

# THE WAYS OF MEN

*Gregg Cusick*

In my restaurant-issue red tie, I smile from behind the bar at the sunlight that precedes the older woman into the restaurant. Recent rains, and not seeing her, have depressed me. I'm 27, a significant age in this story, something of a romantic, a late-bloomer whose friends gave up the music and pathos of under-employed, over-educated seekers years back. I believe I'm in love with the woman who pulls open the door and enters with the long triangle of sun, as I believe I'm in love with the younger wife of my older brother; they're something like 59 and 31, respectively.

Not another soul in this Boston-suburbs brand of Spanish bistro, now between the lunch business, what little there had been, and the dinner crowd, generally more robust. I come from behind the bar trying to hold her glance, noticing her folded newspaper under arm, her beige cardigan over faded print dress, a pattern of burgundy and orange that makes me think of sangria. I meet her inside the door, motion the red leather menu and usher her past me. To the end of the bar by the window that she prefers, where she sits looking, I think, pensive, even sad. Her newspaper, the Madrid daily *El País*, appears to me worn or damp, although there has been no rain this day.

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"Today, I will take you back to Spain," Isabel Menendez had told me some weeks before, after her second sip of rioja, her green eyes suddenly lively and glistening. "It's 1959. I am 23 years old, beautiful perhaps." Something I was certain of.

"Newly married in the city of my new husband's family, wealthy industrialists, a word we used to use back then. He is well older than I, the MIT professor I'd fallen for. We're dressed like royalty, front row at the famous Corrida de las Ventas, since Eduard's family has such connections, at the bullring and elsewhere." She pauses to draw a breath of Madrid's hot, dusty air. "Dominguín and Ordoñez are fighting mano a mano in the heat of the summer. Ernesto the aficionado is watching from close by, taking notes and talking to his wife on one side, his lovely 18-year-old mistress on the other." Her eyes moved side to side, not focusing on anything in her immediate surroundings. "Sit down, can you?"

“Smell the turf, dry, so hot. And the dust, the foods, the sweat. In earlier times, when Eduard was a boy, there was often also the smell of the insides of the horses. You see, the horses carrying the picadors had no protection, and they were frequently gored. They would scream, and they’d gallop away, leaving their entrails steaming on the turf, can you imagine?” We both looked off toward the street and paused, horrified, seeing and smelling the scene.

“They were brothers-in-law, you know. Luis Miguel Dominguín the older, the famous one with all the cold calculated moves and what Ernesto in his book called *trucas*, the tricks that the crowds loved. He’d turn his back to the bull or kneel before him, kissing him even and sometimes arch his body over him, elbow on his forehead acting as if he was talking on the telephone with him. Miguel came out of retirement for the competition that summer. Only 33. His lovely sister Carmen had married the one whom he would fight against. Antonio Ordoñez was 27, but had been the youngest-ever matador. It’s said he held a cape at the age of five. So it was a family affair of sorts. Can you understand?”

At that time, I also thought I was in love with my brother’s wife, and I nodded at Isabel Menendez as if I could understand. Maybe an important part, but merely a part, of a complex, interconnected situation. Like understanding the importance of oil in the function of the engine of my sputtering Volkswagen, yet knowing nothing of internal combustion. “So,” I asked softly as a secret, “you knew *him*?”

“We all did, in a way. He was the most famous, and the most beloved since Manolete. He was the one, you know, he challenged Manolete on the day the great one died. He was 21, the greatest was 30, and the upstart says let’s see who’s best.”

She read my face and paused, a kind of shadow crossing hers. A teacher’s disappointment, the kind I well know now. I immediately wanted to show myself worthy of her tale and not expect that it must be geared somehow to my own needs, my own story. I was young, I confess, in my twenties. Antonio’s age then, as I said. Although I look back now wishing I’d been less like those around me, less callow.

She read me and said, “I’ll tell you later about the one they called Papa – the one you all are so crazy for, the one who wrote about the old man and the big fish – what little I know, anyway. But what I’m telling you now – Madrid, 1959 – is more about others. You should perhaps think a bit more of others.”

This was the only, and most stinging rebuke I’d ever heard

from her. Reddened, I tried to apologize and asked as humbly as I could for her to go on.

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"Have you ever heard of an espontáneo?" she asked me one similar quiet afternoon, her blue-green eyes again flashing like I was looking into a kaleidoscope. "It's something of an interloper, part of our word 'spontaneous.' Today I'll tell you of my espontáneo." I leaned in, making no attempt to look busy. We were alone, again. Back in Madrid, 1959.

"Eduard and I were dressed as if he was a victorious politician in a parade, dark suited, while I wore a formal dress of much color, reds and yellows and orange. My Gabriel said later that when he saw me he thought of sangria." She sipped her rioja. "But I get ahead of myself." A sip and a breath.

"So Antonio Ordoñez, the younger and more artful, was about to face his second bull. A huge toro, visibly brave, Eduard said. And suddenly there was a man, a boy really, darting down the steps toward the rail, directly beside us. Not in any suit of lights, no pink socks – in fact plain blue pants, light shirt, a dark worn cap – but with movements quick and graceful. He was a marvelous dancer," she added, flushing.

"As he reaches the rail, about to leap out onto the turf, he turns his head and looks our way. In his eyes is the fear a child covers with defiance, and I suddenly felt alone in seeing both." Isabel Menendez sipped again, exhaled. "Then he very nearly smiled," she said, "and sprang over the rail as if it was only inches high, out onto the grandest stage. Our eyes would meet again not an hour later."

My reality, then, was shattered by someone in the doorway, in the triangle of light from outside that to me was hers. I was hungry for her story, irritated by the interruption. I apologized to Mrs. Menendez and spoke tersely to the boy, who asked if we were hiring. I pulled an application from the drawer beneath the register and dispatched him. Poor guy, just looking for work, but I had a job, and I was young and impatient. Mrs. Menendez eyed him briefly, sympathetically, then turned back to me.

"The espontáneo is very dangerous to the matador. Bulls are not trained, you know, since they quickly learn in the ring. With each pass, the matador learns something of the toro, and the toro is learning the ways of men. There is only so much time before the bull is schooled enough and can find with his horn the man behind the cape.

“The espontáneo is hated by the matador and his team, since with each veronica, with each pass the upstart is teaching the bull.” Isabel paused, again the teacher looking for assurance that I’d taken in her lesson. I nodded, gravely I thought, and she sipped before continuing.

“So he leapt into the ring, pulling from his shirt a red kerchief, his poor-man’s *muleta*, the small cape. Gabriel – that was his name, I would soon find – quickly gained the attention of the bull. And while the crowd reacted with cheers and jeers, and Antonio Ordoñez’s team gave angry chase, my espontáneo eluded capture long enough to execute several beautiful veronicas, some lovely passes. Even Eduardo beside me grunted admiration. Antonio himself just waited and watched quite intently.

“The whole spectacle took barely two minutes. The banderilleros stole the bull’s attention, and the picadors rushed Gabriel and roughly dragged him to the exit. But when the espontáneo reached Antonio, an amazing thing happened. Ordoñez signaled for the angry picadors to release him, and Antonio put his arm around my Gabriel. No one in the crowd who understood could believe the matador was embracing the upstart who may have spoiled his bull and caused him great danger. Antonio hugged Gabriel and whispered a few things in his ear. Gabriel would never tell me what he said – matadors are a superstitious lot – but he glowed with pride, thinking of it.”

While I could not believe she would stop here, Mrs. Menendez did just that. She gave me an enigmatic smile, drained her rioja, and set a twenty-dollar bill carefully onto the bar. And into her triangle of sunlight, she was out on the street.

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As if to tease me, on her next visit Isabel Menendez returned not to the Corrida de las Ventas. Instead, once seated and sipping, wearing another once-brightly-colored dress, this one containing perhaps some bright pink, her stone-colored hair up like a dancer’s, she said she owed me a visit back “to the one you seemed so anxious to hear about, the one many called Papa.”

Three in the afternoon, the place empty and quiet, I dove into those lovely blue-green eyes again.

“I told you we knew him, as people here used to say they knew Yastrzemski. Because he was visible on the streets and in the cafes. Ernesto’s distinctive beard, his loud, simplistic, passable Spanish, he would hold court at an outdoor table at The Miramar Hotel with his corrida friends. I had read his *Old Man and*

the *Fish* or whatever, of course; we all had. They say that his light was fading when he saved himself with that one, wrote it in a matter of weeks, can you imagine? I can't say I was much of a fan. But years later I would read his *Dangerous Summer*, the chronicle of Ordoñez and Dominguín that season. And I read over and over the passages that spoke of my espontáneo, my Gabriel.

"But your Hemingway was a kind of self-inflated cad, I'm afraid. And a very ill one at that. In July of 1959, he turned sixty, beset by diabetes, impotence, depression, and other problems associated with a lifetime of alcohol abuse. More constantly by his side was not his fourth wife, Mary, but that eighteen-year-old Irish girl he was so openly affectionate toward. And despite doctor warnings, he refused to curtail his drinking. I've told you he criticized Dominguín, just as he criticized their greatest, the legend Manolete. But regarding Miguel during that summer, for being beyond his prime and resorting to trucas, well I say Ernesto was throwing stones at a mirror.

"Your Papa" – I hated when she assumed my admiration for him – "lived like the heroes of his books, or saw himself as one of them, perhaps. And he surrounded himself with people and things, the young Irish lass and the bullfighters and the corrida, you see, that let him believe it. Ah, but I only guess! I'm an old woman past her prime like he was. Or worse, one who let her prime pass by."

She was pensive then, sipping and allowing me to process the information about the writer and the man. In my own mind, I guessed that what I loved and hated about Hemingway was close to home.

I saw my brother, then, as one of Papa's characters – in his sports and endeavors, his treatment of women, his cocksure attitude, even the friends who surrounded him and kept him inflated. He'd chosen his wife like a tie, I thought, and treated her as if she deserved him. His laugh had a competitive edge.

And in Hemingway's case, behind all this – the man behind the capote – was probably an aging man plagued by self-doubt, even an aging matador resorting to trucas. I still had trouble viewing my brother with as much understanding.

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"Have you wondered what became of Antonio Ordoñez after my espontáneo had interrupted his bull?" Isabel Menendez asked me just two days later. "Shall I take you back to Madrid, to the corrida in the heat of summer, 1959?"

Again, near three in the afternoon, quiet. The restaurant might as well have been closed. And I was in love with the storyteller, and the story.

“When my Gabriel was rushed off, after his short consort with Antonio, Ordoñez took to the ring and he knew this brave bull. He worked him in a way your Ernesto couldn’t help but admire, even as he questioned. Asking why, in his writing, once this courageous toro had been *made*, so to speak, why would Antonio continue to work him and bait him and make him perform, if only before the third act of the killing. Why risk what could happen? What so then did, happen?” I couldn’t word the ideas, so she told me.

“Ego, a young man’s feeling of invincibility? At least some kind of blindness, I think really what we call in the ancient stories, hubris?”

“Antonio Ordoñez executed all the moves your Papa so admired, all the veronicas and passes but closer each time, each of the *naturales* shortened to be more dangerous and more elegant, Eduard told me although even I could tell. But when it came time to finish, Antonio for the reasons I’ve said or some others of his alone, he continued.” Isabel paused, nowhere near aware of the bar where we sat. She took a breath, and again I would swear I was seeing what she was, what she had seen.

“The bull could have taken more pics to bring his head down for an easier kill, but Antonio signaled the Presidente asking for banderilleros. And the bull charged one horse and brought it down. Ordoñez signaled the Presidente that he wanted to finish with the muleta, the small cape. And still he kept up with passes, some of the tricks Manolete was known for. He was working a *girardilla* when the bull stumbled on the softened turf.”

And it was then, she said, that the noble toro, enough schooled in the ways of its adversary, found the matador behind the capote.

“Eduard told me later that the horn drove into Ordoñez’s left buttock. We all saw as Antonio was lifted in the air. The crowd went suddenly completely silent, a collective inhale. Ordoñez came down on his feet and did not fall. Gravely wounded, but he would not allow anyone near. He insisted on finishing this brave bull.”

At this point my friend Isabel Menendez spoke about how Ordoñez was honoring the toro. Perhaps she believed it. The idea was classically true, of course, a gladiator respecting a worthy opponent. Still, I found difficulty in her sympathy for this cruelty to an animal, the egotistical way of men. Maybe she honored Ordoñez, then and now, for his kindness to “her” Gabriel. I listened,

moved and horrified both, as she continued. I felt somehow that she'd have continued whether I was present to listen or not.

"Antonio was bleeding profusely through his golden pants, his gorgeous suit of lights, but would not be taken away until he completed the kill. Which he did in a fashion that earned him ears, tail, and hoof." I winced to picture the cutting of these trophies, the indignity of the ritual, but if she noticed she did not let on, only pausing for her *rioja*.

"They carried him off to the *corrida* infirmary. Eduardo insisted we follow, and no one stopped us. Perhaps they recognized Eduard, or perhaps he simply dressed the part and carried himself as if he was entitled, as he always did.

"And in the infirmary, inside the doors where many had gathered, in the hallway outside the room where they'd taken Antonio, kneeling in the hall was my Santo, my Gabriel.

"Weeping like a boy. Like the boy he was then.

"His eyes raised as Eduardo and I entered the empty hall. Probably there was blood on the tile floor, a trail leading to where doctors were frantically assessing Ordoñez's wound. Your Ernesto was inside, too. We saw him as we passed the door. My Gabriel looked up as we approached, and I saw his eyes pass over Eduard's to mine. We exchanged something, like a child's valentine, an agreement of some kind. His look was desperate and wanting, partly a child's plea that he'd swear he's done nothing wrong. And partly a hugely adult responsibility, I suppose, that he'd done everything wrong, that he was the one who'd caused Antonio to be gored. Who is to know, really, but he wasn't the one to blame. I tried to tell him this with my eyes. And somehow tell him that I loved him."

There were many things I had wanted to ask her, but then I could think of none of them. I leaned back against the bar somewhat dazed, not really there at all but in an infirmary hallway nearly forty years ago. Where a young man was at once in love and crying, probably experiencing the greatest and most terrible day of his life. And I tried imagining what it might feel like to have such a woman as Isabel Menendez – then only twenty-three – give one such a loaded and meaningful look.

The restaurant's door suddenly opened then, and a young couple wandered into the foyer. Their bodies shadowed her long triangle of light, their presence jolting me forward, and hardly pleased, four decades.

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One of the things I wanted to ask her, besides of course the obvious *what happened* after the hospital – I mean it's been forty years, for godsakes, and where is your Gabriel? – I wanted to ask how it was that she could speak with such love, and such hate, of bullfighting. She made me wait, not coming in for a few rainy days consecutively. But then there she was, sitting and gazing to the window. But the glass could have been mirrored, because she was seeing only herself. Not today's reflection but back then, again. At 23, in Madrid, 1959.

"We had almost a month – 27 days – Gabriel and I did. Before Eduard put a stop to it. We were brazen, so young and in love, and fearless." She gave me a sad smile. "You know, no doubt." I nodded slowly, wondering.

"People had seen us places, had informed Eduard. He had his women, of course, which was common for powerful figures and somehow accepted. But he would not have his wife cuckolding him," she laughed sadly at her mind's picture. "He with the bull's horns, do you see?" I nodded again, waiting for Eduard's judgment, his sentence.

"Quite simple, he told me. You and your *novillero*, your young bullfighter, are finished. He is leaving town as we speak. If you try to so much as contact him, he will be killed, do you understand? I didn't doubt for a moment he could keep his word on this." Her eyes were dark. "You will get no divorce, he told me. You may leave, but I will always know where you are. And then the thought struck him, and he asked, Are you with child? I said nothing, not knowing, of course, but somehow sure." She took a long, loving sip of *rioja*, exhaled, and took in another.

"Eight months later, I had my child taken from me – I never was told, but I'm certain she was a daughter – and Eduard said I would never see her. That she would only be told of me after my death. Devastated, but still so young, I came back here to Boston, to where I grew up. I kept in touch with Eduard, knew of the cancer that came to him as I left. I felt he deserved it, you see. And his was not an optimistic prognosis, but he has battled on, the anger somehow fueling him. He'll outlive us all, I've long thought." Again, the breath, the draw of wine.

"So you see, I love and hate bullfighting because I loved a bullfighter who saw it as the most noble of pursuits, who saw the brave *toro* as an equal, a respected adversary. As a young woman, I was taken by the pageantry, the colors, the athleticism of the *matadors* who are the most beautiful of dancers. Did you know I danced?" I immediately saw it, in her carriage, her posture. She was lovely to watch. I once saw her walking on the street as I was



driving past. I could pick her out from half a block, just for the way she moved.

"But it is beautiful and cruel, too. Most, I hated the final act, what they called *el momento de verdad*, the moment of truth. The brave bull has been laid low, his shoulder muscles so torn by the bandilleros that he cannot raise his head, making the matador's plunge – where the neck and spine meet – easier, the kill quicker. Even as a young woman, I found the final part awful, and terribly sad. You cannot convince me they are honoring the bull when they drag his bloody body around the *corrida*. It is the cruelties and the egos of men, and the crowd screams and feeds this beastliness." Isabel Menendez looked terribly beautiful then, and as sad. I wondered if she'd have acted any differently back in 1959, if she had it to do again. Would she have still seized her moment, would she have then come back here, and waited?

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In my red tie, I smile from behind the bar at the sunlight that precedes the older woman into the restaurant. Recent rains, and not seeing her, have depressed me. I come around to meet her at the door, motion the red leather menu and usher her past me. To the end of the bar, by the window that she prefers, where she sits looking, I think, pensive, weary, sad. Her newspaper, the Madrid daily *El País*, appears to me worn or damp, although there has been no rain today.

"I have a funny end to the story I've been telling you," she says, settling in as I place a glass of wine before her. "You have been such a patient listener. I've something to show you."

Still the sadness, and I know this won't be funny at all. She lifts her slender arm, unfolds and spreads the newspaper on the bar, turning it for me to see. Her long fingers grip most of the pages and she opens to the next to last. The paper here seems yellowed, like it sat in the sun on a stoop for too long. I picture a globe and mentally trace the long westerly path that this *El País* must have made.

She motions toward the lower part of the left-hand page, and there it is: a small, paragraph-long obituary. I expect the ancient, cancer-ridden Eduard has finally passed. I guess he could be near eighty. Or perhaps, one of the competitors of that dangerous summer, the older pro Dominguín, or the dashing artist Ordoñez. But I am wrong. The byline is from Seville, the tiny headline: *Gabriel Correa, Torero, Entrenador, Criador, 55*. Isabel Menendez translates the paragraph for me, although she speaks longer than the words on the page could possibly reflect.

Her Gabriel had been somewhat famous in the south, skilled, artistic, but his career had never taken off. He'd had injuries, financial concerns, perhaps not of his own responsibility. He'd never married, though it was said he'd had many lovers, even sons. "One of whom you may have heard of," she said to me, although of course I hadn't. "Quite a torero himself, a slow one to mature, but much the rising star when he was sadly killed in an automobile accident at only twenty-seven."

Her Gabriel had trained bullfighters and bred bulls on his ranch outside Seville. And then one sunny morning had suffered a sudden and massive brain aneurism. "He was leaning on a paddock fence," she told me, "watching a young bull he knew showed promise. He was struck by an awful feeling, not pain really but probably worse, a terrible regret. He put his head down on his arms, and was gone." Another sip, "He never fell."

She was silent then, and sipped her rioja in a measured way as if she was summoning all her energy to remain controlled. She did not cry, although I somehow thought of her face as a mask, behind which she was wailing. She must have been.

But I barely saw her after that afternoon. As if our relationship, I sometimes have thought, was somehow based on Gabriel. As if he had introduced us, and now that he was gone we were little more than strangers. Some months later I left for grad school in the western part of the state, studying English, seeing myself as a teacher like Isabel had been, an instructor also like her Gabriel had been. My love for her, like my affection for my brother's underappreciated wife, remained but lessened over time, faded like penciled notes in the margins of a favorite book. Still legible, and read back on every so often.

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In the 1985 edition of *Dangerous Summer*, James Michener writes in the introduction that Hemingway clearly favored Ordoñez over his brother-in-law Dominguín, and of course it is clear from the text, although "Ernesto" considered himself a valued family friend of both. He favored the younger, more artistic to the older, more famous one who used the trucas to entertain the crowds. Michener, a bullfighting aficionado himself, writes that he saw Ordoñez fight a dozen or more times after that summer, in the ten years he continued after his mano a mano with his brother in law. Michener, and the crowds who continued to follow Ordoñez, were never again treated to the balletic movements and the grace of his performances that summer of 1959.

The crowds saw a “pudgy,” slowed figure, only in his thirties but old for a matador, trying to believe he still had the gifts of a youthful artist. They saw a man who resorted to the trucas, the kissing the bull and the talking on the phone bit leaning over the horns. The tricks Hemingway deplored when Dominguín tried them that long ago summer. In those later appearances, Michener reports that Ordoñez was booed, and that spectators threw cushions at him from the grandstands. I was saddened to read of this cruelty. But I guess not so surprised at our ways, our treatment of our heroes who age. Michener wrote that we feel disappointment, even betrayal.

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So nine years after I’d left the Boston area for grad school, I come back through the old neighborhood to visit my brother and his family. He seems to have aged well and seems to treat his still-lovely wife with more respect, more of the, even, reverence I’d thought she deserved. He is less cocksure, and seems to smile more than he laughs. He’s had some humbling business difficulties. And the twins, incredible little people, may have grounded him.

I was between teaching jobs, leaving a position upstate, which included also a failed marriage. I’d fallen for a woman also on the faculty, and things went well for a while, until they didn’t. I was headed for an interview at a small technical college (certainly not MIT) where I might teach analytical minds how to enjoy literature and even write creatively themselves.

On my way back to my brother’s from the interview – which seemed to go well, but who can judge one’s performance in such things – I stop in the old restaurant to see if I might still know anyone there. A cloudy fall day has recently turned partly sunny, and as I enter I notice my long, distorted shadow in a triangle of sunlight. Middle of a Tuesday afternoon, no one in the place. A bartender I’d never seen before, but still in a red tie, nods to me, and I order a draft and sit. Now here’s where it gets funny.

I gaze toward the windows and there *is* someone else in the place. A thin, pretty woman, perhaps late-thirties, sits with beautiful posture, a nearly empty glass of red wine, and a folded newspaper on the bar in front of her. I stand then, and I approach her. And as I get closer I can see her paper is written in Spanish, that it is the Madrid daily *El Pais*. The pages seem damp, although there hasn’t been rain today. From nowhere I say to her, “I used to know a woman who came in here to drink rioja and read that newspaper.”

She seems unsurprised. “You must have known my mother, then.” Her blue-green eyes meet mine, look through mine. “I’m in town for her funeral. My father is ninety and too ill to travel.” She gets an idea – I can see it cross her face. “Perhaps you would go with me. There’s no one else.”

I nod, motion to the bartender with two fingers, another round, and sit. She goes on, “Can you tell me about my mother? I never knew her.”

“What do you know of bullfighting?” I ask her. A crazy question but in this scene, it seems, the right one for my character.