Born in 1969, Swiss author Joseph Incardona has written over fifteen novels across a range of genres and has also written for theatre and cinema. His work is both popular and critically acclaimed; it has won numerous awards and has been adapted for film. Incardona's work has been translated into German, Italian, Korean, and Georgian, but this is his first book available in English. He resides in Geneva.



JOSEPH INCARDONA

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor

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"They got to live before they can afford to die."

JOHN STEINBECK, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Stella wasn't exactly beautiful, and she wasn't too smart either. But you could trust her. She meant what she said. And when you think about it, that might be all you need in this life to become a saint.

So, not too smart and not exactly beautiful… but desirable? Oh yeah, she was certainly that. It was something in her attitude, her posture. The way she moved her hips. The way she looked at you. When Stella gazed into your eyes, you were the only man on earth. You were important. It didn't matter who or what kind of man you were: Stella looked at you with her innocent amber eyes, and you were alive.

She looked into you.

Deep inside you.

Those eyes penetrated your heart, your blood.

And made you feel alive.

So it was only natural that Stella became what she carried within her: the quantification of desire.

And when you think about it, that might be all you need in this life to become a whore.

I

ANNUNCIATION

1

That night—a night in June, with bats swooping around her hastily tied hair—she had waited for the tumult in her head (which she pictured as cold blue water crashing against a rock) to die down before she locked her RV and walked over to Santa Muerte's trailer. It wasn't far, a hundred yards or so, and she covered the distance quickly, her bare feet tickled by the springy grass growing in patches on the dry ground. Even so, she still had time to slap a dozen mosquitoes that were feasting on her bare arms, on her thighs as hard as love.

Stella Thibodeaux was nineteen: the age of martyrs. Although she wasn't sure the date of birth on her ID was correct. What she did know was that she needed to talk urgently with the woman who had taught her everything about men.

This same Santa Muerte had suggested to her that she could become a carnival follower. The old Mexican fortune teller, half her face disfigured by skin cancer, presided over a crystal ball inside her caravan. But she hadn't needed to be clairvoyant to guess that the carnival's shooting gallery would bring in clients with other things on their minds than getting their faces sticky with cotton candy.

Stella knocked three times on the polyester resin door. A muffled voice told her to come in. When the Mexican woman saw the girl moving toward her through the gloom, she coughed and lit up her thirty-ninth cigarette of the day.

The last nail in her coffin? Well, maybe, but it was already so full of nails that it weighed way more than her scrawny old body. She was almost ninety years old and barely a hundred pounds, but still death didn't want her. "I guess I just haven't talked enough shit down here yet," she told Stella once. "People need hope, you know, and when they run out of hope, they need lies, because lies are the only things that can keep them going."

Now the old woman looked up at her and asked: "What brings you here, *amorcita*?"

Santa Muerte spat in the plastic bowl at her feet. She wiped her mouth with a dirty handkerchief and took a gulp from a bottle of mezcal. Smoking unfiltered cigarettes and drinking mezcal was her way of trying to cut a long life short. The worm inside the bottle bobbed against her mouth before sinking back to the bottom. She licked her lips with her small black tongue.

"Sit down and talk, honey. I don't wanna keep my clients waiting."

"I didn't see anybody outside."

"Well, I talk with ghosts too, you know. Most of my work is invisible."

Stella sat on the uncomfortable wicker chair, its foam cushion flattened by thousands of tightly clenched asses. Hesitantly, almost reverently, she placed her transparent, blue-veined hands on the crystal ball.

"How do you see the future in this thing, Santa?"

"Imagination and empathy. Experience, too. So what's on your mind?"

"Okay. Um… well, it's happened again, Santa."

"You mean one of these *resorptions*?"

"Why do you call them that?"

"Because I don't like the other word that comes to mind. For God's sake, kid, spit it out!"

"One of my clients yesterday. He had some kind of disease on his face. What do you call it? Synopsis? Catharsis?"

"Psoriasis… Jesus, Stella, so you just take anyone?"

"It was you who told me never to turn down work."

"*Bueno*. Go on…"

"Well, we did what he came for, then he went away. And then tonight he comes back again and… there's nothing on his face. His skin's as perfect and smooth as a baby's butt."

"And?"

"And so he falls to his knees, weeping, and says I've cured him. *I* cured him, Santa, and I have no idea how this is happening."

The old woman took another swig of mezcal, and this time she sucked the little worm into her toothless mouth and swallowed it. Then she slammed down the bottle on the round table decorated with a doily that had once been white. Stella felt the crystal ball tremble under her hands.

"How many is that, Stella?"

"He's the third. Since the start of the month."

"What sign are you again?"

"Sign?"

"Your star sign, girl."

"My papers say I was born on September fourteenth."

"The Virgin. Hmm…"

"I don't understand, Santa."

"You know what, *querida*?"

"What?"

"There's a pretty good chance you're in deep shit, my love."

2

Robert Smith was married, with three children. His severe psoriasis had become a problem: in his marriage, at work, in every aspect of his life. His wife Helga would only have sex with him when the lights were out and her own face was buried in a pillow. Robert had worked the counter at a post office, but in the end he'd been demoted to the sorting office because he was scaring the customers.

Night had fallen now, but he didn't dare go home looking like this. So he drove through town randomly, the AC turned up full blast, and his fishing equipment, which he hadn't touched all day, in the trunk. He was going to have to explain to his wife how the miracle had occurred, and the consequence would be a divorce and alimony payments so steep he would end up sleeping in his car.

That Sunday morning, as he was driving toward Penholoway Bay for a solitary fishing trip, Robert had seen the young woman sitting outside her RV by the side of the road. Blonde hair, pale skin. He'd driven straight past, because he didn't go with prostitutes. But when he'd spotted her in his rearview mirror, getting up from her red plastic chair and stretching as she walked, he'd felt that urgent desire for purity, for a flawless body to lighten the burden of his ugliness.

Now his conscience weighed heavily on him. What was the point of his body being healed if his soul was scarred by guilt? Besides, he'd been baptized; now was the time to take advantage of that fact, to share the news of his deliverance, his skin washed clean of all sin.

In the parking lot, Robert Smith got out of his Chevy pickup and was hit in the face by the stifling heat before

entering the prefabricated church that stood next to Taco Bell, the fast-food restaurant's neon bell ringing silently in the spot where the church's bell tower should have been. He took off his baseball cap, crossed himself, and read the name of the priest displayed near the stoup.

He sat on a pew and stared at the crucifix on the wall while he waited for the confessional to be vacated. It was surprising to him that he was able to confess his sins so late at night. Maybe the Church was adapting itself to the Age of Perpetual Connection? In any case, today had been an epiphany for Robert Smith.

He decided to stop trying to understand.

A little old woman came out of the confessional, and Robert wondered what she could still have to reproach herself for at her age.

Give the dumb questions a rest, okay, Bob? It's time to testify.

Robert Smith stood up and went to take his place inside the booth. He drew the crimson velvet curtain behind him. He could barely make out Father Brown's face behind the latticework. "I'm listening, my son," the priest said. His voice was as deep and stern as justice.

Father Brown was about to hear Robert Smith's confession.

From that point on, the world would never be quite the same again.

3

A tall, broad-shouldered man with a gray brush cut and a face carved deeply by experience, Father Brown was the kind of caricature who has lived a whole other life before taking

refuge in asceticism. It would be an understatement to say he had witnessed the depths to which the human soul could sink, first as a former Navy SEAL in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War, then as a missionary in Sierra Leone and Rwanda during the massacres of the 1990s. No, darkness and horror were never far from his memory. *Homo homini lupus est*, as Thomas Hobbes wrote. Well, someone had to stick their finger in the dike to stop the promised flood from destroying humanity. Having swapped his M16 assault rifle for a Bible, Father Brown had gone to war armed with nothing but the Word of God. He had spoken, and—sometimes—people had listened. In his experience, confession was an effective means of combating the perfidious evil that lurked inside each human being. Sun Tzu had advised readers of his book *The Art of War* to know their enemy, and nothing Father Brown heard could surprise him. On the contrary, it was necessary to dive deep into confession, regret, and remorse, to probe the Great Fear of Death and the Quest for Meaning that sometimes make us lose our way. That was why he worked the night shift. Over the years, he'd noticed that the cover of darkness, and the tiredness it brought, tended to loosen men's tongues, offering a shortcut to the hidden verities of a mea culpa.

And now Father Brown was sitting at the counter of this dive bar, shoulders hunched as he stared into a glass of bourbon watered down by melting ice cubes. He'd just lit his first cigarette of the day, the late-night cigarette of a onetime chain-smoker who can't bear to quit completely. If you wanted a quicker, more efficient description of this character, you might think of Robert Mitchum in *The Night of the Hunter*. Not only the knuckles tattooed with LOVE and HATE, but also the Shakespearean dilemma that tormented him.

To tell or not to tell.

Now, here, seated on a gleaming chrome and aluminum barstool.

Fingers gripping a glass of whiskey dripping with condensation.

To tell or not to tell, goddamn it!

(Sorry, God.)

Someone appeared on the stool to his right: a woman in her fifties with crows'-feet around her eyes and lines on her face that suggested a life lived without bitterness. "I'm like the tide," she said. "High or low, I come back every night."

"Constancy is a quality I appreciate, Margot."

"Still haven't made your mind up?"

"I'm sixty-six, Margot. Close to the number of the beast… And in recent years, I've been trying to turn my back on sin. You know that."

"Whereas I prefer to look at the world through a shot glass darkly."

"You're not the problem here. You know that too."

"If you gave me a chance, I'd abandon it all. Just for the opportunity."

"What do you mean by 'all'?"

"What little remains to me."

"It's more than that, Margot."

"Okay, but don't forget. When the time comes, I'll be ready to love you. Will you keep that in mind?"

"I will, I promise. But right now I need to be alone. To think. I'm tormented by a Shakespearean dilemma, you see."

Margot didn't go far. She moved to the other end of the bar, where another single man was glad to have her company. He bought her a vodka and lime, and the night went on.

Father Brown loosened his dog collar with his index finger, which came out damp with sweat. A ceiling fan was spinning above his head, but the air in the room was as thick as a greasy steak. He knocked quietly on the countertop. The bartender looked up and made a movement with his chin that meant *What do you need?*

"An answer, Frankie. I need an answer."

Frankie Malone was a former boxer. At twenty-seven, he'd lost the middleweight Golden Gloves championship to Rudi Moreno in the seventh round. His life since then had been marked by the scars on his face and a mortgage on this establishment that he'd never pay off.

"Life's a bitch, and I blame Jesus," said Frankie, drying the glasses as he took them out of the dishwasher.

"Don't blaspheme," Father Brown replied.

"You need an answer, preacher? That's mine. Life's a bitch, and I blame Jesus."

4

Stella Thibodeaux was woken by a beam of sunlight as thin as a shaving of Parmesan. A conjunction of elements on both a human and a cosmic scale: the position of her face on the pillow, perfectly aligned with the angle of the sunlight filtered through the twisted blinds on the window of her motor home.

A single minute in a life. Opening her eyes. Looking around. The succession of events necessary just to be there, and to breathe.

Stella stretched. And even though she was alone in her RV, her baggy, sleeveless T-shirt gave a glimpse of her firm,

delicate breasts, like a pair of Beurre Hardy pears: golden skin, juicy flesh, sweetly perfumed… a fragile fruit.

She lit her camping stove with a match, then boiled some water and drank a mug of Nescafé. The portable AC unit was humming near her bed. Stella sat on the miniature toilet seat and the jet of her urine hissed loudly against the tin bowl, which made her laugh, a sonic gleam that mingled with that of the sun, shining 92.9 million miles away.

Because that's life, right?

And the beauty of a world where a girl was pissing in the pale blue morning.

That was why you had to take what you could. With humility and gratitude.

With patience.

And as soon as Stella opened the door of her motor home, they were already there, waiting for her. Their sorrows were lifted, their faces heavy with hope now she had appeared. Men. Damaged, weakened, ugly men. Men who wanted to live without the shameful weight of this degradation that refused to grant them the elementary grace of a healthy body. A dozen men: tubercular, paraplegic, blind, sick and disabled in multiple ways. Some of them took grimy ten-dollar bills from their pockets and held them out to her, rolled up in their dirty fingers. And Stella looked down at them from the top step of her RV, her blonde hair backlit, her pale eyes invisible in that light but watching them, all of them. This was no longer even about sex or money, the twin udders of the world. This was something far more precious and mysterious, she thought, and so vast it made her feel insignificant. And yet it was through her that it was happening. Stella resisted the urge to close the door, to let these men rot in the hell of their

own bodies. What was required of her now was something more than courage. It was a sort of heroism.

What else could she do but take each of them, in their pain and suffering, and love them?

Stella pointed to a hunchback at the end of the line, and the others moved aside as he slouched toward her.

II

GOD'S MADMEN