

# **Stephen Collis** · The Red Album

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The city was just coming back to life after siesta. The metal gates on storefronts going up. Cafés opening their doors. Dio wandered, watching where his footsteps fell, the unmarked impression they made upon the equally invisible yet somehow still lingering impressions of so many centuries of footsteps. At the entrance to a narrow street, Dio watched a car wait for a metal post, obstructing access, to descend into the ground after the car's driver had slipped a key card into a wall panel. The car drove through – into a street it could barely fit in – and the metal post, a yellow light flashing on top of it, rose back into place. Dio wandered on until he came out onto La Rambla, then followed the flow of tourists along the great avenue, past bird and flower kiosks and street performers pretending to be statues, their faces painted the same colour as their costumes, sparkling and metallic. Just off La Rambla, he found the Boqueria market<sup>2</sup>, and began walking up and down its aisles, not sure what he was looking for, although sensing there was something to be found there. He stood for too long in front of a pile of fish he didn't recognize, trying to ascertain their nature, arousing the displeasure of the fishmonger. So he went back out onto La Rambla, and lacking any other necessity for being where he was, cut back through the Barri Gotic, hoping he was going in the direction of his hotel. Somehow he did indeed find his way back into the large square, where tourists still clutched gelato, and, retracing the path he had watched the woman in the yellow dress take earlier, only in reverse, quickly found himself seated at one of the café tables outside his hotel.

The waiter came to his table and Dio ordered some tapas and a beer, then stretched his feet out from under the awning's shade

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2 This market probably dates from the thirteenth century, and was originally situated just outside the gates of old Barcelona (now known as the Barri Gotic, or "gothic quarter"). But such information is easy enough to find out, and hardly needs comment here. I have, though, myself stared into the faces of the fish mentioned here, and it is truly a disconcerting sight.

and into the sun. People came and went in the busy square. He wondered if Barcelona was always this crowded, or just here in the middle of the tourist area, or if there was a festival or something else afoot. A group of overweight people came up to the restaurant to read the menu. They spoke loud English, some of which Dio could understand, but he chose not to try to do so. His beer arrived and he took a long drink. He wished he had sunglasses – why didn't he have sunglasses? He remembered a rack of them he'd seen in the airport, a fashionable woman turning it round and round, shaking her head.

Nearby in the square, a man stood holding a large open book in his hands, from which he began to read loudly, looking up from his text periodically to glance meaningfully at people passing by or slowing to listen for a moment. It appeared to be a phone book. It was, at any rate, a list of names and numbers, although the performer read them as though it were Quevedo.<sup>3</sup> Shortly a police officer approached the man and he stopped reading.

After his tapas Dio ordered another beer. Then he became aware of another man drinking alone a few tables away and apparently watching him. In a series of casual glances, disguised as surveys of the square, Dio saw that the man was about his age, had a moustache and not much hair, and wore rumpled clothes. He looked like Dio must – tired, staring because there was nothing else he could do.

When Dio's beer was almost finished, the man called out.

Buy you another?

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3 The name dropped here seems a little arbitrary, as though it were the first Spanish writer's name that came to the author. The name "Quevedo" fits no more appropriately than "Bustamente" or "Lopez-Vega" would have.

Dio looked around like he had not quite heard.

Buy you another?

Beer, asked Dio?

Yes, beer. The man smiled and nodded, holding his own almost-empty glass up.

Dio wondered for a moment if the man was a con artist of some kind – a crook laying in wait for unsuspecting foreigners and tourists, or simply a pickpocket trying to lull and distract him – but he didn't particularly care much at the moment. He turned his chair a bit towards the other man and shrugged.

Sure, let's have a beer.

The other man got up from his table and came to Dio's, lifting his empty glass in the air again and gesturing to the waiter. His smile seemed genuinely friendly, and reminded Dio of a colleague from his office back home. He introduced himself as Leandro, and Dio told him his name.

You are not from Catalonia, Leandro observed.

No. South America.

Leandro nodded his head, but didn't ask for any more specific details. I have never been, he said. Once to Madrid. Once to France. Several times here to Barcelona. Mine is a small Catalan town, Alcarràs.<sup>4</sup> I come here this time for my wife's illness. And you?

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4 A small town to the west, about halfway between Barcelona and Zaragoza. Really, an unremarkable, circular stone village with fields sprawled around its outskirts and a river nearby.

Dio wasn't sure if he wanted a full catalogue of his travels (which wasn't much more impressive) or simply the reason for his present visit to Barcelona. He didn't really want to talk about the latter, so he simply said, Business. Again, Leandro didn't seem to want to know anything more detailed. There was a long pause in which they drank and stared out into the busy square. Eventually Dio thought it polite to enquire after the health of his acquaintance's wife. Leandro nodded enthusiastically.

She is doing much better, thank you. Now I am waiting for her recovery. A few more days, the doctor says. Before, we were waiting many weeks for a diagnosis. First in Alcarràs. Then at the hospital in Lleida. And then here, at the big university hospital. Maybe you don't want to know, but it was the strangest thing. It began with a terrible headache – the worst she had ever had. So bad she could not get out of bed. Her mother tried some remedies, but soon we sought a doctor's advice. The doctor said migraines, and gave her something for the pain, which had no effect. My wife is strong, and never sick. So we were much concerned. Her mother, who is always at our house, kept taking me aside and saying it was brain cancer, it was cell phones. Even though we don't have a cell phone! My wife would simply say, There's something wrong with my head. Something wrong. We went to Lleida, and there my wife went truly crazy. Shouting in the hospital, cursing at people who weren't there, asking strange and inappropriate questions of doctors – I think it was doctors – who weren't in the room. She called me Filo and said, Get a hair cut.

Leandro laughed.

I have no hair, my friend, and know no one named Filo. She became frightened, staring into empty corners of the room, whispering. Her eyes, which I always thought were so beautiful, re-

ceded somewhere into her head, as though not wanting to see or be seen.

Leandro paused to finish his drink as the waiter brought two new beers. Dio wondered what he had got himself into, but with a full belly at last, and his second (or was it third?) beer, he didn't much care. If his new friend wanted to talk, Dio would listen.

She became violent, Leandro continued flatly, staring into the centre of the square. The doctor told me she was psychotic, or perhaps schizophrenic. In quiet moments my wife told me a small voice was talking to her, inside her, but she wasn't sure what it was saying. Baby talk, she would say. She developed a fever, then had a seizure. They sent us to the hospital in Barcelona, in an ambulance. She slept the whole way, and then for almost three weeks here. Coma. Her eyes would open, but she would not respond to any stimulus. Not even a sharp needle. I was sure she was gone for good. Prepared myself at last. Mourned the fact that she had not been able to have children – something that made her mother furious (her mother had eight children of her own – but my wife was the only daughter). The doctors, however, remained very curious – like my wife was a great mystery they must solve. They asked me many questions about my wife, the history of her health. What was this scar from? Had she always had this mark on her calf? Had she always had headaches? Nothing seemed to indicate what might be wrong. Scans, spinal taps. Nothing conclusive. White blood cells, they told me, indicated possible encephalitis, a brain inflammation, but they could find no cause. They wanted causes, above all. Believed in causes. A doctor would propose a theory (herpes – I would frown – lyme, syphilis?), but the other doctors (there were many, now, all so curious about my wife) would shake their heads no, no, no, nothing to indicate that.

Leandro took a long drink. His pauses were becoming dramatic, and he seemed to enjoy his role as storyteller. Dio wondered if he had been lonely all this time in Barcelona, with no one but doctors to speak to. Presently he began again.

You know, I have learned a lot about medicine through all of this. The doctors would speak, and then later, I would go to the internet café, and use a computer to look up the things they had been saying. Words I had never heard before. Really just sounds I would ask them to write on a piece of folded paper I kept in my shirt pocket. I understand things, now, about the brain I would never have thought. You know, the cells in your body are renewed all the time, they die and are born anew, so in terms of what you are actually made out of – flesh and bone – you are not the same you as you were five or ten years ago. Literally. Not one cell. You have been replaced by another you. And in the brain, even faster – not the same brain it was, maybe days, hours ago. Proteins dissolve and new proteins form. Synapses fire in new patterns. Now, how do we remember anything at all? Forgetting, *that* I understand. Especially now. It's obvious. But recollection, that's a mystery. You know – how hard would it be to break and replace a pitcher and not spill any sangria?

Anyway, out of desperation they did a CT scan of her whole body, and found a cyst on her left ovary. It is known as a teratoma. That sounds like the name of a Spanish town, but it means *monster* in Greek. This teratoma is small and smooth, like an olive, on the outside, but inside it may have a variety of cells and tissues – even growing hair and teeth. That's the monster part.

Leandro paused, smiling, to see how this sunk in. Dio nodded, frowning.



One doctor was convinced this was the culprit. The little monster was killing my wife. Ovarian Teratoma Encephalitis, that was her diagnosis. (This doctor was a young woman, and beautiful, from Madrid.) The little bastard had grown some primitive brain cells (*primitive* was what the beautiful doctor called the cells), and my wife's immune system had mistaken these for foreign cells and sent antibodies to destroy them. These antibodies then went on to attack the same kind of cells in my wife's brain. Can you believe that?

It's incredible, Dio agreed.

Incredible. And I started to think, if you can believe it, that that monster is the closest we will ever come to a child of our own. And my wife's body wanted to kill it! Because it had a brain. Or at least brain cells, however primitive. Would it have had thoughts? Feelings? Memory even? I wanted to ask, but didn't. The doctors cut it out, and my wife regained consciousness. Now she can go home in another day, maybe two – completely cured. I couldn't bring myself to ask – I wanted to, some strange enemy within me wanted to ask – if I could have the cyst – you know, like tonsils in a jar. A memento. To remember our little monster. But I couldn't quite say it. And the beautiful doctor was so pleased, so excited, she really wanted to get a good look inside our cyst – Let's have a look inside this guy, she said – so what could I say – No, give me the monster, I want to keep him!?

Leandro stared into his beer. Dio shifted uncomfortably, starting to think about his bed, the crack in his ceiling, his appointment tomorrow with the strangely named Amy Godwin.

It's an interesting story, anyhow, Leandro said apologetically. It raises so many questions for me. For instance, what do you think makes us human?

Dio shrugged, I'm not sure I understand your question.

What makes us different from animals? I'm not a religious man – really, not much religion in my village since the Civil War, when we shot the Priest, bless his corrupt soul. Darwin, from what I hear, is right. We are animals. We eat and shit and fuck. We want to reproduce ourselves, feed our young. Then we die. How are we different from animals? Animals don't build hospitals, or cut each other open to remove rogue cysts. They don't have complicated names for their problems, or scientific literatures about those problems, with definitions on the computer. They eat and shit and fuck and die. So, in part, it's language, right? That we name things and make those names our problems, the subjects of our literatures. But then I read on the computer about a dog who knows 300 words. There are 300 things his owner can name, or actions he can command, and the dog knows and goes to get the thing named or perform the action commanded. 300. And that's not all – a parrot I read of, it said the parrot was smarter than the president of the United States! A joke, but the researcher, she's in Buenos Aires, reports that the parrot can express all sorts of desires and feelings, and understands inflection, so the same word can be made to ... to mean something else. Like the bird really understands language, how sound and meaning go together. Amazing.

I think ... I think it's that we think of ourselves as human, Dio offered. Leandro nodded, and Dio went on. That we, you know, *think* we're human – a member of that species, an example of the category. That we're special and stand apart, or have a mission or a cause or purpose. Whether we do or not. Just that we *think* that, and think – like you said – What makes us this and not that? I can't imagine sheep thinking about being sheep, or dogs thinking, Wow, it sucks to be a dog, I wish I could have a beer and go to college. Only humans imagine what they are, generally, and

want what they don't have, things that go beyond mere survival. Desires. Imaginings. Dio paused, his hand counting things off in the air. At least, that's what I think. That it's just that we are given to imagining such things as categories and desires.

Good, Leandro nodded again. Good. Very scientific. Darwin. I love science. At home, I build things. Mostly furniture. I work with wood. Sometimes plastic and steel tubing (that's when I went to France, to get the tubing in my uncle's truck), but mostly it's wood. One has to be scientific to make a chair come out right, or a table to keep your cups and pictures from falling over. Or for it not to crack wide open. Measurement and design. Exactness. Occasionally my wife has found popular science magazines for me at the grocery store and I read them and I think. I like to know how things work. But it's only the past few weeks that I've been using the computer and I can't believe all the things I can read about science there. About time and the universe and how small and insignificant it is to be human and how the earth is warming up or how they built a tunnel under the water to England – that I would like to see. Do you have a computer Dio?

Yes. One at work and an old one at home. The home one is mostly for my kids. And my wife uses it too.

Leandro nodded. She must be a smart woman, like the doctor from Madrid. What work do you do?

I work for the government in my city. Urban planning. Mostly I work on green projects – parks, bicycles.

Bicycles?

Yes, bicycles. Improving bicycling by designing paths through the

city, greenways for cyclists – and pedestrians too. It's a new program, a European idea really, which our mayor seems to think lends his administration credibility. Sophistication and forward-thinking. We haven't done much yet though, and we have almost no funding. But there are too many cars in my city, and the pollution and congestion is terrible as a result. So we want more people to ride bicycles, and for that we must make bicycling easier and safer. It's for the environment – global warming, like you mentioned – and for improving lifestyle and fitness, like it's better for you to exercise on a bicycle than to sit in a car all day. Better for the air too.

Your city must have a very liberal government. Socialist? No doubt. They care for people, and even the earth. They think scientifically, and that's good. We have a socialist government here in Spain once again too. But, not much changes in my town.

Dio smiled. Things change slowly in my city too. The government calls itself socialist, and even brings in liberal ideas from Europe, but ... I'm not always sure what that means. Socialist. We have had right-wing and left-wing governments, but as you say, the difference is not always discernable at the local level. Usually what changes is how the government talks to other countries, to the United States, and the oil and mining interests.

Yes, that's important too, Leandro nodded enthusiastically, taking his next beer from the waiter. The café was crowded now, and the square still filled with people, tourists and vendors and performers. Even more people than before. Somewhere there was singing – a choir, perhaps; Dio couldn't see through all the people – but somewhere across the square there was singing, and occasionally, applause.

## **Colophon**

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