

The Naked Man of Barcelona

by Stephen Carter

It is no easy thing getting noticed on Las Ramblas. Spain's most famous boulevard is lined, from the port to the Placa de Catalunya, with artists and entertainers of every description whose livelihoods depend on doing precisely that. Human statues in lavish costumes, buskers, sleight of hand artists, dance troupes, musicians, Flamenco dancers, Nigerian prostitutes, pick pockets and drug dealers compete endlessly for the attention (and the money) of the sauntering Rambalistas. But the people here have developed discriminating tastes. They are perhaps even a little jaded; Barcelona being the kind of city that can produce a certain amount of ennui in even the simplest of souls. After but one paseo, there is scarcely a whore black enough, a human statue still enough, or a drug dealer determined enough to garner more than a fleeting glance from the people passing by. After an entire evening of it, the whole ridiculous spectacle seems as natural and unremarkable as the tall trees that line the boulevard.

Nevertheless, one night something remarkable did happen. A man materialized on the boulevard who brought all of Las Ramblas to a standstill. It was getting late, around one in the morning, and the crowd was thinning out. Many of the performers were packing it in for the evening. I was standing outside the Hotel Arc La Rambla, smoking, resting my sore feet, when I noticed a general commotion and what seemed from my vantage point to be a surge in the crowd, a crowd forming within a crowd, as is often the case when a fight breaks out. Had it finally come to blows between Che Guevara and the distinguished looking elderly gentleman in the polka dotted tutu? I had seen them earlier that afternoon arguing over a portion of the pitch. One had accused the other employing a squatter to hold

the spot until he arrived, a fairly serious charge.

I was hot and curious. I made my way through the crowd and saw not the brawl that I was expecting but a man kneeling down beside the gargoyle. He was naked except for a black Speedo, black, over the calf socks, and white Venetian loafers. He was tracing shapes on the ground with a stick.

The man was old, sixty at the very least. He was average height and build, neither fat nor thin, with bones that had settled, leaving him no doubt slightly shorter and thicker than he had been in his prime. He had short white hair and a white beard, tawny brown skin and kindly blue eyes that upon reflection may have been slightly crossed.

When he stood up, I was shocked, shocked to see that he was stark naked (the Speedo was a tattoo) and that he had, quite possibly, the largest flaccid penis I had ever seen. In many ways it resembled the trunk of an elephant, long and thick with deep creases and slightly tapered toward the end. Moreover, a single eye was inked into either corner of his shorn pubis, strengthening the impression that I was gazing into the face of some rare species of pachyderm. The tip of the 'trunk' was pierced through with a large silver ring which, like a good pair of shorts, fell to just above the knee.

The gargoyle was infuriated. He had removed the giant head of his costume and, with the assistance of a nearby angel, was cursing and shooing the man away. Meanwhile a mob of gawking on lookers had surrounded them. Young men in stag parties were the first to embrace him. They swarmed the old man two at a time, dropping down to waist level to pose for pictures. Some tried stuffing money into his socks. Those with wives and girlfriends seemed indignant at first, some of them even covering their companion's eyes. But indignation soon gave way to astonishment and astonishment to nods of approval from envious men. Heads shook slowly, deliberately

from side to side and accepting smiles worked their way onto anonymous faces throughout the crowd. I could just make out one pair of lips mumble the words, "Bravo! Old man, and well done!" Women covered their mouths, pointed, laughed out loud and did double takes. Even the prostitutes stopped propositioning the single men long enough to congregate in small groups and have a look. They did not smile, point or laugh like the other women. Clearly they were judging their subject more critically and objectively. Even amongst those hardened, 'seen it all' women, there appeared to be a consensus that the old man was epically endowed.

Meanwhile, the old man took little notice of the mob that had surrounded him (or at least he pretended not to notice). He seemed to be looking right through them. Then, without warning, he turned and began walking purposefully up the boulevard in the direction of the Placa de Catalunya. He cut a wide swath through the crowd as he moved; behind him it was like the wake of a large ship moving through a sea of glass. I pursued him a short distance up La Rambla, as far as the Boqueria market, but he was deceptively fast and what with the crowds he soon pulled away. I could still see him in the distance. He made an abrupt turn off La Rambla toward the Gothic Quarter and disappeared into the labyrinth of narrow alleyways. I was surprised that no one attempted to follow him.

What happened next is more vivid in my mind than the man himself. A mild spirit of light heartedness and conviviality took hold of tourists and residents alike. Everyone on the boulevard was laughing, hugging, kissing, and backslapping while sharing their impressions of the scene that had just unfolded. Men who had been receiving the silent treatment for roving eyes were pardoned. Small debts were cancelled among friends, replaced by arguments over who had the next round. Waiters were invited to sit down at tables with customers, who no longer seemed concerned with the inflated prices. Mildly traumatized women held one another and bonded. The only people who seemed agitated were the usual attractions, the

street performers, whores and drug dealers. They tried to resume with business as usual, but after the old man, no one even noticed they were there.

Rumors abound about the so called naked man of Barcelona. As I was to learn first hand in the days that followed, he is something of a celebrity in that city, and the subject of much discussion and debate. Reports of sightings on the boardwalk in Barcelonetta or at passeig de Gracia were commonplace. One man claimed to have seen him even further a field, outside the Estadi Olimpic in the Parc de Montjuic. Some reported seeing him twice in one day, while others who had lived in the city their entire lives swore they had never seem him at all. In addition to all the reports of sightings around the city, there were innumerable theories about the man's true identity and purpose. Most dismissed him as a shameless exhibitionist, some insisted that he was mentally ill, but the consensus among the locals was that he had got his start as a means of protesting talk of making it illegal to go naked in Spain's public spaces. Proponents of this theory pointed to two much younger, average men who had recently begun following the old man's example. This explanation satisfied me, although no one seemed to know anything for certain, and I left it at that.

More than a year has passed since all of this happened and I have seldom thought of it since. But I recently told the story for the first time to a close friend, just as I related it here for you, with no additional embellishments, exaggerations or liberties taken. Thinking of it now reminds me of a forgotten incident that occurred on the morning I left Barcelona.

I was having coffee beneath the arcade on the placa Reial, killing a little time before I had to catch the metro to the airport. The square was mostly empty, save for a few cigar peddlers setting up their stands. I was seated alone at a table, laughing intermittently to myself without taking the cigarette out of my mouth, as is

occasionally my habit (so I am told). The waiter, a man no more than thirty, noticed this from his position at the entrance to the café and smiled. As I was his only customer, we ended up having a friendly conversation, during which I mentioned the bizarre incident I had witnessed on Las Ramblas.

I cannot say with any certainty if what he told me was true. Perhaps he made the whole thing up! I can only tell you that the casualness and candor with which he spoke had an immediate effect on me and left an impression that persisted long after the conversation had ended.

The waiter mentioned a performer many years ago who for a short time had been a favorite among the crowds on Las Ramblas. He was no bottom rung entertainer; nothing like the here today gone tomorrow variety that you have now. This man was a truly rare talent, an artist. He was also arrogant and chauvinistic. Though he was only a mime, capturing the emotions of the people through the precision of his exquisite expressions and gestures, he had a kind of machismo typically reserved for matadors and prize fighters. He was unwilling to work hard at his craft or to take suggestions from the more experienced performers. Worse than that, he developed contempt for the crowd and treated them badly. He propositioned wives and girlfriends in front of their men and was even said to have spit on a small child who approached his hat without dropping in a coin. Paying his dues was out of the question. He plainly refused to follow the site rotation agreed upon by the other performers and even had the audacity to claim right of pitch for life just outside the Hotel Royale, the most lucrative spot on the entire boulevard. It was often joked that he must be the biggest ego in all of Spain. Eventually the older performers decided they'd had enough and with the testimony of a few witnesses, put together a case against him. He was officially banned from ever performing on the streets of Barcelona again.

“Not long after,” the waiter said, “that idiot you saw on Las Ramblas showed up.”

