

THE SEVEN MADMEN

ROBERTO ARLT

Translated by Nick Caistor

Afterwords by

Nick Caistor and Roberto Bolaño



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CHAPTER ONE

THE SURPRISE

As soon as he opened the frosted glass door to the manager's office, Remo Erdosain wanted to turn back; he realised he was a lost man, but it was too late.

Waiting for him were the director, a short squat man with the head of a wild boar, grey hair cropped short in the style of Umberto I of Italy, and an implacable gaze that filtered through grey fish eyes; Gualdi, small, skinny, sweet-tongued, but with a calculating stare; and the assistant manager, son of the man with the boar's head, a handsome young fellow of thirty, with a shock of white hair and a cynical aspect, his voice gruff and his look as harsh as his father's. None of the three: the director bending over some accounts, his assistant lolling back in an armchair with one leg dangling over the arm, or Gualdi hovering respectfully next to the desk, bothered to return Erdosain's greeting. Only the assistant manager lifted his head and said:

"We've been told you're a swindler, who has robbed us of 600 pesos."

"And seven cents," Gualdi added, as he passed a blotter over the director's signature on one of the accounts. It was only then that the latter, as if making a great effort with his huge bull's neck, raised his eyes. With his thumbs thrust through his waistcoat buttonholes, the director exuded an air of wisdom, but his eyes narrowed as he pored without apparent ill-feeling

over Erdosain's scrawny, expressionless features.

"Why are you so badly dressed?" he wanted to know.

"I earn nothing as a collector."

"What about the money you stole from us?"

"I haven't stolen anything. It's all lies."

"So you're in a position to account for everything, are you?"

"If you wish, by midday today."

This answer won him a brief respite. The three men exchanged inquiring glances, then finally the assistant manager shrugged his shoulders and said, with his father's approval:

"No ... you have until tomorrow at three. Bring all your tally books and your receipts ... You can go now."

The decision took Erdosain so completely by surprise that he remained standing there abjectly, staring at the three of them. Yes, all three of them. At Gualdi, who had humiliated him despite calling himself a socialist; at the assistant manager, who had scornfully stared at his ragged tie; at the director whose bristling boar's head was now tilted in his direction, his cynical, obscene gaze screened by the grey slit of his narrowed eyes.

Yet Erdosain did not budge ... He wanted to say something to them, without knowing what, something that would make them see the crushing misfortune that made his life a misery; so he just stood there, forlorn, the black cube of the safe on a level with his eyes, feeling his back bending further and further with the passing minutes while he nervously twisted the brim of his black hat, and his own look became more and more furtive and sad. Finally, he blurted out:

"So, can I leave?"

"Yes ..."

“No, I mean can I draw my wages today and ...”

“No ... hand your receipts over to Suarez and bring everything else here tomorrow at three, without fail.” “Yes ... everything.” Turning on his heel, Erdosain left without another word.

He walked down Chile to the Paseo Colon. He felt himself hemmed in by invisible pressures. The sun picked out the disgusting interiors as the street sloped downwards. Such a jumble of disparate thoughts raced through his mind, it would have taken him hours of hard work to unravel them. Later he recalled that not for one moment had it occurred to him to wonder who might have betrayed him.

STATES OF MIND

He knew he was a thief. But the category he was labelled with did not interest him. Besides, the word “thief” had little resonance with what he felt inside. There, he was aware of a different feeling, of a kind of circular silence that pierced the mass of his skull like a steel rod, leaving him deaf to anything but his own wretched despair.

This circle of silence and darkness shattered the continuity of Erdosain’s ideas. As his reasoning faltered, he found it impossible to trace the link between the place he called home and an institution that bore the name of prison.

He was thinking telegraphically, omitting prepositions, and this jangled his nerves still further. He lived endless empty hours when he could have committed any crime without feeling in the least responsible. Logically, no judge would have

understood what was going on. But Erdosain was already a hollow man, a shell moved simply by the force of habit.

If he had gone on working in the Sugar Company, it had not been to steal even more money, but because he was hoping for some extraordinary event, something absolutely extraordinary, which would give his life an unexpected twist and save him from the catastrophe he could see knocking at his door.

The name Erdosain gave to this mood of dreams and disquiet that led him to roam like a sleepwalker through the days was “the anguish zone”.

He imagined this zone floating above cities, about two metres in the air, and pictured it graphically like an area of salt flats or deserts that are shown on maps by tiny dots, as dense as herring roe.

This anguish zone was the product of mankind’s suffering. It slid from one place to the next like a cloud of poison gas, seeping through walls, passing straight through buildings, without ever losing its flat horizontal shape; a two-dimensional anguish that left an after-taste of tears in throats it sliced like a guillotine.

This was the explanation Erdosain reached when he felt the first nauseas of despair.

“What am I doing with my life?” he would ask himself, trying with that question to shed light on the origins of this anxiety which led him to long for an existence where the next day would not be merely time measured out in a repetition of today, but something different and totally unexpected, like in the plots of North American films, where yesterday’s tramp suddenly becomes today’s secret society boss, and the gold-digging secretary turns out to be a multimillionairess in disguise.

In the miserable uncertainty that followed, this need for marvels that he could not possibly satisfy – since he was no more than a failed inventor and a criminal on the threshold of gaol – left the acid taste of frustration in Erdosain’s mouth, setting his teeth on edge as if he had been chewing lemons.

When in this mood, he dreamt up the wildest nonsense. He even imagined that the rich, tired of having to listen to the moans of the wretched, built huge cages pulled by teams of horses. Gaolers chosen for their strength hunted the poor with dogcatchers’ poles, and Erdosain could clearly see one scene where a tall, dishevelled woman was chasing after a cage where her one-eyed son was calling out to her, until finally a “dogcatcher”, weary of hearing her cries, beat her senseless with the handle of his pole.

As this apparition faded, Erdosain said, horrified at himself: “But what soul, what kind of soul do I have?” and since his mind was still being propelled by the impulse that had produced the nightmare, he added: “I should have been born a lackey, one of those vile, perfumed lackeys whom rich prostitutes use to do up their bodices, while their lover is lolling on the sofa smoking a cigarette.”

His thoughts flew off once more, this time down into a kitchen in the basement of a luxury mansion. Around the table were gathered two maids, a chauffeur and a levantine trader selling garters and perfumes. On this occasion, Erdosain himself would be wearing a short black jacket not long enough to cover his backside, and a white tie. All of a sudden the “master” would call him, a man who was his mirror image, except that he did not shave his moustaches and wore glasses. Erdosain had no idea what his master wanted of him, but would never forget the strange look he gave him as he left the

room. Then he went back to the kitchen to swap dirty stories with the chauffeur, who to the maids' great amusement, and complete silence from the Arab pederast, was telling of how he had seduced the daughter of a high society lady, a girl of tender years.

Erdosain said again to himself: "Yes, I am a lackey. I have the soul of a true lackey," and clenched his teeth in satisfaction as he insulted and degraded himself in this way.

At other times he saw himself leaving a devout old spinster's bedroom, unctuously carrying a heavy chamberpot. Suddenly he was accosted by a priest – a regular visitor to the house – who asked him, smiling beatifically: "And how are your religious duties going, Ernesto?" And he, Ernesto, Ambrosio or Jose, was living the sordid life of an obscene, hypocritical servant.

Whenever he thought like this, a spasm of madness ran right through him.

Erdosain knew only too well he was gratuitously offending and fouling his soul. As he deliberately delved into the mire, he suffered the same terror as someone who dreams they are falling into an abyss but knows they will not die.

Sometimes he felt compelled to humiliate himself, like saints do when they kiss the wounds of plague-bearers; not out of compassion, but so that they will be more worthy of God's mercy, even though He is revolted at the way they are seeking heaven through such disgusting tests of faith.

But once these images had vanished and all that was left in his mind was the "desire to know the meaning of life", he would say to himself: "No, I'm not a lackey ... truly, I'm not ..." and he wished only to go and beg his wife to take pity on him for all these horrible, sordid thoughts. But the

memory that he had been forced to sacrifice himself so often for her filled him with a blind rage, and soon he found himself wanting to kill her.

He knew for certain that one day she would give herself to another man, and this was a further element he could count on to add to all his other anguish.

When he stole the first twenty pesos, Erdosain was amazed at the ease with which “that” could be done – perhaps because before he did so, he thought he would have to overcome a whole host of scruples which given his circumstances he could not possibly accommodate. So he said to himself:

“It’s simply a question of having the will power and doing it.”

And there was no doubt “that” made life easier; thanks to “that” he had money, which made him feel strange, because it had cost him no effort to get it. And what disturbed Erdosain most was not the theft as such, but that his being a thief might show on his face. He was forced to rob because he earned such a pittance each month. Eighty, a hundred, or a hundred and twenty pesos, according to how much he collected, because his wage included a commission for every cent he brought in.

Some days he carried around four or five thousand pesos, while he went hungry, and had to bear the stench of an imitation leather bag inside which lay happiness in the form of banknotes, cheques, money transfers, payment orders.

For a long while, despite the misery gradually eating away at his house and home, the idea of stealing from the company had never occurred to him.

His wife reproached him for having to scrimp and save every day; he listened to her reproaches in silence, but when

he was on his own would say to himself: “What would she have me do?”

When he had the idea, when the glimmer of an idea occurred to him that he could cheat on his bosses, he felt as delighted as if he had thought of a new invention. Stealing? Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Erdosain was dismayed at his own feebleness. He even criticised himself for lacking initiative – at that time (this was three months prior to the events narrated here) he was having to do without most things, even though large sums of money passed through his hands every day.

And what aided and abetted his fraudulent dealings was the Sugar Company's negligence.

TERROR IN THE STREET

Without doubt Erdosain led a strange life, because sometimes a sudden hope propelled him into the street.

He would catch a bus and get off in Palermo or Belgrano. As he walked along the silent avenues lost in thought, he would say to himself: “A young woman will see me, a tall, pale, intense girl out driving her Rolls-Royce just for the sake of it. She will be driving round sadly. All at once she will spot me and understand I am the love of her life, and that look of hers – until that moment, an insult to the unfortunate – will settle on me – and her eyes will fill with tears.”

This was how Erdosain's foolish fantasy played itself out as he walked slowly along in the shade of the tall house fronts

and the green plane trees, which cast their triangular shadows on to the pavement's white mosaics.

"She'll be a millionairess, but I'll say to her: 'I'm sorry, but I can't touch you. Even if you wanted to give yourself to me, I would not have you.' She would look at me in astonishment, and I would tell her: 'It's no use, you see, it's no use because I'm married.' But she'll offer Elsa a fortune to divorce me, and then we will wed, and sail off to Brazil on her yacht."

That word "Brazil" gave his naive dream an exotic richness; rough and warm, it conjured up for him a pink and white coastline with cliffs and rocks plunging into a warm blue sea. Soon the young maid had lost her tragic air – beneath the white silk of a simple schoolgirl's dress she was a happy, smiling creature, timorous yet daring.

And Erdosain thought: "We'll never have sexual contact. To make our love last, we'll keep our desire in check; I won't even kiss her on the mouth, only on the hand."

He went on to imagine the happiness that would purify his life if something impossible like this were to happen: yet he knew it was easier to stop the earth turning than for such an unlikely event to take place. So he would say to himself with a sudden flash of resentful pride: "Well then, I'll become a pimp." At this thought, a terror far worse than any other unhinged his mind. He felt as though blood was pouring from every cranny of his soul – as if it was being torn into by a drill. With his powers of reasoning numbed, stunned with anguish, he set out on a wild search for a brothel. It was then he experienced the horror of empty nothingness, that luminous horror like the dazzling brilliance of the sun as it bounces off the curved surface of a salt-flat.

He gave in to the kind of impulse that grips those who for

the first time in their lives realise they may be at the prison gate, blind impulses that lead the wretched to stake everything on a card or a woman, searching perhaps for some sad, shocking confirmation of their existence, hoping to find in all that is vile and low some affirmation of purity that will save them for ever.

So beneath a yellow sun during the sweltering afternoon hours, Erdosain roamed the scorching pavements in search of the most disgusting brothels.

He preferred those whose porches were full of orange peel and trails of ashes, the ones with windows covered in red or green cloth and protected by wire netting.

He went in with death in his soul. Usually there was a single dull brown bench out in the patio with its square of blue sky up above. He would collapse exhausted on to it, enduring the madam's icy stare until the girl, inevitably either excessively fat or skinny, came out to him.

Then the whore would shout to him from the half-open door to the bedroom, from where the sounds of another man getting dressed could be heard: "Are you coming, sweetheart?" And Erdosain would go into the other room, his ears ringing and a mist swirling before his eyes.

Then he lay back on the bed varnished the colour of liver, on top of a bedcover soiled by one pair of boots after another.

All of a sudden he felt like bursting into tears, and asking this ghastly slut what love was, that angelic love the celestial hosts sang of at the foot of the throne of the living God – but he could not bring himself to do so, because anguish gripped his throat while a wave of revulsion made his stomach clench like a fist.