

TWO CRIMES

By Jorge Ibarguengoitia

Translated by Asa Zatz

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At first, *Two Crimes* seems a simple invitation to fun and frolic, but Jorge Ibarguengoitia is sly. It slowly dawns on you that he's probing the dark side of experience, caressing it until secrets are delivered up. The novel begins with a dinner party, the fifth anniversary of the Chamuca's "giving

herself" to Marcos, our hero. It's a lovely party—a little Marxism, a lot of wine—until Pancho, a plainclothesman and the friend of a friend, arrives. The next morning is rough for Marcos: "My beard which I had begun growing three years before and to which I was quite accustomed by now startled me." Word comes that the authorities are on their way—something about the burning of El Globo department store. Already the police have everyone else from the party in custody. Marcos isn't a fool; he understands that innocence is no protection.

The hungover couple fling themselves into hurried leave-taking, and plan to meet again shortly on an obscure beach. Marcos, meanwhile, travels to the equally obscure town of Muérdago and tries to con his peesod uncle into a phoney investment that will yield enough for several months of seaside bliss. But uncle is surrounded by cousins who wait with varying degrees of patience for him to die. Each attempts to protect the family interests from this intruder. There's Amalia: blond hair, black eyebrows, feathered spike mules. Her occasional showertime visits to Marcos leave him clinging to the curtain rod wondering, "What would the Chamuca say to see me in such a state over a woman with no ideology?" And Lucero Amalia's very ripe daughter, who moos like her mother. Amalia's brothers are Mexico's answer to the Three Stooges; when not plotting anti-Marcos activities, they romp over the countryside with a mariachi band. And then there's the Gringo, Amalia's husband Jim, a marksman who pulls up his socks a lot, while insisting that Marcos join him early in the a.m. to hunt plump little birds.

Impervious to the scams around him sits the master manipulator—half-paralyzed, one-eyed Uncle Ramón. The old man is genuinely fond of Marcos and vice versa. Even as they ply each other with fake wills and money schemes, both are beaming. Ramón tells Marcos a favorite story.

"Johnny is at school in his zoology class and the teacher is explaining the habits of the hyena. 'The hyena,' she says, 'lives in the wilderness, eats rotten meat, cohabits once a year and laughs. Is that clear? Are there any questions?' Johnny raises his hand and says, 'What I don't understand, teacher, is if the hyena lives in the wilderness, eats rotten meat and cohabits once a year, why does he laugh?'"

Marcos and Ramón know why: they know life can be bitter. To accept it and not be driven by the half-conscious fear of it separates them from the rest. Laughing about it makes them nearly heroic.

No trace here of Fuentes's ancient gods

and ancient memories. Nor does the land carve away at its people as in the tales of Juan Rulfo. Ibarguengoitia's is a secular world, focused on power, pressure, and the ins and outs of emotion. He sets up a morality tale, aware that his characters are beguiling enough to wreak havoc with such frameworks. *Two Crimes* is an endless cycle of value judgment interruptus.

Poor Marcos—the police, led by invincible Pancho, never stop looking for him. Meanwhile things get hotter and hotter in Muérdago, and it's anybody's guess which is more inexorable: bureaucracy or greed. Finally Ramón dies, not from natural causes. Cross-cutting curls the two plots into a tidy gallows knot enveloping Marcos, in custody for two crimes he didn't commit. Yet even when the hairpin turns have nowhere else to go, they don't let up. The last one, appropriately stunning, illustrates just how close to the edge the novel has always hovered. In the midst of this murder and mayhem, who finally pocketed Ramón's millions? Justice, my love, even your scent is gone.

—Elizabeth Hanly