

Barcelona:Open City

By John Wray

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Xavi's luck turned on Day 1 of the curfew. He'd been unemployed for a month, he told me — let go from a job selling homeowner's insurance to defenseless little grandmothers over the phone — and he'd pretty much been in free fall since then; but the lockdown changed everything. Overnight, people stopped asking him if he'd found a new job yet, and if not why not, and how exactly he was figuring to pay next month's rent. They blamed the "covirus" more or less automatically, saving Xavi the trouble of explaining that he'd actually been fired for showing up late, cold calling with his mouth full and trying out goofy voices on the customers to keep himself sane. Suddenly none of that mattered. The whole city was laid off now, and the whole city was half-crazy, and the whole city was desperate to get the hell outside and walk the wrong way up La Rambla and stare mournfully through darkened shop windows at things they didn't actually want to buy. Xavi's life had become everybody's life.

He himself was still allowed to do all the above, strangely enough, in spite of the lockdown, on account of Contessa and Sheppo. Before the quarantine, he took them out once in the morning and once after dinner — Sheppo especially, a 3-year-old Lhasa apso, lost his marbles if he didn't get his daily 15 minutes at the dog run in the Parc de Joan Miró — but lately it was three, four, sometimes six or seven times a day. Xavi took this as a sign that his depression had finally lifted, and that was part of the explanation, no doubt; but there was also a more existential reason. Walking his dogs gave Xavi the feeling of gaming the system, of hacking the matrix, of thumbing his nose at the gods. Eight days into the lockdown, pedestrians without clearance were subject to hassling by the municipal police, not to mention by their own neighbors — but dogs, big or small, mongrel or pedigree, had the run of the town. It didn't take Xavi long to see the business potential in this situation. His miserable employment record notwithstanding, he'd always thought of himself as an entrepreneur.

Xavi put the word out the very next day — first among the residents of his hulking Franco-era apartment complex on Carrer de l'Olivera, then among his friends and acquaintances in the neighborhood — that Sheppo and Contessa were available for "excursions," in two-hour increments, for a discretionary fee. The response was instantaneous. The pitch of his fellow citizens' eagerness disturbed him, in fact. He realized that some kind of vetting process was called for — he wasn't just some sidewalk pimp, after all. He loved his dogs deeply. On the other hand, rent.

He sat down that night with a blue ballpoint pen and a handful of Post-its and drew up an official protocol. Step 1 was an email or text exchange, six messages minimum. Step 2 was an interview of no less than 30 minutes, in person, to be conducted either at the dog

run or in Xavi's living room. If Sheppo showed the least sign of ambivalence — Contessa jumped into anybody's lap within seconds, literally anybody's, and was not to be trusted as a judge of character — then the deal was off, with absolutely no exceptions.

To make things even more rigorous, he decided, after long deliberation, that he'd let no one walk his dogs who voted for the Partido Popular in the most recent referendum, or smoked cigarettes, or was nearsighted or epileptic, or walked with a cane. He was providing a valuable service, he reminded himself: decent, law-abiding citizens got to visit their mothers or their girlfriends or their off-track-betting offices, and his dogs got their exercise, and he got out of debt. Overall, as a business model, it struck Xavi as innovative, streamlined and socially conscious. By the time he'd screened his first client — whom Sheppo rejected in less than five minutes — he was beginning to feel like the Elon Musk of Poble Sec.

The first day's haul of customers was a mixed bag at best: a devout-looking man with a perfectly round bald spot like a Capuchin monk who claimed to need to visit a diabetic aunt in Sarrià; a matronly woman in tennis shoes who told him she needed the dogs for "astral support"; then the same monkish man — who didn't bother to give a reason this time — and lastly Fausto Montoya, a friend from Xavi's old job who made use of his freedom to spy on his ex. Xavi rejected two candidates — one for voting for the Partido Popular (and for being a smoker), the other for referring to the illness that was decimating the global economy and killing Catalans by the hundreds as "Cobi," which just so happened to have been the name of the mascot of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Xavi had felt downright righteous as he showed the man out.

Mariona entered Xavi's life on Day 10 of the lockdown, his second active day of business, at the hour when he normally smoked his first joint. She rapped on the apartment door just as he was settling accounts with the Capuchin — who gave every sign of intending to come twice a day, regular as clockwork, for the rest of the pandemic — and stepped past Xavi without a word of explanation, as though they'd known each other for decades. This mystified Xavi, who had been trying for some time now to cut back on his pre-dinner hash intake. He asked her to sit down, partly to buy himself time, partly because she was at least five centimeters taller than he was and he was feeling more than a little overwhelmed already. He brought her tap water in a cracked Real Madrid cup, although he hated Real Madrid with all his heart, and stumbled through his standard interview, feeling less and less like the Elon Musk of anywhere. He began to get the suspicion that he was the one being vetted, not the woman sitting cross-legged on his futon. The slightly dilapidated zone of Xavi's brain reserved for questions of ethics was starting to tingle: For the first time, for no reason he could put his finger on, he entertained the possibility that his fledgling business venture might not actually be something to be proud of. Nothing that Mariona said had raised this issue directly — her basic gestalt simply conspired to make Xavi feel unworthy. It didn't help his moral clarity, either, that said business venture was the one and only reason for her presence in his room.

“Who did you vote for in the last election?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“Nothing, really. I’m just, you know, trying to get a more in-depth —”

“The CUP,” she said flatly. “My star sign is Taurus. I type 50 words a minute, and I’m allergic to garlic.”

Her joke allowed Xavi to laugh through his relief. Of course she voted CUP. How could someone so perfect vote anything else? “Power to the people,” he mumbled, lamely raising a fist, which he now saw had a mustard stain across two of its knuckles.

“Catalunya for the Catalans —”

“And Covid-19 for no one.” She grinned. “Except maybe my landlord.”

“That’s — a beautiful sentiment. I couldn’t agree more.” He sucked in a breath. “Just one more question.”

“Thank God.”

“Would you mind telling me what you’ll be using them for?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

Xavi explained, not without a certain self-regard, that he preferred to know — purely for his dogs’ sake, of course — what each potential client’s motive was in taking them out.

“I don’t have a motive,” Mariona said.

“But you must have some reason —”

“Of course I have a reason.” She looked at him as if he might be slightly slow. “I like dogs.”

That shut Xavi up. He gave her the two leashes and the key card to the building and she was gone. It was only after she dropped Sheppo and Contessa off, two hours later exactly, that he realized he’d never asked for her ID.

It was too much to hope for that Mariona would come back the next day, like a better-smelling, less-pious version of the Capuchin; but Xavi was disconsolate regardless. There was nothing to do now but focus on work. Day 3 of business — Day 11 of the lockdown — brought him two teenage girls who claimed to have worked in a veterinarian’s office but couldn’t figure out how to buckle Contessa’s harness; the superintendent of Xavi’s building, who was letting his patchy beard grow out like some pudgy, cut-rate Che Guevara; and no fewer than three weed dealers, all of whom paid him in product. The

Capuchin came twice, paying his 20-euro fee in a sealed blue envelope that smelled faintly of rosewater, which irritated Xavi intensely for no reason at all. He asked how the diabetic aunt in Sarrià was doing, in what he hoped was a tone of scathing irony. The Capuchin ignored him.

A day went by, two days, four days, a week. Contessa and Sheppo had never gotten so much exercise, and his thoroughly vetted customers appeared to be treating them well. Then — on Day 22 of the lockdown, long after he'd abandoned all hope — Mariona returned. She wore a mask this time, one that looked to have been made from a pair of pajamas; above the paisley-patterned silk, however, her eyes were distinctly more inviting than on her last visit. Xavi knew the desperation born of weeks of anguished boredom when he saw it. He invited himself along on her outing, not even trying to come up with a pretext, and she put up no objection. They strolled slowly up La Rambla to the Plaça de Catalunya, Mariona walking Contessa and Xavi walking Sheppo, and by the time they passed the public urinal by the little boarded-up electronics store at the corner of Pintor Fortuny, Xavi had become aware of a feeling that he hadn't had since the start of the pandemic: the sense that he knew what the future would bring.

She was a graduate student at Pompeu Fabra, working toward a degree in community organizing, which Xavi hadn't known you needed a degree for. She grew up in Pedralbes, a posh part of town, but only because her father worked as a gardener for a rich old man who did something borderline-illegal involving the labeling of wine. Xavi couldn't remember the shape of her mouth, not exactly — she was charmingly strict about wearing her mask — but he had no reason not to think that it was lovely. The high point of their outing, and the true zero hour of their quarantine romance, came when they spotted none other than the Capuchin himself, decidedly not heading in the direction of the poor aunt's apartment in Sarrià, walking an entirely different pair of dogs.

Within the week, Mariona was quarantining at Xavi's place, smoking his weed and essentially running his business. Xavi had no objection — basically she talked, he told me, and he tried to keep up. She was too smart for him, or at least too high-functioning. It was a magical time — in the way you'd expect, but also in a disquieting way, because it all felt so dreamlike, so improbable, that it was difficult to fully believe in. But then again, Xavi reminded himself, everything felt like that these days. Life as he — and everybody else on the planet — had known it had been replaced, seemingly overnight, with some pulp-science-fiction approximation of itself. What was easy to believe in anymore?

Xavi told me this story — his personal lockdown fable, he called it — over virtual mojitos on a Zoom call in May. Barcelona's lockdown had been lifted, and he was back to his old self: unemployed and melancholy, the way he got when he was smoking, slightly too stoned to bring his fable to a satisfying close. Things with Mariona had “run their course,” he explained — but he had no complaints. The sex had been great, he'd learned a lot about community organizing and she'd genuinely appreciated his cooking; but once the restrictions were finally lifted, and everyone was able to circulate freely again, both his business and his relationship drifted off like smoke. He and Mariona had

something in common for six surreal weeks; then suddenly they didn't. Things like that happened all the time, especially in times of war or plague or famine. Still, they might have stood a chance, Xavi insisted — they might have made a real home, settled down, maybe even had a couple of kids — if the lockdown had never been lifted.

We were getting to the end of our 40 free minutes, and I tried to use what little time remained to boost poor Xavi's spirits. You never knew what might happen, I pointed out to him. Barcelona was an open city again. Who could say what the future might bring?

"I've been thinking about that," Xavi said, cheering up a little. "I was watching the news when you called. There might be a second wave coming this fall. ..."

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