

CHAPTER 3

1939

*The days of a century passed by  
And the hours followed your exile.*

— PABLO NERUDA

*“Artigas”*

CANTO GENERAL

THE DAY NEAR THE END OF JANUARY IN BARCELONA when the exodus that became known as the Retreat began, it dawned so cold that water froze in the pipes, vehicles and animals got stuck on the ice, and the sky, shrouded in dark clouds, seemed to be in deep mourning. It was one of the coldest winters in living memory. Franco’s Nationalist troops were advancing down from Tibidabo, and panic gripped the civilian population. Hundreds of Nationalist prisoners were dragged from their cells and shot. Soldiers, many of them wounded, began the trek toward the French border, following thousands upon thousands of civilians: entire families, grandparents, mothers, children, breast-feeding infants, everyone carrying whatever they could take with them. Some traveled in buses or trucks, others on bicycles, horse-drawn carts, horses, or mules,

but the majority went on foot, hauling their belongings in sacks, a pitiful procession of the desperate. Behind them they left shuttered homes and treasured objects. Pets followed their owners for some of the way, but soon became lost in the chaos and were left behind.

Victor Dalmau had spent the night evacuating those among the wounded who could be transferred in the few available ambulances, trucks, and trains. Around eight o'clock in the morning, he realized he ought to follow his father's orders and save his mother and Roser, but he couldn't abandon his patients. He managed to locate Aitor Ibarra and convince him he should leave with the two women. The Basque driver had an old German motorcycle with a sidecar. In peacetime it had been his pride and joy, but for the past three years he had kept it safe in a friend's garage, unable to use it due to the shortage of fuel. Given the circumstances, Aitor thought extreme measures were justified, and he stole two jerry cans of gasoline from the hospital. The bike lived up to the reputation of Teutonic technological excellence and kicked into life at the third try, as if it had never spent a day buried in a garage. At half past ten, Aitor turned up outside the Dalmau house, engine roaring and in a cloud of exhaust fumes, having zigzagged with difficulty through the crowds thronging the streets. Carme and Roser were expecting him, because Victor had found a way to alert them. His instructions had been clear: they were to stay close to Ibarra, cross the frontier, and once over it, get in touch with the Red Cross to try to find a friend of his called Elisabeth Eidenbenz, a nurse who could be trusted. She would be their contact point when they were all in France.

The two women had packed warm clothing, a few provisions, and some family photos. Roser was loath to go without Guillem, but reassured herself that she would be able to reunite with him in France. Until the last moment, Carme was also doubtful about whether or not she should leave. She felt incapable of starting a new life elsewhere: she said that nothing lasted forever, however bad, and perhaps they

could wait to see how things turned out. Aitor provided her with vivid details of what would happen when the Fascists came. First, there would be flags everywhere, and a solemn Mass in the main square that everybody would be forced to attend. The conquerors would be received with cheers by a crowd of enemies of the Republic who had lain low in the city for three years, and by many more who, impelled by fear, would try to ingratiate themselves and pretend they had never participated in the revolution. *We believe in God, we believe in Spain. We believe in Franco. We love God, we love Spain, we love the Generalissimo Francisco Franco.* Then the purge would begin. First the Fascists would arrest any combatants they could lay their hands on, wounded or not, along with those denounced by others as collaborators or suspected of any activity considered anti-Spanish or anti-Catholic. This included members of trade unions, left-wing parties, followers of other religions, agnostics, freemasons, teachers at all levels, scientists, philosophers, students of Esperanto, foreigners, Jews, gypsies—and so on in an endless list.

“The reprisals are ferocious, Doña Carme. Did you know they take children from their mothers and put them in orphanages run by nuns in order to indoctrinate them in the one true faith and the values of the fatherland?”

“My children are too old for that to happen.”

“That’s just an example. What I’m trying to say is that your only course is to come with me, because otherwise you’ll be shot for teaching revolutionaries to read and write, and for not going to Mass.”

“Listen, young man. I’m fifty-four years old and have a consumptive’s cough. I’m not going to live much longer. What kind of a life would I have in exile? I prefer to die in my own home, my own city, with or without Franco.”

Aitor spent another fifteen minutes trying in vain to persuade her, until finally Roser intervened.

“Come with us, Doña Carme, your grandchild and I need you.

After a while, when we've settled and can see how things are in Spain, you can return if you wish."

"You're stronger and more capable than I am, Roser. You'll get along fine on your own. Don't cry, now . . ."

"How can I not cry? What will I do without you?"

"All right, so long as it's understood I'm doing this for you and the baby. If it were up to me, I'd stay and put a brave face on it."

"That's enough, ladies, we need to leave right now," insisted Aitor.

"What about the hens?"

"Set them loose, somebody will find them. Come on, it's time to go."

Roser wanted to sit astride the motorbike behind Aitor, but he and Carme convinced her to use the sidecar, where there was less danger of damaging the child or causing a miscarriage. Carme, wrapped in several cardigans and a black woolen Castilian blanket that was rain-proof and as heavy as a rug, clambered onto the pillion seat. She weighed so little that if it hadn't been for the blanket she could have blown away. They made very slow progress, dodging around people, other vehicles, and draft animals, skidding on the icy surface and fighting off desperate individuals trying to force their way onto the bike.

The exodus from Barcelona was a Dantesque spectacle of thousands of people shivering with cold in a stampede that soon slowed to a straggling procession traveling at the speed of the amputees, the wounded, the old folks, and the children. Those hospital patients able to walk joined the exodus; others were taken by train as far as possible; the rest were left to face the Moors' knives and bayonets.

They left the city behind and found themselves in open country. Peasants deserted their villages, some with their animals or wagons loaded down with baggage, and mingled with the slowly moving

mass. Anyone with valuables bartered them for a place in the few vehicles on the road: money was worthless now. Mules and horses struggled under the weight of carts, and many of them fell gasping for breath. When they did so, men attached themselves to the harnesses and pulled, while the women pushed from behind. The route became strewn with objects that could no longer be carried, from crockery to pieces of furniture; the dead and wounded also lay where they fell; nobody stopped to attend to them. Any capacity for compassion had gone: everyone looked after only themselves and their loved ones. Warplanes swooped low overhead, spreading death and leaving in their wake a spattering of blood that mingled with the mud and ice. Many of the victims were children. Food was in short supply: the most farsighted had brought enough provisions to last a day or two; the rest went hungry, unless some farmer was willing to make an exchange for food. Aitor cursed himself for having left the hens behind.

Hundreds of thousands of terrified refugees were escaping to France, where a campaign of fear and hatred awaited them. Nobody wanted these foreigners—Reds, filthy fugitives, deserters, delinquents, as the French press labeled them. Repugnant beings who were going to spread epidemics, commit robberies and rape, and stir up a communist revolution. For three years there had been a trickle of Spaniards escaping the war: there was little sympathy for them, but they were dispersed throughout France and were almost invisible. After the Republican defeat, the authorities knew that the flow would increase; they were expecting an unknown number of refugees, possibly ten or fifteen thousand, a figure that already alarmed the French Right. No one imagined that within a few days there would be almost half a million Spaniards, in the last stages of confusion, terror, and misery, clamoring at the border. France's first reaction was to close the ports of entry while the authorities reached an agreement as to how to deal with the problem.