

READING TOLSTOY IN BARCELONA**Peter Deadman**

We clattered down the gangplank, over the black waters slapping between the wharf and the ship, and into the hot Barcelona night. It had rained earlier and I followed Louis, Hank and Emilio as they clomped through puddles iridescent with diesel slick, past rusty stacked containers and warehouses lit by dim bulkhead lights.

Showered, talced and aftershaved, pockets full of wages, loud and cocky for the night, they swept along the inner docks road towards the city, only slowing, shuffling into silence as we neared the gates where the Guardia Civil loitered smoking Ducados.

It was my maiden voyage - on a jobbing merchant ship seven weeks out from Southampton. We'd hugged the French and Portuguese coasts, passed the Punta de Tarifa where you can almost reach out and touch Africa, and turned back up the East coast of Spain, dropping off and loading containers along the way. I'd survived sea sickness and home sickness, the throb of engines and men, the banter and the threats and this was my first real shore leave.

They didn't venture far from the port gates - just along a couple of streets to a dark bar full of barrels and lacquered hams hanging from brown oak beams. Louis slammed a whiskey down in front of me and they crowded round and jostled me till I drank it and then another.

"Leave him, el pobre," the girl behind the bar said, looking at me with dark eyes. She was the first female I'd seen for weeks and I blushed.

"Look, he's in love now," said Louis.

Finally they lost interest in me and turned, business-like, to their own drinking.

When they set off for the brothel they dragged me with them. But though I was seventeen and had never been with a woman, that wasn't how I wanted the first time to be. And I was afraid of these grown men with their barely contained violence. I slipped down an alley, saying I had to take a slash, calling that I'd catch them up, and stood in the dark amidst the dustbins - swaying a bit from the whiskey - as their footsteps and laughter faded into the distance. Then I found my way back to the bar.

It was still early and I settled at a quiet table and plunged back into my book. I was in the middle of *Anna Karenina* amidst the drawing rooms and balls, perfumed countesses, leather harnesses and horse sweat. I'd got to where the pull between Anna and Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky was unbearable but nothing had yet happened. I was in love with Anna myself and afraid of what would happen to her if she surrendered to the self-obsessed Vronsky.

"Hey kid, what's the book?"

When I was older, I would slide invisibly through strangers' lives like a ghost, but when you're young - boy or girl - it seems everyone wants you for some reason or another.

The man coming towards me wasn't easy to ignore. He was big and wide, with a massive, food-stained belly, long greasy hair and grey stubble. He bore down on me like a train and I held up my book to ward him off.

"Ah, Leo Nikolayevich," he said. "*Anna Karenina*; the only one. *War and Peace* drags on forever. *Resurrection* is dull enough to kill

you. But *Anna Karenina*," and he smacked his fingers with wet lips. "He was still a man when he wrote that - before he stopped drinking and lived on nuts and God."

"I can read in Russian, Turkish, English and Armenian," he said. "I can speak fifteen languages and fuck in twenty more."

He rocked to and fro on his heels.

"I used to read them all," he said. "Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Kemal, James, Conrad, Cafavy. Then one day I simply stopped. I sold every last book and I've not opened one since. Living is better than reading. And when my own story bores me, I can listen to somebody else's. You can drown in stories if you keep your ears open. They call me the Turk. Let's have a drink," and as he turned to the bar and shouted for a bottle I slipped my book into the side pocket of my pea jacket.

"So come on, tell me your story kid," he said.

"My name's Tom," I started.

He slapped his hand flat on the table and people looked round.

"That's no name for a boy like you - out to make his fortune. I swear that by the end of tonight you'll be washed clean as a lamb, reborn and renamed."

The girl came over from the bar with a bottle of red wine. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her towards his lap but she was looking at me.

"Lucitta," he said. "Meet my young English friend. You should hear him speak. The language of Milton, Shakespeare, Defoe drips from his tongue. But he is very much in need of a new name. What do you think?"

"I think you should never listen to a word the Turk speaks," she said and pushed away from him. "He is full of merda."

"You pay her," the Turk said to me and I fumbled in my pocket. When I handed her the money, she smiled.

The Turk had lost interest in my story. I didn't mind; it was full of bad luck and nothing to be proud of. My mother had died long ago and my father and I had suffered in silence punctuated by thunderous rows until he died in his turn last year. I moved in with my uncle who drank even more than my father. I was thrown out of school, I read a lot and I ran away to sea. I was proud of the last bit but the rest was all other people's stories. Mine didn't seem to have begun yet.

The Turk didn't need me anyway - he talked enough for both of us.

He'd worked in the gold and diamond trades, been a tour guide in Istanbul and Madrid, run a bar in Antwerp. He was Turkish Armenian Jewish, "a mongrel; an outsider; a citizen of the world."

"And now? I said. "What do you do now?"

"Ah, now I'm retired. I eat, I drink, I shit, I talk shit. What else is there?"

A pack of Greek sailors in crisp whites came in and suddenly the bar was full and hot and noisy. A woman appeared behind the Turk and whispered something in his ear. She wore a red dress and red lipstick and hair pulled back tight from a lined face. She stood like a dancer with one hand resting on her hip, her dress pulled taut against her haunch, the other foot tapping restlessly on the floor.

The Turk took her hand and turned to me.

"This is Almunda, the most beautiful whore in Barcelona. And this," and he flourished his hand towards me in an elegant gesture, "this ... ah I forgot, we still have not found your name."

"Your new friend?" Almunda said to the Turk. "He won't be needing me then."

There was a lot of drink going round the table now, tequila, rum and red wine. I stuck to the wine but I was getting hot and everything was taking on a dreamy, slippery quality.

A woman flopped down next to me. She looked like she'd been weeping. Her dress was cut so low that one breast fell out when she leant towards me, the nipple hanging over the top, and she sat like that trying to make me understand something until Almunda slapped her arm and fired a torrent of Spanish at her.

The woman pulled up the top of her dress and tried to drag me to dance with her but when I wouldn't she started shouting and calling me bastardo until Almunda told her to get lost. I saw her later with one of the Greeks. He was hoisting her back up as she slid down his belly towards the floor.

The Turk was dancing in tight circles with his hands in the air. His shirt had come loose from his trousers which hung half unbuttoned. His hairy belly ground and wobbled.

I grabbed Lucitta's hand as she passed with a tray.

"Maybe later ... mas tarde ... I can see you?"

"See me? You see me now," and she laughed.

"Meet," I said. "I mean meet, just you and me somewhere."

She looked around.

"My father," she said as the Turk threw himself down next to me, hot and rank. She slipped away.

"You like her?" he said. "She will go out back with you if you pay her."

"That's a lie," I said.

"Don't be naive, kid," he said. "It's how the world works. Get used to it."

I wouldn't talk to him any more and decided to leave. I went out back to the bathroom - a flat pan flooded with waste and a cracked basin with a cold water tap. When I came out, Lucitta was coming up the wooden steps from the cellar with a case of wine.

"It's not true," I said. "What the Turk said. That you go with men ... for money?"

"Hijo de puta," she said. "You believe that?"

"No, I don't believe it. No, Lucitta, please," and then - with no warning - my whole body began to shake.

Lucitta looked puzzled. She put down the wine, reached out and stroked down my cheek with a rough thumb.

"Strange boy," she said and her expression softened. I could smell her breath, sweet like aniseed, and I kissed her.

There was a noise behind me, an arm round my neck pulling me away and a man's voice, hot and loud in my ear. He dragged me backwards through the crowded bar. I heard laughter and shouts then I was out of the front door and on the street. He kicked me in the back of the knees and I fell onto the pavement.

"No fucking good," he said and went back into the bar.

"So you met Lucitta's father," the Turk said as I examined my scraped palms under the streetlight. "This is a Catholic country you know."

I turned my back on him.

"It's a shitty bar anyway," he said. "Let's walk. Where are you staying kid?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I'll have to go back on board," but he could hear the hesitation in my voice.

"Stay with me," he said. "Come on; it was just a joke. It's not far."

We walked through dark streets of looming stone buildings with blank shuttered fronts. The Turk was silent now. After a while we stopped outside a weathered wooden door which the Turk opened and I followed him across a cobbled courtyard, then up a flight of stairs. He fumbled a long time at another door, muttering and breathing heavily. Inside it smelt of damp, stale feet and rotting food. He flicked a switch and the bare bulb on the ceiling threw a harsh bright light onto the one room. There was a double bed, strewn with grubby sheets, a sink full of dishes and scummy water, a plain wooden table with a couple of chairs.

I sat down as the Turk rummaged in a cupboard above the sink and came back with a bottle of Bell's whiskey, a blue mug and a smeared glass. He gave me the glass and poured a large shot with a shaking hand. The smell of the whiskey combined with the foulness of the room suddenly made me nauseous.

"Air," I said, and moved towards the window. I was struggling to open it when he came and stood behind me. He reached over and opened it and I leaned out. He didn't move away and I felt his hand on my buttock, stroking and kneading, then both his arms around me and his hand moving down onto my crotch. My heart thudded and I twisted away.

"Hey, no," I said. "Not for me."

"Come on kid," he said, "it's only a bit of fun. What else is there to do?"

"Fuck off!" I shouted. "Why won't people ever fucking leave me alone."

"Suit yourself," he said. "That woman was right; you're a little bastard."

He swallowed down the whiskey in the mug and threw himself on the bed.

"Your new name - Bastardo," he mumbled and fell asleep, his mouth hanging slack. He suddenly looked like an old man.

I slammed the door behind me as I left. Downstairs, I stumbled around the courtyard in the dark, pushing on locked doors till I found the way out onto the street.

My anger soon passed. I began to feel good; reckless, heroic, full of yearning for Lucitta or for any girl who might have me. I walked wherever my eyes and feet led me - as if by keeping on walking I would find what I needed. Some kind of message, truth, love.

I stopped to play with a cat, mangy and thin, on a stone window ledge. It wound itself round my arm, restless and aroused, purring and butting me with its head whenever I stopped the stroking.

"You and me cat," I said.

I sat in a great, empty square on the marble steps of a stone fountain. I looked in the dark windows of bookshops and at cheeses piled high in an ornately gilded delicatessen. I tried to get into a church, or maybe it was a cathedral, but it was locked.

Occasionally I heard footsteps, singing, shouted conversations but I never saw anyone. I walked all through the night until dawn

lightened the sky and the city woke up around me. Men with briefcases hurried past, women clacked over the stone slabs of the squares, the racket of pneumatic drills started up. Though it was chill in the shade, the sun was already warm and friendly and I stood with my eyes closed in a pool of sunshine while life hurried around me.

I went into a bar where men stood at the counter amidst a haze of cigarette smoke. I ordered breakfast and sat at a table at the back by a pinball machine, dunking my doughnut in a bowl of milky coffee. I thought of the books I'd read as I lay long days in bed at my uncle's house after I stopped going to school - Hemingway in Pamplona, Orwell in Catalonia, Laurie Lee with his donkey, treading the mountains from one end of Spain to the other, sleeping under the starry skies.

Then I reached my hand to the pocket of my pea jacket and found that *Anna Karenina* was gone. I must have dropped it in the night - at the bar maybe, or on the pavement when I fell, or in the Turk's room, or just somewhere in the streets of Barcelona.

Bookless, I returned to the ship. The gulls wheeled around the boats unloading the night's catch and the air was filled with the smells of fish and diesel, coiled rope, fresh paint and warming tarmac. The ship's cook, leaning over the side of the ship, waved to me as I climbed the gangplank.

I never got to finish *Anna Karenina*. I picked up a faded copy the following year in a bookshop in Athens, but it wasn't the same. The magic had gone and I left it on a stone bench in Zappeio park.