

Alessandro Baricco

City



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486 pages

Extrait

Prologue

"So, Mr. Klauser, should Mami Jane die?"

"Screw them all."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"What do you think?"

In October of 1987, CRB--the company that for twenty-two years had published the adventures of the mythical Ballon Mac--decided to take a poll of its readers to determine whether Mami Jane ought to die. Ballon Mac was a blind superhero who worked as a dentist by day and at night battled Evil, using the special powers of his saliva. Mami Jane was his mother. The readers were, in general, very fond of her: she collected Indian scalps and at night she performed as a bassist in a blues band whose other members were black. She was white. The idea of killing her off had come from the sales manager of CRB--a placid man who had a single passion: toy trains. He maintained that at this point Ballon Mac was on a dead-end track and needed new inspiration. The death of his mother--hit by a train as she fled a paranoid switchman--would transform him into a lethal mixture of rage and grief, that is, the exact image of his average reader. The idea was idiotic. But then so was the average reader of Ballon Mac.

So, in October of 1987, CRB cleared out a room on the second floor and set up eight young women there to answer the telephones and tabulate readers' opinions. The question was: Should Mami Jane die?

Of the eight young women, four were employees of CRB, two had been sent by the unemployment office, and one was the granddaughter of the company president. The last, a woman of about thirty, from Pomona, was there because she'd won an internship by getting the correct answer on a radio quiz ("What is the thing that Ballon Mac hates most in the world?" "Scraping off tartar"). She had a small tape recorder that she always carried with her. Every so often she turned it on and said something into it.

Her name was Shatzy Shell.

At 10:45 on the twelfth day of the voting--when the death of Mami Jane was winning by 64 percent to 30 (the remaining 6 percent maintained that they should all go to hell, and had called to say so)--Shatzy Shell heard the phone ring for the twenty-first time that day, wrote on the form she had in front of her the number 21, and picked up the receiver. The following conversation ensued:

"CRB, good morning."

"Good morning, is Diesel there yet?"

"Who?"

"OK, he's not there yet..."

"This is CRB, sir."

"Yes, I know."

"You must have the wrong number."

"No, no, it's all right. Now listen to me..."

"Sir..."

"Yes?"

"This is CRB. It's the poll 'Should Mami Jane die?'"

"Thanks, I know that."

"Then would you please give me your name?"

"It doesn't matter what my name is..."

"You have to give it to me, it's the procedure."

"OK, OK, Gould...my name is Gould."

"Mr. Gould."

"Yes, Mr. Gould, now if I can..."

"Should Mami Jane die?"

"What?"

"You're supposed to tell me what you think...should Mami Jane die or not?"

"Oh, Jesus..."

"Do you actually know? Who Mami Jane is?"

"Of course I know, but..."

"You see, all you have to do is tell me if you think that..."

"Please, listen to me for a moment?"

"Of course."

"Then do me a favor and take a look around."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Here?"

"Yes, there, in the room, please do me this one favor."

"OK, I'm looking."

"Good. Do you by any chance see a guy with a shaved head who's holding the hand of a big guy, and I mean big, a kind of giant, with enormous shoes and a green jacket?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Good. Then they haven't arrived yet."

"No."

"OK, then I want you to know something."

"Yes?"

"They aren't bad guys."

"No?"

"No. When they get there they'll start smashing everything up, and it's likely that they'll grab your telephone cord and twist it around your neck, or something like that, but they're not bad guys, really, it's only that..."

"Mr. Gould..."

"Yes?"

"Would you mind telling me how old you are?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen?"

"Twelve...to be exact, twelve."

"Listen, Gould, is your mother around?"

"My mother left four years ago, and now she lives with a professor who studies fish, the habits of fish, an ethologist, to be precise."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. Life is like that, you can't do anything about it."

"Really?"

"Really. Don't you think so?"

"Yes I guess...I don't know exactly, I imagine it's that way."

"It is that way, unfortunately."

"You're twelve, right?"

"Tomorrow I'll be thirteen, tomorrow."

"Splendid."

"Splendid."

"Happy birthday, Gould."

"Thank you."

"You'll see, it's splendid to be thirteen."

"I hope so."

"Congratulations, truly."

"Thank you."

"Your father's not around, is he?"

"No, he's at work."

"Of course."

"My father works for the Army."

"Splendid."

"Is everything always so splendid for you?"

"What?"

"Is everything always so splendid for you?"

"Yes...I think so."

"Splendid."

"That is...it often happens, yes."

"You're lucky."

"It also happens at the oddest moments."

"I think you really are lucky."

"Once I was at a cafeteria, on Route 16, just outside of town, I stopped at a cafeteria, I went in and got in line, and behind the counter there was a Vietnamese man, who could barely understand a word, so nothing was moving, you know, someone would say to him, A hamburger, and he'd say What?, maybe it was his first day of work, I don't know, so I started looking around, in the cafeteria. There were five or six tables, and people were eating, so many different faces and each face with something different in front of it, a pizza, a sandwich, a bowl of chili, they were all eating, and they were all dressed exactly how they wanted to dress, they'd gotten up in the morning and chosen something to put on, the red shirt, or the dress tight across the tits, exactly what they wanted, and now they were there, and each of them had a life behind and a life ahead, they were just *passing through* there, and tomorrow they'd do it all again from the beginning, the blue shirt, the long dress, and surely the blonde with freckles had a mother in the hospital, with all the blood tests really bad, but there she was, pushing aside the French fries with black spots, reading a newspaper propped against a gas pump-shaped salt shaker, there was a guy in a baseball shirt, who for sure had not been on a baseball field in years, he was sitting there with his son, just a kid, and he kept cuffing him on the head, on the back of the head, and every time the boy readjusted his cap, a baseball cap, and click, another cuff, and throughout all this never stopping eating, under a TV hanging on the wall, screen blank, the noise coming in from the highway in gusts, and sitting in a corner two men, very refined-looking, in gray suits, and you could see one of the two was crying, it was absurd, but he was crying, over steak and potatoes, he was crying silently, and the other didn't bat an eye, he had a steak in front of him, too, he was just eating, that's all, only, at one point he got up, went over to the next table, took the ketchup bottle, went back to his seat, and, very careful not to spill on his gray suit, poured a little on the other guy's plate, the one who was crying, and whispered something, I don't know what, then he put the top back on the bottle and started eating again, those two in the corner, and everything else around, a black cherry ice cream cone trampled on the floor, and on the bathroom door a sign saying "Out of Order"--I looked at all that and it was clear that the only thing you could think was *How disgusting, folks*, something so sad it would make you puke, and instead what happened was that while I was standing there in line and the Vietnamese guy kept on not getting a damn thing, I thought *Lord, how lovely*, with even a sort of desire to laugh, My goodness, how nice all this is, all of it, down to the last crumb crushed into the floor, the last greasy napkin, without knowing why, but knowing that it was true, it was all amazingly nice. Absurd, isn't it?"

"Strange."

"I'm sorry to have gone on about it."

"Why?"

"I don't know... people don't usually talk about things like that

"I liked it."

"Come on..."

"No, really, especially the part about the ketchup..."

"He grabbed the bottle and poured some out onto..."

"Yes."

"Dressed all in gray."

"Funny."

"Right."

"Right."

"Gould?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you called."

"Hey, no, wait..."

"I'm still here."

"What's your name?"

"Shatzy."

"Shatzy."

"My name is Shatzy Shell."

"Shatzy Shell."

"Yes."

"And there's no one there wrapping the telephone cord around your neck, right?"

"No."

"You'll remember, when they get there, that they're not bad?"

"You'll see, they won't come."

"Don't count on it, they'll get there..."

"Why is that, Gould?"

"Diesel *adores* Mami Jane. And he is seven feet six inches tall."

"Splendid."

"Depends. When he's very angry it's not at all splendid."

"And now he's *very* angry?"

"You would be, too, if they were taking a poll on whether to kill Mami Jane, and Mami Jane was your ideal mother."

"It's only a poll, Gould."

"Diesel says it's all a trick. He says they already decided months ago that they would kill her off, and they're only doing this for show."

"Maybe he's wrong."

"Diesel is never wrong. He's a giant."

"How giant?"

"Very."

"I was once with a guy who could slam-dunk without even standing on tiptoe."

"Really?"

"But his job was taking tickets in a movie theater."

"And did you love him?"

"What sort of question is that, Gould?"

"You said you were *with* him."

"Yes, we were together. We were together for twenty-two days."

"And then?"

"I don't know...it was all sort of *complicated*, you know what I mean?"

"Yes...For Diesel, too, it's all sort of complicated."

"That's how it is."

"His father had a toilet made specially for him--it cost him a fortune."

"I told you, it's all sort of complicated."

"Yes. When Diesel tried to go to school, down in Taton, he arrived one morning..."

"Gould?"

"Yes?"

"Excuse me a moment, Gould."

"OK."

"Stay on the line, OK?"

"OK."

Shatzy Shell put Gould on hold. Then she turned to the man who was standing in front of her desk, looking at her. It was the head of the department of development and promotion. His name was Bellerbaumer. He was one of those people who suck on the eyepiece of their glasses.

"Mr. Bellerbaumer?"

Mr. Bellerbaumer cleared his throat.

"Miss Shell, you are talking about giants."

"Exactly."

"You have been on the telephone for twelve minutes and you are talking about giants."

"Twelve minutes?"

"Yesterday you talked happily for twenty-seven minutes with a stockbroker who at the end made you a proposal of marriage."

"He didn't know who Mami Jane was, I had to..."

"And the day before you were on that telephone for an hour and eleven minutes correcting the homework of a wretched little boy who then gave you as his answer 'Why not do in Ballon Mac?'"

"It's an idea. You might think about it."

"Miss Shell, that telephone is the property of CRB, and you are paid to say only one goddam sentence: Should Mami Jane die?"

"I'm trying to do my best."

"So am I. And so I am going to fire you, Miss Shell."

"Excuse me?"

"I am compelled to let you go, Miss Shell."

"You're serious?"

"I'm sorry."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Mr. Bellerbaumer?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind if I finish my phone call?"

"What phone call?"

"The phone call. There's a boy on the line, who's on hold."

"..."

"..."

"Finish your phone call."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Gould?"

"Hello?"

"I'm afraid I have to hang up, Gould."

"OK."

"They've fired me."

"Splendid."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"At least now they won't strangle you."

"Who?"

"Diesel and Poomerang."

"The giant?"

"The giant is Diesel. Poomerang is the other, the one with no hair. He's a mute."

"Poomerang."

"Yes. He's a mute. He can't speak. He hears but he can't speak."

"They'll be stopped at the door."

"Generally they never get stopped, those two."

"Gould?"

"Yes."

"Should Mami Jane die?"

"They can all go to hell."

"I don't know.' OK."

"Tell me something, Shatzy?"

"I have to go now."

"Just one thing."

"Go ahead."

"That place, that cafeteria..."

"Yes..."

"I was thinking...it must be a pretty nice place..."

"Yes..."

"I was thinking I might like to have my birthday there."

"What do you mean?"

"Tomorrow...it's my birthday...we could all go and eat there, maybe the two men in gray are still there, the ketchup ones."

"It's a funny idea, Gould."

"You, me, Diesel, and Poomerang. I'll pay."

"I don't know."

"It's a good idea, really."

"Maybe."

"855 6741."

"What's that?"

"My number. Call me, if you feel like it, OK?"

"You don't sound like a thirteen-year-old."

"I will be tomorrow, to be exact."

"I see."

"Then OK."

"Yes."

"OK."

"Gould?"

"Yes?"

"Bye."

"Bye, Shatzy."

"Bye."

Shatzy Shell pressed the blue button and hung up. She started to gather up her things and put them in her bag; it was a yellow bag with "Save the Planet Earth from Painted Toenails" written on it. She took the framed photographs of Walt Disney and Eva Braun. And the little tape recorder that she always carried with her. Every so often she turned it on and said something into it. The seven other women looked at her silently, while the telephones rang in vain, forfeiting precious opinions on the future of Mami Jane. What Shatzy Shell had to say, she said as she took off her sneakers and put on her heels.

"So, for the record, in a little while a giant and a guy with no hair, a mute, will come through that door. They will break up everything and strangle you with your telephone cords. The giant's name is Diesel, the mute's is Poomerang. Or the other way around, I can't remember. Anyway: they're not bad guys."

The photograph of Eva Braun had a red plastic frame, and a foot that folded out from the back, covered in fabric: to hold it up, if necessary. She, Eva Braun, had the face of Eva Braun.

"Get it?"

"More or less." Revue de presse

'Este libro se titula City. Me doy cuenta de que, después de Seda, hubiera sido mejor buscar algo que sonara un poco distinto. Pero este libro está construido como una ciudad, como la idea de una ciudad. Quería que el título lo dijera. Y ahora ya lo dice. Las historias son barrios, los personajes son calles. Lo demás es tiempo que pasa, ganas de vagabundear y necesidad de mirar'. Présentation de l'éditeur

Llega por fin la nueva novela del autor de Seda, que ha levantado grandes expectativas. Un libro que está construido como una ciudad, como la idea de una ciudad. Las historias son barrios, los personajes son calles. Lo demás es tiempo que pasa, ganas de vagabundear y necesidad de mirar. En uno de los barrios hay una historia de boxeo en la época de la radio, en el otro hay un western. Y entre los personajes hay un gigante, un mudo, un barbero que los jueves corta el pelo gratis, un general, muchos profesores, gente que juega con balones, un niño negro que juega a la canasta y siempre la mete&

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