

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

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LUIS STRAINED HIS EARS, watching bare jacaranda branches twitch in silhouette against the bedroom wall. The bedroom window was sliding up. It was not a dream. A human shadow was nearly indivisible from the web of tree branches fluttering on the curtain. Luis woke Nina and told her to stay silent. She rose slowly, confused at first, as he slid open the night stand drawer, removed his pistol, and drew back the slide. She breathed in sharply when the sash rose in its frame. Before Luis could speak, he heard a pistol cock behind the curtains, and then the boy's foot appeared as he slipped into the room.

"No se muevan," the boy said in lazy street Spanish. The short-barreled revolver trembled slightly in his hand. In the dim light, he was barely visible.

"¿Que quieres?" Nina said.

The boy trained the pistol on her before answering. He told her to shut her mouth. Luis shook his pistol at the boy, and the boy swiveled, bringing his other hand to the gun. Luis loosened his thumb and then tightened it back up against the pistol grip. He told the boy to leave his house. Nina whispered that her husband's money clip was on the dresser, that she had some more money downstairs in her purse.

The boy told her to get it.

Luis said, "Stay there."

From the hallway Maria said, "Mamma, I'm thirsty."

The boy swung his pistol toward the door and fired, a flash of light blasting the boy's face white, his crooked teeth and narrow jaw carved into the darkness that followed. Nina screamed. The pistol bucked in Luis's hand, and the room flashed again. The boy fell back against the window, the odor of gunpowder pressing out against the walls and into Luis's face. The noise brought the other children running. Nina burst out into the hallway and took Maria up into her arms.

"Stay outside," she screamed to them. "Stay outside."

Luis kept his pistol leveled at the boy and rose from his bed. His ears were ringing.

"Mother of God," the boy said, gulping for air.

Luis pulled on a pair of pants to cover his temple garments. He imagined that he was only a collection of tissues without a spirit. Blood throbbed through the arteries in his forearm. Blood throttled through his ears. He re-gripped the pistol as it hung from the end of his arm, the muzzle turned in slightly toward his thigh. He pulled the top garment off, catching it on the hammer of the pistol. When it came free, he tossed the garment onto the bed and in the darkness crept toward the boy.

Stepping across him, Luis pulled the sash down and then moved back. The boy's tongue pulsed wordlessly in the open gape of his mouth, his eyes zeroed on the wall over the bed. The boy kicked his heel along the carpet and twitched his hand, which lay palm-up and curled. Luis dropped his eyes back down and watched blood bloom across the cartoon bull of the intruder's tee-shirt. He was no more than fifteen years old and wore an almost imperceptible mustache. His eyes drooped.

Luis stooped down, drove the pistol against the boy's head, twisted it flush, and breathed in, trying to steady himself. He began to pull on the trigger and felt the resistance of it against his skin. He froze. The boy was laboring under his own failing breath and gasped again for Mary. Luis loosened his hold on the trigger but left the pistol pressed against the boy's forehead. Slowly his finger curled again on the trigger.

The lights flashed on, blinding him for moment. Luis turned and saw Nina staring at him, her hand still on the light switch. The boy was motionless. Nina said nothing, but she stood in the doorway watching Luis's naked skin under the light. He threw the pistol on the bed and pushed past without speaking, without surrendering.

"You will have to be released," the stake president said. It was only three days since the shooting, and everyone in *La Boca* had heard about the break-in. Reporters came right on the heels of the police. Photographs of the boy as they wheeled him into an ambulance were everywhere in Buenos Aires by lunch the following day—so much different than the *disparasitos*: a just murder, they called it. "Of course it was self-defense," the stake president continued. Luis nodded. "He broke into your house, shot at your children. I suspect that there will not even be charges brought against you."

"I think it will all be fine," Luis said.

"Your calmness surprises me."

"The boy didn't leave me a choice."

"Still we will have to release you, for your own good. We will want

you to have time with your family, time to repair some of these injuries. The church will be fine without you."

Luis twisted his head slightly until he felt his neck muscles tighten and heard the small pop of his vertebrae. The stake president rose and walked to the window and stood there with his back to him. He waited without speaking for a long time. Luis shifted nervously in his chair, listening to the desk fan hum. Finally the stake president turned around, "Luis, how long have I known you and your family?"

He shrugged, "I do not know, Juan, ten years, maybe."

Juan nodded and slipped his hands down into his pants pockets.

"I have known Nina since she was. . ." He took his right hand out of his pocket and tapped it against the middle of his thigh. "I do not know, since she was this tall."

"What are you asking?" Luis stood.

"I am not asking anything. You know how they are always saying that the people of Buenos Aires are most scared of being forgotten?" Luis scratched his nose and then nodded again. "If you leave here, they say that the *pampas* will swallow you up. It's too big to understand."

"Your point?"

"All we've got is each other, Luis—the church, our families, forgiveness."

"He broke into my house, Juan."

"All I am saying is to stand up before the Lord. It is easy to forget yourself when you're busy being right. Let us help you when you need it."

"Tomas and Rogelio are still assigned to home teach us, are they not?"

Juan shrugged. "I suppose."

"I will call them if we need anything," Luis said.

Juan almost spoke but tossed out his hands in place of the words.

"Are we finished?" Luis asked.

Juan carried his gesture toward the door.

With a thin flashlight and a small magnifying lens, Luis knelt down in the bathroom where the police had cut out a section of the gypsum wall board. They had taken the lead slug from one of the wall studs and dropped it into a small plastic bag. The hole left behind was just above the floor. Directly behind him there was an untouched hole where the bullet had torn through the bedroom wall and entered the bathroom. Luis rose up from off his knees and went into his room, pushed the flashlight into the hole, and switched it on. He walked back into the bathroom and knelt down again and moved his head slowly until he saw the light flicker. He stayed there watching it, imagining the path of the boy's bullet, envisioning Maria's head just left of the invisible trajectory.

"Luis," his wife called.

He continued to stare at the light.

"Luis, where are you?" she asked, her voice growing louder. Soon he heard her footsteps on the carpet. He stood abruptly and put the magnifying glass underneath a towel that was lying on the counter top. When the bathroom door opened, he walked past his wife without saying anything. She turned and saw the light still stuck in the wall.

A week later, while workmen busied themselves replacing the blood-stained tile grout upstairs, Luis sat motionless in the living room slumped in a chair. His thumbs and fingertips were pressed together, the ends of his thumbs resting silently against his lips. He saw Nina watching him from the kitchen, framed by the door jamb and lit from behind. She held a spoon in her hands, and a towel hung over one shoulder. Ignoring her, Luis gripped each arm of the chair and hauled himself up.

One of the tile-setters came down the stairs and asked where they could put the bedroom furniture. Luis did not answer. "Excuse me. . . Sir?" the man said. Luis went to the window and stared out with his back to the man. Nina came out of the kitchen into the living room and told him that he could move it into the spare bedroom across the hall. "We have been staying in there, but we will be okay."

"I am sorry for the trouble," he said.

She shook her head and told him, "It is no trouble. Do not worry." He touched the bill of his cap and then climbed the stairs. She went back into the kitchen. While she was gone, Luis sat down and stared at his feet. After a time Nina returned and knelt down beside Luis without touching him. He watched her fold her hands carefully, one on top of the other.

"I do not know what to think about what you did," she said.

"I did not do anything except kill a thief," he answered, continuing to stare across his fingertips, his chest rising and falling with his breath.

"I have been praying about it," she said. "You think that there are not any commandments about what someone might have done. I understand that." She stood and crossed over into his line of sight. He took his hands away and pushed himself up again but still said nothing. "I know I cannot understand what this has done to you."

"No," he said.

"Perfect," she said, throwing up her arms and then folding them immediately. "You know nothing and I can understand nothing, and God does not speak to people, and Jesus never was, and the whole thing is a big trick against you."

He rocked slightly to one side and then settled again. "Where are the children?" he asked. Nina just stared at him. "Where are the kids?" he asked again. "Do you even know?"

Nina turned and walked over to the window. Upstairs she could hear the men struggling with the bed. "How can I help?" she asked. "What can I do?"

"I don't know."

"Have you prayed about this?" she asked.

"What am I going to say to God, Nina?" he said, throwing his head toward the empty kitchen. She could see that his breathing had become mechanical and exaggerated.

"I am going to ask you a question," she said, and she drew a deep breath, "Do you—I mean, we. . . I mean. . ."

Without turning around, Luis said, "If you are going to babble, then leave."

Tears trembled in Nina's eyes. Luis rose and walked past her, heading for the kitchen. Upstairs there was a thump and the sound of cursing. Nina was crying.

"Why have you stopped wearing your garments?" Nina called out to stop him. He looked back at her, staring as if his gaze could pull the answer out of her mouth, so he would not have to give it. "Luis," she said. "It is our covenant, not just yours." Without a word he turned and walked to the front door, stopped, and raised his hand as if he might speak. "You are sealed to all of us," she said sweeping her hair back from her face. He stood in the entry with his hand on the doorknob as if he had not heard her.

He did not take the car, but walked down the street and caught a bus that took him on the *Avenida Nueve de Julio* through the middle of downtown. It was still early evening, but all eight lanes were packed with cars. He rode, consciously trying to think about nothing, until the bus driver started glancing back at him in the mirror. He wanted to be forgotten, but he knew that it was impossible to really disappear. If Nina had come in one second later, he'd have shot that boy again. And where was the devil during that? Where was Jesus? Since then he felt as if he had walked out of an office building and found himself high on a cliff in Tierra del Fuego, staring out toward Antarctica, the sting of salt on his face, the wind singing like high tension wires in his head.

When his bus stopped, he lurched forward and banged down the steps onto the street. Some school girls in their white coats giggled past. The guitar and bandeleon of some contemporary tango throbbed out of a narrow, modern cafe. He walked for a while, numb to everything, and when another bus stopped in front of him, he got on board, paid the fare, and took a seat in the same place as before. The bus took him into *Barrio Norte* past Recolete Cemetery. He rode, changing busses, until he was no longer certain where he was. It was some industrial suburb to the south, and the bus was full of old women. Across the aisle he noticed a particular old woman with two large shopping bags on the seat next to her. Her withered hands spidered over her rosary beads, the cross spinning one way and then other. She rocked slightly with the familiar words of the Hail Mary.

The boy had been Catholic as Luis had been once, a long time ago. He had called out to Mary and had fallen into the same prayer. Next to him the woman took up another bead, and she began the cycle of her prayers again. Penance, he thought. Mormons never spoke of penance, though they were forever speaking of repentance. Luis had all but forgotten the word.

As an altar boy, he knew that the Catholic Church was a labyrinth of mysteries, a succession of candles, a matter of vestments and high holy days of obligation. His tongue still knew the words. . . Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Then another turn and another. He could sound the words against his teeth. What absolution did this old woman need, what could she have possibly done, Luis wondered as he watched the cross spin. And as he fell under the hypnosis of her rosary, the face and voice of Father DeJardin, a Jesuit and a teacher of his, knit together in his mind.

"Luis, what is the matter?" the priest asked, shaking Luis's shoulder lightly. Confused by prayer, Luis had fallen asleep in one of the pews. He had come back to St. Jude's to ground himself, to find sanctuary with the saint of lost causes. Religion had abandoned him, it seemed, perhaps the saints could find him again. The savor of falling was rich, but Luis could no longer bear the remoteness of his soul. And then, after the Mormon missionaries found him, the world was not as it once seemed to be.

Father DeJardin shook Luis's shoulder lightly. "Luis, morning bells are ringing," he said. Luis stirred, but said nothing. His hair was matted and pressed down on one side. He was unshaven, and his hands trembled slightly, perhaps from the cold.

The priest asked him if he was sick. Luis shook his head. He asked if Luis might want to call his mother. Luis told him there was no one to call and tried to wave him away. When the priest would not leave, Luis lifted his head and saw the black cassock first, and then white collar, then the priest's dark brown eyes and thin, familiar nose. Luis felt immediately embarrassed, and he pulled himself up by the back of the next pew and tried to slide away.

The priest told him to sit back down. His voice was calm. "You do not look well," he said. Luis backed away even further and the priest reached for his hand. He caught it firmly and let his eyes flash up to Luis's, holding his gaze until Luis broke away and relaxed his hand. "Stay," the priest said, lowering himself to sit next to Luis, "and tell me a story." He then crossed his legs, folded his hands, and set them in his lap. Luis sat as well and ran his hands across each side of his head, smoothing the hair with his fingertips. Five minutes passed, candles flickering against the walls, Luis feeling the pressure of the vaulted ceilings, the dark recesses above and behind the truss work, the history of the steeple and the slate shingles. He let his eyes drift about the church. He felt him-

self beginning to grow calm. Father Dejardin scraped his fingertips against his chin, and Luis turned toward the priest, waiting for a sermon. But the priest said nothing, he just cocked his head slightly like a dog waiting to be rewarded.

"Why did Christ never come here, Father?" Luis finally asked.

"A question, Luis?" Father Dejardin said, "I asked for a story."

Luis grimaced, but knew of no way past Dejardin's eccentricities. "What if," he began with a long breath, "What if Christ didn't stay seated at the right hand of God after he rose but went to Columbia and preached to the people up there? What if he really was Quetzalcoatl of the Maya?"

"You have been talking to the Mormons," Father Dejardin said calmly.

Luis nodded.

"Those missionaries are honest people. A bit young, but honest. They do not lack for drive."

"They answer my questions," Luis said.

"Of course they do, that is their job."

"Do you think they are lying to me?"

"Does it feel like they are lying?"

Luis shook his head.

"Does it feel like they are telling the truth?"

Luis shrugged.

"So how are you going to get yourself out of this fix?"

"It's between me and God, I imagine."

"There are no private acts, Luis," Father Dejardin said. "Nothing is self-contained." The priest then drew his hands to his lips and interlaced his fingers. He closed his eyes, and then without re-opening his eyes, he said, "Evil is what man made of paradise. God will save the righteous from themselves. That is the world we live in. Everything is a mix of mystery and grace."

Luis told the priest that he believed all men will be saved, but will not be glorified the same. "You and Peron will not end up in the same place, but that does not mean Peron will be in Hell, if he is repentant, if he accepts the gospel. . . . Paul speaks of these things. Mormons didn't invent it."

As he considered Luis's words, Dejardin fluttered his eyes and then breathed out through his nostrils. "I suppose Socrates was right," he said, "'It is noble to aim at a noble goal, whatever the outcome.'" The priest set his head down onto his fist and became absorbed in his thoughts. Luis felt the vastness of the church return, and he became suddenly aware again of all the small recesses and alcoves in the architecture, all the shadows. The priest lifted his head from his fist and sat back upright. "I imagine this changes everything for you," he said.

Luis started at the priest's words as if he had absentmindedly

touched a hot stove. His heart began to seize in his ribcage. As it began again to beat, Luis thought that the force of it would spring his bones apart. He lowered his face into his hands and tried to keep himself from weeping in frustration. Father Dejardin waited, and then asked Luis again if this knowledge changed the world as he saw it.

"No," he said and then followed it quickly with, "Yes," and then, "I do not know."

"What do you think about the Mormons and their message?" the priest asked again.

"I think it is right, Father; I think it is the way things happened," he said suddenly without thinking.

"They do not cast the Church in a favorable light."

Luis dropped his head and stared down into his lap.

"I think 'whore' is the word they use."

"You know Church history better than I do, Father," Luis said.

Father Dejardin smiled. "We might have taught you too well," he said.

"Perhaps," Luis answered. "But Father, why only Jerusalem? Why leave out all the other people? And why to people who wanted none of it in the first place?"

"You have changed, Luis. In many ways it is good to see. I am concerned at the outcome, but it is good to see that you are not past feeling. You have always had more than your share of demons." Dejardin lifted his eyes to watch Luis's response.

"He doesn't bother us anymore," Luis offered.

"Yes, but have you forgiven him? I have told you a thousand times that you can't come to peace through rage."

Luis refused to listen.

"He's your father, Luis. *Love* does extend to those we dislike. It has to. Remember *agape*. Remember to forgive yourself."

The bus came to a stop, and the old woman stood and moved slowly to the front of the bus. Luis watched her step carefully down onto the street, refusing the driver's help. As the bus pulled away and back into traffic, Luis pushed against the seat. The bus continued on for another block, and then he pulled the cord for a stop, pushed through the door and descended to the street.

The air outside was cool and struck his skin suddenly. It was choked with exhaust, and the streets were still full of cars and young people, full of families and lovers. Some instinct awoke inside of him and stretched itself. His heart began to seize. Above his head, phone and power lines crossed and re-crossed themselves like a drift net, and he became suddenly struck by the flatness of things. Through and beyond them, everything became, for an instant, infinite. He hovered in stillness, drinking in details, promising himself he would not forget. Then the world filled in

again around him, and Luis saw he had been saved from himself, just as Dejardin had said. God was invisible but everywhere. The city, the traffic, the dust hung together by a power that was not chaos.

There was a coin-operated telephone across the street. The man using it, hung up the receiver, checked his watch, and joined the flow of foot traffic. Luis felt through his pockets for a coin, and when he found one, he crossed over to the phone and dialed home, not even thinking what he would say. Nina answered.

"Luis?" she asked.

"It's me," he said.

"Where are you?"

"I don't know. Downtown."

"I'll come with the car and get you."

"I'm not lost," he said, watching people speed past.

"I know that."

A young man and his girlfriend walked past Luis while Nina spoke. The couple stopped and kissed. Young patrons in a nearby café began pointing over their menus at them, and when the man raised her hand, pointing to a ring on her finger, everyone in the café clapped. Behind them, to the north, an ambulance pulsed through the intersection while overhead a helicopter sheared the city noise in two. And severed from one another, the din and clamor rose like a song into the hazy afternoon.