

NO-MAD

PABLO REIG MENDOZA

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To Mrs. Marta.
"It has to be done!"

No-mad

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1 Euro-babel

Juan Mari Arzak, the renowned Basque chef, once said that the best dish in the world is undoubtedly the *croque-madame* sandwich made with special care. What at first glance may seem like a "boutade", from certain angles, it becomes a Templar truth. Throughout my short existence, some characters who were fond of trying the same dish in every restaurant in the world had gained in-depth knowledge on the subject, and even today, they can still correct some great chefs' hands.

I was especially impressed by a couple, he a prestigious journalist and she a psychologist now separated by those twists and turns of life, who had been studying the famous Waldorf salad for

ten years. Against all odds, he was able to make an exquisite version with his own hands. It's something that can be said of very few wannabe gastronomes, who have tried everything but cannot execute a scrambled egg, nor a fried egg since the latter's good preparation requires basic knowledge of thermodynamics.

Another prominent figure of the Spanish Transition, also a journalist, has been tasting every Asturian *fabada* on sale on the face of our planet. I do not want to imagine the displeasure to which such a singular purpose will have led him, not because of the proverbial heaviness of this regional dish, but because this admired friend has traveled a lot. There are cooks out there who deserve to be beaten.

In this frantic beginning of the millennium, the occasional emigrant, especially the new generations, are in the habit of killing the *saudade* of their mother country by opening some canned specialty. In Spain's case, the Litoral *fabada*, a national icon, takes the palm without competition. The French are more inclined towards *cassoulet* and the Maghrebis towards *couscous*. I don't want to mention all the world's peoples at this point so as not to prostitute the argument, but God will recognize his own. In passing, I will limit myself to comment that the brownest Italians are only satisfied with sauces since it is a country of delicious starters and

execrable main courses. Saxon peoples are still a step away from refining their taste; "the Renaissance has not passed through here", as another friend settled in London for a long time would say. Other lights the Saxons have, but not this one.

The fact is that with the aforementioned canned *fabada* it happens like with fast-food hamburgers. The first spoonful takes you directly to your grandmother's arms in the case of *fabada*, as does the first bite of the *dirt-mac* at New York's Fifth Avenue, even if you have never set foot on it. In this way, as you go along, the *fabada* turns into a disgusting paste with the tempered paprika, and the American sandwich confesses its undeniable resemblance to cardboard, both in taste and texture. Whoever speaks from the authority of a promiscuous life will be able to observe the astonishing resemblance of this gustatory effect with the memory of many of his fleeting lovers.

Each of us, therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, has a few dishes that we try throughout our lives, and we form a judgment of how, for example, the immortal archetype of the *croque-madame* sandwich should be. So far, in my case, the best is undoubtedly the one from the *Casa da Guia* pastry shop in Cascais: dry-toasted village bread, a brush of warm butter, and an unbeatable Atlantic Ocean. There is another problem of

gastronomy as a major art. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce the same sensation twice.

Egg Benedict itself marks you in many ways depending on one's mood, the place, the company, and the surroundings. So one tries to remember the soft curves, the fine hair, and Anne's sidelong complicit glances that morning at the Hotel du Louvre having oysters with brioche and Billecart-Salmon for breakfast.... they never taste the same to me since then. What's more, ever since Anne stood me up with a "good riddance" and then her lawyers let me know about our son's visitation schedule for the next ten years, in the few "old times" relapses we've had, Anne doesn't taste the same to me either. I guess it's mutual. The truth is that I have never again accompanied oysters with brioche.

Is this text you're reading a novel? I don't know. Somehow I am committed to writing in the first person in front of a PC screen, just as you are committed to letting yourself be carried away by these lines. Words have an extraordinary power. Now that hypnosis has been renamed NLP, and everyone seems to be able to lecture on the subjects of suggestion, the power of body language, and other animals, few have noticed the birth of *a priori* suspicion in social and professional relationships. Let me explain: raising an eyebrow for your interlocutors is enough for

them to wonder if you are creating an anchor of influence to implant a mental virus in them. They don't know you usually raise your eyebrow three hundred and fifty-four times a day, simply because you have the tic and because you can do it, with both eyebrows. While they think of defending themselves from your underhand attack, they miss what you wanted to tell them, even if the latter was not worth much either.

I have started this text talking about the *croque-madame* sandwich for the simple reason that we are at the beginning of the rant, and I am at the beginning of the day. In all the good households I know, the day begins with a more or less copious breakfast. So, for the sake of good vibes, I beg you to lower your defenses. You are not going to be hypnotized while reading this text to the end. I do not have ten mythology notebooks that will activate your cultural triggers for you to go out to the street to ask your government to do something so that absolutely nothing happens. I intend to share a stretch of the road and make it fun for both of us, me writing and you reading. I have finished my breakfast and can start the day with a bang; it begins in a borrowed apartment in front of Via Fatebenefratelli in Milan and will surely end with some emotions.

For a few weeks now, Jérôme has been organizing a party for the newspaper he runs,

and it's a themed party on a budget. As it is the anniversary of the illustrious newspaper's founding, they have rented the Vittorio Emanuele gallery's great crossing for a few hours. They are going to bring an international personality representative of each section who will give a short talk. Closing a public space for a party was almost unfeasible, so Jérôme - from now on Jéjé, as he is familiarly known - managed to apply for a filming license at the town hall. I must say that Jéjé is admirable in his ease of affectionate cajoling. He is Belgian but could be Totó's distant nephew and moves around Italy like one more of them. Not only has he convinced them that the shoot is for a Paramount blockbuster, but he has managed to get a fee waiver so that the daughter of a friend of the prime minister receives a few minutes of tape. *Tangentopoli*.

Jéjé and I met young and poor, which is the only real way to enjoy the European continent without being a millionaire, a tourist, or a pensioner. We coincided in an obscure office in Bonn, doing telemarketing for several multinationals. It was not easy, back then, to invade the privacy of homes to work the minds of housewives, and the cell phone was still a luxury available to few. On second thought, housewives still existed, and mortgages longer than ten years were a metaphysical impossibility.

I will not confess my age, but for what it's worth, in Germany, they still circulated hard and heavy German Marks. I always wonder why the coins were not square... The fact is that we made friends, and our friendship lasts until today. I guess it's because of intermittency, which gives time to miss each other and have juicy things to tell in further encounters. We were poor to the point of boredom then. Our meager savings were for drinking, but that did not prevent us from making lavish feasts of *risotto* with mushroom powder soup or pasta with grated *bratwurst*, not to mention the evenings of vegetarian *sauerkraut*. He was already announcing his journalistic vocation to the four winds, and I was beginning my dalliances with business psychology.

Before Bonn, Jéjé had made his debut in Rome as personal assistant to a die-hard politician, one of those who will never win an election. He was the first to talk about the legalization of drugs by setting an example, getting himself arrested for selling marijuana loudly in the Piazza Spagna. There is always something to learn from others. From all that Jéjé learned from such a commendable gentleman, the following comment was engraved in my mind: "The only reason for public service is to create difficulty to sell ease". I was recently reminded of this pearl when, in the queue of a

ministry, I heard a Russian civil servant respond to the story of a hairy case: "Did he manage to make the whole thing up?" It is not the civil servant, it's the function.

So we met about a month ago in Paris. He was finalizing the details of a report on the latest student conflicts, and I had to give some assertive reorientation seminars in an American film distribution company. We met at about five o'clock in the afternoon at *Le Trappiste*, for the sake of tasting some abbey malts. It had been about a year since we had seen each other. He showed up on time, as usual. As always in his case, precisely at half past five because, according to him, half an hour late was the perfect compromise between the time that women who know how to assert themselves are usually late, and the usual British punctuality. I confirm that I have never seen or heard of a delay of less than fifteen minutes in the greater London area for those who have never waited for a train in the English Isles.

—Leonardo! *Comment ça va, mon petit père?* - he looked sincerely excited as he shook the water off his black raincoat. It was raining outside in that uncomfortable rain of the Aprils in this city.

—Great Jéjé! Nice to see you around these parts, balder and fatter! I reckon you still don't have time to take care of yourself. I saw you

arrive by car and I ordered you a Lambic. Sit down and tell me the latest.

He instinctively reached a hand to the thinning blond locks that still lined his forehead as if to make sure of their presence. He took a seat shakily and planted a thumb on my glasses to return the "compliment". I just left the glasses on the table, and we both burst out laughing. His laugh is very characteristic, somewhere between the whine of a horny ferret and the victory cry of a turkey that manages to survive Christmas. A burst of contagious and exuberant laughter that never goes unnoticed and that, in the past, even cost us some nasty tavern brawls.

—Leo, Leo, Leo, Leo, *petit père*, you're not bald, you're not bald, but you're no thinner than last time. I come conveniently overexcited. In France, being a student and protesting always go hand in hand, and this time they have burned fifteen cars in the *Bois de Boulogne*.

—Fifteen cars! But don't the guys know about the displeasure of the owner, who is just another taxpayer? Even if the insurance pays, it seems nonsense to me. In Spain, public furniture has always been violated, with a particular preference for containers.

—No, *mon cher ibère*, insurance no longer pays in these cases, at least in the metropolitan area, since one law firm filed an appeal to qualify street protests as acts of terrorism. Another law

firm, I think from the same owner, added to the dossier an argument on how student protests should be considered a natural disaster because university belongs to the city's ecosystem. The issue has been blocked in *cour d'assises* for three years because of some death that had nothing to do with the burned car. Car owners are in deep shit.

—I don't even want to know if you're pulling my leg or you're serious, you old savage. How is Silvia? That woman deserves heaven three times over for putting up with you for so long.

Jéjé took a long drink and pulled out his proverbial little packet of Drum, which he started buying in Bonn to stop smoking cigarettes, relying on his disgust for rolling tobacco, which he has not let go of to this day. I ordered another round while he answered me.

—Silvia deserves heaven, and I'm doing everything I can to make sure she earns it so that I have someone to intercede for me. The last one is that she wants to get married, you know? The thing is, I love her as I've never loved anyone and, if we didn't live in Italy, I wouldn't ask many questions, but her family makes me shudder. They are too Catholic.

—Too Catholic? How come? You are the son of a Marists's real estate contractor, with all the comfort involved. - I interrupted him - Besides, what is the yardstick for being too much or not

enough Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, or whatever?
- He burst out laughing again and solemnly opened his glazed clear eyes.

Do you remember her sister's psychological pregnancy, for which I was unjustly made the main suspect? Well, many years later, in front of the firing squad, sorry, in front of the whole family at a dinner in Rome, they made me a philosophical trap remembering the incident, and I almost didn't make it. One is too catholic when one uses morality as a weapon against one's neighbor. God is love, *et point final*. But we were talking about Silvia. I wouldn't know how to live without her, and while you will see her at the party in Milan, you will both discuss doctrine and, by the way, practice your Italian. Order something salty, *je t'en prie*, and tell me what brings you to Paris, you tendentious punk!

-I'm coming out of an assertive reorientation seminar on Avenue Montaigne. Middle management is a tough nut to crack. I'm almost later than you, so the round of questions has been stretched out. - Another laugh à la Jéré.

-Assertive reorientation? What are you inventing now, *mon petit père*? The butter-cutting thread or the hiccup-removing thong?

-We are like your law firms, we have a *coaching* team that teaches assertiveness in large companies, and I am part of the *SWAT* team that leads it. With that, we manage to keep the

perfect mental balance of their teams. You know that multinationals' turnover is accelerating lately, and that creates imbalances.

—This year will not end without me dedicating a special issue of our weekly magazine to you, *mon petit père*. Do you bill what you bill for this crap you are telling me?

I always have a hard time explaining the nature of my work to a layman. It is usually a layman who signs the estimates, so I live in a permanent conflict between this personal difficulty and my billing objectives. Fortunately, it has been a few years since sales are closed by others, and I limit myself to giving my eclectic talks between planes, but that does not free me from having to justify my services on some occasions, and I have a reasonably well-defined speech.

—It's not that simple, you little fool! Your profession still has a creative component that serves to heal your neurosis, even though you make a living from selling advertising and politics rather than selling newspapers. Notwithstanding your cynicism, I know you care about keeping an editorial line that brings freshness to your readers, so you also end up resembling me in your function as an escape valve, but not in the other ones. In most professions, this is far from being the case. It is a matter of remembering that, even if business means numbers, those who

go to meetings and run the day-to-day are human beings whose good performance also affects the profit and loss account. In an environment of global budget cuts, my job is to keep the troops' morale at acceptable levels and optimize groups and individuals' psychosocial lubrication. This does not make me Dietrich going to see the Marines, Doctor Caligari, or Charlie Rivel. Still, I try to ensure that my interlocutors learn to be like Houdini and strengthen their mental health without negatively affecting the company and their colleagues. Get it now, mussel graveyard with fries?

—You indeed remind me of many law firms with your description, and they certainly don't do badly either. All the more reason for you to have that space to explain your market to my readers. They also laughed at Columbus's egg and Brel's teeth. Seafood or *steak tartare, mon cher ibère?*

And so, between the ferret and the turkey, we finished our beers and went to review the always delicious meats of *La Maison de l'Aubrac* and its regional wines. The night lasted until the wee hours at the *Folies Pigalle*. It was a fairly well-balanced VA session, which we were told about by Martine, Philippe's wife, while we had dinner, and Jéré gave me the details of the party's organization in Milan.

"Dear friend,

On the twentieth anniversary of *Giornale del Mondo*, we are pleased to invite you to the party's shooting that will take place at the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, access Duomo, on May 29th, from 22:30 and up until the Carabinieri Corps kicks us out.

For the occasion, several personalities will delight us with a brief talk. We have asked them to develop an imaginary news item without each one extending more than fifteen minutes. Anyone who wants to be bored can come to our editorial office any day after closing time, but the party is designed to leave you with an unforgettable memory.

We count on your presence. Etiquette, good disposition, and a taste for quality music and surprises are requested.

Jérôme Van der Linden - Director".

We landed last night in Malpensa because of fog which, according to the captain, forced us to divert. I am accompanied by Sandra, a friend from Sao Paulo that I met in Florianopolis on a business trip and is now temporarily based in Oviedo. I should clarify that it's instead me accompanying her because Sandra is a beautiful brunette who is a head taller than me in sandals, and with whom, for my luck or misfortune, there has never been more than friendship.

Sandra is one of those sparkling people who guarantee good humor and no bitterness as long

as you don't remind her of some chapters of her troubled past. Born Wanderleia in a poor slum of São Paulo, she had her name changed when she married her first husband, an obscure businessman from Minas Gerais. Sandra-Wanderleia had the head and good fortune to be able to attend university. She quickly found the opportunity to leave the *mineiro* in the lurch when his umpteenth mistress offered her a job while gossiping about her relationship with the man.

Today, the gentleman lives hooked to a catheter for life due to a Levitra overdose. According to Sandra, that's practically impossible, and she suspects a much more banal origin of the disease. In my opinion, her current name suits her better, just like her closet: always discreet no matter how bright and colorful. When I talk about her to third parties, I can't help remembering that impression. Sandra is a woman of color, a fresh breeze on this often ashen continent.

—O Leo, is this Malpensa in Milan or Venice? I can't stand so many cabs anymore! As Jobim used to say: *Brazil is shit, but it's good; while the first world is good, but it's shit.*

—Don't overreact, Wandí. Besides, you will soon understand that this is part of the hype. You'll see, my dear, you'll love it.

—You call me Wandí once again, and I'll give myself to you to see you fall in love and never

touch me again! And if someone finds out, it will be worse. I should never have told you. Always Sandra, bullocks!

My spoken Portuguese is quite good, but we have an agreement to speak in Spanish to learn as much as possible during her stay. Since I also believe that Portuguese-Spanish hybridization will soon be the official language south of the Rio Grande and the Pyrenees, I don't think it's a bad idea to start practicing. Besides, the poor girl is having some problems with Bable there in Oviedo. I find it very funny when she attributes the origin of the dialect to the Asturcon horses. She speaks excellent English if you can call English what they speak in the United States. As a London comedian said in his Dublin performance: "You must be surprised by my accent. It's normal. I don't have any. I'm British, and that's how my language sounds." We also have a frictionless friendship agreement; we like each other too much to spoil it all over a few hot cramps.

—I apologize a thousand times. It won't happen again, Wandra.

—Son of a bitch...

The apartment is impeccable. It was a penthouse with high ceilings, quite decadent, and spectacular bathrooms, bathtubs, and lots of mosaics. Sometimes, it is justified that the Italians call apartment houses *palazzo*, although it

can be misleading, as misleading is the amount of "princes" who swarm these geographies. Jérôme lent it to us as a special favor. I told him he needn't to, since I had managed to get paid for a talk in the local offices of the same company we were working with at that moment in Paris, and he must surely be up to his ears in commitments due to the organization of the party. Jéjé left no option for further discussion: he invoked the ferret and the *petit père* and hung me on my nose. We took possession of our rooms, and I gave Sandra her set of keys.

—If you flirt, discuss, or get lost, this is the address. Please, if you pick up, make sure he's not into group sex. I don't feel like arguing with a hundred-plus-pound buck at six o'clock in the morning in hostile territory.

—If you want to patronize, you bring your son. Besides, I know how to defend myself, don't you? Oh, and that doesn't stop you from being a gentleman: you make breakfast.

—Wandra...

—*Filho da puta...*

—They'll be the best breakfasts of your life, even if I'm a flirt too, I'll tell you that. Make yourself comfortable. I'm going to sleep. It's going to be a long day. Do you like your room?

—I love it, and you know it, fool. Shall we take a bath together and turn off the deal one night?

–Don't provoke me. Maybe you like it too, and I don't feel getting at the party with the memory of your skin. Women notice that right away, and you know I'm looking for a formal girlfriend. Ask me again the day after tomorrow, and we'll be even.

–Hahaha! No chance, handsome. I'll check the bookshelves. Good night, go. Kiss.

This deal is the scariest challenge I have set for myself in the last ten years. Luckily, we've been training to flirt for a long time now. If nothing has happened in all this time, it's a sign that we've reached cruising speed in the relationship. I like Sandra, and her Paulista accent with those Britishized R's brings back memories. If someday we stop these verbal games, it will be a severe warning that one of us has fallen in love, then we'll see.

My talk starts at ten o'clock in the morning, and I'm pretty well on time. I have already checked my emails, nothing worth mentioning. Thanks to this contract and the expense notes from the last trip to Buenos Aires, the bank is also smooth. I turn on the HK in the living room and play at considerable volume and in replay mode a version of *Tico-Tico no fubá*, by Baremboin, a delight. I leave Sandra the steaming breakfast on her bedside table with my raincoat on, a reversible Aquascutum electric blue and matte yellow, almost tattered but still in

shape and more traveled than Willy Fog. Some garments are as evocative as the eggy mix-and-match on the tray.

–Up, girl! If it gets cold, it's you to blame. Then you go to bed again if you want. Anyway, you'll end up going to the living room when the *Tico-Tico* drills your brain - sleepy and disheveled, Sandra is equally colorful.

–Motherf... Eiiii! What a lovely smell! Thank you, *amôr*. Today, I won't insult you anymore. Have a nice day. Call me when you're free, and God bless you. I'm meeting Pietro, that Sardinian friend I told you about. We'll probably spend the morning shopping.

–If this Pietro wants to, invite him to the party. We'll figure it out with Jéjé. It's black tie, don't forget. *Beijinbo*.

–Mrrrphr, okay - she yawned – Go ahead, go. Thanks for the coffee.

A fine mist has taken hold of Lombardy. I go down the stairs thinking about the benefits of digital tools. *Replay* and *random* are two elements that didn't exist in vinyl times, and being unimportant details, they have always given me play. *Replay* allows turning any song into a mantra. Until Rio de Janeiro's carnival, I had always judged mantras as the apex of redundancy, although it proves useful for some therapies. The same *samba* for an hour and a half (samba music there is spoken in masculine and

danced in the feminine) with a trained audience radically changed my point of view, and some emblematic songs I ingest in this way, discovering new things.

Random has already become inseparable for that game of luck that allows matching the songs' meanings coming out with the thoughts arising in the subconscious and the things that are happening around. There is even morbid anxiety at the end of each song to see how clever the algorithm gets for the choice of the next one, just like adspotting on the Internet.

My client's offices are in a downtown building covered entirely by a marquee with a fashion advertisement. It's like a Christo intervention subsidized by a third party. Few cities lend themselves so well as Milan to this kind of visual exercise, mostly because if there's one thing the Italians know about, it's style. I don't think any brand would leave a poorly designed stencil in the sight of such a punctilious public. According to her golden pin, Sofia Ferrara leads me to the conference room with an angry and sweet dalliance while I am sorting out my ideas for the talk.

I will reuse the Buenos Aires presentation on "Archetypes and Workflow", so I have the topic chewed. I will present in English, as it is the house's official language, and my Italian is very rusty, largely due to the Portuguese I have been

practicing lately. I wish vulgate would come back for everyone. From Portuguese, I especially like the construction and its sixteenth-century sound. The Lusophones people still make good manners and respect the norm, but their language does not pass the years. There is a tense debate these days in Portugal's university about the last reform of the road code of words, on the other hand inevitable, I think. "*O Leonardo está a prestar atenção?*" The third person's use as second and those non-gerunds move my spirit with the same grace as their users maintaining elegance in walking in a hard fight against gravity and rain. The heels and the Portuguese cobblestones, common to the sidewalks of all the countries of the old commercial empire of the pot-bellied naos: fire and tow.

The audience is arriving in the hall. The coffee smell in the adjoining foyer is dissipating, and I have everything ready. I distract myself by reading the day's newspapers on my laptop. I always completely disconnect from the subject matter in the minutes before a presentation. This produces unexpected results, and I end up stringing together new ideas on the fly, almost without realizing it. The main headline of the *Giornale del Mondo*, whose website I had never accessed before, catches my eye:

"A VOTE COSTS 20 EURO IN CAMPANIA".

How much will a plate of *ossobuco* under the Lazio region cost in old Liras, I wonder? No mention on the front page of tonight's party. Lights out.