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Pep and this is Maria," replied the young man. "We've come from Barcelona Ciutat." Jaume listened to the tale of the one hundred and fifty kilometer trek they had made to the village, so their son could be born in the same place as his father, grandfather and great-grandfather.. "Do you have any room? We don't have much money, but I'll do whatever you need to earn our keep."

The owner nodded politely and smiled. "I'm sorry but the place is full. Everyone is returning to be registered for the census."

"We could sleep on the floor. All we need is a roof over our heads to escape the cold wind."

"I'm very sorry, but that's impossible. This is the bar and I cannot allow people to stay here when we are closed. What do you think we are, gypsies?"

The answer saw Pep lower his head in defeat and turn to his wife. "I'm so sorry," he sighed.

"Can't you see I'm pregnant?" She angrily waved her hand in the air and asked, "Do you have no pity?"

"Look. I'm truly sorry," replied the owner, visibly shaken by the outburst "If I had room, you could stay, but I don't, and I can't have you sleeping in the bar. What would happen if you or the child died during birth? People would say my place was cursed and I'd lose business."

"I can't believe what you're saying." Maria's voice trailed as a single tear trickled down her cheek.

She looked to Pep for guidance but Jaume noticed he had the glazed eyes of a man who had run out of answers, of a man who had failed her as a husband despite his best efforts. She responded to the moment, not with waterworks and curses as his wife would've done, but with a comforting smile, a light brush and a soft peck of the cheek.

Pep's eyes lit up with the new found clarity at her touch and the way he chewed his lower lip brought on a memory so quickly it was more an epiphany. Jaume had known a boy named Josep Jakobo who did the exact same thing when he was stuck. He studied the bearded man standing next to him. The similarities to the boy were uncanny.

"Josep Jakobo?" he said. "It's Jaume Puig. Do you remember me? We used to play in the woods near my father's farm before your family moved to Barcelona."

The man's eyes squinted as he nibbled on his lip and thought. "Jaume Puig?" he repeated. "Of course I remember you. We built a fort together."

"So it is you!" Jaume jumped up from the bar, a wide smile across his face. He hugged his old friend and planted a kiss on his wife's cheeks. He was buzzing from the chance encounter, marveling how life had brought them together after all these years. There had to be a reason beyond luck and circumstance as to why they'd met again, and he offered them his place to stay. The joyous looks on their faces warmed his body like a third glass of wine and not even stepping outside the cozy bar into the cold December night could dampen the fire in his stuffed belly.

Like his father, aunts and uncles before him, Jaume, his three brothers and their wives worked a farm about two kilometers outside the village walls. As they walked up the dirt path that led up the mountain, the thousands of stars in the sky dusted the surrounding trees and fields in a soft white light. He looked for the pan-shaped constellation his father once showed him and saw a

bright star streak across the horizon.

“Did you just see that?” he yelled turning to Pep, hoping to share in the moment.

He was not there to answer, but a few legs behind with Maria who was doubled over. “What's that horrible smell?” she cried.

Jaume rushed to help them. “We're fertilizing the ground for spring,” he explained as he took a heavy sack and slung it over his shoulder.

“Thanks,” replied Pep, “It doesn't smell like any animal dung I know.”

“Animal dung! Who can afford to use just that with the taxes we're paying to Madrid?”

“Then what else is it?”

“Let's just say we kill two birds with one stone here in Catalunya, so don't go looking for any toilets.”

“That's disgusting.” Maria punctuated her sentence with cringe.

“What's the matter?” asked Jaume. “Haven't you ever lived in the country?”

"I'm in pain," she cried. "I think the baby's coming."

Jaume didn't panic but felt his body fill with enough strength to carry five, plump sheep across his shoulders. He grabbed Maria's arm and put it around his neck. Lifting her so her toes dragged against the ground, the two of them carried her through a space in the trees and up a narrow path. The overhang of the branches was thick and blocked out the sky until it opened onto a mountainside painted white by the stars and moon. Overlooking it all on a ridge was the red tiled roof of his stone cottage built by three generations of his family. Seven adults and eleven children meant even his beloved old dog had to sleep outside.

"You'll have to stay in the stable," he said, selling them on the space and the fact that the smell of the hay dulled the stench of the fields. He'd originally built it for his two donkeys, but they made a bull seem flexible and still preferred to feed and sleep outside. "So no need to worry about unwanted intruders," he continued, showing them a shelter consisting of four posts, three wooden walls and a thatched roof.

He pointed to the stack of hay by a dusty feeding trough in the far corner and finished the tour, "That there makes a perfect place for a bed. I've had to do it when I get in trouble with the missus, if you know what I mean."

"Thanks," replied Pep. "I'll take your advice."

Jaume's eyes moved from his old friend's smiling face to his wife's somber expression. "Are you alright, Maria?"

"Just tired," she replied with a faint smile. "This place is more than perfect, Jaume. Thank you so much for your kindness. May the Lord bless over you."

"Don't mention it." He watched as Pep left her side and dutifully began preparing a bed using a worn sheet and old clothes. He had an idea and muttered, "I'll be right back," returning soon after carrying a blanket over his arms and tray.

Pep rushed to take the unsteady candle. "Thanks," he said, going over to a patch of dirt away from the hay bed.

Jaume went to where Maria slept and set down the tray, covering her with a blanket. He looked at her peaceful face and thought of a spider web caught in the late afternoon sun after a rain; she was so beautifully delicate yet strong.

"I don't know what we'd do without your kindness and generosity."

Pep's words reminded him that she was not his to admire. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he replied. "My wife's getting everything ready for the big moment. She loves babies."

"I don't know how we can repay you and your family."

"A safe birth will be good enough."

Pep nodded in agreement. "Let's pray there are no complications." He paused to cast a tender glance at Maria laying on the ground. He quickly looked up at Jaume and said, " Well, thanks again for everything. I should get to sleep now."

"Nonsense, my friend. Did you hear your that scream earlier? This will be your last moment of peace ever." He related his experience of being a husband and a father, telling of the constant demands that came from both his wife and children. Their sole purpose to exist, it seemed sometimes, was to drive him crazy, making the rewards feel few and far between. Although, when there was one, like the smile on a son's face after he caught his first fish, it was worth all the stress and ingratitude. "So you see. It's the beginning of a new life," he concluded. "Now is the moment to morn and celebrate this passage of time with a drink."

"I can't be drunk for my son's birth."

"I didn't say a bottle. One drink to calm your nerves. Trust me, you'll need it."

"I don't know. I should probably stay with Maria."

Her head hidden under a blanket that muffled her voice, she said, "Go have a drink so I can rest."

“Best do as the wife says,” replied Jaume as he took Pep by the arm and led him from the cover of the stable into the starry night. A gust of wind brought the faint clangs of bells from surrounding mountainside, and he waved at a rugged terrain. “Only a strong, pragmatic and hard working people like us, Catalans, could create a prosperous life here,” he boasted. “As I told you earlier, we can make plants grow from shit.”

Pep laughed. “Do you pee to water the flowers too?”

“Now that would be uncivilized and dangerous on windy days.” His words faded as he went to the bushes and came back with a ceramic jar. Biting his lip, twisting and turning the stopper, he pulled it out with a pop and handed the drink to Pep. “It's orujo from Galicia,” he said. “My cousin brought it for me. There's nothing like it to keep you warm on a cold night.”

“Thanks.” Pep took a tentative sip that made his body shake. “Wow. Tha... That's... That's strong,” he stuttered with a second shudder.

Jaume snatched the bottle and took a hearty chug. “City life's made you weak, Pepito,” he told him, using Pep's childhood nickname to show his words were only in jest. “So tell me about this beautiful wife of yours. When did the two of you meet?”

Pep took a second, bigger sip and shivered. “About a year ago.”

The orujo combined with the wine had Jaume feeling light headed. A boisterous laugh erupted from his stuffed belly at the sight of his old

friend wiping the tears from his eyes. "When your son's old enough to drink, make sure you send him to Uncle Jaume for an education," he ribbed, pulling out a pipe from his pocket as he sat down on a set of steps.

Pep grunted something to the tune of, "I will."

The pale face sitting next to him left Jaume with the familiar taste of ash in his mouth that came from feeling guilty. He puffed his pipe lit and declared, "No more orujo for you. I promised not to get you drunk."

The cloud of smoke escaping as he spoke glided towards Pep, who gagged and covered his mouth.

"Sorry." Jaume quickly turned his head to blow the smoke in the other direction and added as he exhaled, "My stomach's been a bit tight lately if you know what I mean. Smoking helps loosen it."

"That's okay. I'm feeling better now but can we talk about something else?"

"Sure." He felt relieved at the color returning to his friend's cheeks and asked, "How long have you two love birds been married?"

"We're not married yet. We're waiting for the baby to be born."

“What!” He choked the smoke in his lungs and coughed. “You’re letting your son be born a bastard?”

“Well. He’s not really mine you see,” replied Pep. “Maria received a visit from an angel, who said he will be born the messiah.”

“She’s not the only one,” scoffed Jaume. “Pep from the village said the same thing. Ask him how he feels now with all the pilgrims outside his window day and night.”

“Don’t you believe the messiah’s coming?”

“Wait till you have your third kid and your own farm. You’ll be too tired to think about such things like if there’s one god or two, what their name is, and if one’s got a son.”

Pep smiled and said, “Well, I prayed to my Lord for your family’s health and protection.”

“Thanks. Next time pray for golden carrots, though.” He tapped his spent pipe against the step and took another swig of from the jug before he decided to ask a question which had been on his mind,

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Imagine the angel was albino and the boy looks like him. Would you still love him like a son?”

“Of course! He'd still have the face of an angel.”

The answer made him grit his teeth in irritation. Here was a man who had nothing, not a room in which to sleep, nor a son who was truly his own — yet he was completely at peace, like none of that mattered. Jaume loaded his pipe with tobacco and muttered, “I guess if my wife looked like yours, I wouldn't care who the father was either.”

A bemused grin and silence was the reply. The expression brought to mind another person who had long ago learned the best way to respond to an inappropriate remark was to say nothing, and Jaume's mouth eased as he thought about his wife. “Sorry about that comment from earlier,” he said as he put the pipe back into his pocket. “I'm a bit drunk and my missus says I can get surly sometimes.”

“No need to apologize. You've been more than a gracious host. Besides, Maria can bring out the best and worst in men, I've noticed.”

“Beautiful women will do that,” He paused as another question popped in his head, “So tell me. Have you decided on a name for this miracle baby yet?”

“Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

“It's another form of Josep and means 'the salvation'.”

“Who on earth told you that? I've never heard of such a name.”

“An angel in a dream.”

“You're kidding, right? He wasn't the same one who paid your missus a visit, was he?”

“No.”

Jaume stared at a face so sincere, he'd believe the earth was round if Pep told him so. He raised the ceramic jug in the air and said, “Here's to Jesus, son of Pep! May he live a long life and die of old age,” ending his toast with a chug of orujo.

A bloodcurdling scream sliced through the air. Pep leaped to his feet, screaming, “Maria, I'm coming, honey!” as he sprinted down the path. Jaume smacked his knees to get the blood moving and slowly stirred his body into action. The orujo and wine rushed to his head, giving each star a blurry double as he looked to the sky and swayed. The sound of heavy footsteps behind him meant only one person, his wife. He needed to pull himself together. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and waited for the moving ground to settle.

"You'd better stay here." The words were spoken in a familiar slightly disappointed tone. He opened his eyes to see his wife standing next to him carrying a bowl of steaming water. "You smell of booze and I don't want you fainting like the last time," was her reasoning as she hurried down the stairs towards the stables.

"As you wish my dear," was his merry reply because attending a birth ranked just above working in a sleeting rain on the list of things he liked to do. He listened as a soft wind brought the familiar sound of hooves and a strange language. From where the path met the trees emerged an orange globe atop a golden pole, followed by a second and a third, each carried by a man in bright ornamental robes. Behind them trotted a procession of strange humped animals bearing the weight of sacks stuffed with gold and spice. They were unlike any gypsies he'd ever seen and their arrival was greeted by hundreds of ringing bells in a now still air.

His eyes widened in amazement as herds of animals stepped from the woods and into his clearing which seemed to have become the region's sole watering hole. The fear their owners would think he'd somehow lured them to his land made the awe-inspiring moment fleeting. Without any plausible explanation for the miraculous feat, they'd label him as a practitioner of magic and burn him at the stake; he was sure of it.

Another thunderous scream brought all thoughts, men and animals to a stop. He swore he heard the stars crackle it was so quiet. Imagining the possibility Pep's son didn't make it weighed in his stomach like a loaf of raw dough, bending him over in a pain that brought tears to his eyes. He had seen men's faces turn from joy to

sorrow when the baby they held no longer breathed; not even Pep the calm could stand such a loss. He prayed, but not for relief. Instead he offered to suffer this agony for the rest of his life, if only for the baby to live.

The plaintive wail of a newborn ended the silence. A gust of wind swooped from the north, carrying the sound over the mountains and across the land for all to hear. The weight in Jaume's stomach lifted. The pain faded away at words, "Come all and look! He's so beautiful," shouted by his wife. The news was followed by chimes from the bells, the braying animals, and cheers from the three men.

The joy of the moment had him running towards the glowing stable, as anxious to see Pep and Maria's newborn as his fourth son. His footsteps hitting the hard ground jarred loose the food and booze stuffed in his belly. Nature called, reminding him he needed to fertilize a patch of land first.

