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RETURNING TO CANFRANC

Rosario Raro

Excerpt translated by Charlotte Coombe

In the winter of 1942, the German army seized the Canfranc international railway station in Huesca, as if it were another territory of occupied France. Despite the fact that a brigade of the Bavarian Alpine Troops, several SS agents and some members of the Gestapo settled at its premises, the protagonists in this book—from Aragon, Aquitaine, and Brittany—helped thousands of Jews, some with such famous surnames as Chagall, Ernst, Mahler and Mann, to clandestinely cross the border. These inhabitants of northern Aragon helped them in the same way that Oskar Schindler, Raoul Wallenberg, Chiune Sugihara, Ángel Sanz Briz and others helped those from Krakow, Budapest, and Vilnius... For thousands persecuted by the Nazi regime, hope was called Canfranc.

For years, the people who crossed the border at this terminal as children have been returning to Canfranc. They come from the United States, the rest of America and the other countries that welcomed them as exiles of war. They return so they can show their children and their grandchildren the Pyrenees, the place where they escaped, but above all so they can spend a few days with the descendants of those who helped them gain their freedom, that lineage of heroes from both sides of the mountains to whom they owe their survival.

This is their story.

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PART ONE

ONE DAY IN 1943

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BLACKOUT

Canfranc Station, Huesca, Tuesday 16 March 1943

It was a few minutes before four o'clock in the morning and automatically, in an unconscious attempt to seek the comfort that habit always brings, Laurent Juste, head of international customs at Canfranc station, sparked a match and was illuminated by the small flame. He hunched over it to conceal the flash of light, so that outside the guards would not perceive the slightest hint of his presence. However, he could sense that they were close by; in his imagination every shadow seemed to wear a German overcoat. He listened to the thousand tiny noises of the night, all of them amplified like heralds announcing his arrest. He brought the match to the stove to prepare an Angolan coffee. While he was waiting, he did not take his eyes off his wristwatch. As soon as he raised the cup to his lips he realized that he could not possibly drink it, and left it on the kitchen counter.

The soldiers were stationed on either side of the entrance to the terminal lobby, a few feet from the door to his home, and it was imperative that they didn't notice he was up an hour earlier than usual. Juste groped his way back to the bourgeois interior with which he'd been

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rewarded for holding his position, but which he then did not care about: furniture made of expensive wood imported from the colonies, silver-plated wrought metal amphorae, solely for decoration... He passed beneath the Bohemian crystal chandelier. It was not lit up at that hour, but when it was illuminated in the middle of the room is pieces sparkled, each one chiselled to give the impression of an urn filled with landscapes.

Canfranc was his second Spanish post, having previously spent a few years in Irún, also accompanied by his family: his wife, Arlette, and their three children. They had two girls —the eldest Maude and then Solange—, and a little boy, Auguste.

He went into the master bedroom. In addition to not alerting the Bavarian soldiers, he also did not want to wake up Arlette. The ringing in his ears was so unbearable that it made him dizzy. He approached a table that served as both a dresser and a desk, and after steadying himself on its top, he took out the key to the fuse box cupboard. He kept it on behalf of the stationmaster, who had entrusted it to him because it was he who stayed day and night at the premises. He clutched it tightly, the amulet that helped him achieve his objectives.

He went back into the hallway. Depending on the time of year, the vases were filled with lilacs, jasmine flowers or tuberose, and at that moment it smelled of spring. As he passed the black Steinway grand piano decorated with leaves along the grain of its lacquered wood, he stroked it, as if saying goodbye. It had come with him every time he'd moved, as had the books and paintings. Juste's mouth was extremely dry, his jaw locked, as if below his ears were two cold, rusty hinges. He had always believed that fasting kept his mind clearer, but that night it was no good, he was plagued by horrific images of corpses dismembered by bombs, of single abandoned boots with the leg still inside, detached from the rest of the body. He wanted to recall other places, those of his native Brittany; he thought of his mother, and because of the tension he smiled for barely a tenth of a second, remembering how everyone used to say that their greatest similarity was their stubbornness. Then he noticed the bitter saliva under his tongue. He longed for normality, for the smell of croissants, he longed to peer through the oven window and watch them puff up, shiny with a coating of butter; he wanted get to that lunchtime, alive, and be graced with the scent of the bay leaf and fish of Breton soup, of yod

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kerc'h, of creamy oatmeal or of stew wafting out through the strips of the kitchen curtain. Panic sent him back to the most primal and vital of instincts.

Laurent slipped into the entrance hall of the station through the door that led to the passenger terminal. He stayed as close to the wall as possible, to prevent his shadow from being cast on the outside wall which ran along the platform next to the tracks, right in front of the guards. He felt as if he was surrounded by a silent army; all he could see of them was their silhouettes projected onto the palatial walls of the lobby. He heard a noise at his feet and felt something move. He almost cried out. He quickly pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face with it. He was sweating, his temperature contrasting starkly with that of outside. A rat had scuttled between his legs. Its back brushed against his ankle, then it squeaked and wedged itself behind a wicker trunk in the corner by the door.

He had been there around three years and had come to know the building intimately. He went through the door leading to the rest of the rooms, warehouses and offices, and walked through the lobby, his back still pressed up against the main wall, until he collided gently with the cupboard containing the fuse box. Before carrying out the task, his final thought was for his little boy, Auguste, who spent every evening deep in concentration, painstakingly tracing out his first letters without looking up from his notebook. Immediately Laurent's expression changed; although so much was at stake, nobody suspected him. But only for now. Anyone could be a snitch; anyone could betray him. The rewards offered by the Nazi regime were more than tempting. He saw his actions as the highest mission that a human can carry out, but that did not rid him of the anxiety, the sorrow he felt at putting his family at risk on that checkerboard which the German army and the supporters of the Allied Forces criss-crossed like a game of cat-and-mouse.

There was a wide wooden ticket booth, so wide that there could easily be a man hiding on the other side. This new fear gripped Juste, and he very carefully lit his tin-plated railway lamp and focused on his watch as he stood with his back to the buttress under the arched beam. His legs were shaking. A chance encounter— a worker or soldier turning on the lights—, and all would be lost. If he was discovered, it would be very hard to explain what he was doing

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there in the dark, backed up against the wall next to the electric meters.

If the guards moved, they would have a wider field of vision. He waited. He stood still for a few seconds. It was very close to four o'clock in the morning, the hands were moving around the dial on the steel case. Then he heard the sound of drums. He could not work out where it was coming from. Easter was not for another month yet. He pressed one of his eyelids firmly with a couple of fingers and realized that the rhythmic, grave, insistent sound which seemed to be getting closer and closer, was his own heartbeat.

It was not the first time he'd carried out such a task, but even though he was used to it, the fear never lessened. The explanation he gave for these constant blackouts was that they were caused by voltage drops on the line when the supply was overloaded by the French trains whose engines operated with electricity, while the Spanish trains used steam power. He was not sure how long this excuse would continue to work for him.

As soon as the hands of his watch reached the exact time, he pulled down the lever that cut off the main power supply and stood there motionless, holding his breath. With that gesture he'd completed the first part of the manoeuvre. From that moment on, the actors in that little drama would spring into action. And a single mistake could mean everyone's downfall.

A moment before Laurent Juste pulled down the lever that cut the power, at the other end of the platform a loud whistle tore through the night. The man who whistled was considered by many people to be the steadfast type, but just moments before lifting the index and middle fingers of both hands to his mouth, even he had faltered. What if he didn't manage to catch the Germans' attention? If they refused to leave their post, all would be lost. For now, he couldn't see them coming. Everything was still quiet.

The two soldiers on watch outside the lobby began to walk along one side—a distance of more than one hundred metres—almost half the length of the station's facade. Where the building ended, on the lefthand side, a man on horseback was waiting for them. The man was Esteve Durandarte, seen by some as a bootlegger and by others as a bandit. On his mount he was imposing, but he made even more of an impression when he dismounted. Up on the horse,

it was difficult to calculate his height, his magnitude. He was more like a force of nature than a man; a rugged inhabitant of the forest, he had emerged from it, instead of being born to a man and a woman. He had a lot in common with the Maquis guerrillas, but he was not one of them, and had never married. He seemed to find his true reason for being—his life breath—in feeling independent, in maintaining a certain distance from everything and everyone. He stood out among the various men of a dozen different nationalities that passed through Canfranc Station and its surroundings.

He greeted the soldiers in German and without getting down from the horse, held out a brown paper package fastened with string. He demanded payment in silver dollars; in that business, pesetas and francs were not accepted unless absolutely necessary. The guards looked behind them, in front of them, they fidgeted, they wanted to go, they already had the cigarettes and could not be away from their post for much longer. They risked a great deal: they could face court martial or other disciplinary measures.

Durandarte did not shave his sideburns but let them grow long so that they merged with his beard. He didn't cut his hair either; it was tied back with a leather ribbon. Some said that when it was wet it came down to his waist; at least it looked that way when he'd been spotted bathing at the source of the river in the Astún valley. He was slim but broad-shouldered, and he rarely shouted but had a voice so gruff that when he spoke, it sounded as if it was rattling around inside a large earthenware jar.

The tallest soldier nudged his companion with his elbow to urge him to go back. "*Wenn sie unsere Köpfe abgeschnitten haben, können wir nicht mehr rauchen*[1]," he whispered.

Durandarte had managed to keep them there for barely three minutes; he could not let them return to the lobby yet, so, to keep them entertained a little while longer, he pulled a final ace from his sleeve. He showed them two small boxes, the contents of which had caused many wars: opium poppy juice, in two bars the colour of egg yolk. He threw himself into practicing his German, which was primitive but effective; out of every twenty words he said to them in

[1] If they chop our heads off, we won't be able to smoke.

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Spanish he was sure that they would only understand a couple, tobacco and opium, although that was enough. Besides, in their language these words were almost the same: *Tabak und opium.*

"From the port of Izmir to the port of Marseille. Izmir to Marseille." He drew an arc with his finger in the air. "It even protects against the flu, *Keine Grippe*. *Es ist gut*, es bueno. Good. It won't give you goosebumps or cramps, *Keine Krämpfe*." And he shook, feigning tremors. "It's medicinal because it increases the defences, shields, strengthens*, stärkt*," he told them, at the same time keeping watch all around, especially behind them. The soldiers said nothing. He wanted to continue but couldn't think of anything else to say.

What with the questions at the beginning and then his monologue, it had been more than ten minutes since the guards left their post and they still needed to make their way back, which meant almost a quarter of an hour in total. But he still decided to try and gain a few more seconds, just to be on the safe side:

"If you don't smoke it, you can sell it. Smoke or sell, *Rauchen oder verkaufen*." He accompanied each word with the corresponding gesture, bringing two fingers in a V shape to his lips, or rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. "They'll pay you very well. Five times more than you gave me. Lots of money, *viel geld*. Expensive, *teuer*."

While Esteve Durandarte was busy hustling the soldiers, in the darkness and in absolute silence, a couple of dozen people crossed the tracks of the French railyard in the direction of the main building. They had emerged from the hangar to the rear of the station, at the foot of the mountains. Crouching as they moved along, they resembled a herd of animals.