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Uncle Jesús

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Uncle Jesús

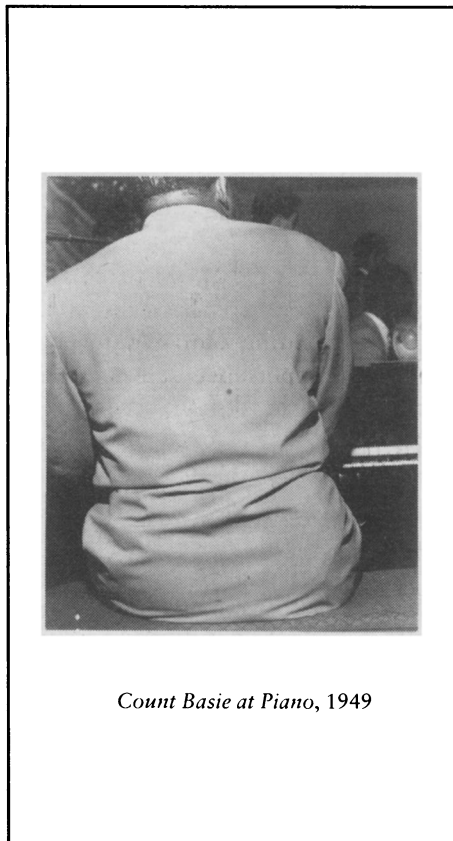
Javier Marías

THE ONLY reason why Uncle Jesús, my mother's brother, could not be termed the black sheep of the family was because there had already been so many—quite how many remains unclear, but far more than is advisable for the happiness and serenity of any family (we even count among our numbers a murderer, possibly a mass murderer). Uncle Jesús, however, was by far the blackest sheep of recent generations, at least until I and my cousins were old enough to commit new outrages and felonies.

My earliest memories of Uncle Jesús go back to the time when I was still a child of tender years and he was living with my grandparents in Calle Cea Bermúdez in Madrid. My parents used to take me and my brothers there for Saturday lunch, where the menu never varied: it was what we used to call "Cuban food," and my grandmother, an excitable, cheerful, ironic woman who was Cuban by birth, presented it to us as the only recipe to be had in the whole of Havana. In fact, we saw very little of Uncle Jesús, because he was not usually up by lunchtime. My grandmother, the most mild-mannered of people, would urge us children not to make too much noise because "poor Jesús is sleeping." I assume that the expression "poor Jesús" was a half-conscious attempt on his mother's part to make us (and herself) believe that Uncle Jesús had been working hard all night. Nothing could have been further from the truth: through his other six surviving siblings, we knew that our uncle was out partying every night until all hours.

Like many small children, I had a highly developed sense of cleanliness and a natural puritanism, and I remember my horror when I saw from the corridor that his bed was still unmade even at that late hour, when he was taking a leisurely bath while we were having our aperitif. Jesús occasionally joined us for those "Cuban lunches," always whistling or humming, with his wet hair carefully combed, although at other times he would race straight from the bathroom out into the street, doubtless fleeing the horde of children. When he did stay for lunch, he was always very funny and clever, as was his brother Javier, who was a year or two younger and the baby of the family. Like my grandfather, several of my uncles could play the piano or some other instrument (Jesús, I seem to recall, could knock out a few jazz classics, jazz being his great love), and they would enliven our lunches there with occasional mad sorties to the piano—which happened to be located in the dining room—on which, between courses, they would hammer wildly away. The macabre tendencies of both Jesús and his broth-

er Enrique (now a respected music critic) were already apparent even at that early age, for they took delight in frightening their junior siblings—Tina (aka Gloria) or Javier—by singing a little ditty, the words of which also reached our young ears. I can now remember only the gruesome opening lines: "A nice little boy all roasted and toasted / is what I like best for my lunch, / some bones and a lung, / a nose and some tongue / slip down with a slurp and a crunch." While they were singing, they would stare fixedly at us younger children and lick their lips. I see in this a clear musical antecedent to Jesús's later cinematographic liking for



Count Basie at Piano, 1949

vampires and Jack the Rippers.

After a certain age, however, I preferred it when Uncle Jesús wasn't there, leaving the field clear for me. For despite being forbidden from entering his room, or precisely because of that, I would spend all afternoon inspecting it at great length. And my inspections became longer and longer when I discovered the magnificent collection of erotica that Jesús kept hidden away in his wardrobe. You have to remember that I'm speaking here of the early 1960s in Spain, when it was even rarer to see a photo of a woman's breast than to see one in the flesh (either by chance or thanks to some particularly uninhibited or provocative maid). Jesús's collection was a veritable treasure trove for the pre-adolescent I was then, and the item I enjoyed most was an unusual book (a hardback with full-page spreads) dedicated entirely to photographs of Brigitte Bardot, in which she never appeared wearing more than

one article of clothing and usually less. Uncle Jesús may not know it, but I owe him a great debt of gratitude for this early initiation.

To a large extent, I also owe him my initiation into literature, because, at the age of seventeen, I ran away to Paris to write my first novel, *The Dominions of the Wolf*, with the inestimable collaboration of the person who was, by then, more Jess Frank than Jesús. Tardily and after much delay, he had married a beautiful Frenchwoman called Nicole and, at the time, owned an apartment in Rue Freycinet, near the Champs-Élysées, which he was generous enough to let me use as my writing base in the summer of 1969, while he was away filming. It was an excellent place, presided over by a white grand piano and by shelves crammed—no need for concealment now—with pornographic books and magazines. I suppose, by then, Jesús had a good excuse for having such a collection—assuming his French wife needed him to provide her with an excuse—because as well as making horror and adventure movies, he also made skin flicks, which were, I believe, filmed mainly in Germany and Italy under extravagant pseudonyms probably unknown to anyone, and he doubtless needed those publications as a source of new talent.

Those were the years when I saw most of him and when he behaved most like the tolerant, errant uncle all the nephews of the world deserve. One summer, he also lent me the apartment he had in Rome, in Viale dei Parioli, where the big-name movie directors lived, including Vittorio Gassman and Sergio Leone. He even took me with him filming: in one of his *Fu Manchu* movies, my cousin Ricardo Franco and I appear in a couple of shots, looking totally unrecognizable. Disguised as Chinese hoodlums wearing black silk outfits and red headbands and wielding swords, we raced barefoot down a precipitous slope to the shore of a lake which was, in fact, a reservoir on the outskirts of Madrid. This suicidal descent, repeated several times, is, I think, the most dangerous thing I have ever done, and I nearly split my head open several times, not that Jesús Franco was bothered (even if the extras were his own flesh and blood), just as long as he got his takes. He made so many films and so quickly that he was, I understand, always working against the clock. I've even heard it said that on more than one occasion, without the knowledge of the actors, whom he kept in a state of confusion by giving them strange, bewildering scripts, he shot two movies at once, with the same team and cast, who thus, completely unbeknownst to them, were doing two jobs but only getting paid for one. Unfortunately, the movie in which I played such an ephemeral role involved none of the great names with whom Jesús was working at the time (he had joined forces with an eccentric British producer called Harry Alan Towers and had at his beck and call such old glories and legends as Jack Palance, George Sanders, Christopher Lee, Mercedes McCambridge, and Herbert Lom, to name but a few); he did, how-

ever, regale us with many juicy anecdotes about them.

While Uncle Jesús was a source of joy to us, he was, both before and after that, and over a period of many years, a cause of despair for our parents, his siblings. When he finally married Nicole, after a long bachelorhood and numerous girlfriends, each more absurd and unspeakable than the last, it was explained to us children that Nicole was a widow, so as to justify the existence of our new cousin, Caroline, who came along with her. Later on, in that summer of *The Dominions of the Wolf*, I happened to meet the father of our false cousin, and he was, I seem to recall, a very jolly divorcé called Jacques. The worst thing, as far as my mother was concerned, were the porn movies, about which, on the other hand, we heard very little. My mother was the eldest of a family of what started out as eleven children (four either died on the journey or before they had even set off) and she was nearly twenty years older than the three youngest, Tina (aka Gloria), Jesús, and Javier, to whom she was a mother long before there was the remotest chance of my brothers and I even being conceived. For that reason, I think, she felt her lecherous brother's cinematographic inclinations to be a personal failure on her part: she didn't so much regret the licentious path his career had taken as see in it a promising moral trajectory cut short. "It doesn't seem possible," she used to say, "when I think how religious Jesús was as a child."

As far as I know, Jesús continued to be pretty much of a child, but there was no way my mother could know that. Those who have shared hotel rooms with him recall, as did my mother when she remembered him as a boy, how panicky he would get if no light was left on to protect him from the dark. It was hard to imagine when you saw him—a short man, verging on the plump, a nervous, jokey, hyperactive type, with a somewhat flattened nose down which his glasses always seemed about to slide. During my adolescence and early youth, no one called me ignorant and uncultivated as often as he did. Whenever he mentioned some C-list actor or some obscure figure from the jazz world and I asked who they were, he would indignantly get to his feet and shout: "You mean you don't know who Willis Bouche is? How can you possibly not know Joe Albany?" And so on and so on, as if it was a universal duty to know who those people were: "You really don't know who Jack Pennick is? You're having me on. You don't know who Ike Quebec is?" And he would exclaim in astonishment: "Ike Quebec! Willis Bouche! Jack Pennick! Joe Albany! What ignorance! And you call yourself cultured! But they're really famous! It's like not knowing who Cervantes is!" I should add that if I ever did find out who the very celebrated Albany, Bouche, Quebec, and Pennick were, I did so by my own means, because beyond feigning amazement, expressing a very real indignation and gesticulating wildly, Uncle Jesús never deigned to tell me. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)