



# *The Last Resort*

A M O R O C C A N M Y S T E R Y

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*To my brother Gervasio,  
and also to the memory of Ana Wickham*





To die like you, Horacio, of sound mind,  
And just as in your stories, isn't so terrible;  
A timely thunderbolt and the festival is over...  
Let them talk...

“Every hour wounds us” – so it goes –  
“but the end is what kills us.”  
A few minutes less... who can blame you?  
Let them talk.

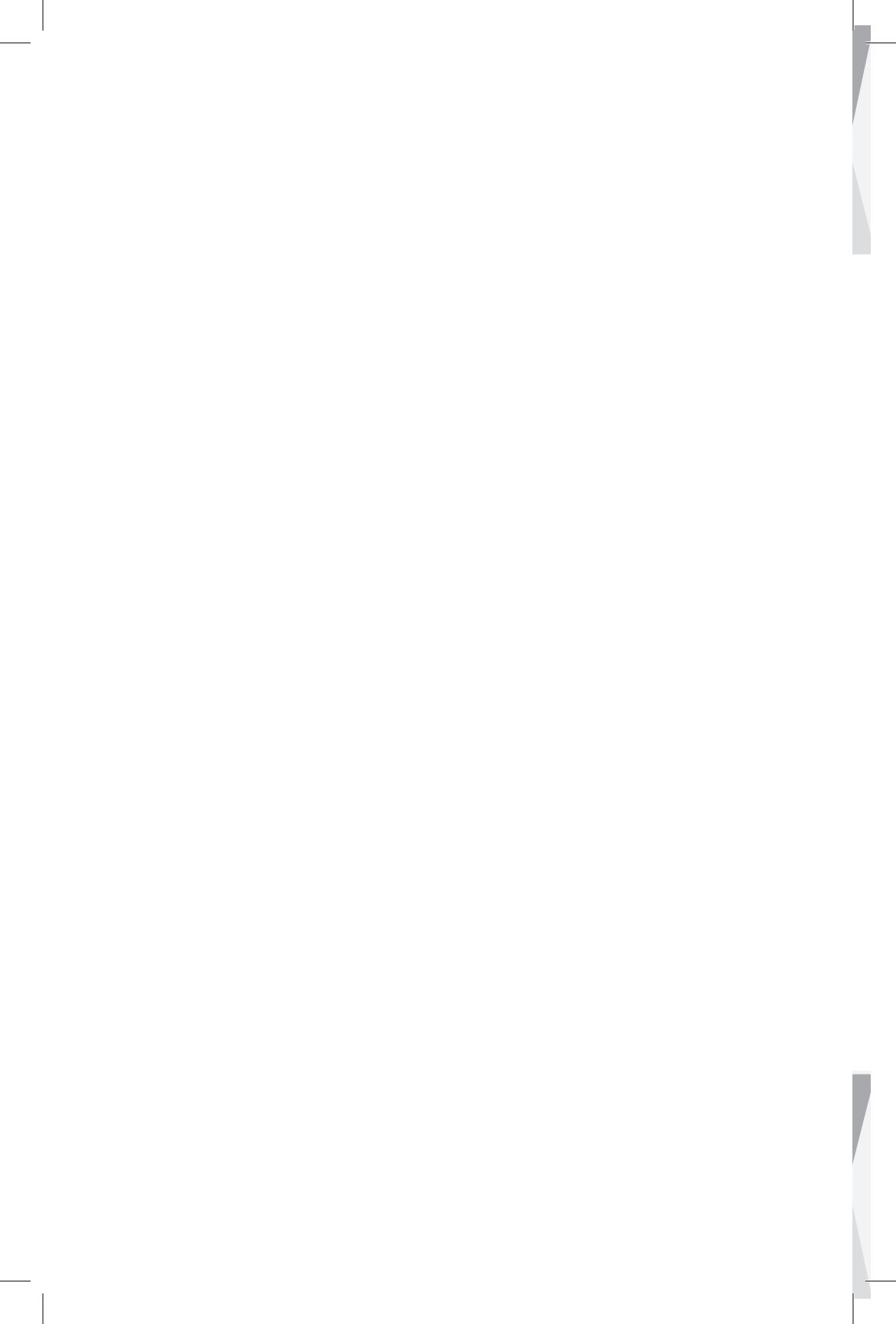
Fear rots far more, Horacio, than the death  
That goes behind people's backs.  
You drank well, and then you smiled...  
Let them talk...

– Alfonsina Storni, ‘To Horacio Quiroga’





# *The Last Resort*





PART ONE

*London*





## *A Lunch Date at Drones*

THEY HAD GIVEN HIM A TABLE SHOVED INTO A CORNER BY THE STAIRCASE, shrouded in a profusion of greenery. When he leant to the left, the branch of a kentia tree lightly caressed the nape of his neck as a motley assortment of aromas – chilli con carne, gnocchi with four-cheese sauce, mandarin soufflé – wafted up the shaft of the spiral staircase. At least they had not condemned him to the arctic zone, the downstairs dining room, or, in other words, the shadowy underworld where the maître d’ normally sends pariahs.

Molinet leant back a bit in his chair. He had arrived ten minutes early, as was his habit, and he allowed his eyes to wander about the restaurant in search of a familiar face. There wasn’t a single one. It had been years since he’d last lunched at Drones, and he was pleased at how little the place had changed. The same black-and-white tiled floor, the same red chairs, even the maître d’ seemed familiar – an old waiter. The walls were the same as ever, which was just as well, since they were, after all, the main attraction at Drones. Years earlier, when David Niven Jr, had taken over the restaurant, he had decided to decorate it with a rather curious collection of photographs. The photographs’ subjects looked like nothing more than a bunch of anonymous children, but the waiters were quick to explain that the youthful faces were actually those of actors, starlets, well-known beautiful people, and many of old Mr Niven’s Hollywood colleagues and cronies. There were large photos, small photos, colour photos, and black-and-white photos, and they all served as entertain-

ment for the neophytes, who would either study them and try to guess who was who or else use them as conversation-fillers when the chit-chat waned. Molinet gracefully unfolded his napkin. He had never fallen prey to that temptation, not even with the dull-est of companions. He considered himself a sterling conversationalist, and even when desperate, he never permitted himself to stoop to something so trite.

Now it was different, however, for he was alone, and so he decided to take a look at the photographs closest to him. He couldn't identify a single person in them until, finally, he thought he could make out... was that Sophia Loren in her First Communion dress? Yes, that just might be her, a homely little girl whose lovely eyes were not quite able to distract the viewer's attention from her rather disproportionately sized mouth.

*Seven years. Seven long years away from this world,* thought Molinet. Too long, he thought, to have been so far removed from all this. It was a relief to see that all these worldly things had remained more or less the same – pleasures, after all, change very little. That was precisely what he admired about London: A man could really believe in a city where five, ten, even fifteen years could go by and the same restaurant would still be in fashion. This thought, however, was just a momentary digression, and Molinet immediately decided to abandon this line of thinking. The last few years had been a parenthesis, a black hole to which he did not wish to dedicate even five minutes of his luncheon, for he had returned to the land of the living – in fact, he had even organized a little excursion to celebrate his return, and right then his only concern was Fernanda and her imminent arrival. It was one-thirty on the dot and he was beginning to get hungry.

He realized that at least twenty years had gone by since he'd last heard from his niece. He had been quite surprised when she had called him. Could this possibly be Fernanda's first trip to London, in all this time? Probably not, but it might very well be her first trip without her husband, which would explain why she had come to call upon her old uncle.

For certain women, he mused to himself, travelling alone always begins with a little flip through the diary: charter flight, budget hotel, and then a glance through the very last pages of the book, which is where the old addresses pile up. These old addresses – obsolete as they may be – are copied down year after year, from diary to diary, on the off chance they might be useful sometime. As on this occasion.

Molinet wondered if he would even be able to recognize his niece's face, for she belonged to a scattered, foggy past that he generally referred to as "my relatives in Madrid" – family members he felt connected to by an affection that was, in all honesty, more abstract than real. But they nevertheless shared a bond, one that translated into the occasional season's greetings over Christmas and inspired them to write occasional letters that kept everyone abreast of only the most essential news, such as deaths, marriages and the obligatory scandal.

Molinet signalled to the *maître d'*, who chose to look directly through him with that selective blindness so typical of restaurant employees. Finally, after a very long while, Molinet managed to catch the attention of a young waiter passing by as he performed a balancing act with a tray piled high with plates and spoons that clinked away against the china. At long last, he ordered a sherry.

"I'd soooooo love to see you," Fernanda had said to him over the phone. His reply had been very cautious so as to avert the possibility that she might invite herself to stay with him.

"Darling, I would simply love it if you could stay with me at Tooting Bec, but things aren't quite the way they were when Mama was alive," Molinet had replied. "You see, I'm dreadfully far from the centre of London, and in fact I'm going away on holiday. Morocco, if you can believe it, a little vacation." He didn't think it necessary to offer any more details – that he had spent seven long years taking care of his mother day and night, for example. That after she died he had spent a month and a half in a hellhole, a terribly expensive hellhole at that, called the Cedars of Lebanon Mental Hospital. That he now rented two miserable

rooms in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of town. That the last thing he wished to ponder was exactly how he was going to get his life on track, and that the very first thing he had done was reserve a hotel room in Morocco for two weeks. After that, God would provide for him. Why bother going into all of it? Surely his niece knew at least half of the story – the hospitalization, the depression – sordid tales do travel the fastest, after all.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Fernanda had said to him, adding that she was coming to London on business and had no intention of staying at his house, even though she would “be thrilled to see you even if it’s only to have lunch. You know, I would have come with Alvaro-husband, but at the last minute he didn’t come through, as always, and no... no, don’t worry about me, really, I’m perfectly happy at the hotel, it’s an adorable little place, right in the centre and everything...”

And so they had agreed to see each other on Friday. Fernanda would be through with her professional appointments by around twelve-thirty, and she could take the Tube to be at Pont Street at about one, one-thirty.

“Yes, yes, it would be really grand if we could meet straight at the restaurant. I’m here for the Ideal Home Exhibition, you can’t imagine how boring it is – for the past two days I’ve talked about nothing but casserole dishes. But, well, what’s the use complaining? This is what has become of my life ever since I decided to become a domestic worker...”

Molinet hadn’t had the easiest time understanding some of Fernanda’s ironic turns of phrase. His visits to Spain were very infrequent. It had been years since he’d last been there, and his childhood summer holidays in San Sebastián, at the home of his maternal relatives, were vague memories. Also, he considered himself neither Spanish, like his mother, nor Uruguayan, like his father, who was also from no place in particular, having lived here, there and everywhere. For this reason Molinet spoke Spanish with the ambivalence that comes from feeling no particular claim to any one nationality; he was the kind of person who had

learnt so many different languages that he peppered his speech with words and expressions from all of them, stealing and adapting them to fit his own, very idiosyncratic kind of Esperanto. Rootless people such as he, people who have learnt to speak in the family home and not out in the street, at work or in school, end up speaking in the most outmoded fashion, using expressions that have long since become obsolete, and are always ignorant of newer, more contemporary terms.

Even so, after his telephone conversation with Fernanda, it hadn't been too terribly hard to figure out that his niece belonged (as did he) to that illustrious social class known as the New Poor. From what little she had said, he was able to deduce that she had been forced to supplement a meagre household budget ("Alvaro-husband is a landscape architect, so you can just imagine how this little recession is treating us") with the help of a personal catering business.

"To put it bluntly, darling, I am what you might call a high-class maid," she had explained to him. "I'll do anything from a cocktail party for two hundred people to some rich old lady's afternoon tea party, with watercress sandwiches and mango infusions. That pretty much sums things up for us right now."

By the time the waiter finally brought him his sherry, Molinet was already thinking about other things. It was fifteen minutes past the hour they had agreed to meet, and though he was more than accustomed to female tardiness, he nevertheless had the limited patience of a man who was not terrifically charmed by the opposite sex. After another sip of his sack he patted about the inside pocket of his jacket, to make sure that the plane ticket he had just picked up was still there. Yes, giving himself that little gift had been a truly marvellous idea. "Relaxation," the advertisement had proclaimed, drawing him in like a spider weaving a web: "Relaxation, silence, and nothing but pure luxuriant bliss." Truth to be told, it was a holiday that was far beyond his financial means, but two weeks in Morocco – at L'Hirondelle d'Or, a magnificent hotel according to *Tatler* magazine – couldn't

possibly make him any more bankrupt than he already was. Such an extravagant Eden seemed to be the perfect place to visit after seven long years of (somewhat) voluntary captivity.

All of a sudden, this last thought reminded him that he should not drink another drop of alcohol if he didn't want to disobey the recommendations – or orders, depending on how you looked at it – of his shrink. This was how he referred to Dr Pertini, a psychiatrist who had studied at the University of Chicago and who also happened to be a somewhat rootless Latin American. Dr Pertini insisted that Molinet call him his “therapist”, but Molinet figured that if Woody Allen (and every other rich New Yorker, for that matter) could call his therapist a shrink, so could he.

As Molinet took a long sip of sherry, he looked through the goblet and the golden-coloured liquid in it and his eyes were met by the vision of his niece Fernanda. From the very first moment he knew it was her. In reality, he realized this not because they shared any kind of family resemblance but because of the clothing she wore.


During the long, dark years of tending to his mother (and also during the last month and a half, as the occupant of a very tranquil room at the Cedars of Lebanon Mental Hospital), Rafael Molinet Rojas had developed a special talent for guessing the nationality of certain people based on the way they dressed. It was all in the details – things that would be missed by the casual observer but highly revealing to someone like him, who had so many hours to kill in a day. During his stay at the mental hospital he had become quite adept at examining the many photograph-laden magazines he regularly purchased – *Paris Match* and *¡Hola!* primarily, *Tatler* and *Der Spiegel* only when a copy somehow found its way into his hands. This was how Molinet had honed his very peculiar talent for recognizing people – and not just famous people. For Molinet, star-watching was a pastime for doormen and chambermaids. No, no. His particular gift was an uncanny ability to identify the origins of the incidental characters who appeared in those gossip-magazine photographs – the person standing behind Luciano Benetton at a

regatta, for example, or some random person laughing away next to Arnold Schwarzenegger at a hotel in Gstaad. Over here, for example, an English-born Greek shipping tycoon; over there, a third-rate actress from Texas trying to rub shoulders with the rich and famous; and just a bit further down, a Milanese financier. Very rarely did he make a mistake.

This talent was precisely what helped Molinet recognize his niece at first glance, and he stood up to greet her like a father welcoming home his prodigal son.

“Fernanda darling, it’s you... I’m here, right over here. My, how lovely it is to see you!”

On this typically drizzly October day Fernanda had dressed up like a real English lady, complete with gabardine raincoat and cashmere scarf draped rakishly across one shoulder – only her bulky Loewe purse, misshapen from overuse, gave her away as unmistakably Spanish. Of course she would never have guessed how her Uncle Rafael had managed to pull off that bit of extemporaneous long-lost-relative identification.



## *How Would You Like to Hear the Story of a Murderess?*

MOLINET AND FERNANDA TACITLY DECIDED TO DEDICATE THE APPETIZER period of their lunch to a discussion of family members. Old relatives. Dead people. Children. And in the final fifteen minutes, once all blood relations were exhausted, Fernanda did her best to stretch, as far as she possibly could, the topic of casserole dishes, thermal blenders, and other startling innovations she had just learnt of during her visit to the Ideal Home Exhibition.

*Good girl*, he thought, duly noting her efforts to be sociable. Even so, he was not too concerned about livening up the conversation, simply because he was not the kind of person who felt the need to maintain constant small talk. And anyway, a perfunctory conversation had its advantages: he could let his mind wander off, do a bit of idle speculation, concentrate on other things. On her, for example.

The first thing that occurred to him was that Fernanda most definitely was something of a health nut. That much was obvious from the food she had ordered: lots of herbs, sprouts and watercress, not to mention the collection of pills that she very quickly arranged in a little line on the tablecloth. But then again, who knew? Nearly everyone had become some kind of health-food addict these days. In anticipation of more significant hints, Molinet decided to review her external appearance, which was much easier to classify.

Fernanda was thirty-five years old, but she had an adolescent air about her, the kind that made people think her much younger than she actually was. She had a wide face, clever eyes and a mouth that smiled often enough to reveal a row of teeth

with just a few too many gaps. None of her features could be called perfect in the strict sense, but the overall result was not at all unattractive.

He knew that face of hers, for he had seen thousands like it before, in magazines as well as in real life, where the passage of time always seemed to manifest itself so remorselessly. It was the kind of face that always reminded him of Mickey Rooney. Masculine or feminine, it was a face with adorable chubby cheeks, a snub nose, and smooth dimples that lasted well past age thirty, when, little by little, wrinkles would etch their way into the skin before time erased those childlike features and turn her into an elderly-looking elf.

Fernanda, however, had not quite begun to pay that steep price for her seemingly eternal youth. Also, she seemed to have a predisposition for seeing everything in life as a kind of amusing joke – she had a dispassionate way of speaking and wasn't afraid to laugh at herself from time to time. In this manner she regaled her uncle with the details of her life, in the very best manner of the relative one sees on very few occasions.

By the time Fernanda decided it was time to get her uncle up-to-date on her present life, Molinet was already thinking about other topics – the trip he was taking the following day, for example. As such, he only registered bits and pieces of his niece's story-telling. He vaguely heard something about Fernanda's children, three big boys of various ages, none of which he could remember, and about how they took lots and lots of classes.

“You can't even imagine all the classes: piano, judo, tennis, horse riding, karate, and God only knows how expensive it all is. It's a nightmare, I'm telling you...” From there, his niece then found it necessary to go into a detail about the Ideal Home Exhibition that had brought her to London with the intention of purchasing some kitchen utensils for the catering outfit she ran, something called Paprika and Dill – or was it Cayenne and Dill? In any event, all of a sudden, she leant in towards her uncle to tell him something in a most conspiratorial tone of voice:

“Listen, Rafamolinet” – That was how she addressed him, saying first and last name all together in one long tongue-twister. “Listen – how would you like to hear the story of a murderer?”

For a moment, he felt a shiver run up his spine, but he quickly shrugged it off, certain that he knew what the question was leading up to. He squinted his eyes and then patted his pockets for his glasses. Of course, the explanation was right in front of him: surely she was referring to one of the actors’ photographs on the wall. *What a melodramatic way of changing the conversation*, Molinet thought, with a touch of displeasure. Maybe he was a bit behind the times when it came to social habits, this banal chit-chat used for passing the time, but from his point of view, their conversation had not sunk so low that they had to turn to the hopelessly unimaginative topic of the star photos lining the restaurant walls.

“Darling, really, I would much rather you tell me more about your children,” he was about to reply as a way of redirecting the conversation when he realized that Fernanda’s eyes were not at all glued to the line-up of celebrity photographs. Gazing just a bit to the left of him, peering in between the pillars along the staircase, Fernanda seemed to be spying on someone downstairs in the lower-level dining room.

“Did you hear what I said, Rafamolinet?” she repeated. Molinet then assumed that she always chirped first and last name like that, all together in a powerful phonetic blast, because she went on to pronounce another name in the very same manner.

“Look at her right there, Isabellalaínez,” she said. Then, leaning back to allow her uncle to see who she was talking about, she flicked her chin to indicate some indeterminate location in the downstairs dining room.

“If you lean a bit to the right, you’ll see her. No, no – down there, silly, in the dining room for the nobodies, in Siberia. Boy would she be furious if she knew that I came here and saw where they sat her.”

Molinet looked, entirely sceptical, towards the spot Fernanda was pointing at. His angle of vision wasn't very good; it was awful, as a matter of fact. The plant that swished against the nape of his neck from time to time covered a fair amount of the space between the pillars along the staircase, and he found it annoying to exert such an effort to follow his niece's instructions, despite the information she had disclosed. A murderess. Come now, he thought, truly gruesome stories never start off that way. But he relented and dutifully steered his gaze downstairs. All he saw was what looked like a married couple with a considerable age difference between them, sitting at a table and eating in silence.

"Who are they?"

"Darling, I thought that in your spiritual withdrawal from the world you spent all your time devouring gossip magazines."

"I have never seen those two in my life. Though I sense they are a married couple despite the age difference. Am I right?"

"Yes, a marriage maintained through eight years of mutual boredom. Do you want to hear the story or don't you?" she asked, signalling vaguely for the waiter to remove the salad she had barely touched. "I have never met anyone more immune to high-society gossip than you, Rafamolinet."

Molinet didn't bother to explain that he was an old dog. He wasn't insensitive to gossip, far from it – he simply did not trust clever conversationalists and their theatrical attempts to liven up otherwise boring conversations. *Coffee-time chit-chat*, he thought, and his face indicated that yes, he was familiar with her little trick – exaggeration can sometimes be very effective.

"So what do you have to say?"

Molinet shrugged his shoulders without saying anything. The waiter had just arrived with the second course, a cheese soufflé that was listed as an appetizer on the menu and which he had long since learnt to request as a main course, since it was quite filling, and inexpensive to boot. "The story of a murderess," Fernanda had said in that very conspiratorial tone a person uses just before tearing someone to shreds. He looked downstairs. The