
El bailarín ruso de Montecarlo

Author: Abilio Estévez

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Reader: **Christina MacSweeney**

When the sixty-year-old academic Constantino Augusto de Moreas arrives in Madrid from Cuba to attend a conference on the poet and liberator José Martí, he makes a momentous decision. Rather than continuing his journey to Zaragoza to the conference, he burns his passport and boards a train for Barcelona, taking with him only his copy of Chateaubriand's *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb* and a few other treasured possessions.

Arriving in Barcelona on a winter's morning, Moreas wanders the streets, delighting in the newfound sense of freedom, of not being watched and the beauty that surrounds him. Having strolled down the Ramblas, the shy academic eventually finds himself in Raval, where he is attracted by the name of a small hotel: *Quo Vadis*. The owner, a voluptuous lady with a beautiful voice, refuses payment when she learns he is from Cuba, the birthplace of her grandmother, and Moreas finds himself ensconced in a small, dimly-lit room whose only redeeming feature is a copy of a beautiful painting of Nijinsky in *L'Après Midi d'un Faune*.

Over the following days, Moreas explores the city on foot, mingling new experiences with his memories: his first and only true love, killed in a car crash when she escaped to Spain, the day he had found his copy of Chateaubriand in his uncle's shop in La Habana, his meeting with the mysterious ballet dancer, who claimed to have performed with the Ballet Russe in Monte Carlo, at an abandoned hotel in a deserted Cuban spa town. He is further reminded of this friendship by the sounds which come to him in the evenings from the adjoining room: the music of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, and the regular, relaxed breathing of his invisible neighbour. Then, one afternoon, he follows a young man who resembles this lost friend and loses one of his prize possessions, his uncle's gold Omega watch, stolen, along with his wallet and money, by the youth, who turns out to be a prostitute. With only a few euros left, Moreas feeds his senses on the smells and sights of the local bakeries. His future is uncertain until his hostess invites him into her sitting room one evening, where the table is laid for a Christmas meal. During the meal she confesses how she has been trapped since her father's death, running the hotel, and how life has passed her by. Slowly, she breaks down Moreas's reserve with food, wine and conversation, so that when she proposes that they go away on a journey together, he accepts, suggesting their destination be Monte Carlo.

The plan is hatched and the two travellers cross the border to France clandestinely, as so many other Spanish refugees had done before them. They finally emerge from the forest into the bright sunshine, where their future happiness lies awaiting them. In the final chapter, when the narrator finally confesses that he is Moreas, it is impossible not to suspect that there is, in fact, something personal in this fictional narrative, that the author himself has travelled similar roads.

This beautifully composed novel of exile, friendship and love cannot fail to capture the reader's imagination, nor will she/he find it possible to be unmoved by the protagonists' journey towards a new life and happiness. Abilio Estévez almost effortlessly creates a world and, with great generosity, invites the reader to be part of it.

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