

ANTONI MORELL

## **BORIS I, KING OF ANDORRA (EXCERPT)**

*Translated by Jerry White*

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He solicited an audience with the President by way of Pere Torres Riba, a being who was absolutely unable to do anything but go around gossiping. He was the classic opportunist whose only wish was to climb the social ladder. He was gifted with a certain readiness, having managed to learn the “Perrier” grammar books, which was what the people, who lacked all manner of learning, were slowly starting to take seriously. He converted this into “knowledge” for the people. He was even able to string two words together and write to Barcelona, or to Béziers, in the south of France.

He introduced himself directly to Boris and explained the situation: “If you want to be king, I can help you. You’ll need to get to know the country; I know it. You’ll have to split hairs; I will help you with that. You’ll have to be sure that you maintain a perfect equilibrium: ambition and treason. I will help you with your ambition and help you make it so that people never feel like traitors. It’s a difficult task, but you can count on me.” He told him all of this as though it was a lesson he had learned by heart—one that was harder than learning the list of Napoleonic defeats.

On that day Pere transformed himself into the Private Secretary of Boris I, King of Andorra. He rifled through his trunks, wedding boxes, and drawers. Eventually, he found two shirts, a pair of briefs, and four ties. The Private Secretary to a king would have to dress like the perfect partner of such a high person (although he would dress at a lower level, of course). He hurried to be a loyal and effective right-hand man who, if his instincts didn’t deceive him—and he didn’t believe they would—would soon become an essential instrument for the grandiose work that Boris wanted to bring to fruition.

The President and Chief Magistrate had granted him an audience for 6pm. At that moment it was 4:30pm, the sky having been overcast since noon, promising a summer shower. The heat invaded the streets and the plazas, seeping in through the doors and windows.

He got dressed like he had never gotten dressed before: he had to make an impression.

(“Look, Boris, at what is keeping it all in balance,” he said to himself.)

Pere had laid the foundation, set out the clothes that would, an hour later, either serve as his triumph or lead to his defeat. The vest would be dark blue, the underpants unpleated, the jacket with narrow blue lapels. Sure, that one that was all shiny on the outside. He also took an overcoat, a camel hair winter jacket with ample lapels, and held it up like a crucifix—simple, prim, beige. At his fingertips, a grey cap. The shirt? He rifled through the drawers and found a sky-blue one with a thin pattern that, on another occasion, he might have put on to go to the city. He shuffled through the clothes and chose some white boxer shorts and a matching shirt and vest. The buttons, black.

He remained calm. He had solved one of the hearing’s important problems. He shouted, from the stairs, for a grenadine with water; he was parched, lost, almost as if he didn’t exist. Why did he just allow Florència to go on that trip to the lake? Anyway, he had the very good habit of collecting all of the articles having to do with fashion in the leading European magazines. Depending on where he was living, he would consult various manuals and then choose from his copious collection.

The village had a nativity display, but without any people. The sky darkened at times, something that obliged him to hustle up in case, despite his precautions, he wound up getting soaked. It seemed that the dogs that crossed his path all sensed the storm coming: they looked nervous, restless. “Why are there so many dogs in this country?” he thought. He’d have to take measures when he was king.

He walked past a stone arch that seemed more like a shield than a threshold. The bailiff—that is to say, *el nunci*, the chief civil servant of Andorra—was waiting for him. He climbed up a few steps that ended with a wooden door decorated with swastikas and gothic-style rose windows. There, behind that woodwork, his challenger was hiding. He could see, on the other side of the door, the hands of a finely tuned clock that chimed at 6pm. Far, far away, behind a scratched-up, empty table, emerged a parson’s

hat and a face that was as wrinkled and pitted as a thousand old roads. From under that table emerged a plump leg clad in corduroy and an enormous black boot. Beyond these traps lay the eyes of a viper, some red cheeks, and a slight smile.

“Come in, come in, Senyor Skossyreff,” beckoned the President, the Right Honorable Valentí Puig i Argemi, elected by a commanding majority and now the Chief Magistrate in all matters of old Andorra. He was elected by a General Council that wanted to resolve, once and for all, old and insipid quarrels that were going nowhere. They had made the most ambitious choice.

“Look, I’ve come from really far away . . .” Boris started to say.

The room looked like a rabbit hutch. He felt the heat, the stifled odours. They really needed to open the windows that were keeping the raindrops now starting to fall from getting onto the walls and floors.

“I have seen your country,” Boris continued. “It’s superb. I’ve traversed it from its highest points to its lowest. I’ve been moving around these lands for days. I could not have imagined it. No, indeed. Maybe you and yours don’t appreciate it,” and here he made an imperceptible gesture of doubt, “but believe me, you don’t know what you have here.”

He fell silent, but it was a sort of fecund silence—the kind that you needed in order to find new concepts and weave in fresh ideas. The clock moved fearlessly forward.

“I don’t know what people have told you about me. Yes, I have traversed all of Europe. Do you know Poland? Right, so I’m from there. Did you know that the Czar, Lenin, William of Orange, and Wallis Simpson . . .”

Suddenly, he fell silent. It was starting to unravel, and that was dangerous! He had come here to talk of negotiations and now, in front of all these bird-faced men, he was explaining his life.

(“Boris, *ça suffit!* What would the mistress say?” he thought to himself. He could feel his shoulders relaxing, and for a few seconds he looked at the English cufflinks.)

Boris interrupted these parentheses and went on talking: “To sum up, my offer consists of making this country into a modern state. You need money, and I can offer you that. This is a unique country: fabulous, but virginal. You just need to bite the bullet. Money, freedom; this is my proposal. An ordered liberty, to be sure. Don’t worry yourselves about that; we will be true to the traditions that matter. Leave it in my hands. I am a man who is ready;

I have friends all over the world. I can bring technicians, specialists, and so on, if we need them. Everyone will die well-cared-for, in a dignified manner. Doctors, schools, a telephone for everyone, paved roads, baths, hotels. Your peasants will live off of rent if they agree to lend their names to business arrangements. It's ridiculous to have a budget of six or seven million pesetas for the whole year. That's 35 francs per person. The salaries alone break the bank."

The old guy looked like the pillar of salt after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra. He was a shell, eyes strangely bloodshot, dry lips, beads of sweat running down the veins of his neck. You could feel a gentle heat as he rose up by his wrists.

His brittle voice filled the walls of the chambers: "What do you want to change?"

The little rain shower had transformed into a splendid rainbow that seemed to clean the dirt from the windows. The sensation of freshness came up from the deepest depths of his stomach, like a bucket coming up from a well. Finally, he was sure of it: he was going to get a little piece of earth on which he could dig a deep furrow and plant his seeds, which would come up magnificent, elegant. He arrived at the moment of truth: for the first time in his life, having been unsuccessful in Holland, France, and England, on this July evening—the clock stood at 7pm—a poor, ambitious yokel was on the point of getting his madness underway and having others accept it. He would create a little corner of the world where he could live out his fantasies.

"I want to be king of Andorra."

So, like the stroke of a hammer, like a baptismal font, like a master beam, like an egg with two yolks, like a 250-kilo ox, like a year of wheat, like 500 bales of tobacco, like . . .

Words, silences, and eyes intensely recreated what he had imagined at the hotel. Not shirts, nor undergarments, nor vests, nor makeup. The secret was ambition, and that was enough.

"If this idea suits you," Boris concluded, "then you would be Andorra's first head of government."

It was a quarter to eight, and even though it wasn't yet the time of the *bagaleu*, that tough, typically Andorran bird, fantasies still started to take flight in the President's mind: the Bishop, the councillors, the French, the woman, President Albert Lebrun of France, the delegates . . .

“Moreover,” Boris revealed, “your General Council needs to be aware that the battle is also being fought in other places—places that are just as valuable or more so. His Royal Highness the Duke of Guisa has asked the civil court of ‘La Seine’ to return to him the right of sovereignty over the country that has, until now, been administered by that man Albert Lebrun, a president who is not in any way the heir to the crown of France. You follow me? Don’t think that we want what isn’t ours. Our longings are legitimate, and we are only motivated by a sense of justice, along with, of course, the welfare of your country. Full stop.”

Boris knew he had to play for time. As he was thinking that, the chamber’s aged wood started to creak.

It was 9pm. The *bagaleus*, those night owls, had long since made the country their kingdom by the time Boris and the President said goodbye to each other at the door.

“Sunday, after the noontime mass, I’ll recall the General Council.”

“Ah!” nodded Boris. “I’ve prepared a program of laws governing the price of food, because I’ve seen a lot of nonsense on that front. You should study it. Anyway, we need to regulate that and avoid any problems with speculators.”

He held a piece of paper in his hands. It said the following:

Wine: 0.35 pesetas per litre  
 Wheat: 24 pesetas per quarter  
 Meat: 3.65 pesetas per kilo  
 Eggs: 2.50 pesetas per dozen  
 Codfish: 4.25 pesetas per kilo

It was a long list, and the President did study it, of course, with his wife.

The President, you see, owned a grocery store.