

From  
Antonia Logue, *Shadow-Box*  
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## PROLOGUE

You'd dip into Cravan for a day and come out of an acid bath, your body corroding, sinuses so full of poison those inner canals in your ears would hear nothing but a high wasting moan and your balance would be all shot to hell. He strode around Berlin wearing hookers on his shoulders, them tittering and screeching down the Kurfurstendam like they were queens on a float, then leave them back where he found them, all legs and suicide. Eventually Berlin threw him out, first man ever, they said, for he was too conspicuous. Make sense of that for me, Mina, too conspicuous. They'd never seen anything like him, that was the problem, a white man able to fight like he could without hurting anybody but himself, too much strength and not enough brain to punch with, they said. They didn't read too many of his poems in the places he hung out in that time. Some heard he'd his own magazine back in Paris but the rumours that threaded into the back-bar conversations didn't last if they confused the pimps who brought them, reciting the pillow talk of their girls. Everybody had a history, Mina, nearly every one made up to suit the men who crept through the alleys at night whipping the girls to finish up and get back out under the light. If you didn't fit into the network, you didn't fit in anyplace, and Cravan didn't, Mina, he'd parade the hookers' tired asses on his shoulders two apiece like he was carrying turkey home for Christmas, laughing and teasing and letting them off without ever putting a hand between their legs. And some men don't trust a man like that.

So he came to Barcelona.

Before that we were in Paris together, back in 1914. That was three full years before he crashed into you, Mina, found real love. In Barcelona he was in the same shape as he'd been then, long and broad as the new roads they were building to transport crops that were never coming, already dead in the earth with disease. But Cravan wasn't scabbed or harrowed, he came in, Mina, and I don't think there was a man in Europe I wanted to see more, I just didn't know it.

Weeks went by before he hit me with it, a fight, staged like nothing the Spanish ever saw, better than bullfights, Jack, he said, not a fix, not a real one anyway, I'll stay on my feet long

enough to look like I can, then you knock me out, all that money, what about it, Jack? And the bastard would too, I knew it then, he'd let me floor him flat out in front of thousands if it'd get him to America. You knew his ego better than anyone. He would have sold me to the circus, fat Ex Heavyweight Champion of the World, Any Fight, Name Your Price, if it would get him there.

America was the only thing they talked about, him and his poet buddy Cendrars, two warped missionaries preaching to one of the few men in Spain who couldn't go. I don't think Cendrars even knew about the warrant out on me in the States, I think he reckoned I was in Europe for an easy retirement. Cravan leaned over to me one night over the noise. Come back with us, Jack, he said, we'll get you in again, like I could just climb off that ship and not have the whole damn lot lined up on the docks, sly as pickpockets, me cuffed and sentenced in ninety seconds, with half of America cheering on like it was Willard all over again.

His plan was serious. He'd fight me. Next day he had the posters spread across Barcelona like a pox - *Gran Fiesta De Boxeo, Finalizara el espectaculo con el sensacional encuentro entre el campeon del mundo, Jack Johnson, Negro de 110 kilos y el campeon europeo, Arthur Cravan, Blanco de 105 kilos*. Different fighters, different styles, different successes. All this stuff he had about being European Champion was true, but he'd come to it through a lot of pussy fights, he'd fought two-bit boot boys he'd loom over and intimidate into lying down, but he could fight, he was one of the strongest white men I'd ever seen.

His plan was for me to throw a few, I'd take a couple, and third round I'd put him down gently as I could without looking like his nursemaid. Fifty thousand pesetas between us and 20 per cent of the door each. He knew this nervous wolfhound, Hierro, who set the whole thing up in the old flour mill on the river, a huge sable building shut down after the phloxera hit the wheat three years in a row. I think it was meant for conversion to a steam mill, but it was the same incinerated mess when I came back from Mexico. Everybody sticks to talking in that city.

On the night of the fight it seemed like the whole city had turned out, all around the river was a carnival, people everywhere drinking their throats dry, too many people even for a place that size, but we knew Hierro would get them in. He had strung together a warm-up show out of a bunch of Spanish kids, kids who'd got tough on the streets, ones Hierro had rounded up like some sort of white-flesh battle royal.

The place was dangerous, you knew that the moment you breathed the air inside, over three thousand men packed in on the first floor sweating and singing, play-fighting with blood punches, not a woman in the room, but the hookers had found the riverside, claiming territory in the scrub like they were mapping out a new cartography of body arcs and curves.

Some of these men had worked in this mill at one time, taking the wraps off wheat and pulverising it into flour. Then there were the men from the oldest quarters of the city,

separated from money by the Paraleo with its cheap theatres and bars, the dancing halls where wives would forget their hatred for their new hovelled life, without water, without drains, where their children died as newborns in the fetid air. They worked in the new fabric factories as spinners, while their men roamed for work, and the countryside they had abandoned for new lives in the slums continued to rot under the command of an insect half the length of an eyelash.

Danger heaved the room, swelling the floorboards, until even the rafters eighty feet above sweated the tiny balls of flour washed out of the wall by the pores of a thousand men. They tore at the makeshift hoarding nailed across the gap in the back wall where the sacks of flour had once been lowered down on to river barges below and floated downstream to the docks to be loaded on to the trucks and ships; they tore at the thick jabs of nails until they had wrenched open the wide firstfloor landing bay, a balcony over the river-bend. This action would save their lives, prevent tragedy where tragedy should have gripped.

Cravan was lucky like that; the little things would go wrong, a shoelace break as he rushed, a missed train, a lightning storm sluicing the countryside as he walked, but he was protected, Mina, his path divined for him so all he had to do was plumb the water. It was as if it was known that he'd be the first of us to go, and he was getting a good ride because it was going to be short. Is that too easy an explanation? I don't know what to say, Mina, this is meant to be a consolation, memories of when he was in my life, but only you know what it is like to lose him properly. It is easy from here, I don't live without him. It doesn't feel as though he is dead these years, he could still be on his honeymoon with you in Mexico. Dead is just a word that gets about in a war. It doesn't fit him; maybe I pretend he's somewhere else, maybe that's what we're doing here, Mina, indulging in a game as if recounting and recounting will displace everything and reinstate him - you can feel he's here with me, and I can believe he's wherever you are. I don't think his luck ran out. I think that night he died things just got bigger than shoelaces and lightning. There was no luck to it.

I didn't need the money like he did. Those fifty thousand pesetas he got off Hierro were his passage to America. The first time he went, he was seventeen and hid in a cargo of untreated cowhides, sailing for weeks as the careless scrag of underside flesh rotted in the hold and he sweltered in the thick unbreathable stench of it. This time he wanted to go properly, not in a cabin or in style, just on top, where the air was. He needed that fight. I'm not being quaint with age, Mina. God knows, had I found him in the hours and weeks after the fight, I would have beaten him till every drop of sweat and blood and sperm was choked out of him, but after a time I was envious as hell. He didn't care about anything people said, he was never defined by other people's perceptions. I couldn't have got up and done what he did. My ego wouldn't have let me, not then. I was Jack Johnson, in my own head I was Champion of the World for decades after I threw it to Willard. Might have been easier to let go if I'd been beaten, but throwing a fight like that, well, it takes a long time to accept the outcome. I am still unbeaten, that's the way I see it. Cravan understood the real

purpose of ego, to keep the real self entire, always challenged, never to let it get slack and dependent on others. You were the only one he changed the rules for. Everything changed for you..

That night, the riot began quick as mercury. I was still in the ring, standing there in my gloves over where he'd fallen while the crowd seethed on to the tarpaulin and I was mauled by the surge. Cravan had disappeared somehow; all of it from start to finish taking just minutes, all the cheers and shouts, the mix of sweat and flour and energy in your mouth when you breathed, everyone trying to touch us as we moved to the ring, bodies all over stripped to the waist, a glisten over everyone as they shouted our names over each other, getting louder and louder, so that by the time we got to the ring all we could hear was a roar of syllables, the musky, high smell of sweat clogging everything then, our throats, our nostrils, our voices, ears, only our eyes still doing their job right in the throb of the crowd, getting us to the ring. It felt like every fight I'd ever won, that same piston knowledge that I would do it, that crowd-spun whirl of certainty as I climbed the ropes into the ring, turning towards the crowd, turning towards Cravan, the booing as the third man came in - a buzzard trainer Hierro had picked to referee - Cravan looking strong and wicked enough to floor an army corps, staring me straight in the eye with this smile you could read any way you wanted, punching the post in his corner like he was warming up for a massacre. Then we were touching gloves in a handshake for a fair fight, as if that was what the Spanish had packed in for, and then, suddenly, the bell, and Mina, I don't know what happened after that.

I moved in to start sparring, no menace, no attack, just the two of us jabbing high, him dancing round the ring looking tough, the crowd on its feet yelling and shouting for him, then me, then him again just as he powered in with a body blow to my ribs. I got angry, ran a left-right-left uppercut combination at him, all the while talking to him, don't remember what I was saying, just the sound of my voice mingling with the crowd's, and his blood was high now too. He was coming at me hard, both of us pitting ourselves at each other as though this were for real, as though there was the world to prove in who won this, me still shouting at him, teasing him, but his concentration so intense I don't think he knew where he was, Mina, every iota of instinct on the next punch, the next manoeuvre, until suddenly he stopped, realised he was fighting to win and like a switch all the power in his arms was flicked off, he eased off as if his brain had been stung, still looking like he was fighting, but not so much as grazing my jaw, aware now of the crowd, his circumstances, the money he was fighting for. And I got angry, Mina, furious that he was pulling the fight, didn't matter that this was the plan, to me this was for real now, one of us would win, and it had to be me, I had to beat him, had to beat him fairly. I needed to floor him with him coming at me, so I started buffeting him round the ring, trying to square him up, get him going again, but he was having none of it, he was getting ready to go down, and I refused to believe he meant it, that he could be fighting it out with Jack Johnson and not care if he won or not,

was able to let it go so easy. And all round us the noise, men hanging off the ropes, all of them stamping the floorboards in this frenzied hammering, boots hitting wood over and over until all I was aware of was the throb of the pounding and a thousand voices, and suddenly I was swinging back in an arc from my shoulder, deep and true, in a slow dolphin punch that caught the side of his head, knocking him straight to the floor, unconscious. There was maybe two or three seconds before the crowd swelled up, and I realised what had happened, and he was gone when I looked down, disappeared, like I'd punched air. It was Cendrars, he had it all arranged, he had Cravan off the canvas and in under the ring before anyone was even sure Cravan had gone down, the two of them shot down the millchute that Hierro had carefully erected the ring over- the one for chuting fresh-filled flour sacks down to the warehouse below - Cendrars dragging Cravan into a car on the river bank to the docks, to the New York ship, unconscious and good as dead he hauled him on, and when Cravan came to he was nine hours nearer America and sore as safari-cull. They went after me in the ring but I was hauled out while benches and pews were thrown alight, a swami of bodies whipped up with a crazed energy attacking one another, barefisted and raw with ferocity. But the fire from the burning pews had caught angrily in the room now, licking the floorboards alight, reaching high to the rafters and beams until soon the room was ablaze, the heat making everything writhe, bodies, faces, the black metal roof-pins, the iron girders in the stone walls, the men surging towards the open loading bay, leaping blind, until the river bank was a dance of bodies hurling themselves out of the mill fire into the river, men jumping headlong into the spit of it, the water turning black and thick with burning flesh, so many that after the first leaps men jumped on men, limbs and backs and shoulders broken in the panic of chaos, and all the while Cravan sailed on towards America. Towards you.

## FABIENNE

*It is the heat that makes her laugh, as if she had forgotten it, stepping happily out on to the street with her delicate ivory train draped across her forearm, her other hand seeking out the budding arum lilies that crown her marrying head. He is not here. She has insisted that he meet her at the church, and like a game he throws himself into the novelty of it, and is there, high on the hill, waiting, without a wince of nervousness to furrow his brow. With him the burly figure in the almost immaculate three-piece suit stands perspiring in the Mexican swelter, his mouth tasting like pigswill from all the cigars smoked tile night before, and the night before that, and every night this week since Cravan and Mina decided they would marry and asked him to be their witness. His head throbs with envy and drink, only envy because he does not wish away their happiness, merely yearns for it. He has never been jealous of anyone, and at this moment as lie sees Mina and Rose, her witness, and their friends come laughing up the hill, Mina translucent in the suit, her hair*

*falling about her face as she turns her head to talk to those behind her, he is jolted back to his own weddings, and he has never felt such love. Not for her, not entirely, and not for anything that has gone before, but for everything he is at the heart of today, this tumbling surging joy that propels him bounding down the hill after Cravan to sweep up the party in his arms and kiss Mina's face. And then at the top of the hill outside the sunswept church they fall into a shambolic order, Cravan and Mina snuggled together laughing as if in a conspiracy all their own, and Jack sent by Rose to unband the groom and get him to the nave of the church so the wedding can begin.*

*The dark coolness of the stone disarms Cravan as he and Jack topple into its vastness. He has been inside it before, he has used it often as his sanctuary when he has needed time alone, not away from Mina, simply alone, to decipher the collection of darting notions he keeps in his head and especially tire ones that don't dart, the ones that embed themselves and need thinking through, like Mina. He has never loved before this, never been raw with need, never felt his soul halved by a person's absence before now. He never believed she would truly come to him here in Mexico nor that she would ever want to marry him, that this day would be his for the taking. On the nights lie cannot sleep he goes out into the city, into the lulling bustle that seems never to calm. He drinks and wanders, goes to the places his friends do not frequent and gambles insignificant sums, wearies himself of his energies, buys food, talks to himself, imagines he is the new King of France, a sailor on leave, an American spy preparing to oust the Mexican Government, a Mexican general planning his naval attack on the world, a lunatic escaped, a criminal being covert, a carnival owner trying to entice the insomniac city to his paradise. And then he meanders home and slips into bed beside the most exquisite person he has ever known, leaves breakfast on the table beside her pillow, and looks at her in her slumber, at her silken lashes, her smooth creamy skin soft as he tenderly strokes her sleeping face with his fingertips. With her he can be anything he wants to be, she has no fetters, no ideas of how anything ought to be. They have no oughts, only now, that is what she tells him, and as the shards of stained glass sunlight cut across his reverie, Jack is turned to him, the padre expectant, the ten or twelve guests scuttling into their seats at Rose's command, and suddenly three voices crack open the air with a single note and 'Ave Maria' ushers the back door to open and from out of a food of blinding sunlight at the other end of the church Mina walks towards him in her simple ivory silk gown, the bouquet of lilies in her hand, his eyes caught in hers drawing her to his side with every step, her satin train scattering flower petals with every shimmy further down the aisle . . . and they are together now, Jack to one side, Rose to the other, and as they say their vows even the padre is swept along in the force of emotion that fills the small church with this tiny coven of wedding guests clustered at its altar. And then they are all bursting out into the sunlight led by the freshly married couple laughing and giddy all the way down the hill towards the three-day celebrations.*

*This is my parents' wedding in 1918. This is their start. Within a year I was born, within a year nothing was as it ought to have been, and for my father there was no now. That was how I was told it all along. I am fifty-three now. I live in Aspen, Colorado, an uncomplicated life until a few weeks ago when a parcel came for me, a 'Thank You For Your Sympathy' card slipped in on top of a sheaf of letters from the estate of an Irene Johnson, a woman of whom I had never heard. They are my mother Mina's letters to this woman's husband, Jack, not love letters, not a hint of impropriety in any of them, just her life as she told him. A different life to the one I thought I knew, but she is dead these past sit years now, since 1966; it is*

*too late to ask her. I have had his letters to her in my house ever since she moved here before sire died, and I left them unread until now. She gave them telling me he had been a great man, had been the only man my mother trusted. I don't think I cared enough by then, all the mystery that enveloped everything about this shadow who fathered me, who loved my mother so profoundly that she lived with him in her heart every moment of her life and yet was a fiction to me, a face that stopped ageing at thirty - other people lost their fathers to war, while I lost mine to mythology.*

*All through my childhood new people turning up to tell my mother he had been seen in some prison or entanglement on the other side of our world, and off she went to search him out, telling she'd be bringing my father home to me . . . And I, at two, at three, at five, at ten, at twelve, at twenty-seven . . . believing her at first, then inuring myself to all of it, all her fantastic futile treks for someone who always seemed to belong elsewhere, who was never there with it, where my mother so clearly believed he should be. And in between these lost voyages people quietly taking the aside to explain that my father was dead, had died before I was born in a storm at sea, while others excitedly told me that I was the daughter of genius, of a brilliant mother and a spectacular father, a father so exuberant that he had had to disappear off the face of the earth to preserve his legend. I am his legend. I am the only true thing he left behind, the only thing he couldn't counterfeit. It is me. Perhaps that is why I now must find him, my mother's obsession passed on to me by proxy, through ragged letters twenty-six years old. One specific ragged letter that starts me on his path again, like a family affliction. But like her, I must know. I must.*

*I go to Mexico this evening. I will see the place where they married, where they lived, where I was conceived, from where he disappeared, where he is now if there is anything to find. But I will trace his routes, and find him, whatever has become of him, it is my legacy, for there is no one else alive any more who can.*

JACK

Chicago, January 1946

Dearest Mina,

I did not know you were alive, and there you are this morning in my newspaper, 'ENGLISH POET NATURALIZED' - living in New York all this time. Nearly thirty years older than the last time I saw you, but beautiful as ever. You always were the most exquisite woman I ever saw, Mina Loy. I was jealous as hell of Cravan when he showed me your

pictures, but it was nothing to what I felt when you came to Mexico and I saw you properly. A little late then, me being best man at your wedding at the time.

This letter is a long time coming, Mina, I'm sorry for that. I wrote to you when Cravan disappeared to see if there was anything I could do, if you wanted to come and stay with us in Chicago, but when I never heard back I reckoned you'd gone back to Europe or else you just wanted left alone. But I should have tried harder to keep in touch, I guess I just lost track. Seeing your face in the paper this morning, hell, it was strange, it brought me back through so much. I had to write to you, chase you up. How are you? Guess you're an American now. Write to me, tell me everything. What you're at, what you've done these past twenty-eight years, tell me all about your life, Mina, everything. It's like we've got a second chance now, time to fill in the gaps, acquaint each other with the lives we've lived. Without seeing you in the paper I would never have done it, would have pinned you in the scrapbook as part of something past, such great memories. Now we can make up for lost time.

Write, Mina, I'd love to hear from you.

Take care,

Jack