

Emma Donoghue

What the Driver Saw

The car's not a Bugatti. The Madonna kept saying it was a Bugatti, in fact she called me that as a nickname – Bugatti - but the car's an Amilcar Grand Sport 1924. You don't know Amilcar? A very popular make here in France, very sporty, very popular. An SV engine, 1074 cc with four-wheel brakes, red, white and blue circles round the tail.

Enough about the car? Okay. You said you wanted to know everything about that day so I thought... Yeah, for your ten dollars I'll tell you everything you want. You're going to print what I say in your American newspaper? Put it in English, okay, that's better. Will you send me a copy?

No, the car isn't mine, it belongs to the Helvetica Garage where I work. I fix cars right now, but I want to race them someday, that's what I want. I like to go fast.

to find the movement which expresses the soul

I first met her that same day, September 14th. No, okay, I saw her a couple of days before, but I didn't speak to her, it was in a restaurant called Tétu. She was with another American lady, she smiled at me and raised her glass, you know, *coquette*. I smiled back. Just to be polite, you understand; they were both middle-aged. Her friend made a little face, like she didn't think I should have had the cheek to smile back.

Anyway the next time I was at that restaurant the *patron* said the American lady had left her address for me, she wanted to buy my car. I didn't know which of the ladies he meant but I thought probably it was the tall one, the one who smiled. I went to the hotel, the maid brought me up to the room but the sour-faced lady answered the door, she said her friend was sleeping, so I left my card.

it is the eternal rising

The next day I was out on a call, I was working on a lovely open-top Maserati. When I got back to the Helvetica the proprietor said a crazy American lady had come asking for me to demonstrate some Bugatti we didn't have. I told him she must mean the Amilcar. I wanted to know what was crazy about her and he said her clothes, she had to be the only woman in Nice still wearing her skirts down to her ankles, hadn't she noticed she was living in the Twenties?

whose body dances in accord with a music heard inwardly

The address she'd left wasn't her hotel, this time, but some sort of warehouse. It was ugly on the outside but like a church inside. The lady called it her studio, but she wasn't a painter, apparently she practised her dancing there. When she told me her name I got the impression she expected me to recognise it. I thought maybe she meant she used to be a dancer when she was young. The only dancing I've seen is in night-clubs or at the vaudeville, those girls are always pretty. It wasn't that this American was ugly or anything – good eyes, big dark eyes – but she was soft and heavy, you know, like a mother. And her hair was dyed a crude kind of red and cut short to the jaw. Oh, I remember at one point she said she wasn't really a dancer, her body was just a machine and its engine was her soul. I liked that, it stuck in my head because it sounded like driving.

the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversions of movement are born, the mirror of vision

I don't know, I didn't know what to think of her. She was like a little girl, she laughed a lot. There were glasses and lemons and champagne bottles lying round, I could tell she'd been drinking. She said I wasn't a *garagiste* called Benoît Falchetto, I was a Greek god in disguise and the lovely Bugatti was my chariot. She kept calling me Bugatti, forgetting it was an Amilcar Grand Sport; that's women for you. When she heard I'm half-Italian she laughed, she said I could call her the Madonna because she knew Italians adored their Madonna.

I asked her when she'd given up dancing and she sort of stared at me and said she would never give it up. She told me she'd changed the world, that's what she said; she claimed that people were now dancing her way all over the earth. Natural dancing, I think she called it, barefoot like the Greeks. I never saw that kind of dancing; the only Greek I know, he works at the garage, he can't dance.

the bird never struggles

She said she wore loose gauzes because the bourgeoisie were too scared of nudity. I had to look away when she said that, I nearly laughed at the thought of her dancing in the nude. No, she wasn't wearing gauze, that was her dance costumes she was talking about! On the 14th, I don't know, she was wearing some long skirt and lots of wraps and a felt hat. I don't think she had a corset on; she kept pressing herself in the middle of the ribs and saying that was where all movement began, with a breath.

life is the root, and art is the flower

Oh yeah, I've remembered another reason I thought the Madonna was rich enough to buy the Amilcar, aren't famous people usually rich? She sure sounded famous, and all that champagne. She boasted about her fans, said they used to unharness her carriage and pull it through the streets - I guess this was before cars - and they once broke the window of a restaurant to see her better. Invalids were brought into the theatre on stretchers so the sight of her could cure them. She told me she was going to be filmed dancing but she wanted to lose some weight first, I could see what she meant.

Yeah, she spoke French pretty well, but with an English accent, and she said I like for I liked, that kind of thing. She didn't speak it as well as you but she had a good voice, very rich. She had this dramatic way of talking, she'd repeat things: 'Bugatti, Bugatti, what a name! What a name!' Sometimes she made odd remarks. Like what? Well, for instance she told me she'd spent all her life going to and fro between America and Europe, and between men as well, she was *une femme égarée*, as in, astray. But that's only said of a sheep or a cow, I think she

meant *vagabonde*. No, I wasn't embarrassed when she said that about men, I was just startled that she'd say it to a stranger.

an undulating line as the point of departure

I heard afterwards that her son and daughter had different fathers and she wasn't married to either, is that true? She mentioned her children, yeah. She told me she was unlucky with cars, she wanted to buy a lovely Bugatti and change her luck, because a car had wrecked her life. In Paris her children and their *gouvernante* had been in the car when it stalled and the driver got out to crank the engine; the brake must have slipped, because the car shot across the street and into the Seine and they were all drowned.

I didn't know what to say when she told me this, I thought it happened recently, but it turned out this was fourteen years ago, when her children were still small. It was a rented Renault, an old-fashioned car, I don't like them. I told her the driver must have lied about remembering to put the car in neutral because it would only have jumped backwards like that if it was in gear. Then I wished I hadn't said anything because her eyes got wet.

the continuing beauty of a movement that mounted, that spread, that ended

Yes, of course I thought the Madonna really wanted to buy the Amilcar. Because she said so, that's why, and I don't assume people are lying. She hated to go by train, she liked to be driven, and open cars were the best, she liked the wind in her mouth, she said. She and her friend Mary had spent weeks being driven along the Côte d'Azur, she thought it would be beautiful but the forest fires were blackening everything. She got me talking about cars, the power and torque of the engines and also the bodies, the streamlining, how they're designed to glide through the air. No, she never asked the price of the Amilcar but I thought that was because she was rich. She seemed like a big spender, there were lots of champagne bottles lying around, I only found out afterwards that she was broke. Apparently she'd sold her last car – another old Renault - to pay her hotel bill, and she was praying for some big publisher to buy her memoirs.

in nothing does nature suggest jumps or breaks; there is between all the conditions of life a continuity or flow

The Madonna was looking for more than a car? I guess, I don't know. What does that mean, *coy*? Listen, mister journalist, I can tell she likes me, okay. She goes on about how well my driving costume suits me. But she's fifty years old – she tells me so, she says 'Can you believe it?' - she's older than my mother. She can't expect anything.

What else did she say to me? Lots of things, I don't remember most of them. I am trying. Oh, it came up in conversation that I have a pilot's licence, she was thrilled about that. That was what she was looking for, a man who wasn't afraid of anything. She said she'd buy a plane and I could fly her back to America; I could tell she was just kidding about that. She'd been in the crowd in Paris last May when Lindbergh landed after the first non-stop solo across the Atlantic, there were a hundred thousand people half out of their minds. That made me so jealous when she told me that, I wish I'd been there. I haven't been anywhere yet.

motion is motivated by emotion and must be expressed with the instrument of the entire human body

Anyway, next thing, this man arrived at the studio, an American. Pretty old, tall, rich-looking, with a blond beard; he seemed to know the Madonna well. She flung her arms around him and called him Paris, I remember thinking that was a strange name. He said 'I see you haven't changed.' He sort of jerked his head at me when he said that. The Madonna, she seemed embarrassed, she said I was just an automobile salesman, Mary was shopping for a Bugatti. When in fact her friend had never spoken to me except to tell me to go away the day before. I guess the Madonna was trying to make it seem like it was Mary who'd asked me to call. Anyway the Paris man didn't seem to believe her, he rolled his eyes and said he wouldn't intrude, perhaps he'd call again the next day. The Madonna got all agitated, she made a big show of hurrying me out of the studio because she was busy, and could I come to the hotel at nine tonight to show her how the car performed? I was getting irritated, to be honest, I got the impression

she was using me to make her American man jealous. I shrugged, and she said please come, she said it two or three times, like she didn't think I would.

all movement on earth is governed by the law of gravitation, by attraction and repulsion, resistance and yielding

What do you mean, was it an assignation? It was to take her for a ride, get her to buy the car. Yeah, I was friendly but remember the lady was twice my age and twice my size. To be honest, I thought of staying home because I wasn't sure what she wanted of me. And maybe that was God telling me not to go, and if I'd listened then everything would have been okay. But my job is cars, you know, and if there was any chance of selling such a pricey auto I wasn't going to let it slip.

So at five to nine I drove up to the hotel, I saw the Madonna pull back the curtain and look out. She came down right away, she seemed happy again; her breath smelled of champagne. Her friend Mary ran down after her, telling her she'd be cold in nothing but her dress and shawl. I offered her my leather coat... What scarf? No, it wasn't a scarf, it was a red shawl she'd wrapped round and round her neck. Well I don't know, I'm not an expert on women's clothes. It was huge, silk maybe, it had these long fringes. Yeah, scarlet, it clashed with her hair. Oh and there were Chinese characters on it too, I think, and a big yellow bird.

the waters, the winds, the plants, living creatures, the particles of matter itself obey this controlling rhythm of which the characteristic line is the wave

So anyway, I helped her in. Now, these low-slung racing models, the passenger seat on the left is set back from the driver's, you understand? We weren't sitting side-by-side, she was slightly behind me, that's important. The Madonna waved up at the hotel room, she called out goodbye to her friends. No, I don't remember. Is that what her friends say she said, *Adieu mes amis, je vais à la gloire*? Okay, I don't know, I didn't hear that. Sure, she might have said it, that was the kind of dramatic thing she came out with. Precognition? No, I don't think so, she seemed in a great mood.

my heavy shoes were like chains; my clothes were my prison

Yeah, I guess the shawl was blowing about when I shut her door, it may have been hanging out a little, but of course I'd have noticed if it was caught in the spokes of the back wheel, what kind of idiot do you take me for? She must have moved after I got into the driver's seat, she must have thrown it over her shoulder. No, her friend Mary didn't tell me about any bad feelings she had, didn't beg me to drive carefully. Did she tell you that? No, I'm not calling her a liar, I just... No, I didn't hear her shout out anything about the shawl. The engine was on by then, it's pretty noisy. Well, if she says she shouted something, okay, but I didn't hear it. I would have stopped if I'd heard any kind of warning, of course I would; I'd have killed the engine like a shot.

Now I come to think of it I did look at the Madonna, just before I released the brake. I'd forgotten this till now. I glanced back over my shoulder and for a moment I saw she was beautiful. You know how some women, they don't look anything special till you happen to see them swimming or crying or holding their babies? Well the Madonna, she was like that. She put her head back and it was as if I could see right past the rouge and the hair-dye, her face lit up like a candle.

the head turned backward

in this movement one senses immediately the Bacchic frenzy possessing the entire body

Can we stop there, mister? You know the rest. Yeah, I know you're paying, but I don't see what good -

through my whole being I felt one great surging

Okay, okay. I didn't hear anything, it wasn't that, it was a dragging sensation. There was something wrong with the car. I didn't look over my shoulder, I was staring at the dials to see what the matter was. But when I stopped the car and it was quiet I could hear the screaming. It was her friend Mary, she came screeching down the street from the hotel.

one great surging longing, unmistakable urge

When I turned around the Madonna was gone, I thought for a second she'd disappeared, and then I knew she must have fallen out. I ran round the car and – oh, Christ! You know this bit, it was in all the papers.

in a striking upward tremendous mounting

Okay, yes, she'd been yanked out of the car by her shawl. Dragged along for maybe a hundred yards.

it is the alternate attraction and resistance of the law of gravity that causes this wave

She was trapped between the panel and the tire. The red shawl was all tangled up.

to find the movement which expresses the soul

No, I'm not proud of myself, but you never know how you'll react when something like that happens. Don't be so quick to judge. I may have screamed a bit, yeah. Well of course I was in a panic! And there was this crowd all of a sudden, I couldn't see... Yeah, her friend and some guy lifted the back of the car and got her out, her body I mean. Her friend Mary kept talking, telling her to breathe, they were taking her to the hospital, but I could tell it was too late for that. The head, you could tell by how the head hung sideways.

when my body moves it is because my spirit moves it

Did I go to the funeral? No way, I didn't want everyone to point me out as the one who killed the famous dancer.

So that's it. No, I haven't left anything out. Well I'm sorry mister, but it's the truth. No kissing, no embraces, nothing like that. I was just the driver, it was

my bad luck I happened to be there. I don't care if it would make a better story if I was her lover, that's not how it was!

thus, the body itself must be forgotten

You mean your paper won't publish this? That's ridiculous. The story is the lady died, that's what the story is. Will you still pay me? I've been talking to you all afternoon, it's not my fault if your paper won't print it. Okay, I suppose five dollars will do.

Was she beautiful? I already told you – Oh, you mean was it beautiful, what happened? I don't know what you're driving at. She didn't fly free, it wasn't elegant like at the opera. A fat lady gets her neck broken, as quick as a hanging but messier, she gets hauled over the side of the car like a side of beef and dragged along behind the wheel, her legs all crooked and scraped, blood on the street and gravel in her hair, her face battered and purple... How can that be beautiful?

perhaps you will be nearer to my spirit when the body with all its material nuisance is not there

You're asking the wrong man here. I guess, yes, the moment, when I put my foot to the floor and the car purred and began to move, that's always beautiful to me, and the Madonna – well, I don't know, I wasn't looking at her anymore once I released the brake, I was driving, wasn't I? I had my eyes on the road.

Note

Lines in italics are all quotes from Isadora Duncan (1877-1927). Her friend Mary Desti published a full but unreliable account of her last days in *The Untold Story: The Life of Isadora Duncan, 1921-27* (1929). For the little information available about Benoît Falchetto from newspaper clippings I've drawn on *Isadora: A Sensational Life* (2001) by Peter Kurth. Falchetto went on to race Bugattis and Maseratis in the early 1930s.