Guernica

Dave Boling

Prologue

(Guernica, 1939)

Justo Ansotegui returns to the market now to hear the language and to buy soap. He places bars in scattered dishes where he can catch their scent during the day, although they fail to mask the odours of the livestock that have lived in his house for generations. As he sits in the evening, he'll idly lift a bar to his nose. He strokes his moustache with one so the scent will linger in the coarse black hairs that droop past his upper lip and conceal his expressions. The many times when he awakens in the night, he touches a bar at his bedside and then smells his fingers, hoping the fragrance will invite certain memories into his dreams.

Alaia Aldecoa, the village soap-maker, explains that the bars are blended with sheep's milk and scented with an ingredient she keeps secret, but Justo is not interested in how they are made, only how they make him feel.

'Kaixo, Alaia, it's Justo,' he says, approaching her booth on market day.

She accepts his unnecessary introduction. She has known him for years, and besides, his scent has preceded him. From the pocket of his braced woollen trousers, now drooping at the waist, he extracts a slippery coin. It carries a pleasant smell, as it's coated with residue from a soap bar he keeps in there, too.

'I would like a bar of the Miren blend,' he says.

The soap-maker pinches a smile at the sound of the name 'Miren', and, as she does every week, she has two bars set aside in a separate wrapper for Justo. She sells that blend to no one else. As always, she rejects his payment, and he places the coin back in his pocket. She devotes time each week to trying to imagine something she might say that would brighten his day, but once again she has nothing but soap to give him.

It's Monday afternoon, the traditional shopping day, but the new market isn't crowded. Business resumed reluctantly in the past three years, and the market is now some distance east of the old site, closer to the river. It's smaller because traffic is scant and money scarce, and so many people are gone. Since much of the trade is

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restricted by government control and rationing, market day is now about things other than just buying and selling.

As he moves from Alaia's booth on the edge of the marketplace, Justo listens to the clacking of the gathered amumak, like a clutch of hens, trading their only abundant currency: gossip. In earlier times the grandmothers would negotiate the purchase of beef tongue and shoulders of lamb, and the mild green peppers they would dust with garlic and fry in olive oil. And they would sniff at the colourful garlands of chorizo sausages hanging from the butcher's booth. The spicy links would be browned in an iron frying pan along with eggs, which would absorb their rusty juices and pungent taste. Scent tentacles from the stove could lure a family to the table without conscious assent. The flavour would cause the little ones to gather at Amuma's lap and exhale into her face the garlicky breath of joy.

There's no haste for them at the market now; there is so little to choose from. So they painstakingly examine every vegetable and heft each precious egg.

'These are too small,' one says, triggering a flurry of critiques from the others.

'These vegetables are not fresh.'

'I would never serve this to my family.'

'Are we buying today, ladies, or just fondling?' the vendor asks.

They scoff in unison but are reluctant to replace the produce. It's easier to deem the food unacceptable than admit they cannot afford it. Even in good times the elderly women were particular about such matters, since cooking defined them. More than the collection, inflation and distribution of gossip, their mission is to feed. Ageing may change many things, but it can't diminish their skills in the kitchen. And to improve as a cook is a way to annex emotional territory within a family. But with so little food now there is no medium for their art. And the hunger that once chewed at them like a mean dog now seems more like an annoying house-guest who simply refuses to leave.

Justo passes their gathering. They gesture and pause, then resume chattering and bobbing, energized by a new topic. They will peck at the particulars of Justo's life until another subject causes them to blink and move on. Communication is an illusion anyway, since all speak at once.

The bells of Santa María toll the hour, and many turn their heads to look up into the cloudless sky.

Under the blue-striped canvas awnings of the taberna, older men play mus, a four-man insult contest waged around a deck of cards.

'Come, play, Justo, I will need a new partner once this one smothers under the mountain of shit he's been using for brains,' an old friend calls, sparking rebukes from the other players. Successively all four grumble, 'Mus!' and it is unanimous that

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the inadequate cards they've been given should be tossed in. If all players agree, the hands are scrapped and re-dealt with fresh starts and new opportunities for all.

'The world could learn much from this game,' a relieved player says.

Justo declines the offer to play, which is only a courtesy anyway. Of the numerous activities denied a man with one arm, Justo has found that forgoing mus is among the smaller sacrifices.

So they proceed with the tics and gestures used to signal to their partners, acts that are not only allowed but encouraged. The creative Basques decided that cheating could be prevented by declaring it a legal part of the game. Accordingly, if one never recognizes the existence of a border, then carrying goods across it is not smuggling, merely nocturnal commerce. And if a race believes it has always lived in its own nation, then protecting its imaginary boundaries is a matter of patriotism, not separatism.

A wink of the right eye to a mus partner reveals a bit of information and a tongue-waggle supplies another, but when the tricks fall badly, one speculates that his partner uses his farm animals for uncon¬ventional recreation.

'God, I wish I still had sheep – for that reason or any other,' the partner answers, laughing off the insult.

Justo produces a one-note laugh and the sound surprises him. Vagrant threads of humour arise at times. Some still try, at least. On the blackboard taberna menu behind them, in small letters beneath the list of offerings and their prices, is a note highlighted only by a snowflake asterisk: if you're drinking to forget, please pay in advance.

'Stay, Justo, please stay,' one implores. 'I may need the services of Guernica's strongest man to pull my foot from my partner's arse.' It's another courtesy comment to Justo, whose renowned physical strength has not been publicly demonstrated for some time.

'No merciful God would have put on His earth so many Fascists or such ignorant partners,' one player says, his voice lowered. Justo scans the area to see if anyone takes offence at the statement.

He has not come to the market for cards or levity. Once the most visible of the town's characters, he now passes odd hours adrift in the streets and alleys. He watches, overhears discussions of the news of the town, and disappears.

The amumak cluck, 'Of course he might be, you know, disturbed, like his father, considering everything . . .'

'Oh, yes, he might be, considering . . .'

'I think he is . . . yes . . . who wouldn't be?'

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Justo has heard the whispers and is not bothered by being thought mad. It might even be a good thing these days. People ask fewer questions.

On a bench of land to the west, the symbolic oak of Guernica stands rigid and undisturbed. The residents tell and retell the stories of ancestors gathering beneath the oak tree since the Dark Ages to make laws or plan the defence of the land from invaders. Somehow, the rebels and Germans didn't damage the tree, though little else escaped their influence.

Across the market, there are no displays of the red, white, and green Ikurriña because the flag is banned in public. There are no pelota games, as there used to be, because the fronton has not been rebuilt. There are no dances at the plaza in the evenings after market day because dancing the jota or aurresku in public could lead to arrest.

Justo doesn't consider these realities anymore since they no longer apply to him. He's beyond punishment. Conspicuous in his boasts and bluster for so many years, Justo mostly listens now. If the Guardia Civil officers are occupied elsewhere, the market is the best place to hear the language. Since Miguel left, Justo has only the company of a hogget and a few suspicious chickens at home, and they offer such predictable conversation. In truth, they visit him as much as Miguel had in the final weeks before he withdrew into the mountains in a search for . . . something.

So Justo comes to listen. The language always has been the most important act of separation anyway, as the bond is to the words more than to the land. Since nothing on maps reflects their existence, the extent of their 'country' is the range of their language. But like the dances, the flag, and the celebrations, the words are banned, making a prayer whispered in Basque as illegal as a call to arms in the public square.

Justo's brother Xabier, the academic priest, told him that the Basque race has gone unassimilated by invaders because of the isola¬tion of their stony coast and encircling mountains. But Justo joked in return that they have survived by being incoherent to all others. It is a unique defence.

Even the sounds of the market have changed. The mus players throw their pasteboard cards to the table so hard and fast that it sounds like clapping, but then they pause to watch over their shoulders for the guards in their tricorne hats and green capes. And the amumak in their black shifts and scarves – rolling boulders of women – are unafraid of any man bearing arms or condemnations. But their nattering has a lower tone, as there are fewer to have to talk above.

The locals now shuffle between booths as an accordion player squeezes out a waltz from under a drooping canopy that muffles the notes, making it sound as if the music is coming from the distance, or from the past. Many move as if they're wading through a heavy pointlessness – trying, like the amumak with the vegetables, to hold on to things that are no longer theirs. To laugh at cards and profit from business feels like an insult to those who can no longer laugh and profit. To them, the decay of will is an act of consideration. They buy what they must and return home.

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According to the old Basques, everything that has a name exists. But Justo would argue that things now exist that are beyond description, which imagination cannot conceive: the explosions, the smell of things aflame, the sight of oxen and men mixed into gory Minotaurs among the rubble. They existed yet are unspeakable.

At the market now, tinkers sell used copper pots with silver scars from solder repairs, and farmers cover their tables with patchy bouquets of bunched greens and small pyramids of potatoes. Alaia Aldecoa again sells her soaps that smell of the nearby meadows. Commerce, the pulse of normal existence, slowly and respectfully returns on these Mondays.

Justo Ansotegui extracts a scented coin from his pocket and buys two potatoes as an excuse to hear another voice. For a moment, he listens to the language, to the rhythm of the phrases and their melancholy inflections. But there are no words for the things they have seen.

PART 1 (1893–1933)

chapter 1

Baby Xabier cried from his cradle, and when Angeles didn't stir, Pascual Ansotegui touched a match to the oil lamp on the wall and retrieved the newborn for his feed.

'Kuttuna, it's time,' he whispered, careful not to disturb their sons sleeping in the next room. But within a moment, his scream shook Justo and little Josepe from their beds. In the smoky lamplight, Pascual saw Angeles's sheet-white face and a dark stain on the bedding.

Justo and Josepe scrambled into their parents' room and found baby Xabier wailing on the floor. Justo picked up his little brother and returned him to the cradle. Josepe fought to pull himself onto the bed to be with his mother but only managed to claw the bloody blanket towards his face. Justo pulled him back and whispered to him. The three stood at the bedside as a corrosive grief began to hollow out Pascual Ansotegui.

Angeles had presented him a succession of three robust sons in a span of four years. Almost from the moment she recovered from the delivery of one, she was once again carrying the next. The men in the village laughed at Pascual's appetites, and he took a dash of pride in their jokes. Good-natured, accommodating, and fertile as the estuarial plain on which they lived, Angeles gave birth without complications. But a few days after the uneventful appearance of her third son, she simply failed to awaken. Pascual was left with two children, a newborn, and a harness of guilt.

The boys grew together in a hyperactive litter, teasing and chal¬lenging and wrestling one another from predawn awakenings until their nightly collapse, often

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not in their beds but sprawled at odd angles wherever their energy randomly expired. The increasingly absent Pascual kept them fed, a minimal challenge on a thriving farm, but they otherwise operated on their own initiative and imagination. Four males now lived at Errotabarri, the Ansotegui family farm, with no maternal or feminine influence past the few reminders of Angeles Ansotegui's brief life, a comb and brush set on her dresser, a few dresses in the cupboard, and a ruffled floral-print apron that Pascual Ansotegui now wore while cooking.

As Pascual withdrew, physically and emotionally, the boys grad¬ually took over the farm. Even young boys understand that chickens need feed and eggs must be collected, so they completed these tasks without recognizing them as work. Even young boys understand that stock need food for the winter, so they learned to swing the scythe through the musky grass and fork the hay high against the tall spindle that supported the stack.

When one of them came across a rotten egg, it became ammu¬nition for an ambush of an unsuspecting brother. They dived together into the cut grass before collecting it. They hid in the haystacks before spreading them for the stock. They rode the cows bare¬back before they milked them. Piles of wood were forts before they became fuel for the hearth. Every task was a contest: who could throw the pitchfork furthest? Who could run fastest to the well? Who could carry the most water?

Because each action was a competition or game, there was rarely a division of labour; the three shared each job and moved in unison to the next. Virtual orphans, they were nonetheless content, and the farm operated in a surprisingly efficient atmosphere of playful may¬hem. But at times even the instincts of farm boys could not lead them to anticipate threats to stock or crops. For three boys easily distracted by the ballistic possibilities of rancid eggs, surprises arose.

Had Pascual Ansotegui been conscious of the passing of the sea¬sons, he would have reminded his sons that the ewes about to lamb in the spring needed the protection of the shed. But in the first warm afternoons of spring, the shed was merely a wall for young boys playing pelota. When Xabier clumsily sent the ball onto the roof and it wedged between cracked tiles, Justo retrieved the ladder and scaled the slanted shed, placing one foot dramatically on the peak, as if he had reached the summit of Mount Oiz. Josepe sensed in his posture the potential for a new game.

'How about you can stay up there until one of us hits you with sheep shit?' he said, having retrieved several dried pieces.

As he took aim at his brother, Josepe spotted a sliver of darkness banking in tight circles above the hillside. 'Justo, Justo, an eagle – are there lambs out there?' he screamed.

'Get the gun!' Justo yelled, leaping down onto a bale and rolling off onto his feet.

Pascual Ansotegui's rifle was old before the turn of the century and the boys had never seen it fired. At thirteen, Justo was as strong as some of the men in the village, but Pascual had never taught him how to shoot. Josepe could hardly lift the iron

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weapon off the pegs in the shed. He dragged it to his brother with both hands at the end of the barrel, the butt bouncing along the ground.

Justo took it from him, raised it to his shoulder, and waved the heavy barrel in the direction of the diving eagle. Xabier knelt in front of him and grabbed the stock with both hands, trying to buttress his big brother's hold.

'Shoot him, Justo!' Josepe screamed. 'Shoot him!'

With the rifle butt inches from his shoulder, Justo pulled the trigger. The cartridge exploded in the barrel, and the recoil thrust Justo to the ground, bleeding from the side of his head. Xabier flattened out beside him, screaming from the noise. The shot did not even startle the eagle, which was now applying a lethal clench of its talons into the neck of a tiny, still-wet lamb.

With Justo and Xabier down, Josepe charged. Before he could reach it, the eagle extended its wings, hammered them several times into the ground, and lifted off on a downhill swoop just over Josepe's head.

Justo fought his way uphill to Josepe. Xabier,crying to the point of breathlessness, face freckled with his brother's blood, ran in sprints and tumbles to a neighbour's house for help.

'Look for other newborns, and let's get the ewes into the shed!' Justo shouted, regaining control. They saw no other lambs that were vulnerable, and they both herded the oblivious mother ewe, still dragging birth tissue, into the shed.

The neighbours held Xabier to calm him. But what did he expect them to do? Where was his father, after all? 'Boys your age shouldn't deal with these matters and certainly shouldn't be firing rifles; it's a good thing none of our stock was harmed,' they said. He couldn't hear them over the painful ringing of his ears but read rejection in their faces.

'Well . . . fine!' Xabier yelled, breaking away to rejoin his brothers.

The shaken boys gathered in the shed and clutched the ewe, which was bothered not by the loss of its offspring, a development it had already forgotten, but by the fierce embraces of these boys, one of whom was bleeding all over her wool.

When Pascual Ansotegui returned that evening, the boys stood in a line at the door, in descending order of age, and Justo briefed his father on the events. Pascual nodded. Justo and Josepe accepted his minimal response. Xabier, though, flared with indignation.

'Where were you?' he yelled, a spindle-thin nine-year-old in third-hand overalls stained with blood.

Pascual stared without comment.

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Xabier repeated the question.

'I was gone,' the father said.

'I know you were gone; you're always gone,' Xabier said. 'We'd get along just as well if you never came back.'

Pascual tilted his head, as if this would bring his youngest into clearer focus. He then turned away, pulled the floral apron from its peg on the hearth, and began to make dinner.

Justo knew early that he, as the eldest, would someday assume sole control of Errotabarri, and his siblings understood that they would inevitably find work elsewhere. If inequitable to the younger children, the pattern assured survival of the baserri culture. Justo Ansotegui would claim his birthright and become the latest in the chain of stewards of the land that extended back to times when their ancestors painted animals onto walls in the nearby Santimamiñe caves.

Bequeathing the farm to the eldest carried no guarantees. He who inherits the farm may never leave to discover other opportunities, to go to sea, perhaps, or to a city like Bilbao. But to run the baserri was to shepherd the family trust, Justo believed. Still, he expected a period of apprenticeship to learn. For another year or so after the lamb's slaughter, Pascual Ansotegui unenthusiastically attended mass each morning, mouthing the responses. He returned to church to pray in silence again in the evening, wandering unseen in between. Even¬tually, he stopped attending mass, and one day he drifted off.

It took several days before Justo realized his father had gone missing. He alerted the neighbours, and small groups searched the hillsides. When no evidence of death or life surfaced, the boys assumed that he had been swallowed up by a crevice or a sinkhole, or that he just forgot to stop wandering.

Although the boys loved and missed their father, their affection for him was more out of habit than true sentiment. They noticed little difference in his absence: they still performed the same chores and played the same games. Justo was now in charge.

'Here, this is yours now,' Josepe said to him, handing him the ruffled apron.

'Eskerrik asko,' Justo said, thanking his brother. He lifted the strap over his head and tied the worn sash behind his back in solemn ceremony. 'Wash your hands for dinner.'

He had the family baserri to run. He was fifteen.

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