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The Disappeared Do Not Exist

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Juan Carlos Pérez

August 2011

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Tod Goldberg, Co-Chairperson  
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The Thesis of Juan Carlos Pérez is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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To Billy, Jon, and Toni, and their families.

To my family and friends.

To all those who have left us.

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*An injustice committed against anyone is a threat to everyone."*  
- Montesquieu

*"They are neither alive or dead. They are disappeared."*  
- General Jorge Rafael Videla

## **SOMEWHERE IN MID-SKY OVER BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA**

### **1. The Fall**

Like cargo in bags and tossed from an airplane, the bodies free fall at around 120 miles an hour. At 18,000 feet, the bitter cold wind slaps them. The jute sacks, which take the shapes of the human figures spiraling down, cut through small clouds of vapor. As they plunge to an uncertain destination, their occupants struggle to comprehend.

Billy Lee Hunt is one of them.

His head hurts from the beating. Or beatings. Someone has kicked him with a heavy shoe, a boot. A military boot. His scalp feels wet, so there must be blood. He is not sure of anything right now. Everything around him is dark. His eyes are watery, fuzzy. The skin itches from the rough fabric absorbing him. One minute he was on solid ground, he remembers; the next, he's flying, floating. He wonders if this is all a hallucination. If he's not getting enough oxygen. Or if the drug he's surely been given is playing tricks with his mind.

Because in his mind, he now can't remember what's become of Ana María. His girlfriend was with him at the church before the thugs in the Falcon cars arrived and took them away. That much he knows. *I never used to pray, but I will for you now, Ana.* The others on the plane with him – they all went down too, tumbling, a groan here, a moan

there, but they've become quiet. Except for the whirring sounds of the wind, nothing else is heard.

Billy wants to see Evie and Nancy. He will miss his sisters, and they will be devastated when they find out about his fate. Just like his mama, Pina. Because, if this is not a dream, if he is falling for real, he knows where he's headed. To the depths of the River Plate, colored like lead by grief and sadness.

Were Pina to discover the way her son is spending his final minutes of life, it would kill her. How could it not? How can a mother survive the discovery – if she's ever told – that her child was thrown off a plane to descend into the unknown?

*“Mama, I hope I did not disappoint you.”*

That's what bothers him the most. That his mother and two sisters will suffer his loss. The dead, well, they're dead, but the living go on living with the pain.

His heart is pumping so fast he can hear it. It seems to want to burst from his chest, like wound-up coils from a clock in search of room. His eardrums pop hard. His hands are numb, but his fingertips sting; his whole body is damp, bathed in sweat, or water. He doesn't know for sure. He may have pissed on himself too. Did they hose him down? They explained he was being quarantined along with other prisoners for a routine disease checkup. *Off you go, che*, they said. They put him on an aircraft, sent him off to a base not too far from Buenos Aires. Then... what? They dropped him?

So, if he is falling on the city, on the city that embraced his family, the city that saw him grow, play, fall in love, and develop a conscience, what will he fall on? Billy

wonders. What if he lands on a driving car? On the rooftop terrace of a friend? On the 9 de Julio Avenue?

*Breathe, breathe.*

It's hard to breathe in the bag. And a drink of water would be nice. A nice, last wish. Or maybe an aspirin. His head throbs, and the rest of his body is in such severe pain. He's been kicked more, and harder, than he originally thought. The sack squeezes him, swallows him. It suffocates him. He tries to spread his legs, but they ache too much. Maybe a bone is broken. Or a few.

He is dozing off. There's nothing else to do. He's on his side now. That's how he always slept, from those days when Mama Pina or Evie would tuck him in back at the wooden house in Lebanon, that little town in Tennessee where nobody could have ever imagined that one of its own children would today be somewhere over the skies of a South American city doomed as a falling star. So, he wants someone to tuck him in, but there's no one to do that. This makes him sad. It's easier to breathe now, which means he must be getting closer to his final destination. But it doesn't matter anymore.

Now, it's just him in need of wings.

*Let me just get home.*

## **LEBANON, TENNESSEE, 1961**

### **2. The Porch**

They are all home: Pina, Evie, Billy. It's past the children's bedtime.

“One more story, Mama. Please?”

Pina smiles. She opens the book again and agrees to read another story. “But after that, it’s night-night for you. Deal?”

Billy nods with a big smile. Evie sits on the floor as she does every night, also listening to her mother read out loud fantastical or spooky tales – and they’re usually the same, but that doesn’t matter – to her baby brother.

“This is the tale of a boy who fell from a star and landed on Earth...” begins their mother, still dressed in the outfit she wore to work at the library. In no time, Billy is asleep. Pina kisses the boy goodnight, stands up and makes a motion to Evie to exit with her.

“But I want to hear more...” the girl complains

“Shhh. Outside. It’s time to go to bed.”

Soon it’s Evie’s turn to be tucked in. She kisses her eldest child on the forehead, and blesses her. Evie notices the rosary dangling from her mother’s neck. Pina always wore it as other women wear their jewelry.

The girl hears her mother sigh as she leaves the darkened room and shuts the door. It has been another long day for Pina. Evie could tell. Days have been like this now since William, Billy’s and Evie’s father, left the house. Some wisps of gray are beginning to show around Pina’s all-too black hair, and even her soothing demeanor or comforting words cannot disguise the weight of worry. Evie knows because she hears her mother cry often at night, in the room next door to hers, or outside on the porch. They’re faint sobs, but they are there until Pina falls asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Pina is at work at the Lebanon-Wilson County Public Library, and the children are off from school, Iris takes care of them. Further down the road where Evie and her family live, at the end of a row of cedars, where the tar changes into dirt, where magnolia trees have not been chopped down in the name of progress, that's where one can find the home of this old black woman, Iris. She is the town's unofficial doctor, a descendent of slaves who hailed from New Orleans; she speaks with a Creole accent and practices ancient medicinal arts that are deemed witchcraft by some, miracles by others. She too had been abandoned by her husband, and had forged a bond with this Italian American woman who would soon decide to leave Lebanon and to settle somewhere else.

“Now, y'all don't be giving Iris no trouble, you hear me sweetie pies?” says Pina as she kisses the children goodbye and heads off to her job.

Evie, little Billy and, of course, Pina, all embraced Iris as family. For it was Iris who, among many other things, once broke a fever – or a spell? – that afflicted Evie for three straight days with no signs of abating. Evie never forgets that. Under pumice-like skies, the rainy season had come to flood the streets of Lebanon with brownish rivers of pestilence and rot, and no car could enter or leave. The charming, mostly-brick town square, with a fountain and a statue, remained empty, eerily quiet as the Confederate cemetery not too far away. That day of biblical rains, Evie and her family were stuck at home with no means of reaching the nearest hospital in Nashville.

As if carried by the gusts of wind, the word had spread just before the downpour that Evie was sick, that an unknown malady afflicted the child and, what could be done about it? And although Pina had taken some time off to be with her, on the third day of the fever, a knock on the door of the Hunt house was heard, and outside, drenched and covered in mud and weeds, was Iris, who had braved the road in the deluge to see the girl she had come to love as her own.

“This child will die if we don’t intercede,” stated Iris without any histrionics upon touching Evie. “The coldest water you can get, chilled with ice. Hot water and warm blankets later, plus soup that we will make and my remedies. They will all free her from this malevolent heat that’s eating her from inside.”

True to her Italian ancestry, Evie’s mother was Catholic, and did not necessarily believe in unexplainable, foreign forces or superstitions. But with her daughter’s life in the balance, all prejudices had to be cast away. Pina had to believe in Iris.

Iris had brought a basket full of ingredients, the potions, lotions, powders, teas, herbs, flowers and so many other things with which she made tisanes and bathed the little girl in waters that turned green in the tub and cleansed her of all evil. Candles and incense were lit, rosary beads touched over and over, and a constant vigil kept at her side. On the fifth day, the fever broke and began to subside, just like the rain and river waters outside. On the sixth day, the fever had left Evie for good, and the sun had risen over Lebanon.

Evie had heard stories from her mother of people that make rain, rainmakers they call them, she said. But she had never heard of a sunmaker, which is what she wanted to call Iris from then on.

But Evie never saw Iris again, for not too long afterwards, the family would move to Argentina, seeking a better life, avoiding the fate for Billy that would befall so many American youth: being drafted into the hell that is war.

\*\*\*\*\*

“We’re moving,” Pina announced one afternoon while making dinner. Evie and Billy had been playing outside all day, by a creek, and had come back with their shoes muddied and their clothes less than pristine.

Evie and Billy stopped in their tracks when they heard their mother’s terse, cold, statement, and simply stared at her. Nobody paid attention to the dirty footprints left behind.

“Go bathe and get ready to eat. I will tell you all about it in a while,” Pina went on. Evie obeyed. She took Billy by the hand and walked out of the kitchen, not knowing whether to feel excited or fearful or both. She had no idea where the family was headed, but she already felt she would miss the wooden porch outside to sit with Iris and hear the old woman tell her and Billy old phantasmagorical legends, while she cracked peanuts. She would miss her father William, even if she hadn’t seen him around the house for months. She would miss the woods and rivers and ponds she and Billy were used to exploring without fear. She would miss Lebanon.

The smell of homemade, simmered marinara sauce permeated the house while Pina boiled pasta and set the kitchen’s turquoise Formica table. A cookie jar in the shape

of the head of Pinocchio sat next to a bowl filled with chocolate chip cookie dough, the children's favorite.

Pina began molding the dough into little cookies and was putting them on a cookie sheet when she saw Billy enter the kitchen. She couldn't help but laugh.

"What did your sister do to your hair?!" she said, sounding more like her normal self now, Evie thought.

Billy smiled and shrugged, his blond locks divided in three parts, the top one in the shape of a peak. Pina quickly washed her hands, dried them on her apron and came down to Billy's level. Boy and mother hugged each other.

"You are my little Kewpie," Pina told Billy.

Just then Evie walked in, carrying with her one of her mother's Kewpie dolls, part of large collection, her only hobby, which would make the odyssey with them halfway across the world to Argentina. Evie also gave her mother a hug, and Pina kissed her back.

"Why are we moving, Mama?" she wanted to know.

The mother let go.

"Aunt Mary and Uncle Tito are inviting us to move to a nice city with lots of trees and high mountains in a beautiful country called Argentina. We'll be in Mendoza with them for a little while, and then maybe go to the big city, to beautiful Buenos Aires."

"Have you been there?" Evie said with a bit of a frown.

"No, but I have read all about it. Wait here."

Pina left the kitchen for a moment to step into the room she kept as the family's library and study, and brought back with her a large world atlas. It had been William's.

He had gotten it while in college. She placed it on the side of the table, turned off the stove and directed her attention to the book once again. There, almost at the beginning of the pages, under A, was this big, long country on the map, in an area the children had never seen or heard of before.

“There, Argentina,” Pina pointed.

Evie and Billy mimicked their mother, and pointed at the same page as well.

“It is safe down there. Uncle Tito is in the military, but there is no war. And Aunt Mary can’t wait to see you. She loves you very much.”

Evie had never met this woman who loved her very much. But if her mother said so, then it had to be true. Fear led to curiosity and then to excitement, as the family discussed the new adventure that awaited them. Evie understood right away her father would not be joining them. She did not ask about him this time, though.

Pina set the plates, yet the children were more interested now in the journey than in the spaghetti she had made. Billy remained quiet, sitting, watching his mother and sister. Evie had so many questions.

“We will go on a ship, a huge ship, leaving first from New York!” Pina explained, while showing her son and daughter now the route on a full-page map. “From there we head to Miami, then Panama City, cross this giant canal, travel to the city of Santiago, in Chile, and there Aunt Mary and Uncle Tito will pick us up and drive to Mendoza.”

“*Men-dou-zah*,” repeated Evie, trying to sound like her mother.

By now, Billy had begun eating. Evie was ready to go.

“When do we leave, Mommy?”

“Very soon, sweetie. Very soon. It will change our lives. You will see.”

## **BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA, 1974**

### **3. The Diplomat**

He’s always found it easy to lie. And he does it so well. Why not? He is, after all, a diplomat. A cynical one, he will admit; not as noble, or idealistic, as his father John Patrick Egan, a former U.S. ambassador whose greatest, and mostly unrecognized achievement, was aiding those who ushered in the Carnation Revolution in Portugal.

His legacy, if any, is whatever he can build now, today, in Buenos Aires. Home. For the first time, he is trying to emulate a little bit of his father’s accomplishments, his sense of duty, that spirit of certainty in him, in the hopes that he will have something to be proud of at the end of his life.

Every day, however, is the same thing. Today is no exception.

“Good morning, sir,” he is told repeatedly as he walks into the U.S. compound at eight. A nod here, a smile there, a shake of the hand. The greetings are empty, delivered in ways that betray what he is sure are the true feelings towards him. If one believes in them, memories are like ghosts, roaming around everywhere, even if one does not see them. The halls of the embassy reverberate with the father’s diplomatic exploits. The past weighs heavily on the son.

Portraits of President Richard Nixon and of Vice President Gerald Ford greet him as he enters the building on Avenida Colombia. He cringes when he sees the photos of

these two men, especially Nixon's waxy visage. But he dare not share his feelings with anyone at the embassy. When he accepted the role of *chargé d'affaires* until the new ambassador arrived, he too grinned in the phoniest, most consensus-building, Congress-stamped, United Nations-welcomed way he could muster, a role model, no doubt, for his staff.

After greeting his assistant, a Ms. Borges, there are memos to answer, reports to analyze, cases to follow. He sits at his L-shaped desk, swivels in his chair and stares out the window. There is a Japanese garden in the middle of the embassy compound, and his office has a prime view of its manicured shrubs and fragrant flowers.

The phone rings, but he doesn't answer. It's too early for that, he thinks. He's almost tempted to turn the photo of his father, which he has on his desk, around. What would that famous ambassador say if he saw that his kid was admiring the garden and not answering what could be an important call?

Had his dad known the real reasons why he took the job – oh, the perks, the travel, the prestige, blah blah blah – he would've been disappointed in him, no doubt about it. The seduction of glamour and the semblance of power seemed good incentives to join the Foreign Service. Besides, after John Sr.'s name opened doors for him in diplomacy school, how could he not continue his noble tradition? Instead of cocktails in Paris, though, it was mishaps in Kinshasa. It served him well. His one brief posting in Africa was punishment enough for every decision that he had previously refused to make, any action that he let slip away, and all the pleas that he turned down.

He is 34 years old, and has sworn to himself that he will do better. Become the man he wants to be by age 40. “Only six more years to go,” he grumbles.

Growing up, living with his parents Anna and John was a relatively happy experience. His actions and thoughts, however, existed far removed from what his father did for a living. At least until he entered college and realized he did not know what to do, other than follow in the old man’s footsteps. Something that the elder Egan encouraged and aided his only boy with. In a way, that man is to blame as well for the path he took.

He lives with that thought all the time, just like this day, bored with his job, staring at a Zen garden in the American embassy in Argentina. Meetings lined up already, briefings, phone calls, favors, requests, protocol. The consular affairs section wants his help with an American citizen detained after being caught at the airport with kilos of Bolivian coca. “He can rot in jail, for all I care,” is how John Jr. feels about him. He won’t intercede. At least not right now.

There are still files scattered everywhere on that big desk. He will go through them diligently after all, but the pile will never seem to get smaller. He looks at the industrial clock on the wall, and the antique clock on his desk, and the luxury watch on his wrist. The hours fly by under a mountain of tasks. And it’s already sunset. Still, several notes are pending, messages left by Ms. Borges during the day, some more important than others.

His attention is interrupted by a knock on the door. He lifts his eyes.

“Yes, what is it?”

Ms. Borges opens the door and stands in the doorway.

“Sir, it’s very late. I’m leaving. Are you still staying?”

He shrugs. “Why not. Nothing awaits for me at my pad.”

She has no ring on her fingers. She probably goes home alone too. He doesn’t care much, however.

The last home he could technically call that, home, was Lisbon, just a few months ago. He had lived in a small studio near the house then occupied by his parents, the restored former residence of a nobleman, Count of Olivais e Penha Longa, in the city’s chic Lapa sector. There’s a photo of that old mansion on John Jr.’s desk. That building that he so fondly remembers, from 1878, was a magnificent ode to the decay of power, a remnant of a former empire that had become rotten. He recalls his mother, Anna, being overjoyed at the thought of living in a house that, just like Portuguese society, needed much repair. Fond memories that follow him like his shadow. His mother is dead, but her words live on.

“The amount of work that needs to be done defies description, but I enjoy it. Life cannot always be playing roles,” she shares with her son one morning in Lisbon, shortly after she and her husband John have moved into the mansion. She stands on a ladder, removing some worn-out curtains. He is amazed at her ongoing dexterity, and notices her hands. They are gentle with the old cloth, as they used to be when she played with his hair. That is his mother’s nature. Soft, warm, and sometimes a little bit...melancholic. Sadness lives within her smiles, and he always wondered why. She never tells, because she doesn’t want anyone to worry. “Today a seamstress is coming to take the

measurements for the new drapes. And tomorrow is the carpenter. Then the painter. The gardener. And so on!”

Thoughts of his mother fill him with joy and kindness, feelings worthy of keeping inside his heart, even if that is hard for him. He looks at the photo of her on his desk at his Buenos Aires office. It is a photo of Anna Egan in Lisbon, by herself, elegantly dressed and holding a parasol. He misses her. Life for him has not been the same since she died. And neither has it been for his father. After his retirement, silence overtook his soul, and he remained in Lisbon, aging more with the city as well.

Egan Sr. had always spent many hours, perhaps too many, at the embassy, a former high school converted for government use, situated on the ominously titled Avenida das Forças Armadas. Not difficult to figure out what the name of the avenue means.

“I will be home late tonight, dear, so don’t wait up for me.” It was the same story every night. Yet, his mother always put up with it.

John Jr. can still hear those words as if they had been uttered yesterday, because *he* does the same. He goes home late every night.

“You are going to kill yourself, John, and for what?”

In the end, his mother always acquiesces to the needs of her husband’s job, but not before showing a bit of disappointment. No harsh words are exchanged, just a simple reply, but one lacking her customary sweetness.

“Anna, this is a particularly critical time, you know that. Things are not well with the government.”

“Things are never well with *any* government, John.”

And with that, another night ends between them, as in a truce. John Jr. thanks them for the dinner, and returns to his apartment, blocks away from the mansion.

He analyzes what his parents' lives were all about. There was love, but there was conflict as well. No denying that. Of course, there were reconciliations, and silent *détentes* varnished at times by mostly warm memories amidst the walls of the Lisbon house. During his teens, however, John Jr.'s hormones were strangely subdued, perhaps somewhat like his mother's will. It makes him a bit ashamed to think about that stage. Since then, it's always been a hardship to feel close to anyone, to make friends, to find love. Or to let others approach him, befriend him, love him.

Lisbon Lisbon Lisbon: he can't say that he made many friends while living there. Can he say that about Buenos Aires, though? Much to his father's chagrin, he liked keeping to himself in Portugal, and since physically he looked more Scandinavian than Mediterranean, he always stood out, and that made him feel, well, different, uncomfortable. Besides...Lisbon bored him. In some odd way that maybe only made sense to him, the city reminded him of those fans the old-fashioned Portuguese ladies would carry everywhere to air themselves in the midst of the heat at church or simply walking down a street on a sweltering day. Most of the time, their fans were shut, like the Portuguese capital itself, and only when they were opened could the beauty of their designs be appreciated. Something more or less like that happened with this ancient town, he recognized, when it came to life each spring with the blooming of flowers everywhere.

A shy, awkward child: that was John Jr. when his father first took him to the Haiti of the late 1950s, Duvalier's Haiti, where his dad was stationed. How he missed what had been his home in DC back then. But in his late teens he went back to the capital with his mother. When ready for college, studies in diplomacy followed. The fruit never falls too far away from the tree, right? Then it was John Jr.'s first posting, in Zaire. His parents were so proud, until the son came back with of some sort of sadness, he called it, and decided to live near them in Lisbon. When he was "well" again, he got another assignment: Argentina. Everything would be OK.

As a young boy, John Jr. did not understand all the politics surrounding his father and the governments in power, but he assumed Ambassador Egan was doing something good for all of them. It was better to believe that, and easy to read his father that way: at the end of the day, John Sr.'s moods were mostly not of frustration, but of satisfaction, even on those occasions when he and Anna would have a discussion. John Jr. knew she was his father's biggest fan, even if she would not always admit to it. He is his biggest fan now.

John Jr. stands from his desk. He yawns, he stretches. He's lost all notion of time. It really is late now, and he must go. His eyes once again catch the photo of his parents' old house in Lisbon. Hanging from the wall behind the desk with that picture, there's a 17<sup>th</sup> century map of Portugal, a gift from his father, and the commendation John Patrick Egan earned from the State Department for his role in avoiding bloodshed in Portugal.

No one has to tell him this. John Jr. was there. He witnessed his father's last hour of triumph. While government tanks bullran through the old streets of Lisbon and into the

plazas, buildings trembled like teacups on a shelf, in a not too pleasant reminder of earthquakes from a not too distant past. Blue mosaic tiles everywhere came off decrepit structures, as if the whole city were a snake shedding its skin. Dust arose from brick roads, birds flew away in a panic, women shut their balcony windows. The rumble and the noise and the trembling movements of these machines were heard on all the streets, even if many could not see the actual vehicles. John Jr. stayed during the turbulence at his parent's residence, and thus he experienced history firsthand.

Even now, he can still smell what reminded him of sawdust in the air. The roar of those tanks just three years ago has never abandoned him either. The goose bumps, from excitement and from fear, can be summoned easily just by going back in time to those days.

Days that are with him once again tonight. He is back at the Lisbon mansion, his pied-à-terre locked up during the conflict. *A confrontation between the loyalist soldiers and the breakaway military divisions joined by the population at large seems inevitable*, a radio station shouts in English. John Egan Jr. drinks coffee, while a mechanical herd has been set loose. He reads a Portuguese paper. After leaving the cup half-full, he sits on a chaise longue to listen to the incessant sounds of conflict. Every once in a while, his mother comes in and chats. Nervously. She tries not to act concerned, but he can tell she is. She is not her usual, well-dressed self. That is always the first clue, because his mother was never a careless dresser. On the contrary. She generally looked like she had stepped out of one of those 1950s mail order catalogues. On the certain occasions when things

weren't going well, however, there was always a physical giveaway: no rouge on her lips, or some other detail that made her look off-kilter. Subtle, yet evident.

God, if she could only be with him in Buenos Aires.

Jet-setting with his father, young John experienced everything in a sheltered fashion. Bodyguards, cooks, maids, nannies, tutors. Private schools holding on to old-world charm, birthday parties for the children of diplomats who, through lavish celebrations, attempted to make up for their regular lack of affection. Whenever the Egan family had encountered trouble in any of the ambassador's previous postings – as if under a voodoo spell, John Jr. has etched in his mind forever the days he spent in Haiti as a child – John Jr.'s mother made sure the boy did not become aware of how dreadful things had really gotten.

And if his mother was a pretty good actress – a pretty good liar, like everyone else at home at different times – then Eloisa, her right hand in keeping the Lisbon house clean and tidy, in preparing the succulent Portuguese dishes made of *bacalao* that filled the mansion's halls with a salty aroma that seemed to breeze right in from the ocean, was not. As word on the street had it that the government would fall, Eloisa too closed all the doors and windows and pulled the curtains but rejoiced in the events taking place.

*Eloisa, what a character.*

It was impossible for the Egan's house not to be noticed. The home of the American ambassador, the previous abode of the Count, was unmistakable. Still, Mrs. Egan insisted on taking every precautionary measure as well. She had done the same in Port-au-Prince.

“You will go to school with the bodyguard. He will wait for you and pick you up in the afternoon. You cannot go riding your bike outside. You won’t be able to invite anyone over, at least until things settle down. And no arguments.” These were some of her “maternal rules.” She was the disciplinarian and the watchguard, and his father let her exercise her discretion.

John Jr. doesn’t think often of Eloisa or of her culinary talents anymore, not because he doesn’t want to, but because as the years go by, certain people seem to vanish in a blur of obsolescence, he reasons. They fulfill their duties in one’s life, they come in, and go out. Tonight, however, alone in that office in Buenos Aires, with no one waiting for him at his apartment, and at an ungodly hour, he thinks of her and of what a special human being she was. How she spoiled his parents and him. And he feels nostalgia for those visits with the old woman, when she always confided in him that things would be *tudo bem*. As when those tanks rolled into Lisbon and they both watched together through the long, dark drapes that she would pull from one side of the room to the other. It was like their own little secret, a conspiracy of sorts.

“This is the people’s will,” she whispers in her Portuguese-accented English. The truth was, of course, that this whole revolutionary affair, this Revolução dos Cravos, had never really been a revolution of the masses. It was still a romantic notion, however.

The day of the coup in Lisbon, Mrs. Egan, Eloisa and John Jr. stayed inside the house, listening to the radio and waiting for two key songs, a code the ambassador had shared: *E Depois do Adeus* and *Grândola, Vila Morena*. Those would signal the beginning of the end. John Jr., though, never played Portuguese music. Only tuned in to

whatever pop and rock songs he could get on the BBC and the Voice of America. He wanted David Bowie, the Bee Gees. The Portuguese sound was all about *fado*, dark and somber as the country's mood after all those years under Salazar and Caetano, shadowy as the veils worn by ladies at church on Sundays.

*António de Oliveira Salazar's rule will be nothing but an unfortunate memory, and tonight, the government of Marcelo Caetano will be in the dustbin of history...* the radio announcer states.

There was a certain romanticism to the Lisbon coup, John Jr. considered. Back in Portugal, military loyalists seemed poised to battle their colleagues who had rebelled, and came to confront each other in a large vendors' market. Crowds gathered, everyone holding the flower in bloom that season, carnations. And so, quickly, in silence, thousands upon thousands of carnations exchanged hands, and soldiers and officers alike began inserting them into their rifles and into the tanks staring them down. Women dressed in black, waiting like crows on a clothesline; priests counting their rosary beads, hoping for some kind of rapture; fishermen with berets, students and their books, everyone side by side; even barefoot children giggling, unaware of the perils at hand. They formed a massive wall of hope, one brightened by the colors of the many petals held in their hands, a landlocked Ganges of flowers galore.

A petal for a pistol.

The government fell. How could it not?

As a foreign affairs rookie, John Jr. tried to explain to Eloisa that not everything was what it seemed, but Eloisa refused to believe him. His father, he offered, had all the

background knowledge: Disgruntled officers were the ones who had led the charge in a desperately needed, if too long in the making, push to end the Estado Novo right-wing dictatorship.

Fibs. Revisionism. Tricks. That was his family's life. That is diplomacy, John Jr. admits to himself, now and then.

What could not be questioned was the ambassador's mastery in the skills of compromise, and how he displayed them backstage, where they mattered, not in the front pages of newspapers or at the top of the broadcasts. And it all began at his home. Conquer domestic strife, avoid public bloodshed.

John Jr. laughs at this thought as he grabs his briefcase. He walks out. The corridor is empty, except for a security guard who tips his hat on the diplomat's way out. Egan acknowledges the man. He passes by the photos of President Nixon and Vice President Ford.

*What would you do now in Argentina, Papa, if you were in my place? I took that dream away from you, didn't I?*

"Nixon could give a rat's ass about Portugal, but he listens to Kissinger, his twisted conscience," he hears his father say. He has not lost sight of that night, of the euphemistic "change of government" in Lisbon, what Nixon and Kissinger called it, as the elder Egan relayed it to the family.

"I tell them what they want to hear. It's all about buying time," the veteran diplomat reveals to his son. The ambassador had tact, finesse. John Patrick Egan from Montana, married to Anna, a Californian, knew better than to butt heads all the time with

the President of the United States and the Secretary of State; he understood to perfection how to handle the anachronistic leaders of Haiti or Portugal or wherever the hell he was sent to. He was not a rebel, true. He was a player. He followed rules, yet took advantage of flaws and loopholes. He grasped which buttons to press. Even when not many were interested in what was taking place in Portugal at the time.

*Why should it, Dad? Why should Portugal have mattered? And what about Argentina?*

America's spooks were actually much more worried about, and involved in, Latin America. Chile was a headache they had been able to cure; then it was Argentina that was making them ill. Mr. Egan was close to retirement, but he would still scrawl or type the word Argentina on papers scattered across his desk in the studio. Even on napkins. He dreamed of that one last unforgettable posting. It wouldn't happen. His son got the job.

"The Portuguese want to take charge of their destiny, and we are here to facilitate that, not impose our will," the father explains. "This change will bring them into the modern age."

Some modern age. John Jr. is not convinced. There he was, living in a city where he was not able to get a good burger, but he understood what his father had said. In the scope of a nation's future, gripes such as these were insignificant.

On his way home, walking past the Buenos Aires botanical gardens, he sees an elderly lady standing by a doorway. Lost in thought, or admiring the night, or listening to music. There's the faint sound of tango coming from somewhere behind her. Maybe an album is playing. She nods. He nods. Eloisa comes back to haunt him...

Eloisa turns on the radio. She pulls the day's page off the kitchen's almanac, brings it to her lips, and kisses it as if afraid of damaging the paper. The light contour of her mauve lipstick adorns the black, block-like letters and numbers: **April 26, 1974.**

Like so many of these other memories, the date is one John Jr. never forgets.

John Jr. prefers walking towards his place, rather than taking a cab. There's usually a breeze and the aroma of the flowers in the gardens, and he can stretch his legs after sitting all day. Plus, he's able to think. He can think of a past that seems at times so much better than his present. A present in which both his parents have left an insurmountable void. His father, by living so far away; his mother, by passing away. Their voices never leave him.

"This could be a model for the future, with no bloodshed," Egan the always-hopeful diplomat says to his son. The son is happy for his father. Egan's mission accomplished, it was time to leave Portugal. That's how it always was. Come in, try to help clean up the mess, and exit.

High expectations can cause irreparable damage. Egan Jr. lived that in Zaire. He hopes not to repeat the same mistake in Argentina.

#### **4. The Move**

On his way home tonight, John Jr. notices, as usual, cars that never seem to go anywhere. They occupy the same space, their windows tinted, but their headlights are sometimes on. The vehicle is always the same: a Ford Falcon, green or red. He wonders if moving here for this was worth it after all.

The move to Argentina was fast. Why postpone the inevitable, was his father's explanation. The son was assigned to Buenos Aires. The ambassador would not get his last wish, of being in that South American city trying to broker another time of peace, but he had high hopes for his only child, and he planned on joining him soon. His wife's death, however, would put a stop to all of his plans, for the time being. So he returned to Lisbon, where he had friends and knew the ins and outs of the city, after a disappointing brief sojourn in the States.

A going-away party was held for the ambassador and his wife; then the couple packed all their belongings again, funded a pension for Eloisa, left the Count's mansion in pristine fashion and bid *adeus* to Lisbon. They were headed back to DC. His mother wore a red carnation on her lapel on the day of their departure. When she died of a heart attack, she had worn a carnation of the same color on her dress as well.

*Mama, it is lonely here...*

John Jr. is almost home. He passes a film theater, its marquee dark, but still visible thanks to moonlight. Movies are starting to be censored, that's probably why there are no movie posters in it, he reasons. There's trash on the sidewalk, and no one else in sight. The Falcons are gone.

*We used to love going to the movies...*

That's how it was after Port-au-Prince, when the Egans returned to DC, and John Jr. studied and appreciated the city more than ever before. He could spend time with his mother, doing all the usual touristy things, the noisy ones, the mellow ones. Anna and her son caught up with the latest flicks – she particularly liked *The Conversation*, he dug

*Blazing Saddles*— while the father spent several days being briefed, in meetings, conferences, seminars, and such.

During his first weeks at work in Buenos Aires, Egan Jr. decided he would walk from his apartment by the botanical gardens to Colombia Avenue, on to the embassy, and back. Although advised not to do this by his own security forces, he insisted on getting to know the neighborhood and its people. His home below the equator, the “City of Our Lady Saint Mary of the Fair Winds.”

A rusting and rustling birdcage of a city. That’s what his mother once called it after visiting it in her youth. She had told her son she’d always been curious about this faraway place with a European past, the beauty of a courtesan and the humor of a mime. Tango, no doubt, would be another skill to be added to her repertoire of social graces if she ever went there again to spend time with John Jr. She never made it.

Now it was John Jr. who had considered taking tango lessons, even if the idea of tango dancing was starting to be considered – ridiculously – subversive by some and, worst of all, gauche!

“I can’t do my job if I’m being chauffeured,” Egan argued about his morning and evening walks.

His staff severely objected to his routine. A compromise was reached, but it didn’t last long: Two undercover agents would lag a few meters behind him and pretend to be either going out to buy a newspaper or just admiring the gardens or the cats that lived in them.

Dozens of cats had made the gardens their home, and the neighbors in Palermo would take utmost care of these creatures. They slept under rose bushes, climbed pine trees, played with acorns as if they were soccer balls, put their paws on the lotus flowers in the small ponds trying to cross them. Although Egan had witnessed first-hand poverty and hunger in Haiti, and repression in Portugal, plus many other less than desirable situations, and never seemed to be too affected by them, he retained a tender heart for animals. Especially for these strays. He felt they humanized him, and with the difficult days Argentina was living, and would have to endure for much longer and in much more dire circumstances, it was a simple joy of life to pet a cat.

That daily joy, however, was brief, for as Egan approached the security gates of the embassy, every day he saw an every-growing line of people stretched all along the fence and out onto the street, past the security checkpoint and around the block. A sad river of humanity, he thought. He would walk quietly, looking at the families standing there waiting. Waiting for answers. Waiting to ask questions. Waiting for a chance to plead their cases. Waiting to beg for help. Egan did not have to ask them to know that despair, and fear, and hope had brought them there.

Some women were blonde, well poised, and dressed, with vestiges of a dignity that seemed to have been eroded over time. Others were maids, cleaning ladies, their skin darker, their hair unkempt. There were babies crying and children with dirty faces sitting on the ground, bored, playing with little rocks or making castles out of leaves. Elderly gentlemen read tattered books or wrinkled magazines, hiding behind the pages, peeking through their glasses to see the tall man impeccably dressed in gray with a little American

flag pinned on his lapel walk by them. They had never seen him in person before, but they knew who he was, either from that article that had run with his picture in the newspapers, or had heard from someone who had seen the picture or knew of another person who had clipped it and passed it along as well.

If nobody in their government would listen to them, certainly the American *chargé d' affaires* would, no?

“Good morning... Ma’am... Sir...Hello. *Buenos días... Hola... Señor... Señora...*”

Egan acknowledged them all as he walked by, whether by nodding, smiling or just saying a few words. His guards followed closely, no longer pretending not to be protecting him. But hardly anyone moved. They just seemed happy that, at least for a moment, this man had engaged them. They probably knew that if they lost their patience, if they pushed too hard, those gates would never open for them, that security checkpoint would become impenetrable, and the American hope would be unreachable.

This particular morning, Egan was about to pass the security checkpoint when his eyes fixed on an elderly woman with a white handkerchief around her head. She was small, with glassy eyes that seemed worn out, tired from restless nights perhaps. Or too many tears? She had one hand hidden in the folds of her floral dress. He did not want to stop abruptly in front of her, for that would alert the guards behind him, and could trigger an unwelcome response on their part. Had she something that could prove of danger to him in her hand though? Instead, he slowed down, smiling, shaking hands with a few more patrons before reaching her.

In his accented, but proper Spanish, he spoke.

She smiled and engaged him as well.

“Por favor,” she said.

“I know you have been waiting here for a long time, and I will try to do everything I can to help you.” He extended both his hands.

Without missing a beat, the woman’s eyes scouted the area. She then placed a folded piece of paper in the diplomat’s left hand. The grip between them was warm, strong. He nodded and turned back to the checkpoint. Several onlookers sighed in disappointment after his back faced them while he entered the compound, only to disappear shortly thereafter from their view.

That evening, as with any other evening leaving to go home, the same scenario would wait for Egan outside: many of the people that had been there in the morning, would still be there when the sun had set and the temperature had dropped a bit and the cats in the botanical gardens were out hunting or frolicking in the dark.

Egan would try to be more like his father, and make him proud: seek solutions, whether by arbitration, negotiation or persuasion. Do something for these people. Something that would not fray relations between his government and the Argentines. Something that would keep President Perón at bay. Something that would not arouse suspicions from López Rega or from any of his goons, at least for a little while, he hoped.

John Jr. finally reaches his apartment building. He pulls out his keys and enters the modernist glass and marble lobby, which seems out of place with the rest of the

rococo-style edifice he lives in. So common in Buenos Aires. There is no one in the vestibule, or in the elevator.

He now sits in his living room; already has a glass of whiskey in hand, just like his father used to do whenever he got home. There's silence everywhere around him. And mostly darkness. He hasn't turned the lights on, except for the one in the kitchen, where the bar is. Everything looks tidy, so the maid, Lily, must have come in today. How clean, and quiet, even, dare he say it, peaceful.

Restless, he stands up, heads over to the living room window and looks down below at the street. Deserted. He wonders what to do about the people by the gates. How to help them without provoking a phone call from Kissinger or a memo from Nixon. He paces around the apartment. Letting his mind wander, he can't help but notice that day's *Sun* newspaper on the kitchen counter. Egan reads the top headline and frowns as he had earlier that day when he found out the news. His was a face of severe disapproval: "Argentine peso: Devalued by 50 percent". That was the title of the main story, and it did not augur anything good. The Minister of Economy, Celestino Rodrigo, a protégé of López Rega, had decided, under the "advice" of the Minister of Social Welfare, to devalue the national currency. Instead of benefitting the economy, though, Egan sensed this plan would fail miserably, creating more havoc.

"Fools," he says.

He then remembers he has some unfinished business. That piece of paper from the elderly woman at the embassy. Her note must still be in his jacket. He fetches it in the

foyer. The paper is there. First he notices a woman's name written. Then a phone number. And then the words that make him shudder.

*My daughter Paula was forced to dig her own grave. She was pregnant, and they shot her. I have proof.*

## **5. The President**

The day John Egan Jr. arrived at the Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires, on September 16, 1974, 40 bombs went off throughout the country, detonating paranoia and fear everywhere. Major American and other foreign corporations, Ford, Goodyear, Coca-Cola, had seen their showrooms blown to pieces. The left-wing Montoneros group claimed responsibility.

Nixon had resigned over Watergate, and little over two months had gone by from Juan Domingo Perón's death on July 1, leaving his widow, Isabel, in charge. It had been less than a year since he had been elected "Presidente" for a third time and his wife vice-president. Perón-Perón was the ticket; many bought it, and came to regret it.

Mrs. Perón made her marks in the history books right away as the first non-royal female head of state and head of government in the Western Hemisphere. The power and the glory, alas, would be ephemeral.

The daily reports from the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires to the State Department were odes to catastrophe. A growing plethora of buildings destroyed, numerous police officers killed and an increase in the number of businessmen held for ransom. The military forces grew restless, and President Perón appeared weak, unable to control them

in their quest for order. Brutality, it seemed, had become their mantra. And she, well, she had opened a box of scorpions, and now they were about to sting her.

In the face of impending doom, the President did what any sensible leader of a country experiencing its biggest crisis ever would do: she consulted with her astrologer.

When Egan Jr. was debriefed on this information, he was unsettled, but not completely surprised. He had witnessed many strange things living abroad, especially in Port-au-Prince. Egan recalled the hair-raising tales about Duvalier his father used to share with the family: ministers holding voodoo ceremonies in their offices; enemies of the dictatorship allegedly being turned into zombies; foreigners sacrificed to appease the *loas*, or the gods. Drums and rum, he used to say about the island's priorities.

A different kind of fear, perhaps unease, would haunt Egan Jr. as well in Buenos Aires upon his arrival, when the new *chargé d'affaires* met for the first time Argentina's Minister of Social Welfare, Isabel's astrologer-in-residence, a leathery-looking man with slicked-back white hair who evoked an excessively tanned Italian fashion designer rather than an old, stodgy politician.

Egan had gone to inspect the American ambassador's residence by the city's botanical gardens. A new top-ranking diplomat was expected shortly from Washington, and Egan had the responsibility of sorting out everything before his arrival. He also acted as *the* ambassador until the next appointee showed up.

The house was an opulent, 19<sup>th</sup>-century French-styled mansion still called by its original name, the Bosch Palace, a grand hotel-type of property that surpassed in

extravagance Ambassador Egan Sr.'s former home in Lisbon and that made the young Egan's current apartment in the Palermo area look like the maid's quarters.

Before that first long visit there, however, John stopped at the U.S. compound to take a quick tour of that property. The embassy was a long, rectangular building; a modernist box, parts of it unfinished, and tinkered with until 1977, under the helm of Argentine architect Eduardo Catalano. The grounds, ceded to the Americans in 1963, were in what used to be known as the Intendente Seeber Plaza. Back at the embassy, a small committee awaited Egan Jr. He first met a tall, wide-shouldered American with thick lenses and an even thicker Texan accent, Tex Harris, who would become one of his most trusted confidantes.

“Just say what you need, and we'll get it done, sir,” said Harris.

Egan Jr. immediately warmed up to him. But that was also the time when he had the displeasure of being introduced to a man whose demeanor rubbed him the wrong way, José López Rega, that Minister of Social Welfare, who acted presidential while in reality exuded the air of a nobody. Egan shook hands with him, repulsed in turn by the fact that the man's hand was warm and clammy, like a wet shirt stuck to the back.

“Do not believe everything you hear, Mr. Egan,” said the Minister as he walked alongside the American, both headed to the Zen-like gardens in the center of the building, where they could talk alone. Harris remained behind them.

“Tell me, Minister, with all due respect, how aware is the President of the growing discontent of the people ?” Egan asked.

From the look on López Rega's face, Egan thought the man in front of him would snap. But the Minister contained himself, even as his facial expression betrayed him.

"Every action that the President takes is a decision she makes in close consultation with me, with other advisors, with the security forces, and with the church. Believe me, there is nothing that eludes her."

Egan did not feel confident about this. He had already read a few reports on Isabel's incompetence and weakness, remembered his father's warnings, and heard plenty of stories about the Minister's brainwashing effects on her.

"Washington is concerned about the escalating violence, Minister."

López-Rega smiled, turned towards a petite gardenia bush next to him, and plucked one of its white flowers. He inhaled the fragrance and put the bud in the breast pocket of his jacket. He then looked upwards.

"It looks like it's going to rain. I like rainy days. They are days of cleansing."

Egan was at a loss as to how to respond. He chose not to.

"We should have dinner soon, Mr. Egan. It's been a joy."

## **6. The Conversation**

Later that same night, Egan Jr. shared his impressions with his most trusted audience: his father. He called Lisbon, and although communication was at times spotty, and echoes were not uncommon, both men could still get their messages across. "López Rega seems to have some strange control over President Isabel," Egan Jr. tells his father. "He holds one of these government posts that really defy description. No one that I've

spoken to about him has been able to tell me what he does, or has dared anyway. I don't get this guy."

The former ambassador breaks his silence.

"What do your contacts know of this man, John?"

"Little. That's the problem," the son responds. "From what I've been able to find out, the consular staff, the security officers, even the CIA, they don't know what to make of him either. He has power, or the semblance of it, that's for sure."

Egan Jr. walks a bit around the apartment, untangling the phone cord. "He founded a sort of paramilitary group, the Triple A, the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, or some darn thing, to hunt down suspected terrorists and saboteurs, subversives, as they call them here."

"Have you talked with him in an official capacity?" says Egan Sr..

"No, we only had an impromptu chat in the embassy garden today, and before that, I saw him briefly at the Casa Rosada, prior to a meeting with President Perón. She and I also exchanged mostly pleasantries, and when I broached the subject of the turmoil going on, she pretty much dismissed it, like he did, saying it was under control."

Egan Jr. pauses. Then proceeds.

"She waved her right hand as if swatting a fly, in this very nonchalant way. I reminded her we had lost a consular officer in Córdoba, killed last year, and she acknowledged that '73 had been a rough time for everyone in the country, and that our casualty was a tragedy, but one that would not happen again."

Mr. Egan now asks, "What are the risks for the Americans?"

The son feels he is on the same wavelength with his dad. Even though there's such a physical distance between them right now, he feels so close to him.

“I asked her about the safety of the Americans living in Argentina, Dad. That took her by surprise. The internal affairs of the country, she replied, only affect Argentines: ‘And this will be resolved by Argentines’. And I thought, ‘Doesn't this woman even know what is going on in her country? What information is López Rega feeding her?’ ”

The father continues, “Are there many Americans living there?”

“About 5,000, but I don't know to what level, if any, they are following or are getting involved in the politics of the country,” Egan Jr. replies. “Dad, I am going to ask a member of my staff, this guy Harris, very no-nonsense from what I could tell, to compile a list of all the Americans living here. I want to know where they are, what they do and if possible, alert them of any danger.”

Egan Sr. remains silent for a moment. Egan Jr. senses the worry.

“I have to be honest. It's different from what we all lived in Lisbon, and I think it's different in a very bad way,” Egan Jr. says. “I am getting reports, not too many, but I am starting to see more, of people disappearing. Vanishing. In broad daylight. One moment they're crossing the street, or leaving their homes, and the next thing, they're whisked away in cars never to be seen or heard from again. They're calling them *desaparecidos*. The disappeared.” He doesn't tell his father the cars have followed him as well.

If there's no body, there's no proof, he explains, and there's no case. “It's perversely perfect. And apparently, even the local press, except for this one newspaper,

*The Buenos Aires Sun*, won't report it. Either the rest are afraid, or they're acting in a complicit manner. The government doesn't worry too much about the *Sun*, because it's in English and well, most people here don't read it."

"Think Germany," is Egan Sr.'s best reply. "To be honest, I don't know why men do such things. I really don't. And I wish I had some sort of answer."

But there are no answers. The son knows this. Evil and malice, he has seen, always defy logic and reason. Before he gets emotional and chokes up, he decides to hang up.

"Love you, Dad."

## **7. The Journalist**

"I want a stronger ending to this story!" an editor shouts. His accent is English.

The headquarters of *The Buenos Aires Sun* are humble, yet with a slight decadence: a four-story nautically inspired Art Deco building, with a salt-colored granite façade and a small elevator right in the middle of the lobby. The elevator is nothing but a small box open all-around with ornate bars for walls and an iron-wrought gate door that has to be pushed manually to open and close. Barely three people could fit in what seems like an old barbecue grill, rusty and dusty but effective nevertheless. Anyone that goes up the building on San Juan Avenue can see glimpses of the street below through the portholes in the wall. All around the lift, as the machine rattles and shakes, provides a view of the stairs in green terrazzo, weathered by years of shoes stepping on it, wrapped around in a serpentine way.

Inside, the newsroom is just one, long, messy space, with about a dozen typewriters, desks to match, books, piles of papers, and boxes everywhere. Layers of dust have changed the colors of the once-white ceiling fans to gray. Noise abounds, English and Spanish emanating from the desks, from surrounding offices that belong to the editors, from the TV sets tuned in to the local channels, from radio stations galore. In the middle of the salon, hooked to a beam are five big, metal and glass clocks: one with the time in Buenos Aires, the other in New York, and the last one in London. The two others, for Africa and Asia, are broken, their times frozen.

“Where the hell is that piece on that terrorist attack in Córdoba?” the editor wants to know.

“Working on it!” replies a male voice from somewhere in the back, behind a stack of books.

*The Buenos Aires Sun* has always been a scrappy little daily geared towards the community of expatriates that have made Buenos Aires their home. Diplomats, businessmen, tourists, and the occasional Argentine who wanted to learn English, would pick it up on the street kiosks, common every other block in a most Parisian way. Always lacking for funds, of a rather dour presentation, and without the modernity of color or graphics, *The Sun* didn't seem to have entered the 20th century. Kind of like the newsroom. In a long period of darkness for the country, however, it would be one of its rare beacons of light.

“What else do we have today?!” the editor yells from his office once more.

Another rookie reporter, a young bilingual Argentine, jumps up from his desk and heads over with a page that has come in through the Teletype. Paper in hand, he stands at the threshold of a doorway. There's a little golden sign on the wall that reads Managing Editor.

"The military are going after the unions, sir. They're busting them."

"Who's first?"

"Ford Automobiles."

"How bad is it?"

"There are allegations about some disappearances at the main plant already."

"Follow up. And try to stay alive."

In the eyes of many Argentines, *The Sun* would forever be redeemed of any imperfections for one major reason: at a time when the country's major newspapers, *La Patria* and *Registro*, shied away from reporting the atrocities taking place, *The Buenos Aires Sun* stood up to Isabel, to López Rega and his anticommunist forces, to the leftists that were sabotaging order, to the rightists who wanted to clamp down on all liberties, to the anarchists who reveled in fanning the flames of chaos and, above all, to the generals who would take power on March 24, 1976.

"What else do we have on the budget this week?" the editor presses on.

"I could do a piece on the new American diplomat, a guy called Egan, whose father was some big-shot in Europe," says a female reporter sitting next to the managing editor's office. "And there should be a new U.S. ambassador coming in soon as well."

"Do it," says the editor.

That editor, also the owner of the paper, was a British journalist, Robert Cox, affectionately drawn by the *Sun*'s cartoonist as a jolly and rotund gentleman with aquamarine eyes and still-rosy cheeks in spite of being close to 60; little hair other than a few strands that were combed from one side of his head to another; owlish spectacles; and a daily bowtie in bright colors that livened up his bookish appearance.

“They want to break the backbone of the country. Perón empowered the unions, and now Isabel will crush them. A bloody mess this will be,” says Cox to a reporter before giving him some further instructions. He picks up the phone after a first ring.

“Yes?!” he shouts.

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In his youth, Robert Cox had been quite a dapper and agile fellow, stationed in Rome during WWII, covering the Allies' offensive and chronicling the last days of Mussolini for BBC Radio. It was then that he fell in love with an Argentine translator of Italian descent whom he met on one of his assignments and who, contrary to many of her countrymen living in Italy at the time, abhorred fascism. Thus, she collaborated with a network of clandestine groups that gathered intelligence, translated it into English, and sent it to the resistance groups backed by the United States and England.

Romina Scioli was her name, and she was as pretty as the name sounded when it left her lips. After the war ended, her mission accomplished, she decided to go back home to her family, who never really knew what she had been doing in Europe. To her parents,

younger brother and sister, she had originally gone to learn Italian, and had later on joined the Red Cross relief effort. All that was accurate. She never lied to them. She just did not tell them the whole truth.

“If I told you, I would have to kill you all,” she used to tease.

One truth she shared with them completely, however, was that she had met this English journalist – she spared them the details of the real way they met, for that would’ve blown her cover; instead, her story was that he had gone to the Red Cross after suffering a leg injury – who had fallen in love with her. They dated for several months until she told him it was time for her to go back to Argentina. Her fate rested there, she said. A bombed-out, massacred, Holocaust-inflicted Europe would rise from the ashes one day, she believed, but she didn’t want to wait to see that. She had already witnessed too much suffering. And besides, things were going well in Argentina. Strongman Juan Domingo Perón had the economy at full blast, the workers loved their first lady, Evita, and a new era of hope seemingly dawned for the Argentines.

Of course, Romina detested Perón’s fascist tendencies, but she had to admit that he had gotten the country up and moving again, especially after the grains market collapsed in the Great Depression of 1929. Argentina had gone from being the basket that fed the world, to a hungry basket case. Perón’s economic policies, thankfully, had stopped that.

Her news of leaving Italy only emboldened her suitor: Cox asked for her hand, and agreed to move with her to Buenos Aires. She accepted. They left. They would marry once they got to Argentina.

And then?

His idea was to start a newspaper. An English-language newspaper like the city, heck, the country, the region, had never seen. It would be a private, family-owned affair, objective and with a centrist view, staffed first with a row of stringers and Romina acting as secretary, reporter, wife, mother of his future children, love of his life. For its logo, he would replicate the sun that appeared in the Argentine flag. Yeah, that looked good. It felt right. It was... Argentine.

A one-sheet newsletter, *The Buenos Aires News*, opened by a Scotsman in 1876, was until then the only locally produced, English-language publication for most residents. Those with a bit more money, like the ones who lived in the posh Recoleta area, could afford to buy British magazines. But there really wasn't anything like the American newspapers that had so impressed Cox during his formative years as a journalist.

With his own funds, he bought the facilities of *The News*, and ushered in a new type of publication. One that, again and again, would get him and Romina into bundles of trouble. Particularly each time Perón had a fit, a government crumbled or a president was deposed by the military. And this seemed to happen so often it was as if nothing could inoculate the patient against this disease.

Mr. and Mrs. Cox inaugurated their newspaper in 1948, and never looked back. Not when the death threats came, or when the warnings about going into exile, rather than ending up at the bottom of La Plata River, started becoming a bit too common.

But nothing that had come before could compare to the country's last coup, they thought, that hellish period that descended upon the land as the United States celebrated its bicentennial, and only disappeared almost a decade later.

It was in the early years leading to the coup, 1974 to be precise, that Cox met John Egan Jr., whom they learned had been assigned to Buenos Aires after a stint in Zaire and studies in Washington and in Lisbon. Egan was said to be a thoroughly decent chap, if perhaps a bit of a dilettante, son of a famous ambassador, John Patrick Egan, who had helped broker the transition of a government in Portugal after the Carnation Revolution. Cox would invite the young Egan to the offices of *The Buenos Aires Sun* on Avenida San Juan and run a piece on him in the paper. Then, depending on how that went, he would have the diplomat over for *vino* and an *asado* at his home in the country on a Sunday. Cox would also have to stop by the American embassy one day and see what changes were in store for the U.S. diplomatic corps now that a new ambassador was expected.

The journalist remained hopeful. Yet, his faith had been tested by what was happening. He had never seen Argentina descend into such disorder, but he had lived through worse atrocities, unspeakable horrors, during the last Great War, and had had the chance to tell of them. He also found love then, and a new goal in life. Going back to dull, rainy England, with London blitzed and virtually in ruins, had never been an option. Not then. Not now.

His option was Romina, his love, and his adopted country, Argentina.

After almost three decades there, where he had gone from being a feisty and ambitious 26-year-old to a witty and not less combative mature gadfly, it pained Cox to

see everything falling apart. The arrival of Egan, he cautiously hoped, could bring some change, since the governments in power always had to listen to the American presidents, no matter who was in charge, whether a Republican or a Democrat in the U.S., or a general or a civilian in Argentina.

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Cox listens as the phone ring. He hopes Egan will pick up. Egan comes on the line.

“Mr. Egan, I would be delighted to have you visit our offices, give you a tour and talk a bit about what’s going on. This Thursday? That will be fine. Yes, 11 a.m., I shall be waiting for you.”

It was settled then. Easily. The diplomat and the journalist would have their first meeting. On the scheduled Thursday, Egan, all by himself, no security apparatus, only a driver waiting for him downstairs, knocks on the door and waits for Cox to come out. Creaking, weathered parquet wood floors signal the journalist is getting closer, until the beige door finally opens accompanied by a warm and charming English-inflected “Hello.”

A silver-haired woman in a light-blue one-piece, short-sleeved dress, a uniform really, with no makeup, smile or sparkle in her eyes, emerges out of a nearby broom closet with a mop and a bucket. She walks right past the two men. Her hair tied up in a

knot, she looks down, staring at the floor. For a moment, the only sound that could be heard was that of her dragging the mop down the corridor.

“That’s the third one this month,” says Cox after a sigh, staring at her and then turning his gaze back towards the diplomat.

“The third housekeeper?”

“The third snitch, snoop, spy, whatever you want to call them. They watch us. They follow us.”

This is not paranoia on the part of the journalist, Cox clarifies.

“I don’t want to sound alarmist, but a fact is a fact: People are dying. People are disappearing. People are being... abducted, burned, drowned, incarcerated, kidnapped, shot, snatched, tortured, vanished.”

Egan nods and continues the conversation.

“They follow us too. We even lost a consular officer, and we still don’t know what happened. Who do you think is responsible for all this, all the mayhem around us?”

Cox does not hesitate, “Bloody López Rega.”

## **8. The Warlock**

The phone rings in López Rega’s dispatch.

“Yes?”

“Cox, from *The Buenos Aires Sun*, had a visitor.”

“That... English toad. Who was he with?”

“The new American diplomat.”

“Again. Those two could be lovers. When is the U.S. ambassador arriving?”

Silence at the other end of the line.

“Well?”

“Sir, from what our sources say, no appointment has been made yet. Egan is in charge.”

“Wrong. *I* am in charge.”

López Rega lowers the old, black, bulky phone and strokes his chin. He remains at his desk, in his office, alone, as if in a meditative state. Thoughts swirl around in his head like a dervish in ecstasy...

*What was Egan doing there again? Why did he visit that fool Cox? Does he think he has the right to lecture us about how we handle our affairs? Has he found out about the subversives brought to justice?*

He places both his hands on his face, wanting to shut out the outside world, then combs his hair back, in an attempt to calm himself. A mixture of alarm, disgust and fascination bubble up inside him. He can feel his temperature rising, maybe his blood pressure, affecting his heart. Control, self-control, he reminds himself. Repeatedly, control, self-control.

Americans like Egan were not the ones he liked. These were agitators, provocateurs. They came here to change the status quo, poking their noses into other people's, other countries' affairs. And for what? They were the ones who decried the American intervention that helped save Chile! It was not just the copper industry; much more was at stake in the neighboring nation. It was liberty, freedom, Christianity. Allende

was a socialist, an atheist, a heretic. Didn't they see what was taking place in South America? Che Guevara had tried to spread his darn revolution all over the continent. And although he died shitting his pants in the Bolivian jungle, his words still echoed throughout and appealed to many. If Chile had fallen, what then, Argentina? Paraguay? Bolivia? Brazil? No, that could not be allowed.

That's why plans had to be drawn up, conceived only in the belly of survival, with fury against all reason and humanity. There was no other way. Hence, Plan Condor, a bird of prey spreading death under its wings. Plucking out subversion like vermin wherever it could be found, no matter the national boundaries or laws. When it came to eradicating communists, subversives, terrorists, all rules of decency, decorum and law had to be thrown out. It was Darwinian, it was draconian, of course, but it had to be. Kill them first, or they will kill you. Kill them by decree.

Then comes a pompous gringo like Egan, most likely educated in the best schools his country has to offer, with stints abroad and lots of commendations. Human rights this, human rights that. More and more, that was the talk that was creeping into the diplomatic circles. At least Kissinger was still around, thank God. He would never allow Argentina to go red. Kissinger was the master; a genius at *realpolitik* if ever there was one.

All these bright, savvy, pragmatic people in America, as well as a bunch of peace-loving losers who don't know the intricacies of war, of terrorism, of fighting for a homeland. Hell, the Vietnamese in Vietnam are still dying for their country. Do they teach that in America's schools? Well, the same is happening in Argentina. Dying for an ideal.

“I will stamp out any and every enemy of our great nation, by any means necessary, with or without Isabel’s approval,” vowed López Rega every day, before throwing the shells on the floor, or reading the tarot cards, or tea leaves, communicating with the spirits that guided him.

A knock on the door to his office pulls him away from his reveries. He does that quite often, fall into trance-like states, with his mind concocting plots, devising plans to meet his goals and protect Madam President, Isabel. He liked her, not as much as Evita, but he still liked her. No one, of course, could compare to Evita. He had only met her once, at a Peronist rally in front of the Casa Rosada, when thousands gathered at the gates of the presidential palace to listen to their leader, Perón. The young López Rega saw her on the balcony waving. Rewarded for his loyalty towards the party, he had been granted access to stand closest to the entrance of the government house.

Evita looked like a saint. She glowed! But Isabel, ah, Isabel was opaque.

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A former police officer, José López Rega could barely contain his admiration for both Evita and for Perón. He would never get to be her confidante, however. She would die young, surrounded only by the president’s inner circle. Something López Rega was not a part of. Yet.

He met Isabel when Perón went into exile, in 1955. A natural charmer, with a way of speaking that created an image of a man much more cultured than he really was,

meticulously dressed and observant of details, López Rega had many qualities that Perón admired: he knew when to be quiet and listen, and when to speak; and he was always willing to do the dirty work.

Ambition was amoral for the future Minister of Social Welfare, a title Isabel would bestow upon him since nothing else seemed to match his qualifications. In the 1950s, when Perón visited friends in Spain, after the welcome mat had been plucked from under his feet by Panama and the Dominican Republic, Franco extended an invitation for him to stay.

Perón accepted, and so he moved with Isabel, López Rega and a few more confidants. For López Rega, the immediate goal was to get rid of the others, with just him and Isabel taking care of their leader's affairs. He would make himself indispensable, and expose the betrayals, defects and weaknesses of the others on Perón's staff. Perón had saved the country once before. His wife Evita had helped families like López Rega's. And so it was only natural, no, it was his duty, to give his life for the old man if necessary. How many of those in the circle around him would be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice? None. Maybe Isabel. Maybe. It was in the stars. It was in his dreams. It was his destiny.

It was 1951 when López Rega was introduced to the worlds of the occult, the realms of the esoteric, mysticism, witchcraft and freemasonry. He had gone to Brazil for carnival, and there, in a massage parlor in Rio, had met a *masseuse* called Victoria Montero, a medium who would later on accompany him to Argentina for the unveiling of a statue in a park honoring Perón. She was his conduit to other worlds, or at least so he

thought. They traveled to Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Rhodesia. They attended séances and ceremonies, visited graveyards, and learned the rituals of macumba, santería, spiritism, umbanda, voodoo. When he joined the former president and his new wife in their exile, without Victoria (she would drown a year before one night during a baptism in the beaches of Recife), he revealed his interest in these arts to both, but only Isabel bit. Perón, ever the skeptic, tired, and feeling the weight of time on his shoulders, could care less. He reasoned, however, it would give his wife something to do. No harm there.

What began as friendly and casual conversations, soon turned into rituals. After Perón had finished his daily nightcap and retired to his room, López Rega and Isabel would dismiss the other members of the staff, except two security guards, and gather like children in the parlor of their Madrid mansion, giggling and showing amazement at all the things they were sharing.

He always took her right hand and examined her palm. It was a delicate hand, with long, slim fingers and almost translucent skin. Her fingernails were painted a bright red, which went well with the ruby ring she wore. Her two little dogs usually surrounded him with verbal dislike, yapping at him, while Rosarito her chambermaid ran after them, getting them out of harm's way.

“Great things are in store for you!” he repeated to Isabel with unwavering bombast. “I made a trip to the United States once. It was California, 1962. Remember that I took off for two weeks? And since then, I have had revelations.”

Isabel stared wide-eyed.

“Yes, and you were very secretive about where you were going. You said you were visiting relatives up north, in Formosa, but I didn’t think you were telling the truth. I had never heard you speak of any relatives in that province, so something did not sound right.”

“Smart. I saw a bright future for the man whom I met, a reverend, Jim Jones, and whose advice I cherish to this day. He opened the doors of the esoteric world for me. And I see a brighter future for us.”

They both smiled at each other, she with the pleasure of revealing to him that she could tell when he was making up stories; he acknowledging that she was not always the dumb ballerina he normally thought she was, something he had never shown to her of course. After Evita, why would Perón choose a second-rate cabaret dancer in Panama City to be his next wife, his next first lady?

While in Panama before their Madrid sojourn, before Isabel, López Rega would run into another one of Perón’s paramours, a woman from Chicago, Eleanor Freeman, with whom the deposed president enjoyed an affair in Central America.

Eleanor was a carefree spirit, not interested in the General’s fortune or power. She just enjoyed being around him. They had met at the bar of a hotel in the city of Colón, before government after government shifted the balance of power in Panama to the capital and poverty and despair crept through that port area like the out-of-control jungle. She had gone there to learn Spanish and escape the brutal storms of Illinois. A friend back home had worked on the Panama Canal as an engineer years ago, and had taken her for a visit. The 25-year-old girl fell in love with the tropics.

One night, suntanned and wearing a white linen dress that played nicely against her skin tone and molded sensually to her body, she sat at the bar and ordered a rum punch. Perón walked in with his amanuensis, López Rega and others, and noticed her right away. It was as if the world had stopped. Nothing else existed for him at that moment. No one else was around. His vanity, pride and yes, insecurities flourished. He wore a well-pressed, long-sleeve *guayabera* with khaki pants and a Panama hat. He looked more like a wealthy hacienda owner than the former president of Argentina.

Eleanor mistook him for a *bon vivant* retiree; he misjudged her to be a singer, most certainly brought in by the hotel to entertain the Americans with torch songs. In this case, his instincts had failed him. She was an elementary school teacher. But he was not the only one who did not get the story right, for clearly he was not exactly what she had imagined.

It didn't matter.

Perón raised his right arm slightly, making a signal to his group that they should stay behind, and proceeded to walk directly to the bar. He tipped his hat, smiled and asked if he could sit next to her. She acquiesced, and so he did.

"I'll have the same."

Perón, who had never had a rum punch before, enjoyed his first one. López Rega tasted it beforehand.

"My name is Perón, mademoiselle."

Eleanor smiled and took a sip of her drink. She looked him straight in the eyes and noticed the wrinkles around them and the creeping gray hairs in his eyebrows. She found him attractive.

“That is a funny name.”

“I should clarify. That is my last name. Juan is my first.”

“Well, Juan Perón, it is a pleasure to meet you. *Un placer conocerle.*”

Argentina’s savior was momentarily thrown off, not expecting to hear Spanish coming from this black-haired, blue-eyed beauty that spoke his language rather well. López Rega whispered something in the old man’s ear.

“To meeting you, Miss --- ?”

“Freeman. Eleanor Freeman.”

“Leave us, López Rega. But don’t get lost.”

For the rest of Perón’s months in Panama, the couple was inseparable, with López Rega however never too far behind. She would teach him English, and he would practice Spanish with her. They danced till late and mingled with other guests, high-profile people: Howard Hughes, actress Terri Moore. Perón kept her abreast of what was going on back home. If Perón was happy, then López Rega was happy. He had never seen his idol quite so content and relaxed with what he had: a sweet, modest woman by his side. Maybe it was... Panama’s unrelenting heat? Or the seductiveness of the jungle? The beaches whose waves were an alluring far cry from La Plata River in Buenos Aires?

López Rega liked Eleanor, but he knew that Perón liked her even more. With time, though, this began to worry him, because it could be an impediment to his plans. No

American woman could go back with “El General” and be accepted as future first lady of Argentina. As much as López Rega appreciated that the *Americana* was a good influence on Perón, she was too risky, a political liability that could throw into disarray Perón’s triumphant return to Argentina and the future of the homeland.

Perón’s guards were also starting to relax. They could see their boss felt and looked better than he had in years, in spite of his age. The burden of too much responsibility, of constant duty and loyalty to one’s country had dissipated a bit in the name of what, love? Infatuation? Romance? Whatever it was, their walks on the pebble-covered beaches of Colón or their strolls through the grounds of the hotel at night, under trees enveloped in little lights that brought them to life as if hundreds of fireflies had decided to rest on their branches, signaled that something was happening between the two of them. Something that could be just temporary, a simple summer fever of affection, or more permanent, like the beginnings of a relationship that would be hard to decipher and explain to followers and enemies alike.

“Another rum punch, *mi general*?”

“Sure, my little gringa...”

López Rega then feared for himself. Give this woman too much power, and *he* may be out of a job. Oh no, Eleanor would have to go. She would have to vanish. Somehow, in any way. López Rega was fond of her, really, but poor Eleanor. This would not work out. No one would stop the march of history, the great encounter with destiny that the cards, the stars and the universe had told López Rega waited for him and for the father of the nation.

The planets were aligned in his favor. The goat's blood reached its destiny. The hex, the spell, the incantation, whatever had done it, had done it right. One night, at the same bar where seven months earlier the General had met the American schoolteacher, Perón saw another woman who struck his fancy. But this one was singing, albeit not very well, and dancing, which she did a bit better.

She wore an outfit worthy of Brazilian carnival, plumes and rhinestones and jewels and what-have-you, and sang a samba that had everyone in the club getting up from their tables and heading to the bar to order more drinks. Perón was mesmerized. Eleanor was asleep, his guards had been given the night off, and only López Rega toiled behind. When he saw Perón transfixed by the woman with the parrot-like feathers on her head and a constellation of sequins bouncing off the dim ceiling lights, López Rega knew he had found the answer. He would not have to get rid of Eleanor after all. She would go all on her own, thanks to this ballerina named Isabel.

“Drink, madam?”

“Never before a dance, always one afterwards,” said the dancer after she finished her performance for the night and sat at the bar.

López Rega made a signal to attract the bartender's attention, and asked what the dancer wanted to drink.

“Cerveza,” said the woman.

“A Tom Collins for me.” López Rega then extended his hand.

“I work with General Perón.”

“I know who he is.”

“You’re Argentine.”

“In Panama just for work.”

“How would you like to have another kind of job?”

“I never pass up on a good opportunity.”

And with that, and their drinks in hand, they celebrated.

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The knock on the door grew louder. This time, it shook López Rega out of his stupor. He straightened up and composed himself.

“Come in.”

“Here’s a piece of cloth we were able to obtain from one of the Egan’s jackets, as per your instructions Minister. Our friends at his dry cleaners never fail us. Now we’re waiting for a sample of his hair.”

“This should be enough. You’re dismissed.”

With black magic as his ally, López Rega had all he needed.

## **9. The Meeting**

At the Casa Rosada, Isabel feels the loss of power, draining from her like blood being taken out. The gendarmes of the Pink Palace, *los Granaderos*, stand stiffly erect in silence as she walks by them every day. Her office is only one flight up, but she uses the ornate elevator the Spanish government regaled the Argentines with in the early 1920s. It

is a slow, over-the-top contraption, walls and seats covered in red velvet cushions, with golden tassels and mirrors on the sides of the chamber. Its vulgarity is not apparent to the President, it would seem.

The halls that lead to her office embrace her with their fragrance. She has her favorite perfume, Christian Dior's Diorella, pumped in through the ventilation system. The high walls of her office, decorated with paintings of former presidents and generals, encroach on her. The gendarmes on that floor greet her upon her entrance to the office, and she nods. She closes the door behind her, drops her briefcase on the desk, and picks up the phone.

"Get me López Rega."

"Right away, Madam President."

That day would not be a good one for the president's astrologer in residence, her *consigliere* and most trusted aide. He didn't think of informing her, until it was too late, about the "meet and greets" that the new American diplomat was celebrating at the U.S. compound most afternoons. And now, he would have to face the consequences.

López Rega's secretary, Fabiana, a rather plain-looking and plump woman in her 30s, chosen precisely because her looks would not be a threat to the president, sort of an edict that had to be obeyed throughout the Casa Rosada, knocked on the minister's door but did not wait for him to answer. She was already in when he opened his mouth.

"Minister, Madam President wants to see you..."

"What is the mood, Fabiana?"

"Umm, she could be happier, sir."

If there was an ally who would never betray him, López Rega was sure that was Fabiana. He had plucked her from obscurity, covered her education as a secretary and gave her a job within the Peronist Party in exchange for her undying loyalty and devotion. And when she needed money to terminate what she tearfully confessed to him was “an accidental pregnancy”, it was the Minister of Social Welfare who paid for her abortion. With state funds, of course. In return, whenever he needed a personal item from someone to practice his “magic”, she was one of the procurers of those samples.

The minister stood up, put on his jacket, looked down at his black shoes to see if they needed luster, and calmly walked out the door. He went down a long hall decorated with more old paintings of Argentine leaders and military heroes dating back to the late 19th century, and stopped at the entrance of the President’s office before announcing himself.

“Come in,” said Isabel. Her tone of voice lacked the camaraderie that usually accompanied her conversations with him, and the Minister noticed it right away. She also did not ask him to sit down.

Her eyes fixed on a notepad in front of her; she remained concentrated on whatever it was she was writing for a few more moments before paying any attention to the man standing in front of her.

“Presidential work never ends, does it? I have meetings with Ceaușescu, Qaddafi, and the Shah of Iran... Everybody wants to do business with us now, knowing that things are getting under control.”

“Isabel –” the Minister began to say, before she cut him off.

“What is going on at the American embassy, López Rega?”

He did not feel too good. Not because he did not have an answer for her, but because she rarely, if ever, called him by his last names. Ever since they had met at that cabaret in the Panamanian city of Colón almost two decades ago, he had always been José to her. He knew his answer would repel her. This was not going to be pleasant, he thought.

“Egan is hosting people.”

“What people?”

“Argentines, Madam President.”

“My beloved minister, do you think I am an imbecile? Of course I know he is hosting Argentines! But I want to know what kind of Argentines.”

López Rega stared at her from the middle of the room, about nine feet away from her desk. They were both alone, and only the sound of a ceiling fan could be heard when neither one of them said a word. The Argentine flag, with its sky-blue and white stripes, stood behind her.

“They are going in for tours, they say. These people are interested in getting visas to immigrate to the United States. Mostly poor losers, troublemakers and riff-raff. They could probably go into exile. Good riddance, I say.”

Isabel eyed him without saying a word. She tapped a pen on her desk and smiled. It was a smile as cold as her country’s glaciers down south.

“I know they are going there for visas, and tours, and they have a little bit of our wine and that man Egan greets and meets them. But there are too many and I think there

are subversives within their ranks. They are spreading lies about my government, about *your* government, Mr. Minister. I want you to find out more about this. I want a full report by the beginning of next week, let's say Tuesday, and if it turns out to be what I suspect it is, I want it stopped."

Twenty years in politics and now he had to deal with this ignorant woman who knew nothing of the intricacies of diplomacy, of state secrets, of protocols and relationships between nations, of doing things in a certain way or in another depending on the results required.

"Isabel," he dared call her again by her first name, with a hollow tenderness that sought to assuage her wrath, "each embassy is like a country. Once those people are inside, they are protected, and there is nothing we can do. I will request a meeting with the *chargé d'affaires*."

Either she did not understand what he had just said, or simply did not pay any attention to it. "Just get it done. That will be all... José."

Her tone softened as she dismissed him, but she lowered her eyes, ignoring that he was still standing in her presence. The Minister courteously half-bowed and turned around on his heels, walking out of the chamber like some wounded prince.

Contempt and hatred for this woman were now poisoning his day, his clarity of thinking, his mental acuity and what he believed were his paranormal powers. Yet, he had not seen this coming in the cards. His zodiac sign also did not warn him of any of this. Humiliation had been the result of his being caught off guard. It would never happen again, he vowed.

He would be the messenger, the oracle, of General Perón's legacy, but not of his widow. Regret came back momentarily to haunt him. He remembered Eleanor Freeman, the American from Chicago Perón had been in love with. The woman he helped steer away from the General, thinking she would not be good for the country, or for López Rega's own goals. Now he cursed himself for having driven a wedge between them. For lying to the General about the schoolteacher, saying, among other lies, that she was an agent of the United States Secret Service. Perón cursed him, laughed at him at first, but between the calumnies and fabrications, and that first sight of the sexy Isabel singing and dancing at the cabaret in Colón, he gave in. He let himself be convinced. And he did agree with his friend José that his people would not take anyone other than an Argentine in the role of first lady. It would be blasphemous to the memory of his, of their, beloved Evita. Isabel, however, in her weakness and indecision, had learned too well from López Rega to fill in the gaps with paranoia and cruelty. The student had become more adept than the master at being a monster.

“She will destroy me, if I don't destroy her first.”

### **10. The Report**

The “meet-and-greets” sponsored by the Americans, the weekly gatherings to which Argentines are invited, continuously irk the president and discombobulate the Minister of Social Welfare. He has not been able to stop them, much to his boss' fury, and John Egan Jr. is running the acts himself.

Also attending them every week is the elderly woman with the white kerchief around her head that gave Egan the gruesome note about her daughter. She has told him what little she knew over the phone, but he invited her to come in person whenever she could and see him, regardless of whether she had any more information or not, so he could be sure she was all right.

There she was again this afternoon.

As soon as Egan spotted her, he made his way over to her.

He hugged her and the lady, as she did when she had something to share, slipped him another piece of paper. He patted the pocket of his jacket where she had placed it, and continued his rounds.

Tex Harris, his loyal Texan, the second in command, would have to take over his duties for the day. Egan retreated to his office and opened the new paper the old woman had given him minutes before. It had the name of a man, Carlos Beltrán, and his address. No phone number.

Egan walked towards the reception area, past the official portrait of President Ford. When he asked the attendant at the front desk for one of the cards of the taxi companies on file, the receptionist hesitated.

“Not the chauffeur, sir?”

“Just a regular cab, please.”

And so the receptionist called the same taxi service she sometimes used to get home whenever the trains broke down. Egan gave the instructions that he should be picked up in the back of the building, not the front. Fifteen minutes later, Egan was on his

way to Barrio Once, a working-class area with a mixed ethnic composition, part of the Balvanera neighborhood.

The taxi crossed the busy Corrientes Avenue, passing theaters on one side, clothing shops on the other, to reach this area west of the city proper's downtown. Sinewy one-way streets followed a checkerboard pattern, which had the cab driver maneuvering as in a labyrinth to reach Once. Tightly squeezed buildings on small plots of land, sometimes reminding Egan of the high-density areas of New York's boroughs, came into view. Orthodox Jews could be seen in front of their stores, with plenty of customers of all denominations visiting the area in search of bargains. Argentines of Indian stock, or of creole background, usually from the provinces, also lived or worked in the area. Though in the same city, the area seems worlds away from the exclusive zones of Barrio Norte and Recoleta, far from embassies and parties thrown by European diplomats.

Fumes of cars too close for comfort inundated the streets, with sidewalks equally bursting with people coming and going. They passed the bazaar-like area of La Recova, and the Abasto produce market. Egan noticed a young, handsome Argentine Air Force pilot walking down the street, hurrying to get somewhere.

This town held a special place in the hearts of many Argentines, for it had been frequented by tango legend Carlos Gardel. Here, in spite of whatever objections the generals would exhibit after their coup towards music that long ago had sprung from brothels and bars, it was revered. And with Isabel still in power, it survived.

"It's here, this must be the address," said Egan.

“I shall wait, Mr. Ambassador.”

“I’m not the ambassador, but thanks.”

The fact that the cab driver knew pretty accurately who the passenger was took Egan by surprise. He must’ve found out through the receptionist, the diplomat thought. In any case, it would be good to have someone ready to pick him up. This was not an area that he frequented.

A little rusted bell next to the building’s also rusted numbers had to be rung to alert people inside that someone was at the front gate. Footsteps were heard coming down a staircase almost immediately after Egan made his announcement.

“Americano?”

“Yes. Beltrán?”

The man behind the gate nodded. He unlocked it and made room for Egan to enter. Both men went up some narrow steps, lit dimly by one lonesome bulb in the very high ceiling. Like so many other buildings in the area, this one was 19<sup>th</sup> century French in its style, but moribund in its current state.

Beltrán opened the door to his apartment on the second floor of the building, and invited Egan in. It was the first time since his arrival in Argentina that the diplomat had actually ventured out to see how the working poor of this city lived. In comparison to the poor in Haiti, this man was rich. But in a city with so much wealth and ostentation, the disparity struck Egan as more obscene than usual.

The man sat down on a wobbly aqua vinyl-covered 1950s chair with a gash on one side. Egan’s was better. The man pulled out a cigarette from his shirt and made a

silent offer to the diplomat. Egan declined. The hand holding the man's cigarette trembled.

"I saw it all. I was there. And there was nothing I could do to stop it," he blurted out rapidly before taking a puff.

Egan crossed his legs and nodded, watching without saying a word.

"We were supposed to throw them off a plane, but the woman was pregnant and, I don't know why, they decided to have her shot instead."

The man smoked with more intensity now.

"She was held with a few other subversives at a CDC."

"CDC?"

"Clandestine Detention Centers. They're all over the city. There are the transitory ones, and the established ones. Those are where most of the tortures take place."

Egan had read the reports from the embassy about such places, but to talk to someone who had actually been in one conducting less than noble affairs, shook him.

"We were at El Campito, one of the first CDCs, established by the government."

"By the government?"

The man looked at Egan incredulously.

"Yes, by the government. Who else?"

He hadn't finished his cigarette, but was already searching for another one in his pocket.

"Right now, we have about 600 of them, between transitory and permanent. This woman, Paula, was brought to El Campito, along with a man, her boyfriend it seems,

after it was decided they would not be thrown off a Skyvan, a type of plane. They wanted to interrogate her, and make her suffer. Feel the loss of her child inside. Her lover as well would be tortured. So a sergeant and I were instructed to take them to a city dump and kill them there instead. Badly beaten and handcuffed, we threw them in the back of an Unimog van and took off to the wasteland.”

Egan watched as the man’s left foot shook rather rapidly. There was also sweat forming on his forehead, even though the temperature was cool and dry.

“And then?”

“And then we, we got to the dump and the other officer and I pulled the woman and the man off the truck. We stood them against one another and they closed their eyes. The sergeant then ordered me to hold my fire, but to keep pointing my gun at them. He released them from their handcuffs and told them to wait together. Any move, and I would have to blow their heads off.”

“What did the sergeant do?”

“He went back to the truck, and then returned with two shovels.”

Beltrán looked down, as if ashamed, and could not utter another word. He threw a stub on the floor and lit up the next cigarette in his hand. The chair beneath him squeaked as he stood up and paced around his living room.

“Can you go on?”

“Then... then the woman, Paula, she, she pleaded with us because she was pregnant. She begged us with tears running down her eyes, and I felt sick. Gravely sick, disgusted. The sergeant gave them each a shovel, and ordered to dig.”

“To dig?”

“Yeah. To dig their own graves.”

Egan sat on the edge of his seat, feet planted firmly on the ground, and both hands held together.

“Please, proceed.”

“They kept on digging, for about two hours, or so. I’m not sure now. And they were exhausted, covered in filth, sobbing, in pain. The sergeant asked for the shovels and put them aside.”

The soldier stood by the small window in his living room. He looked to the distance. He covered his face with his hands and broke down.

Egan stood up as well, but did not approach him.

“The sergeant told me to shoot them. I refused. I couldn’t. I couldn’t do this to my neighbors. Yes, they were my neighbors, you see? So he did it. He shot her first, then the man with her, but she was still alive, so he shot her again, and then shot at her womb. Both bodies dropped into one grave, and I had to cover it.”

Egan’s discomfort was severe. His stomach hurt.

“Is that how the woman who came to see me knows?”

“Yes, yes, she is Paula’s mother. And I told her. I had to.”

The man sat down again on his chair and cried some more.

“I don’t know what will happen to me, but I’ve been discharged.”

Egan approached the man and squeezed a shoulder before turning to leave. As he neared the door on his way out, he turned around.

“I will report this. Now, what about the man with Paula, who was he?”

“I don’t know. Someone from the Ford Auto plant, I think. A union leader. They say the chief of security there wanted him dead.”

“The chief of security?”

“Yes. A gringo. Like you.”

## **BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA, MARCH 1976**

### **11. The Party**

It was a week before the coup when John Egan Jr. came face to face with the generals. They all met at a party, a diplomatic affair held at the house of the Belgian ambassador, a somewhat larger-than-life, eccentric character who loved to play charades, don white-powdered wigs, and who declared himself the biggest fan of King Leopold II. Often, his 19th-century Belle Époque mansion, which also served as his country’s embassy, would be turned into salons of merry celebration.

The plan for the coup was already set in motion, but one would never have known any kind of military action or the ousting of a president was about to take place based on the relaxed behavior of the generals and the jolly atmosphere at the festivities.

“No ambassador yet, Mr. Egan?” said Lieutenant-General Jorge Rafael Videla, known as the most austere and sober of the triumvirate that would soon rule the country.

“In no time now, I am sure,” Egan replied. “By the way, I see you’re all over the news. How does it feel to be, uh, famous?”

“Comes with the territory,” he said. “A territory you may find yourself in one day.”

Videla’s pictures increasingly appeared in all the media, in a clear sign of growing power. Everyone now wanted to have a good, closer look at this man thin as a rail, with a big mustache and glasses, always fastidious in his way of dressing, arid in his speaking mannerisms and practically incapable of being funny or witty. Egan soon became bored with him.

“I hear that you are a Catholic, Mr. Egan.”

“You heard correctly, General. Champagne?”

“No thank you, I don’t drink.”

“Pity.”

Egan took a flute from a tray in the hands of a waiter and directed his gaze back at Videla.

“You then understand what we’re trying to do here, Mr. Egan. I just hope the new ambassador does too. Maybe you can be of help in that respect.”

“And what is it that you’re trying to do here, General Videla?”

“Save a nation.”

“Mighty generous of you, sir. Save it from what, if I may ask?”

Egan noticed how Videla’s face turned into a mask of displeasure. Was *he* making him uncomfortable? Or their conversation?

“Hippies, homosexuals, non-Catholics, long-haired musicians, drug users, bohemians, journalists, professors, liberals, intellectuals, actors, writers, musicians, in

other words, the losers, the traitors, the blasphemous. I owe it to my seven children, and I owe to Argentina.”

Egan could not resist.

“Seven children? Quite feisty, eh general?”

Videla tipped his uniform’s hat, straightened his tie, and bid goodbye to the American. But before he left, he had this to say: “We will show the world, that we are human, and that we are right.”

Searching for an early exit, Egan ran into the second military man about to take over the country, the tall, imposing and strapping Navy general Admiral Emilio Massera. It was impossible not to focus on his strong jaw and Italian complexion, which obviously made him quite popular with the ladies, and someone all men should fear. Egan had heard from his assistant Harris that Massera was perhaps the most ruthless of the generals, with little or no conscience, in spite of being a practicing Catholic as well.

“Mr. Egan, I pray that we will be ready for business with your country again, in no time,” said Massera, glass of red wine in hand. Egan shivered at the tone he employed.

“I thought we still were.”

“We are only starting our mission, but once we get underway, we will be swift.”

The General shifted his feet, trying to maintain his balance. Clearly, he had had a bit too much alcohol. Not quite becoming for an officer of his stature, Egan thought.

“And what is your mission, Admiral Massera?”

“So you know who I am.”

“Everyone here does, no?”

“I am just a humble servant of this nation and of its president.”

“Do you like her?”

Massera took a gulp from his glass.

“The question is, Mr. Egan, do *you* like our country?”

Egan did not miss a beat.

“It’s, shall we say, boisterous.”

“Boisterous?” Massera could not contain his laughter. “Now, that is a very diplomatic way of describing the subversion that is afflicting us. Boisterous, indeed. But I guarantee you something, my dear sir...”

“What is that, Admiral?”

“We will do whatever it takes to wipe out this evil that is corroding Argentina, and no one, no foreign emissary or local would-be hero will stand in our way.”

This was too much for Egan to put up with. He had to leave.

“Time for a refill, sir. Good night to you.”

“Give my regards to the new American ambassador, whoever he is.”

Egan excused himself as he made his way through a group of men in tuxedos and ladies in their finest gowns, and headed towards what seemed an exit. He walked past a long table with all sorts of cakes and pastries, and he could hear, though not see at the time, the loud laughs coming from the host of the event, that crazy Belgian owner of the house.

Behind a duo of Greek-inspired columns, Egan found a French door, and saw that it led to a terrace. He opened the door without turning around and felt the cool breeze hit

his face. He stood there with his eyes closed, his back inching towards a wall. The wall felt refreshing on his back, just like the aroma of the jasmine bushes planted around the perimeter of the mansion.

“Fun party, isn’t it? A bit hot in there, though. It’s better out here.”

The man’s voice startled Egan, who did not see anyone immediately upon opening his eyes. Until from within some shadows a short, pudgy man in an officer’s white suit came out, lighting up a cigarette.

“Not for nothing is Buenos Aires the city of fair winds, right?” Egan said, trying to cover up his anxiety.

“There are people, however, who will stop at nothing to destroy all the beauty that surrounds us.”

The young diplomat remained silent, and focused his eyes on the cigarette that had just been lit. The man offered him one.

“Thank you,” he said, “but I don’t smoke.”

“I am Brigadier General Orlando Agosti, head of the Air Force, at your service.”

“And I am...”

“... John Egan, distinguished son of an American ambassador. Hope you have been enjoying Argentina.”

“It’s been an experience.”

“A good one, right?” Agosti winked at him.

“I... I...”

“We know everything, Mr. Egan. We have to. Only by becoming a nation of informers, we are able to pinpoint and root out those who cause our despair, those who threaten our daily lives.”

“Is this something Madam President has assigned to you all?”

Even he recognized how brusque his question had sounded. Too bad.

“In a few days, we won’t have to worry about that.”

The general exhaled, much of the smoke hitting Egan’s face.

“And why not?”

He shifted his position slightly to face him directly and grinned.

“*Señor* Egan, just mark your calendar, March 24, and stay in that day. Enjoy your evening.”

## **11. The Cavalry**

The morning of March 24, a few hours after the coup, a shrouded sun hazily glows over the city, as if waiting to be stabbed by the Obelisk in the center’s Plaza de la República. Its grayish halo makes the sphere look larger than normal, and allows one to look at it without being blinded. Billy Lee Hunt is back, and he carries with him some magazines and the three major newspapers in Spanish, and one in English, *The Buenos Aires Sun*, which the family read to practice what little remained of their once native tongue.

His keys make a racket at the front door, and he fiddles with the main lock for a few moments, impossible not to hear the noise. Evie and Nancy both greet him. In no

time, Evie sets the small Formica table for breakfast, and places a basket of sweet *facturas* in the middle. Generals or no generals, any day calls for a crème-filled croissant, she says. Billy runs in and kisses each sister lightly on her cheeks. He heads to the table and grabs a cup of coffee Evie has made, downs some juice from Nancy's glass, and walks towards the bathroom at the end of the hall. Evie shakes her head. She reviews the newspapers he's brought in. Billy comes out.

"I need to sleep," he says. "Important night ahead."

He then grabs his backpack, and goes to his room. Evie and Nancy watch him.

"You are always in a hurry," says Evie.

"Ah, I don't know how much longer I'll be on this fucked-up planet of ours!" he kids with her. She does not appreciate this.

He shuts the door.

"Why does he always do this?" Nancy says while eating with her sister.

"If he weren't doing it, he wouldn't be Billy, Nancy."

Silence invades the kitchen. Only the kitchen clock can be heard ticking, and Evie turning the pages of a magazine. Nancy lights a cigarette.

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Early that evening, now all rested, Billy appears once more carrying his bag, ready to leave again.

"There's still a curfew, you know," says Nancy matter-of-factly.

“Out again? Can’t you stay in for once?” Evie adds as she sets the table.

“I’ll be back. But if you or Nan doesn’t hear from me by tonight, call the Embassy. We may need the cavalry.”

Evie ignores his comment, and goes back to the newspapers that Billy brought that morning, all with adulatory coverage of the coup.

“We’re going to be reading about this for the rest of our lives,” she grumbles.

The newspapers mostly share a somber if respectful attitude towards the coup: the generals take over the reigns of a country in chaos, and the people sigh in relief. At least a great portion of them. She peruses the stories, accounts that sound like public service announcements. They embrace the soldiers that came to plant the flag of order; they salute the regiments that traversed the city and moved towards the Casa Rosada to trample out chaos and disorder; and they will attend the victory parade that day en masse, celebrating how three men especially, Generals Videla, Massera and Agosti, in spotless black shoes, spiffy uniforms with golden epaulets, and white gloves, have rescued *la patria*, the nation.

But Evie has no use for that parade. She will watch it, though, for there will be nothing else on TV. Nothing will be open that day, nobody will go to work.

Nobody sees what they don’t want to see; no one speaks more than one should speak, she thinks. With breakfast, she distracts her mind.

Evie watches on TV the clips of the armed forces’ victory: black and white images of what looks like a never-ending procession of soldiers and officers going somewhere, or nowhere. They move in that particular way which characterizes all

military parades as the participants flex their muscles. To the masses congregated, they are the rescuers that now pay their respects to the Argentine flag while the citizens fill the sidewalks and cheer them on. To Evie, they remind her of the toy soldiers Billy used to wind up when he was little.

There's a speech on TV, something about "El Proceso", the process that will straighten out this nation. The voice speaking is dry and brittle as the salt mines from the north. There is no sense of innocent jubilation. The crowds, plentiful, respond in kind. Noticeable is the absence of smiles, but not an absence of patriotism. More words are spoken by three generals, *the* generals, but none mentions Isabel. No foreign leaders that Evie could tell are present at this pivotal moment in the homeland's history, one where she understands that liberty had been eclipsed. Wait, there's an American there. Kissinger, yes, that's the American Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger. Evie changes channels, but there is no use. They are all broadcasting the ascension of the new government, the de facto establishment of a military rule of law with a new outpouring of blessings from the Catholic Church. She stops at another channel. On stage, next to the microphones, she notices the cardinal of Buenos Aires alongside, once more, Videla, Massera, and Agosti, the triumvirate that decided to chart a new course for Argentina, with an emphasis on "Christianity, the rule of law, and order."

"The priests were always in on this as well," Evie says to herself. "Next thing you know, they'll tell us the Americans orchestrated this whole affair."

She goes to look for her passport. And Billy's.

## 12. The Awakening

It was three in the morning when Evie Lou woke up, startled, anxious about Billy. She hadn't heard from him since the previous evening, and that alarmed her more than usual. Billy never failed to call, even at midnight, if he was not going to stay at his house with the family. And so Evie felt sick. Sick with the uncertainty that can make one's pulse race, the pit of the stomach go sour, and the mind wander around in terror. This, Evie convinced herself, was not paranoia. This was the same feeling she had experienced by merely listening to the news of the coup during the days leading to the military takeover, the weeks prior to the defenestration of the *ancien régime*.

An unwelcome sensation of body and mind that warned her very fiber that nothing good would come out of this, struck her. The generals revolted, and they revolted her as well. The generals, everyone knew that month of March 1976, were moving in. What many did not know, however, was what they would unleash. Her mother Pina shared her faint hopes with Evie, however. Because back in Mendoza, Uncle Tito was ecstatic. He phoned Pina to let him know the good news: the coup was a fact. Nancy buried herself in work.

It all took place before dawn, at 3 a.m.

Radio and TV repeated the feat over and over, to the point of saturation: Argentine army tanks rolled in and surrounded that pink government palace, the Casa Rosada; the vicars of Christ prayed and thanked their saints; and the president became a prisoner. The day's first rays of sun would see the rise of a new order in Argentina, while

Evie tried to stay calm by listening to her usual tango shows on the radio. Because, until that day, there was still tango to be heard.

Still, restless and worried about her younger brother while the coup unfolded, Evie sought the solace that melancholy and nostalgia brought to her in those old melodies. Melodies that spoke of unrequited loves and broken lives; that protected her from the reality engulfing her and everyone else in Argentina. Acts of sabotage, assassinations, bombings, kidnappings – a rosary of human cruelty, now routine for the past several years, since Juan Domingo Perón returned to power, for a third time, and installed a government as decrepit and malfunctioning as his body. A government on life support after his death, agonizing at the hands of his widow and subsequent President of Argentina, Isabel.

When at 3 a.m. the morning of the *putsch* her favorite radio station went silent, Evie moved the dial across the spectrum to discover that only white noise filled the airwaves, and then, her room. Outside her home, sirens pierced the Buenos Aires night. Helicopters hovered over the skyline, flashing spotlights that intruded obscenely into people's windows, lighting darkness and arousing suspicions as to who was a criminal, and who wasn't. Trashcans rolled down the streets, as if thrown by some invisible hand. Dogs howled. Firecrackers or shots, they all sounded the same.

Evie stood up to close the bedroom window of her room, attempting to drown out the ruckus that grew stronger with each passing minute. A cold and unexpected breeze, smelling of decayed gardenias and fresh blood, blew in, and it unnerved her. An ill wind, she thought, as she went back to the edge of her bed and fiddled some more with the

radio. She looked at the clock on the wall. It was late. Or, maybe it was more appropriate to say that it was too early. And Billy was still out.

Ten minutes after the airwaves' silence had begun, just one tune came on all the stations at once. A tune that Evie hoped never to hear again. It was the Argentine military anthem, *Avenida de las Camelias*, or Avenue of the Camellias. No more tango. Instead, a hymn to hierarchies and orders which she knew from Billy could only mean one thing: that the rumors about a military coup, which had been gossiped about for months; the warnings Billy had secretly shared with his sisters over *yerba mate* infusions and biscuits; the reports published on the front pages of the newspapers every day for weeks, had all been correct. The end of the presidency, the crush of democracy, the arrival of darker times... they were imminent, they had arrived. And she, Billy, their younger half-sister Nancy and their mother Pina, would be living them.

Another military takeover, Evie huffed while getting under the covers again. Why would anyone want to *take over* all the problems of a nation, and in such a manner? And not one, but various times. This would be the third coup she, Billy, their mother, and Nancy had endured since their family moved to Argentina in the early 1960s. Did life there get any better with the new forces? It never seemed like it did.

A coup for her? Sure, at age 16, it meant beating Nancy at hopscotch. That was the kind of coup she understood. Not this one.

“How many dictators is that now, Billy?” Evie remembers asking her brother one night after dinner, the week before that latest Military Junta came to power, even though she already knew the answer to that question.

“So far, eight,” Billy said, sounding unperturbed. “That’s the story of this country.” He then tuned the strings of his new electric guitar, the one he planned to use later that month with his band Los Caravelles, made up mostly of buddies who had moved down from Mendoza as well in search of the big city life. “We’ll see what happens with these generals who say they are gentlemen, Evie. I tell you this, though: it ain’t gonna be pretty. If you really want to know what I think, they will make Isabel look like a saint.”

Saint Isabel. Evie laughed at that. Nancy shushed them: “You never know if the walls can hear.”

That morning when tango died, the morning of the coup, Isabel Perón and the calamity unfolding were the farthest things away from Evie’s thoughts. Whatever punishment befell this woman, the former first lady turned vice-president turned president had brought it upon herself and, Evie, frankly, could care less. All she cared about was Billy.

The door to her room opened unexpectedly. Billy peeked inside.

“Hi sis, you up?” he whispered.

“Don’t you ever do this to me again, Billy Lee Hunt. Don’t you vanish on me like that.”

### **13. The Partridge**

At the same time Evie Lou Hunt had worried about her brother being out on the streets while a coup took place, another woman’s night played out differently. That

woman was Isabel, the soon-to-be former President of the Republic of Argentina. She too, like Evie, or Nancy or Billy, knew a thing or two about being followed, about spying. Except that, in her case, it was *she* who has been pulling the strings. She ordered the men who sent the men with the dark glasses that shielded their faces as they waited in front of a house, cigarette in hand, intimidation conveyed merely by their presence. She signed the laws that encouraged anyone to become an informant, hence the blinds of the neighbor that opened and closed more than they normally would, the stares that fixated on the train a bit longer than usual, the eyes that went down when a friend or a colleague was near.

The night of the coup, however, Isabel was done. She ceased to be the first female president of a western nation and reverted to being the unknown cabaret singer that bewitched Perón back in Panama in the 1950s.

“Where are you taking me, general?”

“We are headed to your residence at Olivos, madam. The Casa Rosada is not safe.”

She has trouble hearing the man next to her. The helicopter blades almost drown out every other sound.

“And why is it not safe?”

“There may be disturbances.”

She doesn't understand. Why would there be disturbances, when the people of Argentina love her? She is their second Evita, no?

The red and white helicopter buzzes like a dragonfly hovering over a pond. From the sky, she can see that lights shine, or flicker, or go dark. It could be any major city around the world, she thinks. Except that the Obelisk in the middle, beautiful as a lighthouse guiding those ashore, is a reference point for all on land, or air, that are part of Buenos Aires.

“I want my dogs, general.”

“We’ll get your dogs, madam.”

The helicopter does not take her to the Olivos residence. It is late – or maybe it is too early in the day, she has lost track of time – and the sun will be waking up in a few hours. She wonders if this is the last time she will see it rise.

“The people of Argentina will come to my defense, general.”

“The people of Argentina want us to defend them from *you*, madam.”

It hurts, what he just said. It aches in her gut and in her heart. But she’d rather not believe him. She pats down her hair. The wind has messed it up.

Fewer lights can be seen on the horizon now. The chopper has left the confines of the city, and it is heading into the dark.

“This is treason, general.”

“This is justice, my lady.”

The man next to her stands up and approaches the cockpit. He speaks into the pilot’s ear, then makes some hand signals. Isabel watches, perplexed.

The pilot grabs a small microphone perched on a wall next to the cockpit and repeats the words the general just told him.

“The partridge has been roped.”

Indignation swells within Isabel. She would rather have been compared to an eagle.

“Perón would know what to do. If I had just been tougher, like him.”

She notices her shoes. They’re scuffed, and now the beige in them looks dirty. Her coat and purse and the clothes she is wearing are all she carries with her. How was it that less than an hour ago, she headed a country, and now she can’t even freshen up?

Lights appear on the ground again. They grow bigger.

“It’s an airport?”

“In Neuquén.”

“Why have you brought me to the province?”

“For your sake, you have been placed under house arrest at El Messidor. You shall remain at the residence until further notice.”

Exiled within her own homeland. Will they shoot her? Is this a ruse?

She doesn’t know.

“What are you going to do?”

“We will put this country back on track. We will have a national process of reorganization.”

Isabel shifts on the small ledge where she’s been sitting close to this man in olive green fatigues. This man she once trusted. This man she appointed.

“I will need Rosarito, and my dogs. I want my dogs back.”

“Your maid will be joining you soon. So will your dogs. We have given instructions to that effect. And we will be getting our lives back.”

BUENOS AIRES, APRIL, 1977

#### **14. The Last Night**

Her brother is gone. Missing. Vanished. Forced to disappear, like so many others. That is something she will soon discover. The requiem for her brother and her country, however, began way before, last year, in those early morning hours of March 24, 1976. And even before that, Evie Lou Hunt already sensed one day her life would change forever. And it would be because of Billy, her younger brother.

Because he always tempted fate.

He tempted it the night of the coup. He was still tempting it a year after.

Like him, Evie knew what it meant to be followed, how it felt to be spied upon. The unknown faces of men hidden behind their dark glasses, having a cigarette in front of her house, waiting for someone or something, watching. The window blinds that opened and closed as she walked to the *subte* station nearby. The stranger in the train car two seats down, newspaper in hand, staring at her. The neighbor with the shopping cart and the baby, lowering her eyes upon Evie’s return home from work. And of course, the dark green Falcon automobiles with tinted windows, slowly creeping up on her as she walked the sidewalks of Buenos Aires.

It went on like this until yesterday, April 8, 1977, when both his sisters, Evie and Nancy, warned him, like always, not to go out at night. But he did. Billy being Billy, could not resist. He grabbed his *mochila*, and Evie and Nancy became alarmed when they saw him ready to head out with his backpack.

“The city beckons,” he explained.

“Stay in, until things quiet down,” Evie said.

“Sis, they’ve always been noisy,” he replied with a shrug. Yet, he sat down on the sofa, and sighed. He then picked up his guitar, which he’d left leaning against the furniture, and riffed, as usual.

“Nan, please check the phone,” said Billy, tuning a string. “Is it working?”

Nancy did as asked. There was no tone.

“Whom do you need to call at this hour of the night?” Nancy wanted to know.

Billy stood up, and mimicked a soldier’s salute.

“Our generals, our saviors.”

With that, Billy laughed heartily, and threw himself back on the living room couch. His sisters found little humor in his response, and told him so.

“You don’t really think that I’m gonna stay in and watch TV when all this abuse is still taking place, do you? I mean, it’s been a year since the coup, and look at all the moments of infamy and misery that we have had to witness since then. Every day our human rights are being violated. It’s got to stop.”

“Infamy and misery,” said Evie in a soft voice without looking at her brother. “As if we could get rid of them.”

“So, only at night can we make them wonder who’s against them,” he continued.

And with that, he left again.

The door slammed.

“Where does he go?” Nancy asked.

“I’m off to bed,” was Evie’s answer. “Don’t tell Mama any of this.”

## **15. The Church**

Happy to be meeting his girlfriend, Ana María, on that cool April night, Billy walked a few blocks to reach a main street from which he could hail a cab. He was on his way to Our Lady of Fátima Church, ready to share the latest news with Ana. Big news.

The small modernist-shaped house of worship with plenty of glass came into view amidst the dark of the street. Some of the streetlamps were not working, and so only the glow of the moon and the building’s white and angular walls made the church stand out. Billy did not see Ana right away but, knowing her and what a good student she had been at learning how to act in such situations, she was probably hiding while waiting for his arrival.

Billy stepped out of the cab and walked towards the front of the church, looking around to see if anyone followed. The street remained quiet, with no other cars driving through it. It was not that late, so Billy wondered why so few autos seemed to be around.

He had known this place all his life, ever since moving from Mendoza to Buenos Aires, after having left Lebanon, Tennessee. Though his love for America was still there, his love for his adopted homeland, and its struggle, had become absolute. More relevant,

permanent. Those occasional memories of his childhood were more like flickers of contentment that came and went, bringing some joy to the darkness that encroached upon his family and so many others in Argentina.

Trying not to step on leaves or branches that would make inconvenient noises, Billy went through a small garden in front, and then on to the main entrance, where he stopped. Someone was moving from behind a bush. Billy walked up to it, and whispered Ana's name.

She emerged from her hiding place and with equal measures of resolute passion and silence, hugged and kissed her boyfriend.

"I knew you'd be here," Billy said.

"My family was suspicious," Ana replied without letting go of him.

"It'll all be worth it in the end."

A light shone on Billy's face. He pulled back from Ana to try to see in the dark the provenance of the beam, but just as quickly a man speaking Spanish with an American accent came up to them.

"Hurry, there's no time to lose," said the man.

Billy put a hand on the man's left shoulder.

"It's good to see you, Father Dengler."

"I don't know if we'll meet again. It's all in God's hands now but, here my son, is what you were looking for. Here is the proof you need," whispered the priest, his glasses reflecting the light from one of the streetlamps, as he gave Billy an envelope.

The young couple hugged the old man at once, and thanked him. But the joy was short-lived. A wide spotlight seemingly popped out of nowhere, accompanied by a voice on a megaphone ordering Billy, Ana María, and Father Dengler to give themselves up.

“Put up your weapons and surrender!” the disembodied voice yelled with ferocity.

Lowering themselves so as to avoid detection, the priest signaled the couple to follow him down a narrow rock path by more bushes, and enter the church through a side door. They did as instructed, and while the sounds of men moving about in the front, and cocking rifles, could be heard, the trio managed to find refuge inside the building.

Billy stuck in his shirt the envelope that Father Dengler had given him a few moments before, and made a signal with his hand to remain silent. All three stood there, listening to the noises outside.

“Are they soldiers, Billy?” Ana María asked in the lowest voice she could muster.

“We never know. Sometimes they are, sometimes it’s the police, and sometimes it’s thugs that are hired.”

“It doesn’t matter, they are all fascists,” said Father Dengler.

Billy looked at the priest and smiled.

“And they are all Catholic, Father.”

“That doesn’t make them saints or heroes, son.”

Through the building’s glass panels, the spotlight could be seen circling around and illuminating everything in its path. Cars screeched out in the front, while the number of voices appeared to increase.

“They’ll be in here in no time,” said Father Dengler. He rushed to a desk in the room, and from its top drawer he retrieved a small key. He then opened the largest of the three drawers on the left side of the desk, and pulled out three guns.

“Here,” he said, as he handed Luger semi-automatic pistols to Billy and Ana María. Billy’s face could not hide his surprise at the fact that Father Dengler not only had arms hiding in this desk, but that he was willing to use one.

A loud, cracking sound came from another wing of the church, and the footsteps of men rushing into the building soon followed. The yells and curses grew stronger as the men approached the small office where the priest and his two friends awaited.

Glass shattered from above and rained on Father Dengler, Billy and Ana María as bullets pierced the darkness of the room. Sweating profusely, and almost flat on the floor with his girlfriend and the priest, Billy slowly stood up, raising the gun next to his face. He held it up.

A gas grenade landed on Father Dengler’s desk, and an acrid, bitter cloud soon enveloped the space. Billy choked on the smell and dropped the gun, while Ana María had already fallen to the ground, and the priest lay crumpled next to a chair.

The men on the other side knocked down the door, and entered screaming, “Long live a free Argentina!”

## **16. The River**

So many had welcomed the generals just a year ago, it seemed, in the name of country, of law, and of God, that when the bodies began to fall out of the sky, the beaten,

drugged, naked men, women and children whose cries were confounded with the howls of the wind, were relegated to slanderous myths, false folklore certainly spread by the motherland's enemies.

"The disappeared do not exist," General Videla had stated during an international press conference defending the country's human rights record.

With nightmares like this, it was no wonder sleeping had become a Calvary in Argentina. Except that these were not dreams gone horribly wrong. They were the warped reality many had to contend with day and night. Argentines like this one pilot who, along with other colleagues, found a shred of solace in the pills he swallowed before going to bed and praying for redemption. But sometimes even they were no match for the noise the plane kept making in his head. The noise of the back hatch being opened. The noise of the cargo unloaded.

The waters of Buenos Aires' River Plate were never sky blue. The pilot learned that right away, upon being notified he was being transferred from his hometown in Mendoza. A colleague of his told him about the colors. Sometimes, the soldier said, the river looked a rusty ochre, like many a gate of decaying Belle Époque buildings in areas where prosperity was now only a ghost. Others, it was a muddy ash, a monochromatic palette of turbulence and filth that flowed and swirled while witnessing the erection of luxury and the displacement of poverty. The real reason the Río de la Plata seemed dour and distant, though, the soon pilot discovered, was because of so much death being poured into it.

Of course, he never thought it would be this way. That's not why he had joined the armed forces three years ago, he kept repeating to himself, trying to justify his actions or preserve his sanity or maybe both.

Serving in the name of his country was supposed to be an occasion of pride, of joy, of loyalty. The only child of a widow, she would still tease him at 24 and in a sharp-looking uniform, about his straight black hair parted meticulously to the side, combed in the manner of a *matinée* idol, his rather bushy eyebrows framing his big green eyes. He had recently earned his wings to fight the war against subversion and terrorism, as his commanding officers reiterated to him. His first crucial assignment awaited him.

By being accepted into the air force, the pilot was bound to be on a journey to a better life, he hoped. The orders for his debut mission in the war against terror were to report to a no-frills, low profile airport known simply as Dorado, in the middle of Buenos Aires. It was used exclusively for cargo, supplies and materiel for the armed forces. From there he would fly out to the base of Puerto Indio. And then... what? The pilot was more than disappointed. For this he had trained so hard, for so long? To simply drop some boxes or sacks and be done? Yes, his superiors seemed to be saying, as if all tedious and unpleasant chores contributed to the survival of the nation.

He obeyed, as was expected.

That foggy evening in April, the pilot showed up an hour before the scheduled flight, at 22:00 hours, to review the plane. It was a ghastly two-engine piece of equipment from the 1960s in the shape of a shoebox. Called Skyvans, he and his colleagues would refer to them as "sheds." The British and the Argentines were big on these things to

transport bulky loads. Except that in Argentina, more often than not, the loads were vastly different.

The pilot examined the logbook and read his departure time. Midnight, the schedule stated. Odd, he thought once more, at that hour, and with no other activity around.

A few minutes later, the pilot heard the echo of footsteps throughout the cavernous hangar where the planes were given maintenance and remained on standby. The hangar, a corrugated metal roof over rusted iron beams wrapped by walls of more corrugated metal and a small office, dated back to the 1930s, when blimps use to stop in the city. That glorious era was long gone.

The pilot saw a figure approach him. Bald, with dark eyeglasses, short and stocky, a man dressed in a dark gray suit, a sinister salesman, took some papers from the pocket inside his jacket and silently showed them to the aircraft's commander. They were a brief explanation of his mission, inexplicably sent via this courier.

Without introduction, the man repeated what appeared in the papers. That the pilot was to fly south, to Puerto Indio, and after that, to an undisclosed place the location of which he would be informed in mid-flight. The objective: 13 terrorists who were sick had been apprehended and were to be taken to a secret medical installation for quarantine.

The pilot nodded, walked to his Skyvan, gave a cursory glance around and then waited in the cockpit. He rubbed his temples, and closed his eyes for a moment. He saw his mother's aging face. He saw the snow-capped mountains in Mendoza. Soon he heard

the sound of a truck pulling in. He stuck his head outside the window next to him, and noticed in the shadows an olive green vehicle with a brown canvas roof. He was curious, but pulled his head back inside right away so as not to arouse any suspicion.

After a bit of rattling, the back door of the aircraft opened. The plane seemed to shudder each time some unknown object was tossed inside. The pilot didn't hear the footsteps of the subversives boarding the plane. Only a few thumps and the sound of the truck leaving. Someone then shut and secured the hatch door.

Where were the men? Why only cargo? That's not what his orders had stated. Surely there was some mistake.

Tempted to go back and check to see if any prisoners had been brought on board, the pilot changed his mind when another unidentified man, this one dressed in a physician's gown, entered the cockpit.

"Fly," he said dryly while taking a seat and shutting the door. He withheld his name, but flashed an official badge. His soft, almost feminine, voice; wisps of thinning blond hair covering his round, puppet-like face, and too calm demeanor, reminded the pilot of the physicians his parents used to take him to when he was a child. The ones he hated each time he had to go in for a vaccination.

"Final destination?" the pilot asked.

"You don't have to worry about anything. Just get this thing off the ground," the doctor replied. He then put a hand on the pilot's right shoulder and patted it several times.

The pilot could not contain himself.

"Are the prisoners on board?"

The doctor looked at him with a slight grin.

“Yes”.

A chill ran through the pilot, afraid of asking too much, but more scared of not asking enough. “How sick are the inmates? I hear whatever they have is contagious...” he added, trying to make conversation and sense of it all.

The doctor waited several seconds before answering, as if carefully studying what the pilot had said and what he was going to reply.

“They are a cancer in our society, young man, and they have to be eradicated. I will let you know when we’re ready to dispose of the cargo. Until then, we shall not communicate again,” he explained, turning around, and strapping in his seatbelt.

Then it dawned on the pilot. He had heard about this. Of course he had. There were no sick men and there was no quarantine. The loud sounds he had heard hitting the metal floor of the aircraft? They were humans, captives, who were either alive or suffocating or almost dead. But why? Why were they being flown on a plane at this hour, and where were they to be taken?

A sense of uneasiness filled cockpit. The pilot began to feel sick, yet realized he needed to control himself. It could cost him dearly, he thought, if he wavered. In a flash, he recalled all those years his mother had labored as a maid in a wealthy man’s house in Mendoza, the owner of one of the most important vineyards in the valley against the Andes, just so her son could attend the Argentine air force academy and not only fulfill his obligations to his country but escape the hard life she had known.

And now, he would be used as an executioner in the skies, he was sure of that.

The pilot radioed the traffic control tower and waited for permission to depart. The doctor gave it. The control tower agreed. The engines were started, the craft taxied outside the hangar and the Skyvan took off into the night, with Buenos Aires looking like an enormous grid of toy lights below, blurred by a faint layer of fog. Roaring into the sky, the motors' noise distracted the pilot a bit from the scenarios playing in his head. What would happen to these people? Who were they, really? And why were honest men like him involved in this?

Almost as if he had been reading the pilot's mind, the doctor opened the cockpit door without warning and left for the area holding the cargo. Some five minutes later, he came back, and entered the small space to sit next to the pilot again.

“You taking care of them?”

“They will not suffer. They have been administered a sedative, and all are asleep. We told them it was a vaccination, and they fell for it. Some of them even celebrated the fact that we were transferring them to a better prison. We allowed them to sing and dance before telling them that they had to be inoculated against diseases down in the Patagonian region.”

The doctor spoke proudly, in the same way any other man would speak of a true achievement. The pilot felt numb. He knew what was in store. The doctor continued his speech.

“I am one of the medical specialists on staff at the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics. My duty is to make sure we eliminate our prisoners in a humane way, in accordance with the Hippocratic oath and our Christian values.”

He paused for a moment to pull out of his medical robe's pocket a breath freshener pump. He squeezed it a few times, sprayed into his mouth, and made a gargling sound before going on with his speech.

“Be assured that what we are doing has been blessed by the church and accepted by other doctors as a legitimate means of disposal. I speak as your commander, with the proper authority bestowed on me.”

The pilot grew more uncomfortable and felt sweat on his forehead. He was queasy, his mouth parched. Ire and repulsion began to rise within him, and almost in a state of despair, he tried to think of an escape.

“This is a particularly momentous occasion for you, my dear friend,” the doctor continued. “It is one of our most important missions, because we have among the criminals back there one of the worst... an American.”

Startled, the pilot looked at the doctor with unspoken fear.

“An American... but... but, what about...?”

“Don't worry, it'll be fine. We have been given the go-ahead. He's one of the most radical and potentially dangerous elements of the subversion. A journalist who will never write again, a musician who's about to play his last tune.”

The pilot could not believe his ears. He was sure he knew that man. Had met him a few years ago in Mendoza, at a rock concert. Now he wanted to vomit.

Maybe he could throw the doctor off the craft and argue it had been an accident. Then there would be an investigation, for sure, and all kinds of questions would be asked. He had never been very good at lying. He would be caught.

Maybe the prisoners in those bags were not going to be thrown off the plane, after all. It was just a technique to plant fear in everyone, from the general population to the military forces themselves. But no, that did not seem to be the case. The doctor was clear and serious in his orders.

Maybe he should plead with the doctor and appeal to his sense of Christianity. Which would not accomplish anything, since he had already told the pilot that disposing of these subversives was not only necessary for the country, but it would be done humanely and with the blessing of the Church.

Maybe he could refuse to open the hatch. That would be insubordination. The moment he landed back at the base, he would be arrested, interrogated, taken to one of the detention centers, perhaps even the one at the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics, and never be heard from again.

No, there was nothing to do. He flew a death chamber amidst the clouds, and if he wanted to stay alive, he would have to follow his orders.

“How many of these flights are there?” the pilot ventured to say.

The doctor replied immediately.

“Only those necessary. There are more than what we had anticipated, because the subversive element is strong and defiant. As we decimate the terrorists, the frequency will decrease. In due time I will give you numbers. In due time.”

“We never studied this sort of counterterrorism tactic at the academy. How is it that we’re doing this now?”

Silence filled the cockpit again, and the pilot thought perhaps his line of questioning had gone too far. He stared straight ahead into the dark void and did not look at the man next to him.

Shifting in his seat, and getting closer to the pilot, the doctor explained that the orders were coming from one of the admirals. The pilot could smell that fruity alcohol aroma from the pump on the doctor's breath, as well as the sweat that moving the bodies with some soldiers must have caused.

"This time we will go over the River Plate. Sometimes it's the Atlantic Ocean. The prisoners are in a stupor, their hands and feet are tied, stuffed in these canvas bags that to the untrained eye would seem to be merely supplies being flown somewhere. Imagine you have potatoes back there."

That final thought must've been funny to the doctor, since he could not contain a small, piercing laugh that reminded the pilot of the cawing of a bird.

"We are not the first ones to dispose of dangerous elements in such a fashion, you know. We learned from the French."

"The French?" said the pilot, bewildered.

"Yes, during the Battle of Algiers, and later in Indochina. It was common for the French soldiers to capture the enemy and throw him alive, maybe unconscious or half-conscious, hands and feet tied as well, or with all the extremities broken, from helicopters or planes into the silence of the seas. And at The School of the Americas, our American counterparts gave us some good tips for handling difficult cases."

"Difficult cases?"

“Sure, those that resist the Pentothal or those that intuit that something is not right and put up a fight.”

The pilot did not want to know more. He had finished talking with the doctor. But the doctor was not through with him: The man looked at his watch and simply told the pilot “It’s time.”

Outrage threatened to overtake the pilot, but he managed to get himself under control. He could not show emotion of any kind in front of this criminal. Should he crash the plane and end the misery for everyone involved? No, he did not have the guts to do so. He should live, he wanted to live, as he was sure those men and women in the back had hoped to do.

“Open the hatch.”

And with that, the pilot pushed the lever that unlocked the back door. The sound of the bone-chilling wind swept through the plane and objects could be heard and almost felt as they bounced off the floor and against the walls. Things seemed to roll from one side to the other, each body hitting another body.

“Raise the nose.”

The pilot did as instructed. He wanted to scream. He wanted to murder this bastard. He felt a swelling of shame traveling through his body, blinding him and obfuscating his breathing.

With the nose at a higher angle than the tail, the bodies continued to roll in the back. Until there were no more. The pilot tried to steal a glance outside the window. Could he see with his own eyes any of the bodies falling from the plane? Instead of

dropping off medical supplies or food to help people, he lamented, here he was, sending fellow Argentines to their deaths.

Satisfied with himself and with the pilot, the doctor gloatingly rubbed his hands and pulled out a small flask from inside his medical gown. He opened the silver container and took a deep swig.

“Care for some cognac?”

“Sir, I am on duty. I do not drink.”

The pilot struggled with all his might to stay focused. Whenever the image of that American being dumped from the plane entered his mind, he pushed it aside. It was too much to contemplate now.

“You have the right attitude. Ethical and loyal to the principles of our country’s armed forces,” the doctor continued. “I shall recommend you to the admirals as an exemplary officer, and make sure you’re rewarded with more flights.”

Those last words echoed in the pilot’s head as if his worst punishment were coming true. He had entered Argentina’s Fuerza Aérea in 1974 to make his mother proud. Now, he would be “rewarded with more flights.” More people thrown to their watery graves by his pushing a lever.

“Doctor, I am honored by your confidence in me, but my Christian principles will not allow me to continue doing this. I would need to speak with a priest.”

The physician laughed.

“Son, speak to any of the chaplains. They have all agreed this is right, this is humane. What do you think is best? To know that someone is going to blow your head

off, or to go to sleep thinking you're going to wake up the next morning with a beautiful view of one of our glaciers down south from your cell? I would prefer to think that I am going to be looking at a mountain of blue ice rather than at the end of a pistol.”

The pilot headed the plane back to Dorado now. Using red ink, he would write in the remarks' section of his aviator's flight log book – *Date: April, 1977 / Type of machine: Skyvan PA-53 / Duration of flight: 1.1 / Pilot: --- / Crew: 2... in cockpit* – that the mission had been accomplished. The doctor added that he would ask that they both be deployed together the next time.

At last, the liquor had begun to quiet the doctor. He had started to snore slightly while the pilot imagined what it must be like to be dropped from a plane. The body in free-fall, quickly descending into the unknown, with broken limbs that hurt so much while being bounced on the floor of the craft, that being in open air was actually quite a relief. The hands and feet tied, however, would probably instill more terror in the prisoner if he were to wake up. And what if someone did wake up? What if the drug wore off, or the body didn't react to it?

Uneventful landing. The hangar almost deserted.

“How many people?” asked the pilot after touching ground.

“Umm, about a dozen every Wednesday,” said the doctor, seemingly alert. “Son, in two years, we hope to have eliminated some 1,000 subversives this way, give or take a few.”

“Are any remains ever found?”

“Once or twice we’ve had cases of bodies washing up on the banks of the River Plate. Fisherman find the bags and the police are quickly summoned.”

The doctor put the flask that was resting on his lap inside the gown, buttoned it and adjusted the stethoscope around his neck. He then ran his fingers through his thin, greasy hair as if to comb it.

“What happens to those fishermen that run into the bags?”

“They’re taken into custody.”

The pilot knew what that meant. And with that, he was ready to deplane. He walked away from the aircraft and the doctor without saying goodbye, just explaining that he had to fill out the log.

When he got to his small apartment in Barrio Once, the nightmares began. That same night. Never again would he be able to sleep properly. He kept hearing the bodies bouncing, the doctor’s shrill laugh, and the freezing wind tormenting his ears. He thought of Billy, the American he had once befriended, and how he had done nothing to help him. He was sure Billy had been on that plane. The pilot imagined the horrors inside the cargo area to be worse than they were, more savage, unbelievably cruel: perhaps babies were being thrown into the air as well. That’s when the pills came in handy. He kept it hidden from everyone that he was taking them. It would’ve shown weakness on his part, a crack in his manhood.

Thus, he took pills to get on the Skyvans for more death journeys. He took pills to sleep and he took pills to function during the day and he took pills to go on with his miserable life. Another doctor he saw at the base told him the pills would help and

besides, he should not worry. Instead, he should feel proud! He was paying his greatest respects to the homeland, and one day everyone would remember and be grateful and appreciative for his efforts to combat the enemy.

That day never came, of course. And the pills never stopped.

### **17. The Sister**

Evie can't work. She's restless at her desk. Bored at spending time at the public power company. A company owned by the state that most likely abducted her brother. The brother whose last words echo in her head. Every day.

*"I'll be back, sis. I have to meet Ana María. But if you and Nan don't hear from me by this afternoon, call the embassy. We may need the cavalry."*

She takes the afternoon off. She visits the American embassy. It's been four days since Billy left the house one evening, on Good Friday, never to return.

"I want to report a disappearance."

"If the person is an Argentine, fill these out."

"The person is my brother, and he's an American citizen."

"Then you fill this other form, and wait to speak to a consul."

"No, I want to speak directly to the ambassador."

"Ma'am, there's a protocol to follow. The consul will contact you after you've filled out these papers."

Evie Lou stares at the woman behind the glass window, who speaks through a tiny microphone she presses with a button hidden somewhere. The woman has slid some papers to Evie under an opening in the window, but Evie doesn't touch them.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“I told you. This is an emergency. An American citizen has disappeared, and I need to speak to the ambassador.”

“And I told you what the procedure is, Miss. - ?”

“Hunt. Evie Lou Hunt.”

“Miss Hunt, have you filed a habeas corpus?”

“Don't you know we no longer have that? That the Junta got rid of it?”

“Well, I'm new here. Fill out these papers and we'll see what we can do.”

Evie Lou's heart sinks in the face of such mediocrity. She thinks again of a drug the Junta is peddling around, to make people forget about the “tough” times. Is this story of erasing bad memories too monstrous to contemplate?

Perhaps the news had been relayed wrongly, the journalists had not understood what Argentine scientists had allegedly achieved, the government's propaganda machinery was in full effect. Or maybe *she* was at fault, having failed to comprehend correctly. So she read the stories, repeatedly, dissected them, studied them. Her English had gotten better over the years; working for an accounting office with international clients, had had a positive effect on her language skills.

That memory-erasing drug, Zip, which left one with just that, zip, nothing, nada, no painful memories, occupied her thoughts whenever frustration was all she gained from

searching for answers regarding her brother. It had worked on rats' brains in experiments held in the States. But here, where ethics were a much more laissez-faire affair, trials had gone a little further. On humans. And had, apparently, succeeded.

The unrelenting and hurtful storms of the mind could finally be quelled, horrific remembrances vanquished from the brain into the netherworld. If a serum existed to make you tell the truth, why not one to make you forget?

But right now, Evie Lou really does not want to forget, as much as the events hurt her. To wipe out the part of her being that retains ensconced in its very DNA the nightmarish events of the past year, that perhaps took her brother away, means erasing the one good thing that persists in them: Billy.

Billy, the boy everyone loved. The little boy whose hair had resembled a Kewpie's, who had grown up to be the blond young man all girls wanted to go out with. The rocker and journalist, the fighter and idealist. The good man, son and brother. How could someone have taken him away? There must be a mistake. She can't give up hope. Maybe he's in hiding. He's only been missing for a few days, right?

Undaunted, Evie goes to her local police station. An officer has his feet on the desk. The soles of his shoes are worn and dirty. Evie feels disgusted.

"Let's see Miss Hunt, what do you think happened to your brother?"

"He has disappeared."

"Miss Hunt, didn't you hear what General Videla said on TV? We don't have *desaparecidos* in this country. If I were you, I would be very careful of the way you speak. Now, again, what do you think happened to, ah, Billy Lee?"

“He has disappeared, officer.”

Evie will never be able to erase the face of contempt the police officer from her precinct shows her each time she tells him of Billy’s fate. He removes his feet from the desk and sits properly.

“Miss Hunt, let’s say, for argument’s sake, that something did happen to your brother, ok?”

“Yes, something did happen.”

“Fine. So, I will ask the question again. What do you think has happened to him?”

“He went to a church, to meet his girlfriend. My family and her family believe they were both abducted. I’m told men came in Falcons and took them away. There was a priest with them.”

“Miss Hunt, you don’t really believe that nonsense, do you? About Falcons operating as some sort of death machines on wheels? Come on, you seem a sane woman. This is not a horror movie.”

The policeman writes something down. He shakes his head.

“Was Billy a communist?”

“He believed in a better society.”

“Ok, so he was.”

“What was his profession?”

“Journalist. Musician.”

“A bum. Sorry if I sound crude.”

Evie wanted to spit at the man sitting across from her.

“I will file a missing person’s report. He may have gone abroad.”

“Abroad?”

“Sure. All these leftists are suddenly finding refuge in Cuba, in Eastern Europe, in France. They leave without saying goodbye, and their loved ones suffer. Mighty selfish, if I may add.”

“Billy wouldn’t do that. He’s disappeared.”

“All right, Miss Hunt, we’ll do what we have to do.”

“And I will too.”

Nancy is not too optimistic. Neither is her boyfriend, Iván. Evie Lou doesn’t want to hear talk like that. She refuses to accommodate herself to other people’s notions of normal. Nancy says she feels the same sense of outrage, of disgust, of frustration Evie experiences every waking moment. Plus, she can’t bear looking at the pain Mama Pina is in. But, she says, she must go on living.

Two weeks go by. Then a month. Evie doesn’t stop visiting police stations, hospitals, morgues, hotels, churches. She is not eating the way she should. She loses weight. She looks haggard, distraught. Nancy tries to reason with Evie, to get her to understand that slowly moving on with her life in no way diminishes her love for Billy or desecrates his memory, whatever his fate is. Evie’s childhood friends also intervene: “Grieve and move on, Evie,” they say.

She shuts them out.

To grieve and move on? Move on to what? She has been grieving since that gray and chilly afternoon in Buenos Aires, on April 8, 1977, when she experienced the most inexplicable kind of pain. The pain that comes from not knowing. Ever.

A gnawing pain that eats at one's stomach and causes sickening butterflies every time the telephone rings or a letter arrives. The kind of angst that is always present in the soul, that makes one aware that there's something wrong inside, yet no one can pinpoint exactly what it is. The uncertainty that comes with wondering: What happened? Is he suffering? Did he escape? Can he come back? Will he come back? Is he in exile as some say? Did he make a new life for himself? Are the rumors about planes true? Was he one of the many thrown out of an aircraft, like she's heard? If so, was he awake then? Could he feel the water? Did he drown? Or did they shoot him, like others whispered, by that small church near the house, Iglesia de la Virgen de Fátima, and dump him with his girlfriend in a pit in the countryside and burn them to ashes? Were there any bones left?

Rarely did she hesitate, but yes, Evie had to admit, she was tired. She was not invincible after all. Still, she goes to the police station every day. The same officer is there. He mocks her. Ignores her. Complains when he sees her.

A month after Billy's disappearance, something else has happened. She is not alone. Evie notices that with each visit to the precinct, more and more women appear, distraught, sad, upset, in search of answer. They all want to know: where are our children? Where are our brothers? Our sisters? Mothers, fathers, lovers, friends, etc...

Indeed, where are they?

Evie sits on a waiting room. She is no longer the only person that goes to inquire about a loved one.

“How long have you been coming here? I’ve seen you before” she asks a woman old enough to be her mother. She even reminds her of Pina.

“Over a week now. My husband. They took him one night.”

“Who did?”

“The *milicos*.”

“The police won’t tell me if the military also detained my brother, but I know they did.”

“They broke into our home one night. It was all so sudden. We were both sleeping, and heard this loud noise. They ransacked our room. A few of them held Emilio, my husband, and beat him. One of them slapped me and told me to stop screaming or he would blow my head off. Then they took off with Emilio.”

Evie noticed the woman’s eyes filling with tears. She held her wrinkled, humble hand.

“My daughter is gone too,” another woman, this one sitting behind Evie and the elderly lady, added in a low voice. “We only found her bicycle on the sidewalk near our home. She was coming back from class.”

The woman fidgeted with a rosary in her hands, looking down while speaking to Evie. “I keep asking the police, but they make fun of me. They say my Elsa was a troublemaker, a traitor, a communist, and deserved to die. She was none of those things. She was a biology student.”

“My husband was a welder,” the elderly woman sitting next to Evie adds. “I keep everything at home they left it, but all his tools are in place for when he comes back. I know he will. I need him too.”

“I also keep my daughter’s things the way they were the last day we saw her,” says the other woman.

Evie can relate to both of them on so many levels. She too keeps all of Billy’s things. Every time Evie plays Billy’s cassettes, touches his letters, or gazes at his photos, she understands why she holds on to all this. She simply refuses to wipe out his essence, like those who had made him disappear. It would have been killing him, that is, if he wasn’t already dead. And so she carries on, convincing others, and even herself, that she is not losing, or hasn’t lost, her sanity. That Billy is still there somewhere. That he can come back. That until she sees the body in a morgue...

As her only living sibling, Nancy attempted to be patient; Evie recognized that. Less so Iván, Nancy’s boyfriend. Talking about Billy always led to an argument on politics, on what the subversives did or did not do, and how the generals responded or should not have responded. This was unavoidable. Wasn’t politics the reason Billy had been kidnapped, tortured, or worse, after all?

“Politics should never be the reason for violence,” Evie argued. “And violence is only the refuge of those who have refused to carry out a decent argument.”

Returning to their 1950s four-bedroom home, staring at her sparsely decorated celadon walls, every night coming from work meant the same thing. Avoid that conversation with Iván, or else face another argument. Any shred of information on Billy

brought her into the house beaming with a hopeful smile. Likewise, no new details left her morose, taciturn, defeated. Evie was now 35, but looked older. Perhaps 10 years older. She had been without Billy for two months now, yet the sensation of having him around had not subsided one bit. Billy had become her phantom limb, amputated physically from her being, yet preserved spiritually and mentally inside her. They were like Siamese twins, even though they weren't.

Pina, their mother, has not been well. She no longer speaks to her sister Mary in Mendoza, after her husband Tito, refused to intercede for his nephew. He could've warned Billy, Pina said. He did no such thing.

Evie can't even listen to her beloved tangos anymore. The generals had banned the radio programs that remained a constant in an unpredictable world. They had outlawed the most cherished of Argentine music and dance expressions.

Evie wondered if there was anything she could've done differently. She had never been involved in politics, but she got involved; she had to, after Billy got involved. Listening to his stories, his excitement became her excitement. His fear, her fear. His joy at the prospect of changing the society that surrounded them, of being part of something greater than he and everyone else, would be her joy. Evie didn't necessarily understand it, but she was glad to be experiencing it if that's how Billy felt. This meant too, that when he panicked, she panicked, but could not show it to him. As the older sister, and with a frail and despondent mother, she knew Billy needed to see her strong.

Anxiety was mostly what Billy felt on that April 1977 afternoon in Buenos Aires when he had his last conversation with his sister, after he walked out the door with his

backpack on as he usually did. He had planned on visiting his friend and sometime roommate Eduardo, but instead, he postponed that plan to stop by the Our Lady of Fátima Church and rendezvous with his girlfriend Ana María. Something more important was at stake. Something that a priest, Father Ralph Dengler, had promised would help Billy's cause.

Evie did not know what Billy was up to. She never did with any certainty. She had ideas, and shared in his dreams and goals as much as he wanted to let her be a part of them. Truth was, his mind was impenetrable, like the minds of the kids from one of her favorite movies, *Village of the Damned*. The one where they tried to control everyone's thoughts and then take over their bodies. Those last days he was around her, Billy had erected this massive brick wall that she had been unable to climb over or crack open or even decipher where it started and where it ended. All she knew was that he seemed to be running faster than he ever had before.

"Our struggle has no time to waste!" he would tell Evie with the excitement of a young man heading to prom.

Billy had quit his band, Los Caravelles, leaving them without a leader and at a loss for answers. He had resigned from his job at his college newspaper. And he was no longer in charge of the student union. As the winter of '76 enshrouded Argentina, and then 1977 crept up on them, her fears grew deeper and more powerful. But there was nothing she could do, she repeated to herself, other than to trust Billy.

"Let go, you're not his mother," Nancy would chastise Evie in a non-threatening way. "He already has one, and she's not as worried as you are."

“That’s because she doesn’t understand what’s going on,” Evie would reply, without a hint of cruelty. Pina knew English, of course, and Italian, but was not fluent in Spanish. This Evie and Nancy thought of more or less as a blessing, given the violence that increasingly swept their adopted land and that was pretty much the only subject of conversation everywhere one went.

Pina, however, watched the news, and she could decipher things. She spoke with a few of her neighbors in her mixture of Italian, Spanish and English, and they responded in hushed tones. Soldiers on every corner were more and more a common sight, as was the antigovernment graffiti on the walls, the explosions at night, and the sound of bullets hitting the deserted sidewalks. Things were not going well in Argentina, everyone she knew seemed to agree, and it concerned her. Yet, she also had great faith in Billy, her precious little child who had wanted to be a musician and a writer, and who had become both, and seemed intent on exchanging it all for something else.

Evie reflected upon these memories every night, keeping Billy alive. Mama Pina withered with each passing day, broken-hearted from never knowing what destiny had befallen her boy. Her daughters saw her as a small bird that had had its wings clipped and was perishing from sadness. In the end, they feared she would just sit and rock in a chair, remembering her years in Italy, then Lebanon, TN, visiting New Orleans with her siblings and parents, meeting her husband, detesting war and, above all, regretting the one decision that changed her life and those of her children forever: moving to Argentina.

Pina’s father, an anti-fascist, had fought in WWII and survived, but she remembered the nightmares he came back with after seeing so many of his resistance

comrades killed. The horrors that he buried in his heart and that had eventually decimated his marriage and took his life away were not something Pina wanted to relive again. Not for Billy who, at the time, was too young for Vietnam, but who one day would not be. She would do everything in her power then to protect her child from the insanity of war, even if that meant uprooting everybody and traveling halfway around the globe to another destination.

Argentina had been a welcoming land for immigrants in the 19th century, her grandfather used to say. So it would be for her in the 20th. Five years after giving birth to Billy in Lebanon, she packed her suitcases and fled with little Evie and Billy to Buenos Aires (Nancy would be born there later). Her husband did not follow or visit. The marriage had grown strained and eventually crumbled. He deemed her a coward, unable to comprehend the terror that grew inside her: of losing Billy.

Evie cried at leaving her Italian grandpa Gianni, at saying goodbye to her American uncle Raymond, and of course, her father William, whom she would never see again. When the school term finished, her mother revealed to Evie that for the next school year, she would be meeting new people in a new country. Just like that.

Her American passport in hand, Evie and Billy confused and tugging at her skirt, Pina left behind her life in Tennessee and boarded a plane to uncertainty. Besides her relatives in the province of Mendoza, through a member of her Catholic parish, she was given a contact in Buenos Aires, a young Irish-American priest, Father James Weeks, who would become a savior of sorts for her as she struggled to settle in the new city once the initial excitement of spending some time with her sister had worn off.

Evie's youthful hopes began to falter with the revolution that was taking place, the mayhem caused by terrorists, anarchists, communists, and fascists. President Juan Domingo Perón's widow didn't seem to be in control of the country anymore. In his last few months of life, the old general was like a macabre wax figure propped on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, with Isabel trying unsuccessfully to become the new Evita. Next to them, that sinister little man known as "El Brujo", The Warlock, seemed to be in charge of all of Perón's affairs. These people were the harbingers of Argentina's destruction, Billy and his colleagues would eventually argue with Evie. They populated their nightmares, and gave their lives a new meaning and urgency.

For Billy and for Evie, every time the generals dictated cruelty into law, became more repressive or acted more out of touch with reality, it was a step closer for their generation to achieve justice and greatness, things deep-rooted in the principles of freedom and democracy from the country of their birth, that somehow had gotten lost in this foreign place. Answering violence with violence, Billy used to tell Evie, was sometimes the only way to achieve progress. And so when the government of Isabel collapsed and the generals goose-stepped in, many hoped the worst had passed, and that a new era would begin for all of Argentina.

Evie wanted to believe that this was true, because many of her friends had believed it to be so. Until the day when Billy joined the lists of those who were no longer seen. The day he didn't come back from the church; the day his nightly phone call did not materialize; the day the neighbors stared down at the floor when she asked them about him, or just ignored her and continued walking; the day when some priest blessed her,

told her not to worry and then invited her to confess everything she knew about Billy; the day the police officer mocked her; the day she met relatives of others who had vanished; the day when she called the American embassy, her embassy, and they told her they had no information on any Billy.

“Call back again. No news yet,” was always the response.

Those days oppress her, prevent her from focusing on the future. Evie lives in the past, she knows this; and she seems destined to remain there till the end of her days.

“Let’s go back to the States. Let’s go to Lebanon, and search for Papa,” Nancy pleads.

Evie will have none of that.

“Not until Billy comes back.”

## **18. The Americans**

Evie Lou Hunt doesn’t mind long lines.

She has grown accustomed to being very patient. What with weeks of dealing with sclerotic bureaucratic agencies, corrupt police officers, cowardly politicians, apathetic diplomats, murderous thugs, and a few kooks, she is almost immune to the delays that come her way all the time. She is glad, however, that she does not have to make the line. The American diplomat, who is giving her some of his time, has also given her an invitation to come right away.

*Just go through the security booth, identify yourself and wait for me in the lobby.*

She does as she is told. It's a breeze to go in. That, however, does not necessarily make her feel any better. Through her dark sunglasses, she watches the people she has just walked in front of, waiting for hours, while she goes in, in just a few minutes. At this point, Evie expects someone to heckle her, to yell at her. No one does.

Maybe it's those rather-stylish glasses. Or perhaps the overcoat she is wearing, which makes her look much more imposing, or serious, or business-like than she really is. Could be her hair, tightly wound around her head in a braid, making it difficult to pick out the gray in it. She's dressing up better lately.

Whatever the reason, Evie shows her Argentine national identification document and her recently found American passport and is waved in. She follows a path across the lawn that takes her to double glass doors with the seal of the United States. The glass is tinted however. She can't see in from the outside, though she is sure anyone can detect her from the inside.

She is buzzed in. A guard stands at attention and without blinking instructs her to take a seat in a small vestibule right off the entrance. It is cool inside, with the noise of fingers tapping on typewriters, breaking the drab atmosphere.

There are two rows of three plastic chairs each, and no one else but Evie is sitting on them. Everyone who enters the building and passes by her in the 15 minutes or so that she waits there before being called, heads straight to the consular section.

Evie waits for John Egan.

A young woman with tortoise-shell frames on her face, a business-like brown jacket and matching skirt, approaches her with a stack of papers, files of some sort,

maybe Billy's files. Evie studies her: the pale skin, deep blue eyes, and lips painted ochre. Her body language, the distance she keeps from Evie, tells Evie she is somewhat aloof, but cordial.

"Ms. Hunt? I am Ms. Borges."

There are small offices on each side of the corridor, and workers in them writing papers or reading documents or looking busy. No one seems to be taking care of the people outside, the people who wait by the fence for hours.

Perhaps they're called into another section. Or it's that consular section they seemed to be headed to while she was waiting, no?

"Ms. Borges, come in," says the man inside.

Evie first hears the voice, then sees Egan behind the desk. His assistant introduces them and is dismissed. Evie takes off her glasses, puts them inside a pocket of the overcoat and proceeds to remove it. Egan stands up and offers to help her with it. He grabs the coat and hangs it with his. He gestures again for her to take a seat, and offers a beverage.

She declines.

"Mr. Egan, I am looking for my brother Billy. He is an American citizen. And he is a *desaparecido*. I've made enquiries every day since he disappeared in April. I pester the authorities. They warn me. But I want answers. And I am willing to risk it all to get them, even if these murderers win in the end."

The diplomat puts on some reading lenses and opens the file Ms. Borges carried with her when she met Evie. He reads briefly and silently from it before taking the

glasses off and addressing Evie again. For a moment, he feels uncomfortable hearing how fondly the woman sitting across from him expects him to succeed where others, if there have been others, have failed.

“Yes, Ms. Hunt, I have a file on him. Your brother Billy’s, and two more cases, Jon Pirmin Arozarena and Toni Agatina Motta. Americans as well.”

Evie shakes her head.

“No one in the Argentine military forces has any information and –” he says.

“Or they do not want to release it,” she interrupts Egan.

“That’s true. It could very well be the case. But in all the off-the-record and on-the-record conversations that I’ve had with my Argentine contacts, the names of your brother and of two other Americans have never been mentioned. Which is odd, because the military forces are very detail-oriented, and they would remember them.”

“Like the Nazis,” she says.

Not sure of whether she doubts that Billy and Jon and Toni disappeared at the hands of the government, or suffered a different fate, Evie controls her temper.

“Mr. Egan, the Security Forces have acknowledged that they have arrested thousands of so-called subversives. They say these people are terrorists, and that they have fled the country or they are in hiding. I don’t buy that for one minute.”

Egan nods.

Evie scouts the office around her while the diplomat stares at her with what strikes her as genuine concern. She doesn’t want to think of him in physical terms, but she admits to herself that he is handsome, and probably not much older than she is.

Square-jawed, clean-shaven, with strong cheekbones and blue eyes, thick eyebrows and his dirty blonde hair combed back. He has big, strong hands, long fingers, and no rings on any of them. In a few seconds, Evie further examines him. He dresses conservatively, and impeccably. Not a light-blue shirt with a white collar, but a crisp shirt in a white that resembles silver and a charcoal tie. His jacket, hanging where her overcoat now is, is a charcoal color as well. The office, not too oppressively small or uncomfortably large, just right, is an exercise in elegant minimalism, restraint and class. Very few decorative items, other than some clocks, family pictures, an old map of Argentina on a wall, and the portraits of the President and the Vice President of the United States. Photos of Egan with various dignitaries, politicians, congressmen and such, occupy the top of a small bookcase. There are more books lined up neatly in a large black case right next to the office's main door. By the old clock, there is a big frame with a picture of who must be his father. A smaller frame has the photo of a mature woman, Anna Egan she surmises.

“You admire your father,” Evie says while gazing in the direction of the pictures.

“Indeed, Ms. Hunt, he is an extraordinary man.”

“What about your mother?”

Egan's face reacts surprised by the intimacy of the question. Evie is sure she has hit a raw nerve.

“She passed away. Now, shall we proceed?”

Evie speaks again, without commenting on his mother's death.

“How can you be of help? I mean, other than empty promises?”

Egan shifts in his seat.

“The Argentine and U.S. governments have lucrative financial deals, even if President Carter is a believer in human rights. But no economic sanctions have been imposed, right?”

Egan sighs.

“Ms. Hunt, I want to assure you, that this administration takes the issue of human rights violations very, very seriously, above any economic considerations that may surface between the governments in question. There is always an appropriate time and manner in which to raise these concerns with the authorities. Just don’t expect immediate results. Politics can be a strange animal, sometimes moving vertiginously fast, others exasperatingly slow. It may take some time.”

Evie has heard words to this effect, and in similar variations, on so many other occasions. But what else can she do?

“Mr. Egan, you have lived in other countries, or am I mistaken?”

Once again, Evie had thrown the conversation off course. Discreetly he looks at the watch on his wrist, but this too she sees. Evie goes on with her train of thought.

“Yes, in Haiti, Zaire, Portugal.”

“Ah, Portugal. Of course, in the Carnation Revolution, with your father, Ambassador Egan.”

“You know your history well, Ms. Hunt.”

“Your father is said to have saved people in Portugal. Can you do the same here?”

“With all due respect Ms. Hunt, what are you getting at?”

“Just to let you know that I do understand that things don’t happen overnight. I know because I’ve been waiting for weeks now. And I will continue to wait, for as long as it takes, Mr. Egan. Put yourself in my shoes for one day, one day, Mr. Egan. Do you… have a… significant other? Someone you love?”

The diplomat blushed. “Not right now, Ms. Hunt, but I have. I have,” he replied, rather unconvincingly.

“Then just remember my words when you hug, caress or kiss that person. And then imagine them gone, just like that. One day with you, the next, disappeared. Yet, instead of suffering the natural pain of death, here you are enduring the torture of uncertainty, the fear that something terrible is hurting your loved one. Can you comprehend that?”

“I can, Ms. Hunt,” was all Egan could say before standing up and offering to shake her hand. Evie took his hand while looking straight into his eyes, trying to read his face. What she got in return, a weak shake and a nervous stare, did not augur well. But, she had vowed to herself: she would try. She would hope. She would go back to the Americans as many times as necessary to see if someone there would help. Before he could hand her the coat, she grabbed it herself and put her sunglasses back on. Egan called his secretary and asked her to escort Evie out.

“Shall we get you a car, Ms. Hunt?”

“I can walk, thank you. I am not afraid of the city. And if I see a Falcon, I shall duck.”