

TERESA SOLANA

The first-ever serial killer

Translated from the Catalan by Peter Bush

A number of us woke up this morning when the storm broke only to find another corpse in the cave. This time it was Pere. The moment I saw his smashed skull and brains seeping down his temples into a pool of black blood I almost fainted but the others slapped me and I came round. I rushed to rouse our chief and ask him to come and look and tell us what to do, but Berenguer is on the deaf side and slept like a log, and though the men were shouting, we finally had to piss on him to wake him up. Grumbling and bleary-eyed, our chief examined Pere's body cursing our bones for dragging him out of bed at such an early hour. In the meantime, the rain stopped and the sun came out.

While Berenguer and the others speculated about what had happened, I studied the bloody rock that lay a few yards from Pere's corpse and suggested to Berenguer the two might be related. Berenguer, a rather laconic troglodyte, looked at me skeptically and warned me not to jump to conclusions.

"Take this an inch at a time," he commented. "I want my breakfast first."

After gobbling down fried ostrich eggs and turtle and herb sausages, Berenguer calmed his men by insisting it must have been an accident. Then he brushed his teeth on a branch and said he'd like to speak to me in private. We surreptitiously retreated to a little recess at the back of the cave so the other males wouldn't hear our conversation, but as our cave has magnificent acoustics and you have to shout at Berenguer to make sure he hears you, everybody eavesdropped on our chinwag. In fact, I didn't see the point of so much secrecy, because he soon called an assembly to inform the men, and, except for Odalric, who's rather snoopy, nobody seemed particularly interested.

Berenguer, who isn't as stupid as he seems, asked me to open an investigation because three deaths in 14 moons are too many deaths and the clan was beginning to feel edgy. The fact all three were male and that we found them early in the morning with their heads smashed in by a rock was too much of a coincidence; however, prudent Odalric and Berenguer favour the accident hypothesis. For my part, I'm pretty sure something's up in the cave. My problem is I don't know what.

Odalric, Berenguer's right-hand man, immediately protested at the very idea I should lead the investigation, but Berenguer quickly landed a punch, knocking a couple of his teeth out and end of argument. It really makes a lot of sense he's chosen me to handle this; I am, by a long chalk, the cleverest troglodyte ever. Of the 20 males that comprise the Hairy Bear tribe (give or take a male), I'm the only one not to stumble over the same stone every morning when I leave the cave, a phenomenon that intrigues the lot of them. The other point in my favour is that I'm the troglodyte with most free time on his hands because Berenguer has banned me from going hunting. Partly because I'm not very handy at it and he prefers me to stay with the females rather than upset the hunting party. Indeed, if I hadn't discovered fire by chance one spring evening, when the other males were shafting and I was bored stiff, they'd have probably put me six feet under and I'd be pushing up daisies in the necropolis or be in some animal's craw. After all, thinking with one's head and not one's feet (or that other appendage...) has its advantage and I trust that will get some recognition some day.

Because of the privileged status I enjoy as the idler in the tribe I had no choice but to follow Berenguer's orders. He's in charge and, however much we grumble, this is no democracy. As the rain had stopped, the men went mammoth hunting and the women snail collecting; in the meantime I slumped under a fig tree and activated my grey cells to find a lead to help me discover the murderer's identity. Berenguer and Odalric can say what they like, but I am convinced there's skullduggery a-foot and we're dealing with three murders with a capital M.

The first to cop it was Guifré, whose head was also smashed in with a bloody stone that was lying left next to it. Guifré was a fine fellow but as daft as a brush, so we all thought it was self-inflicted and left it at that. A few moons later on it was Jaume's turn, and since he

received most blows to the right side of his skull, I started to think we were barking up the wrong tree. Everyone in the clan knew Jaume was left-handed (because his right arm ended up in some beast's belly), so it could hardly have been suicide or an accident, which was our theory in Guifré's case. My suspicions were confirmed this morning when we found Pere's corpse. At a glance the cause of death seems similar, but as nobody knows how to carry out an autopsy *comme il faut*, we can't be sure. In the absence of scientific evidence I must tread the slippery terrain of hypothesis where it's easy to come a cropper. Nonetheless, I think there are three facts I can establish beyond the shadow of a doubt: firstly, all three met a violent death; secondly, someone smashed their skulls in with a rock; thirdly, it happened while they were sleeping because we found all three on the pile of rotting leaves we call a bed.

Far be it from me to seem melodramatic, but considering that the *modus operandi* seems to be the same in each case, I'm beginning to think we are dealing with the first prehistoric serial killer ever. The fellow who did it has bumped off three men and we've yet to find him, so I deduce he must be a cold, calculating male, and a brainy chap too.



Mid-morning the hunters returned with a couple of mammoths. There were no casualties on this occasion. After clearing it with Berenguer, I started my interrogations and spoke to every member of the tribe to see if anyone didn't have an alibi. Unfortunately, they all did, because they swore to a man they were snoozing in the cave. As I'd spent the night at the necropolis reflecting on the question of to be or not to be, I realised I was the only one without a rock-solid alibi. But I'd swear I didn't kill Berenguer. I'm almost absolutely sure on that front.

Given that everyone has an alibi, I concluded we were perhaps looking in the wrong place. Not far from our cave there's a small hamlet of stone houses we call Poblet because it's a little village. It's more than likely the murderer doesn't belong to our tribe and has come from outside. If the murderer is an outsider, the Pobletians are top of my list; as far as we know, they are the only prehistoric community roundabouts. After informing Berenguer of my conclusions, our chief decided to send a fact-finding mission.

Berenguer, Odalric, Humfrid and yours truly went to Poblet. Initially, we were on tenterhooks, given the Pobletians are practising cannibals (endocannibals, is the term they use) and we were afraid they'd gobble us up before we could explain why we'd come. In the end, our fears were groundless. The Pobletian Neanderthals are amazingly hospitable and gave us a first-rate welcome, all things being equal. They even invited us to wash in a green bath of aromatic herbs, a form of ritual ablution, but as water is not our favourite element, we politely refused the bath claiming our beliefs forbade us to wash and we'd come on business. After the typical exchange of presents – an oval stone for a round one, a trefoil for an ammonite – we told Hug, their chief, what had happened in our cave and our suspicions. He was adamant in his response.

"How on earth could the murderer be a Pobletian if, as you say, nobody tucked into the corpses? You know we are cannibals!" he grimaced, visibly annoyed.

"Yes, but you always reckon you practise endocannibalism, I mean you only eat your own..." I retaliated.

"In fact, we like a little bit of this and a little bit of that..." Hug confessed rather reluctantly. "However, we use more sophisticated tools and don't go around killing people with rocks, like you. For God's sake, if it had been one of us, he'd have used an axe, not a boulder!"

"True enough," I acquiesced.

"Right, let's be off then!" roared Berenguer springing to his feet. "That's all cleared up, Hug, we won't bother you any more. Do forgive us for burdening you with all our woes. Some individuals," he added giving me a withering look, "think they're real bloody *homo sapiens*..."

"Don't worry", said Hug knowingly, "Weeds prosper wherever."

We walked back in silence, our tails between our legs (in Humfrid's case not merely metaphorically speaking). Back in our cave, I got a tongue-lashing and savaging I couldn't dodge. Berenguer and Odalric were livid and shouted at me in front of the women.

"We were made to look like complete fools!" Odalric spat in my face. "I don't know what the fucking use such a highly developed brain is if you never get it right!"

"To err is only human," I answered meekly.

"Come on, Mycroft, stop being such a Sherlock and get cracking. See if you can invent the axe!" added Berenguer. "We were made to look like a bunch of yokels!"

“All right, I’ll see what I can do in the morning,” I agreed.

I had no choice but to discount the outsider theory and concentrate on the inhabitants of our cave, because if the Poblethians are innocent, the guilty party must be one of us. After ruminating a while, waiting for the women to serve tea, I thought I’d better concentrate on discovering what the three victims, that is, Pere, Jaume and Guifré had in common, and I reached the following conclusions: a) all three were male; b) all three were hunters; c) none was immortal. Apart from that I drew a blank and couldn’t establish a motive, because the deceased were all beautiful people. Strictly in terms of their characters, I mean.

After tea, when getting ready to have a nap, I thought it would be worth my while to create a psychological profile of the murderer and see if I could eliminate any suspects. The results were disappointing: the only conclusion I drew was that the guilty man is someone who can wield a rock. So I could discount the children and Verdaguer, who’s armless because a bear ate his arms one day when he was siesta-ing under a pile of branches by the cave. Not counting the three who’ve already passed away, there remain some 53 suspects, because I wouldn’t want to leave the women out or they’d be furious and accusing me of being a male pig. Fifty-three suspects are a lot of suspects, but it’s better than nothing.

In any case, I must shorten this list. I retraced my steps, recalling how I’d established, quite reasonably, that the murderer must be a cold, calculating, intelligent fellow. Naturally, that led me automatically to eliminate women and children from my enquiry. I reviewed the list of males in the tribe and, in essence, was unable to identify a single one worthy of the epithet of ‘intelligent’. Once more, the finger of suspicion points at me: I don’t have an alibi and am the only Neanderthal in the group whose neurons function at all. Moreover, I’m a cold customer and the only one able to calculate within a reasonably small margin of error how many tribal males are left if three bite the dust. I plucked up my courage and accepted the evidence: no doubt about it, I’m the murderer.

“I’ve solved the case,” I told Berenguer, who was busy carving a mammoth. “After examining the facts, I’ve reached the conclusion that I did it.”

“What do you mean?” reacted Berenguer, putting the mammoth to one side and glowering at me.

“How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?” I declared. “Berenguer, I am the murderer.”

“Mycroft, cut the crap!” thundered Berenguer punching a rock and breaking a couple of bones in his hand. “How the hell can you have killed them? If the sight of a drop of blood sends you fainting to the floor...!”

“True enough. I’d forgotten.”

“So, get on with it. If you don’t solve this case, none of us will get any shut eye and you’re up for immolation, you know that, don’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. It’s news to me.”

“Well, I had the idea a while back. We voted on the motion and it was passed *nem con*. Sorry, I forgot to pass the news on.”

“That’s OK.”



I have the impression I’m miscuing this investigation. From the start I’ve focused on *who*, but perhaps if I concentrate on *why* the answer will come just like that. Why were Jaume, Guifré and Pere in particular picked for the chop? What’s the motive lurking behind these deaths? Who gains?

There’s one aspect Odalric highlighted and it may be worth some consideration. All we males of the tribe are stressed out by the murders but the women, on the contrary, are as cool as cucumbers, as if the serial killer thing doesn’t affect them. Not even Ermessenda, the matriarch of the group, seems the least worried by the fact we’ve a head-smashing psychopath in the cave. This made me ponder. What can’t I see? What am I missing?

We all know women have a secret: what do they do to get pregnant. Do they swallow on the sly a magic root we know nothing about? Do they hoard their farts, inflate their bellies and thus create a child inside? All of us males are obsessed by procreation, because however much we bluster on our weekend binges, the females are in the driving-seat. If we could crack the female secret behind pregnancy, the power they exert over us would evaporate. Can’t you tidy the cave? You’ve pissed up the wrong tree! The meat was tough again! They treat us like dummies, and on the pretext that they have to suckle their babes they dispatch us to get rid of the rubbish and hunt wild animals, which means we often return to the cave with

a companion or a limb less. But there's no way we can find out how the buggers do it.

The day before his head was smashed in, Guifré announced he'd found out their big secret: females get pregnant thanks to our white wee-wee. Of course, this is pure idiocy, and apart from Pere and Jaume, who are credulous men, none of us gave it a second thought. I mean, if male wee-wee is what gets women pregnant... the goats and hens in the corral would also be bringing kids into the world! Those poor chaps are so simple-minded!

Even though I don't think the women's secret is at all connected with the homicides, I decided to have a word with Ermessenda because all in all this is making me feel uneasy. I told her my doubts and she reassured me straight away.

"Mycroft, don't get your knickers in a twist, I beg you."

"It's just that you don't seem scared by the psychopath in the cave. At the very least it's a little odd..."

"So you want to be the next one appearing one morning with his head smashed in?" she asked picking a rock up.

"Of course not... But if I don't find the guilty party, they're going to immolate me at the crack of the dawn. You know how cussed old Berenguer is..."

"Sit down and listen to me then," she said with a sigh. This is what you must tell Berenguer and his band of rogues."



As Ermessenda isn't short of spunk and is quite able to send an adult male flying from one end of the cave to another, I sat obediently next to her and listened to her most rational explanations. Give her excellent aim when sling-hunting bats, I found her arguments most persuasive. I immediately went to see Berenguer to tell him a second time that I'd solved the case.

"Jaume, Guifré and Pere were punished by the gods because they discovered something they weren't supposed to know," I affirmed smugly.

"And what might that be?" asked Berenguer offhandedly.

"The women's secret. The child thing..."

"Oh...!" Berenguer scratched his private parts with his nails and out jumped a couple of fleas. "And who the fuck might these gods be?"

“Gods are superior beings who rule the universe,” I answered, making it up as I went along “They are eternal, almighty and immortal. From up in the sky where they live, they see all and know all.”

“How do you know?” he enquired looking at me like a wet fish.

“I had a vision in my dreams. I was told that if we stop trying to find out what women do to get with child there will be no more deaths.”

“What good news!” exclaimed Berenguer, squashing another flea. “Case closed! Now let’s sup. I’m so hungry I could eat a diplodocus!”

And added, with a grin, winking his only eye at me, “If they’re not extinct, I mean...”



I can’t complain. Today I’ve solved three murders and in one fell swoop invented prophecies, gods and oneiromancy. And, into the bargain, saved my own skin. The only thing worrying me now is that from here on everybody will be badgering me to interpret his dreams and will have the cheek to want me to do it for nothing. I can see it all. “I’m having erotic dreams about my mother or dream about killing my father.” Or, “Yesterday I dreamt so-and-so’s menhir was longer than mine...”

You know, perhaps I should consider inventing psychoanalysis. It’s not as if I have anything better to do.

TERESA SOLANA lives in Barcelona. Born in 1962, she studied philosophy and worked as a literary translator and essayist. She has written several novels in Catalan kept quietly in her drawer. *A Not So Perfect Crime*, her first published title, won the 2007 Brigada 21 Prize for the best Catalan mystery novel. The English version translated by Peter Bush was published by Bitter Lemon Press in 2009.

PETER BUSH has translated over 50 novels and screenplays including, from Spanish, the Renaissance novel *Celestina* and Juan Goytisolo’s *Juan the Landless* and, from Catalan, *The Enormity of the Tragedy* by Quim Monzó.