

Stella and America

Joseph Incardona

Novel

French



A young woman performing miracles in the United States? Excellent news for the Catholic Church so it would seem. But there are certain conditions. Both saint and prostitute, Stella learns this to her cost. All the ingredients for a subtle, humorous and sassy thriller.

"Billie heard his brother peeing then the toilet flushing. But there was nothing poetic about the blue morning. They weren't Stella, they were not grace incarnate. They were what breaks, twists and destroys.

With no soul-searching.

With no soul at all.

Like fate."

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Stella et l'Amérique

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Italian-born Swiss author Joseph Incardona lives in Geneva. He has published some fifteen novels. His latest books, *Derrière les panneaux, il y a des hommes* (Grand Prix de littérature policière), *Chaleur*, *La Soustraction des possibles* (Prix Relay) and *Les Corps solides* are meeting with growing success both among the critics and the reading public. Several are in the process of being adapted for the cinema.

Photo: Sandrine Cellard

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Excerpt translated by Ros Schwartz

"They got to live before they can afford to die."

John Steinbeck

The Grapes of Wrath

Admittedly, Stella wasn't exactly beautiful, nor was she very smart. But she was sincere. And loyal. And, all things considered, that is enough to become a saint.

Not very smart, nor exactly beautiful, but desirable she certainly was. It was her attitude, her posture, the shimmy of her hips and the way she looked at you. When Stella looked at you, you were the only man in the world, you were someone. Little did it matter who you were or what you looked like: Stella gazed at you with her trusting, amber eyes, and you felt alive.

She gazed at you.

You.

Your heart, your blood.

Alive.

And so, naturally, Stella couldn't help becoming what was inborn in her: the expression of desire.

And, all things considered, that is enough become a prostitute.

1. Annunciation

1

That evening, a June evening with bats skimming her hastily scrunched-back hair, she'd waited for the turmoil in her head to calm down – a sensation like cold blue water pounding a rock –, to lock up her camper van and go over to Santa Muerte's caravan. It was only a hundred metres or so away. She walked fast, her bare feet brushing the patchy grass and rebounding off the dry earth, but enough time to squash a dozen mosquitoes on her bare arms and her thighs as tough as love.

Stella Thibodeaux was nineteen, the age of martyrs. She herself wasn't certain of the birth date on her identity documents. But what she did know was that she needed to speak urgently to the woman who had taught her everything about men.

It was also Santa Muerte who had suggested she follow the fairground folk. The elderly Mexican woman, whose face was partially discoloured by a melanoma, was a fortune-teller. And men came to visit her, as they did for many things. She'd been right: the clay target shooting gallery drew a different sort of fairground customer from the innocent candy-floss munchers.

Stella rapped sharply three times on the polyester resin door. A muffled voice bade her come in. When Santa Muerte saw Stella advancing in the half-dark, she coughed and lit one of the forty cigarettes she smoked each day. She had already put so many nails in her coffin that it weighed a lot more than her emaciated body. But death wanted none of her eighty-nine years and forty-eight kilos.

"Anyone would think I haven't talked enough drivel here below. It's just that people need hope, I tell you, and when they've lost all hope, they need lies, which is another means of coping. So, what brings you here, *amorcita*?"

Santa Muerte leaned over and spat in the plastic bowl at her feet. She wiped her mouth with a grubby handkerchief and took a swig of mezcal from the bottle. Which, with the non-filter cigarettes, was an admirable attempt to cut short her life. The worm in the bottle tickled her lips before sinking back down to the bottom. Santa passed her little black tongue around her mouth.

"Sit down and spit it out, *amorcita*. I've got clients waiting."

"I didn't see anyone outside."

"I also talk to ghosts, most of my work is invisible."

Stella sat down on the uncomfortable wicker chair, its foam seat flattened by thousands of anxious buttocks. With a sort of reverence, she placed her translucent hands criss-crossed with blue veins on the crystal ball.

"How do you manage to see anything in there, Santa?"

"Imagination and empathy. And experience too. So?"

"So, here's the thing. It ... it happened again, Santa."

"You mean these *resorptions*?"

"Why do you call them that?"

"Because I don't like the other word for them. Speak,

for heaven's sake."

"One of yesterday's punters. He had one of those diseases on his face and hands, *synopsis ...? Catharsis ...?*"

"Psoriasis ... Lord, Stella, don't you ever say no?"

"It was you who taught me never to turn any of them away."

"Bueno, then what?"

"We did what he'd come for, he leaves and then this evening, he comes back and there's nothing wrong with him anymore. I can see that his face and skin are as pure and smooth as a baby's."

"And then?"

"And then he falls to his knees, bursts into tears and says that I've cured him. It's me that cured him. I just don't get it, Santa."

Not content just to glug her mezcal, the old woman went all out and drained the bottle, swallowing the little worm which she hoovered up into her toothless mouth. The bottle banged down on the round table with its once-white doily. Stella felt the crystal ball tremble beneath her hands.

"That's the how-many-ieth, Stella?"

"The third. Since the start of the month."

"Remind me what sign you are?"

"What do you mean, what sign?"

"Of the Zodiac."

"My ID papers say the 14th of September."

"That's Virgo . . ."

"I don't get it, Santa."

"Do you know what, *querida?*"

"What?"

"It's highly likely that you're in deep shit, my precious."

2

Robert Smith was a married father of three. His severe psoriasis had become a problem – in his marriage, at work and in his life, full stop. His wife Helga would only have sex in the dark and doggy-style. He had been demoted from his job as a post-office counter clerk to the sorting office, to avoid frightening the customers.

And now it was getting dark, he didn't dare go home

with his new face, so he drove aimlessly around the town, with the aircon on full blast and his fishing tackle, which had sat untouched all day, in the boot. Robert was going to have to explain to his wife how the miracle had come about. It would result in divorce and having to pay alimony, and he'd end up being forced to sleep in his car.

That Sunday morning, as he was driving to Penholoway Bay for a solitary fishing trip, Robert had glimpsed the young woman with blonde hair and pale skin sitting in front of her camper by the roadside. He'd kept going, he didn't frequent prostitutes. But when in his rear-view mirror he'd seen her get up from her woven red-plastic chair and stretch as she took a few steps, he'd felt the call of purity, that of a flawless body to relieve his ugliness.

Now, he had that burden on his conscience. What was the point of being cured in his body if it was to feel guilty in his soul? And besides, he'd been baptised, so may as well make the most of it. The moment had come to share his deliverance and his skin cleansed of all sin.

Robert Smith parked his Chevrolet pickup in the parking lot. He was hit full on by the heat as he walked into the prefab church next to the Taco Bell. Ironically, the church bell had been replaced by the tacky bell logo of the franchise outlet. He removed his hat and read the name of the priest on a board near the stoup.

He sat down in a pew and stared at Christ suffering on his cross, then waited until the confessional was free. It was surprising to be able to do this so late. Maybe the Church was keeping up with the times, those of Perpetual Connection? At any rate, for him, this day was an epiphany.

Robert Smith stopped wanting to understand.

A little old woman came out of the confessional. Robert wondered what sin she could possibly have committed at her age. Stop asking yourself stupid questions, Bob.

It's time to unburden himself.

Robert Smith rose and went to take a seat in the confessional. He drew the purple velvet curtain behind him and could barely make out the face of Father Brown behind the lattice. The priest said: "I am listening, my child". His voice was deep and grave as the law.

Father Brown was about to hear what Robert Smith had to say.

Henceforth, the world would no longer be the same.