

A silhouette of a man in a trench coat walking from left to right. A long, dark shadow is cast behind him, extending diagonally across the cover. The background is a dark blue gradient with a subtle, grainy texture.

**ROBERT
WILSON**

**THE
BLIND MAN
OF
SEVILLE**

A novel by the author of the bestselling

A SMALL DEATH IN LISBON

THE BLIND MAN OF SEVILLE



Robert Wilson

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A C E G I K J H F D B

THE BLIND MAN OF SEVILLE

by the same author

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

A SMALL DEATH IN LISBON

A DARKENING STAIN

BLOOD IS DIRT

THE BIG KILLING

INSTRUMENTS OF DARKNESS

*For Jane
and
Mick and José*

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L'art, c'est le vice. On ne l'épouse pas légitimement, on le viole.

Art is vice. You don't marry it legitimately, you rape it.

EDGAR DEGAS

'You have to look,' said the voice.

But he couldn't look. He was the one person who couldn't look at it, who would never be able to look at it because it started things up in that part of his brain, the part that would show up bright red on a cerebral scan while he was asleep, that tunnel of the brain maze which laymen would name 'wild imaginings'. It was the danger zone which had to be closed off, barricaded with whatever came to hand, nailed up, chained, padlocked, key hurled into the deepest lake. It was the dead end where his big-boned, mule-knuckled peasant frame was reduced to the shivering nakedness of a little boy, face pressed into the dark, hard, narrow comfort of a corner, legs and buttocks raw from sitting in his uncontrollable urine.

He wouldn't look. He couldn't.

The sound from the TV switched back to an old movie. He heard the dubbed voices. Yes, he'd look at that. He could look at James Cagney speaking Spanish while his eyes darted in his head and his lips said things differently.

The tape whirled in the video player as it rewound, clicked off at the beginning. A horizon slopped in the back of his head. Nausea? Or worse? The tidal wave of the past rising up. His throat tightened, his lip trembled, a fuzziness converged on James Cagney's manic Spanish. He curled the toes of his bare feet, gripped the arms of his chair, his wrists already cut from the flex that secured them. His eyes filled and blurred.

'Tears before bedtime,' said the voice.

Bedtime? His brain juggled with the concept. He coughed a muffled thump into the socks stuffed in his cheeks. The end? Is that what bedtime means? The end would be better than this. Time for bed. Deep, dark, endless bed.

'I'm going to ask you to try again . . . to try to *see*. But you must look first. There's no seeing without looking,' said the voice, quiet

in his ear. The 'play' light winked red out of the black. He shook his head, squeezed his eyes tight shut. James Cagney's voice was swallowed by the scream of laughter, the wild giggling holler of a small boy. It *was* laughter, wasn't it? He rolled his head from side to side as if this might deafen him to the sound, the confusing sound that he refused to believe could be agony, shrieking agony. And the sobbing aftermath, the helplessness, the terrible weakness as when the tickling stops . . . or was it the torturing? The sobbing. The concentrated panting. The recovery from pain.

'You're not *looking*,' said the voice, angry.

His chair rocked as he tried to throw himself back from the screen, away from the piercing sound. James Cagney's perfect staccato Spanish returned and the whirr of the rewind, the acceleration to the thump at the end of the tape.

'I have tried,' said the voice. 'I have been patient and . . . reasonable.'

Reasonable? This is reasonable? Tying my feet and hands to the chair, stuffing my stinking socks into my mouth. Forcing me to watch this . . . my . . . this . . .

A pause. The muttered expletive behind his head. Tissues ripped from the box on the desk. The smell in the room again. The one he remembered. The dark patch coming towards him, but not on a rag, on tissues. The smell and what it meant. Darkness. Lovable darkness. Give it to me. I'll take that over this.

The hard smack of the chloroform tilted him back into space.



A snick of light, small as a star, punctured the high vault. It grew to a circle and drew him up from his dark well. No, I'll stay. Leave me here in the dungeon dark. But it was inexorable, the drag, the wrench into the widening circle until he was reborn into the living room with James Cagney and a girl now, which wasn't the only thing that was different. There was flex cutting into his face. It had been pulled tight under his nose and fastened to the high back of the chair so that he could feel the carved contours of some ancient coat of arms digging into his scalp. And there was more. Oh Mary, Mother of Christ, *Virgen de la Macarena, de la . . . de la Esperanza . . .* what have you *done* to me?

The tears were warm on his cheeks, down the sides of his face, in the corners of his mouth. They dripped thickly on to his white shirt. There was the taste of a sugary blade between his teeth. What have you *done* to me? The screen rolled on its casters towards him, stopping at his knees. Too much was happening at once. Cagney kissing the girl, nastily. The flex cutting up into his septum. The panic rising from his feet, ripping through his body, collecting more panic on the way, funnelling up through his organs, shunting up his narrowing aorta. Irrepressible. Unswallowable. Unthinkable. His brain was livid, his eyes on fire, the tears blazing away. His lids – lines of stubble burning in the dark – advanced towards his black and shining pupils, blistering the whites of his eyes.

A dropper appeared in his torched vision, a quivering bead of dew hanging from its glass tube. His eyes would drink that down. Drink it down and take more.

‘Now you will see everything,’ said the voice. ‘And I will provide the tears.’

The drop flashed on to the eye. The tape engaged and squeaked on its reels. James Cagney and his girl were consumed by a creeping blizzard. Then came the screaming and the administering of considerate tears.



Thursday, 12th April 2001, Edificio del Presidente, Los Remedios, Seville

It had started the moment he'd walked into that room and had seen that face.

The call had come at 8.15 a.m. just as he was preparing to leave home – one dead body, suspected murder and the address.

Semana Santa. It was only right that there should be at least one murder in Holy Week; not that it would have any effect on the crowds of people following the daily convergence of quivering Holy Virgins on board their floats en route to the cathedral.

He eased his car out of the massive house that had belonged to his father on Calle Bailén. The tyres rattled on the cobbles of the empty, narrow streets. The city, reluctant to wake up at any time of year, was especially silent at this hour during Semana Santa. He entered the square in front of the Museo de Bellas Artes. The white-washed houses, framed in ochre were silent behind the high palms, the two colossal rubber trees and the tall jacarandas, which had not yet flowered. He opened his window to the morning still fresh from last night's dew and drove down to the Guadalquivir River and the avenue of trees along the Paseo de Cristóbal Colón. He thought he might be approaching contentment as he passed by the red doors of the Puerta del Príncipe in the baroque façade of the Plaza de Toros, La Maestranza, which was about to see the first bullfights in the week leading up to the Feria de Abril.

This was as close as he got to happiness these days and it held firm as he turned right after the Torre del Oro and, leaving the old part of the city behind, crossed the river, which was misty in the early-morning sunshine. At the Plaza de Cuba he veered away from his regular route to work and headed down Calle de Asunción. Later he would try to recapture these moments because they were the last

of what he'd thought, until then, had been a quite satisfactory life.

The new and very young Juez de Guardia, the duty judge, who'd been waiting for him in the pristine, white-marbled entrance hall of Raúl Jiménez's large and expensive apartment on the sixth floor of the Edificio del Presidente, did try to warn him. He remembered that.

'Prepare yourself, Inspector Jefe,' he'd said.

'For what?' Falcón had asked.

In the embarrassed silence that followed, Inspector Jefe Javier Falcón had minutely scrutinized the surface detail of the Juez de Guardia's suit, which he decided was either Italian or a leading Spanish designer, someone like Adolfo Dominguez, perhaps. Expensive for a young judge like Esteban Calderón, thirty-six years old and barely a year in the job.

Falcón's apparent lack of interest decided Calderón that he didn't want to appear naïve in front of the forty-five-year-old Inspector Jefe del Grupo de Homicidios de Sevilla, who'd spent more than twenty years looking at murdered people in Barcelona, Zaragoza, Madrid and now Seville.

'You'll see,' he said, with a nervous shrug of his shoulder.

'Shall I proceed then?' asked Falcón, maintaining proper procedure with a judge he'd never worked with before.

Calderón nodded and told him that the Policía Científica had just been let into the building and that he could go ahead with his initial observations of the scene.

Falcón walked down the corridor leading from the entrance hall to Raúl Jiménez's study thinking about preparing himself without knowing how it was done. He stopped at the door to the living room, frowned. The room was empty. He turned to Calderón who had his back to him now, dictating something to the Secretaria del Juez while the Médico Forense listened in. Falcón looked into the dining room and found that empty, too.

'Were they moving out?' he asked.

'Claro, Inspector Jefe,' said Calderón, 'the only furniture left in the apartment is a bed in one of the kids' rooms and Sr Jiménez's complete study.'

'Does that mean Sra Jiménez is already in the new house with the children?'

'We're not sure.'

‘My number two, Inspector Ramírez, should be here in a few minutes. Send him straight through to me.’

Falcón proceeded to the end of the corridor, suddenly conscious of each footstep on the polished parquet flooring in the empty apartment. His eyes were fixed on a hook on the bare wall at the end of the corridor under which was a square lighter than its surrounds, where a picture or mirror had been hanging.

He eased his hands into a pair of surgical gloves, snapped the cuffs against his wrists and flexed his fingers. He turned into the study, looked up from his cloudy latex palms to find Raúl Jiménez’s terrible face staring at him.

And that was when it had started.

It wasn’t a question of looking back at that moment and realizing later that it had been a turning point. The change was not subtle. A difference in body chemistry has a way of making itself immediately felt. Sweat came up inside his gloves and at a spot high on his forehead just out of the hairline. The taut pattering of his heart stopped him and he began to find oxygen in the air difficult to come by. He hyperventilated for some seconds, pinched at his throat to try to encourage a better intake. His body was telling him that there was something to fear while his brain was indicating otherwise.

His brain was making the usual dispassionate observations. Raúl Jiménez’s feet were bare, his ankles secured to the chair legs. Some furniture was out of place, at odds with the rest of the room. Indentations in the expensive rug, Persian, showed the normal position of the chair. The lead to the TV/video was stretched taut because the rolling cabinet was some metres from its normal position by the wall socket in the corner. A ball of cloth, which looked like socks tracked with saliva and blood, lay on the floor by the desk. Windows, double-glazed, were shut, curtains drawn back. A large soapstone ashtray sat on the desk, full of pinched stubs and whole, clean filters which had been broken off from the cigarettes whose pack lay alongside, brand name Celtas. Cheap cigarettes. The cheapest. Only the cheapest for Raúl Jiménez, owner of four of the most popular restaurants in Seville, with two others in Sanlúcar de Barrameda and Puerto Santa María down on the coast. Only the cheapest for Raúl Jiménez in his ninety-million-peseta apartment in Los Remedios, overlooking the Feria ground, with his celebrity photographs hanging on the wall behind his leather-inlaid desk. Raúl with the torero El Cordobés. Raúl with the TV presenter Ana Rosa Quintana. Raúl, my God, Raúl

with a carving knife behind a *jamón* which had to be a top quality *Pata Negra* because he was flanked by Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith, who was looking completely appalled at the cloven hoof pointing at her right breast.

Still the sweat didn't stop but appeared elsewhere. Top lip, small of the back, trickling down to his waist from his armpit. He knew what he was doing. He was pretending, persuading himself that it was hot in the room, that the coffee he'd just taken . . . He hadn't had any coffee.

The face.

For a dead man it was a face with presence. Like El Greco's saints whose eyes never left you alone.

Were they following him?

Falcón moved to one side. Yes. Then the other. Absurd. The tricks of the mind. He pulled himself together, clenched a latex fist.

He stepped over the taut lead from the wall to the TV/video and went behind the dead man's chair. He looked up to the ceiling and let his eyes fall on to Raúl Jiménez's wire-wool hair. The back of the head was matted thick, black and red, from where he'd rammed his head repeatedly against the carved coat of arms on the chair back. The head was still secured to the chair with flex. Originally it must have been tight but Jiménez had gained some slack through his struggle. The flex had cut deeply into the flesh beneath his nose and had ridden up until it had bitten into the cartilaginous material of the septum and it had even sawn through that to reach the bone of the bridge. The nose was hanging off his face. The flex had also cut into the flesh over his cheekbones as he'd thrown his head from side to side.

Falcón turned away from the profile only to see the full frontal in the blank TV screen. He blinked, wanting to close those staring eyes, which, even in reflection, penetrated. His stomach leapt at the thought of the horror images that had forced a man to do this to himself. Were they still there, burned on to the retina, or further back in the brain in some cubist digitalized state?

He shook his head, unused to these wild thoughts interfering with his investigative coolness. He moved around to confront the gory face, not quite full on because the TV/video cabinet was up against the man's knees, and, at this moment, Javier Falcón came up against his first physical failing. His legs would not bend. None of the usual motor messages could get beyond the roiling panic in his chest and

stomach. He did what the Juez de Guardia had advised and looked out of the window. He noted the brightness of the April morning, remembered that restlessness as he'd got dressed in the shuttered dark, the uneasiness left after a long, lonely winter with too much rain. So much rain that even he had noticed how the city's gardens had burgeoned to the density of jungle, to the richness of an abundant botanical exhibit. He looked down on the Feria ground, which two weeks from now would be transformed into a tented Seville crowded with *casetas*, marquees, for the week-long session of eating, drinking fino and dancing *Sevillanas* until dawn. He breathed in deeply and lowered himself to meet Raúl Jiménez's face.

The terrible staring effect was produced by the man's eyeballs bulging out of his head as if he had a thyroid problem. Falcón glanced up at the photos. Jiménez was not bug-eyed in any of them. This was caused by . . . His synapses shunted like cars crunching into each other nose to tail. The visible ball of the eye. The blood down the face. The coagulation on the jaw line. And these? What are these delicate things on his shirtfront? Petals. Four of them. But rich, exotic, fleshy as orchids with these fine filaments, just like fly-catchers. But petals . . . here?

He reeled backwards, his feet kicking at the rug edge and the parquet flooring as he fell over the television lead, yanking the plug out of the wall socket. He crabbed on the heels of his hands and feet until he hit the wall and sat legs splayed, thighs twitching, shoes nodding.

Eyelids. Two top. Two bottom. Nothing could have prepared him for that.

'Are you all right, Inspector Jefe?'

'Is that you, Inspector Ramírez?' he asked, getting up slowly, messily.

'The Policía Científica are ready to move in.'

'Send the Médico Forense down here.'

Ramírez slipped out of the doorframe. Falcón shook himself down. The Médico Forense appeared.

'Did you see that this man had had his eyelids cu— his eyelids removed?'

'*Claro*, Inspector Jefe. The Juez de Guardia and I had to satisfy ourselves that the man was dead. I saw that the man's eyelids had been removed and . . . it's all in my notes. The *secretaria* has noted it, too. It's hardly something you'd miss.'