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Place of Rest

While smoking a cheroot in the back garden, Teddy Wilson made up his mind to die in Paraguay. It was late, the streets were quiet, and if he held the cigar to one side he could smell night-blooming jasmine on the trellis. The rich scent on the warm summer air somehow confused itself with the Brahms piano concerto he had listened to that evening. Forty years. The decision came to him easily, as if someone else had done the hard thinking. All he had to do was nod his head in acknowledgement. He had been in Paraguay a Biblical length of time and had no chance of going home.

Teddy was sixty-five. He taught biology, in English, at the Asunción Academy. He had an abiding love for the Linnaean classification system with its crowded orderly kingdoms and went to work every day hoping to ignite a passion for science in an unsuspecting pupil. The odds were against him. His students were bred in the swamp of the country's crocodilian elite. *Hijos de papá*, people called them. Daddy's kids, meaning privileged, pampered, and protected, secure in the knowledge they would inherit the earth no matter how outrageously they messed up. Still, once in a while he succeeded. Look at Max.

He felt bad about avoiding Max's phone calls. The boy—Dr. Maximiliano Iglesias—would not drop his plan for a tribute. Teddy had quashed the idea from the first. *I'm not the man you think I am*, he always told him, but Max didn't buy it. He kept coming back. Now Teddy ground out the stub of his cigar on a flat stone and stood up having made another decision. He did not want to be cremated.

He had no near-term plans to kick the bucket. His health, he thought, was pretty good, and he still liked teaching. Why he suddenly felt compelled to choose his final resting place puzzled him, but the decision had a momentum of its own and he wound

up talking to Lourdes about it the next day at school. Behind the reception desk in the front office, fingers poised above a keyboard, she seemed stunned by the thought.

“You want to be buried here, in Faraway? At la Recoleta?”

Lourdes was the director’s secretary, a mainstay at the academy even though she was young and new. She was plump and cheerfully effective and considered señor Wilson an asset to the school despite his age. Unlike everybody else, she never called him Teodoro. Teddy realized he was under no obligation to explain himself. That was a relief, and Lourdes could not help being helpful.

“It’s full,” she said.

The Recoleta was the capital’s cemetery, a traditional dead city unto itself crowded with massive family vaults and graves that ran the gamut from modest commemorative markers to towers of overwrought invention. Once or twice, years ago, Teddy had strolled its stone streets, reading the inscriptions, observing the stone angels, the fluted columns, the impossibly heavy doors to crypts that looked as though they had not swung open in a hundred years.

“There might be a different cemetery, one that still has space,” Lourdes suggested. “I can call around and ask.”

But the thought of being buried in Asunción was tied in Teddy’s mind to the Recoleta. His imagination would countenance no substitutes.

“Thank you just the same,” he said.

That afternoon, as he was leaving the academy, she came out into the roofed-over walkway that led from the office to the sprawl of classrooms. The students were long gone, and he enjoyed the quiet clatter of her heels on the red tiles. She took his arm. The summer heat was ferocious, the sunlight on a mission to blind, and Teddy had sweated through his shirt. His frazzled appearance embarrassed him. At the same time his skin felt tight on his bones, as if somebody with strong hands had taken hold of him in a secret place, pulling until his shape changed. Lourdes, by contrast, was comfortably cool.

“You’re serious about being buried at the Recoleta, aren’t you,” she said.

He nodded.

She handed him a piece of paper with an address and

telephone number in her childlike handwriting. “Señora de López is my husband’s brother’s wife’s aunt. There is a López mausoleum at the Recoleta. I am told it is not quite full. You may want to talk with her.”

“I will.”

“Don’t let her put you off, Mister Wilson.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Doña Candelaria has . . . unusual attitudes.”

She turned away, and Teddy made his way to the parking lot in the implacable heat of December. As he unlocked the car door, his phone rang. It was Max. Teddy let it go to voicemail.

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Candelaria Macchi viuda de López was eighty if she was a day and lied to Teddy, inviting him to drink tea.

“You speak perfect Spanish,” she said. “Like a real Paraguayan.”

It wasn’t true. He spoke easily. After forty years he had the verbs and prepositions down, he knew the idioms, but he had not shaken an American accent that often made him self-conscious opening his mouth.

She lived in a fine old house with pillars and a portico on Calle don Felix de Guaranía not far from the Recoleta. A high-walled fence of grainy pink adobe safeguarded the property, a dense tracery of brilliant flowering bushes clinging to the walls with the vegetable tenacity they had flaunted for fifty years. This was colonial Asunción, unlikely to survive many more generations.

The old woman’s skin was desiccated, her hair a thin white pretense. The eyes she turned on him with visible distaste were angry black. They drank tea from a silver service on iron chairs in the garden, where straight-boled trees kept off the sun, insects ticked, and a servant woman with a gloomy face moved on bare brown feet like a spy too clever to blend in. In the heat, the songs of the numerous birds sounded like distress calls.

“We are not supposed to say this,” the widow told her guest, “but I miss the General. Not the man, of course. He was a brute with nasty habits. What I long for is the peace, the security.”

“You could leave a bag at the bus station,” said Teddy, who had

heard the refrain seven hundred times, “and come back for it the next day. No one touched it.”

Doña Candelaria nodded, scarcely paying attention. It had never been true, not even in the days of the General’s most complete control over the country he dominated.

“My husband was a López,” she said as if it followed. “I wanted to dance the day he died, but people were scandalized. Among the men of my acquaintance there was not a single one with the courage to take my arm. Like the General, Custodio was a brute. So many men are.”

“I was told there may be space in the López mausoleum. If there is, and you were willing to sell, I would be interested.”

“The *mausoleo* is enormous. Custodio’s family was a large one. At one point a person could scarcely turn around without knocking down a López. Now they’re all gone. I took possession of the crypt upon the death of his youngest brother, Nelson. Nelson was fishing for dorado on the Paraguay River when his boat capsized. People remarked how wonderful it was, a man dying while engaged in what he liked best. I suppose it’s true. A woman went down with him. She was young and had no family to speak of. I have it on good authority that, at the time of the accident, she and Nelson were having relations.”

She had the knack of stringing together non sequiturs and having them come out like conversation.

“I used to fly to Buenos Aires to shop,” she told him. “I felt it was my duty to spend some of the fortune that Custodio made. He cut down palms to get at the heart, which is tender and quite delicious. My father was a rancher, also quite prosperous. As a girl, I remember watching him gallop about the territory on a handsome black horse with a whip in his hand, savaging the people who worked for him.”

“Have you always been this outspoken?”

She drained her cup, which was Wedgwood with a wreath of blue flowers. She smashed it on the patio stones. The servant woman emerged with a broom and dustpan and swept up the pieces, humming softly as she worked.

“It’s too late,” doña Candelaria told Teddy.

“Too late for what?”

“What my people did, it will send me to Hell. I have eaten the fruit of their sin, I have gorged myself and lived too well. And I

thought, when Custodio died, that I was finally getting shut of him.”

Teddy saw tears in her eyes, though she held them back. She wanted revenge. Now that all the people in her life were gone, it was not an option. Still, the thought of allowing a Yankee nobody to lay his bones alongside theirs had a certain savor. She sent him away with a vague promise to think about it.

He drove home knowing he would have to take Max's next call. Max was not just his most successful foster son, he was the most faithful. *We are your children, Teddy, we will always be your children.*

When he came to Paraguay, Teddy began taking in orphans, one or two at a time. Boys, for the most part, although the occasional girl had found a refuge under his roof. The supply of parentless children was unending, and once he started, word got around. In the early days, eyebrows were raised. A single man in a home alone with vulnerable children: he seemed to fit the profile of a predator. The director of the academy at the time called him in for an interview that was painful for both of them. Inquiries were made, the children were interviewed, then interviewed again. So were a succession of women who worked as household maids. There was no smoke, there was no fire. And after a few years people stopped finding the biology teacher's generosity suspicious. In a predictable turnabout he became a hero, praised for feeding and clothing kids who had nothing, paying for them to study.

To this day, when some fatuous prattler went on about how wonderful he was, a black mood came over him in an instant, and he said something outrageous. *It's free labor around the house, or I make a mean soup with their bones, or, in recent years, A teacher's pension is for shit. I make a few extra dollars selling the kids over the internet.*

He did not have to deliberate whether to take Max's phone call. At home, there stood the man himself at the front gate, self-possessed as always. He was tall, with honey-brown skin. In fact his good looks had come close to being his downfall. During medical school he had been approached by an advertising firm to make television commercials. He said yes for the money and wound up seduced by the glitz, the parties, the painfully conspicuous consumption. But the bubble popped. Powered by cocaine, the

woman who had been his modeling partner drove a speedboat into a concrete jetty. Her classically beautiful head separated from her body. And Max came to his senses. In a single terrible hour, the danger passed.

They embraced.

“You’re looking good, Max.”

“*Lo mismo digo yo*, Teddy. Right back at you.”

He never let the orphans call him *papito*, as some of them had longed to do.

His mind was on the Recoleta, which was not a subject to discuss with Max. They went inside and drank *tereré*, the Paraguayan cold tea to which Teddy was long addicted, and Max told him the time had come to set a date for the tribute dinner. Max would host. He had compiled a list of everybody Teddy Wilson had sheltered over the years. All of them were eager to attend, no abstentions.

“Let’s wait until the weather cools down,” Teddy said. “People will enjoy the party more if they’re not sweating.”

“Come on, Teddy. As excuses go, that doesn’t even rise to pathetic.”

“All right. I’ll have a look at my calendar and give you a call.”

“Let’s look now.”

It took time, it took diplomacy, but Teddy succeeded in postponing the decision one more time. Leaving, Max had a hunch and asked him, “Are you okay?”

“Never been better.”

“No health problems?”

“If I need a doctor, I know a good one.”

When Max was gone, Teddy wrapped the empty house around him as a shawl. It sat heavily on his shoulders. He listened to the first movement of a Brahms symphony. Only recently had he begun to appreciate the music of the old German Romantic. It had to do with remorse. Every time he put a piece on, the sound spread like a lake filling cavities he was not aware were inside him until they were awash in sonorously lapping Brahms. He went outside and smoked his nightly cheroot in the garden, which lacked only a *corochiré*. He fumbled a moment for the English word for what he did not have. Nightingale.

He could have confided in Max. People talked about old souls. Some few individuals actually had one. Max’s soul might or might

not be old, but it certainly was craggy. Teddy drew on the cigar. He shook his head as if someone sitting across from him in the nightingale-less garden were challenging him. He would keep the truth to himself.

Forty-one years ago, Teddy drove to Parkside, near the Buffalo zoo, to say goodbye to his Uncle Arthur, whom cancer had captured. A month, the doctors said; tops, he had two. Teddy climbed the porch steps to the grand house reluctantly. He knew cancer was not contagious. But death might be. His uncle sent the nurse away so he could rant without medical interference. He was angry at Charles, his only child. Teddy and Charles were not close. In his twenties, Charles was an accomplished deadbeat, and Teddy disliked his cousin's friends. Charles' mother had died reassuring him that the world was anthropocentric and—such luck!—had chosen to revolve around him. He had a kind of divine dispensation to get his way. For his part, Uncle Arthur lacked much in the way of emotional intelligence. As a parent, he had consistently performed subpar.

Sin was a mystery. How it happened that Teddy took advantage of his uncle's distemper was beyond understanding. Over the seven weeks that Arthur Wilson remained conscious, Teddy manipulated him into changing his will, cutting Charles out, dealing Teddy in. Just as inexplicable was the ease with which he adjusted to being a perfidious person. The change that came over him was casual. He did not agonize or beat himself up. *So this is who I am*, he recalled thinking. The insight came offhandedly, like a spring bird in the front yard. *April 17; first robin.*

Losing Uncle Arthur's money turned out to be as trivial a thing as getting it had been. He drove to the racetrack at Batavia Downs and discovered that he enjoyed a horse race as spectacle. It was a shapely one-act play with an exciting climax built in. Betting felt like an afterthought, and losing five thousand bucks that first outing did not faze him.

He was teaching science at a Catholic school in Buffalo. No money, no social life, no prospects. All he had was the elegance of Linnaeus, which interested few. So he quit. Over the next couple of months, he made himself a regular at all the racetracks across western New York and southern Ontario. He particularly liked harness racing and showed up early to study and admire the sulkies. Sometimes the jockeys talked with him. And he bet. He

bet big, he bet compulsively. He picked his horses for their names, many of which were clever. Unfortunately the horse with the most intriguing name did not always win. By the middle of the third month, he had lost the hundred fifty thousand dollars his uncle bequeathed him.

Also in the third month, Charles died. The Wilsons, as a clan, were Catholic traditionalists who refused to speak the word suicide aloud. Speed had been Teddy's cousin's drug of choice, and he rode a fast train to oblivion. The Wilsons were far from a united bunch, but they made a collective decision that it fell to Teddy to handle the funeral arrangements. After all, he was the one who got the money.

Teddy learned with some surprise how difficult it was to find a priest who would bury a suicide. He threw himself into the quest and finally found one at St. Martin de Porres Church who agreed to inter his cousin's body with an orthodox ceremony. The priest was from somewhere in South America, and Buffalo was exile. He had black tragic eyes and conducted the Mass in what appeared to be a state of hypnosis, which communicated itself to Teddy. He sat alone in the front pew because nobody in the family attended. Driving home, he exited the Scajaquada Expressway, found a side street, parked, and cried. He cried until he realized the tears were for himself and only compounded the error of his ways. He went to Faraway. He stayed.

Now he tossed his cigar. There was a bird in the garden. In the dark he sensed it hopping around the base of a banana tree.

"Sing, goddamn you," he grunted.

No luck. The bird kept its beak shut. Teddy tossed a handful of gravel toward the tree and heard the small commotion of wings. Rising from his chair, he realized with renewed force, as if for the first time, that atonement was not enough.

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Celia Figueroa, who was Teddy's lover, lived in two rooms above the business she had started from scratch. She imported consumer goods from Brazil to resell in rural Paraguay. She knew everything there was to know about moving merchandise across borders and the character flaws of customs officials. The age

difference between her and Teddy was beginning to matter more than it used to. In a couple of months Celia turned fifty, reaching which milestone she would have to ask herself how it felt, keeping company with a man who was moving inexorably from sixty-five to sixty-six.

She would postpone that moment of reckoning if she could. Celia was loyal. Her loyalty had to do, in part, with class. She was born in a village. Her parents had no teeth. What she made of her life, she made on her own. Her willpower was a thing of beauty in Teddy's eyes. He was indifferent to her beginnings. At the same time, even as irregular lover he raised her social status. It made sense that if Teddy was going to break his newly remade vow not to talk about Buffalo, Celia would be the one to hear what he had to say.

They made love like friends with joint-custody memories in a brass bed in the room Celia slept in. Calling it a bedroom would be a stretch. The walls were lined with stacks of merchandise she would send out to the countryside in a truck with a driver she trusted not to rip her off, selling the stuff village by village.

In the quiescent interval after love, Celia brought them both a glass of water. She was one of those fortunate people who moved into middle age without the burden of weight. She dyed her hair; there was a national law against going gray. Her breasts depended. But she was comfortable in her naked self with an ease that made Teddy feel the same. It was her great gift to him.

"I killed a man," he told her.

"This morning after breakfast?"

"I'm serious."

"Go ahead, be serious. I don't believe you."

"My cousin Charles."

"I still don't believe you."

He told her the story. She preferred talking to listening, as a rule. For a few moments she lay next to him in the bed playing with his listless penis, but as he went on, she began to pay attention.

"You behaved badly," she decided when he finished. "As a young man your totem animal was a snake. But you did not kill your cousin."

He left Celia's and drove home thinking more connectedly about Buffalo than he had thought in years. With age he felt

more acutely the horror of what he had done. The orphans he saved from the hot streets of Asunción did not, could not, annul his guilt. The headlong ease with which he dove into a gutter appalled him. Worse was this: only the end of his uncle's money had stopped him. If there had been more cash, he might have gone on dog-paddling in filth to the end of time.

The next day at school, Lourdes stopped by his classroom at the end of the day. She studied the diagram he had drawn on a whiteboard.

"It bothers you when people say you're a saint, I can tell."

"To be a saint you have to be boiled in oil."

She nodded. "Teaching these students, maybe that qualifies." She had been painting her nails a different color every few days. Today they were peach. She was not a person who would murder a cousin. "I hear through the grapevine that doña Candelaria was quite taken with you."

"She did a good job hiding it."

"She is inclined to sell you space in her mausoleum. I think she wants you to beg, just a little. It's in her nature. Will that bother you?"

"Not having a place to lie down when I'm dead, that's what will bother me."

So he visited the widow again, this time without calling ahead. She received him in her formal *sala*, an oversized cave of a room with fat furniture and gilt-framed pictures. In an alcove at one end of the room stood a Chickering grand piano like a dispossessed aristocrat, conscious of his quality, unreconciled to the new world. The gemstones in the rings on doña Candelaria's pincers looked bigger to Teddy than they had the first time they met. It was evening, and she called for brandy.

"Have you made a decision?" Teddy asked her.

She glanced away as if to avoid an uppercut. She grimaced. "It would be such a drastic step to take."

Rather than beg as Lourdes had suggested, Teddy told her, "Sometimes I think about the General."

"Indeed. And what is it that you think?"

Here was the brandy, carried on a silver tray by the same woman who had swept up the smashed teacup. She hummed as she poured. Teddy wished he knew the tune.

He sipped his drink and said, "I wonder what he thought about as an old man. I mean in Brazil, after he fell from power and

knew he could never return. I wonder if he regretted some of the terrible things he did when he was president.”

“You refer, perhaps, to the school for poor girls.”

Teddy nodded. Everybody knew the story. But she continued as if it must be new to him, a foreigner.

“He sent henchmen in jeeps out combing the countryside for pretty young girls. Sometimes the parents consented to let their daughter go, sometimes other means were employed. The school was a kind of farm where girls were cultivated, like food, to satisfy the sexual appetites of the General and the monsters of his inner circle.”

“Yes,” Teddy said. “Those are the things I wonder about. I sit in my garden in the evening. I smoke a cigar and ask myself, was he sorry? Did he feel guilt for what he had done?”

“I can tell you exactly what he thought, and what he felt. Men like the General do not regret. They feel no guilt. He spent his last years and days recalling his conquests with fondness, in great detail. What he felt was nostalgia. He was grateful for the deep well of memory that sustained him. It was memory that made the years of his decline bearable. In his mind he raped every last girl again. As dementia set in, he had difficulty staying mentally erect, but he managed. Oh, he managed all right. Some of those girls were raped a dozen times.”

In the widow’s own mind, the dictator’s villainy was perplexingly linked to her husband’s, and impulsively she told Teddy, “Come back tomorrow afternoon. My lawyer will be here. We will come to terms.”

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Teddy was not surprised to find no lawyer at doña Candelaria’s the following day. It was a cat and mouse game, and he knew which beast he was tapped to play. She called the servant and spoke to her in Guaraní, which Teddy understood haltingly at best. The woman nodded and left the room. This time Teddy only imagined he heard her humming.

“You should see the crypt before you make up your mind,” the widow told him dryly. “There is no going back, you know. You must be certain. Respicio will take you.”

Respicio was a boy of ten, likely the son of the woman who

hummed. He wore blue shorts, a stained white T-shirt, and was timid. For the length of the short drive to the cemetery he looked down at his flip-flops, refusing to answer Teddy's questions, which were intended to put him at ease.

At la Recoleta, he walked ahead of the American, head down. They entered the monumental stone city heading for the López mausoleum, Respicio glancing back now and then to be sure his charge was still behind him. The heat was a dagger, the humidity a sponge, the sunlight so bright it was like a new way to experience darkness. It disoriented Teddy. He felt like a sleepwalker, following the kid.

After ten minutes it was clear to both of them that Respicio could not find the López family vault. He was unable to respond when Teddy asked him if he knew where it lay. Any sort of response would have been okay. A shrug, a nod, a single word. The boy couldn't give him anything. They kept walking.

Five minutes later, Respicio took off running to shed the American, who in any event did not give chase. Watching him go around a corner past a crypt studded with placid angels, Teddy understood that it was shame that drove him off. He had been given a task. Not a difficult task. He was unable to complete it. His mortification was complete, and he could not face failure. Having dealt with many distressed children, Teddy did not blame him.

He kept walking. Because of the heat, and what the heat did to his equilibrium, he went slowly. With any luck, he might stumble across the López mausoleum. All of them were marked prominently with their family names, and he knew he was looking for a grand edifice. Once, he went past a woman hunched on the grass under a parasol. She waved gaudy bunches of flowers for the dead at him. When he shook his head, she turned away in disgust. Otherwise, the cemetery was glassily still in the siesta hour, the hour of maximum sun. At what point in a person's individual history, he heard himself ask no one, does sorrow become despair?

Alone, he could not find the López vault. That was obvious. He resisted the urge to wobble, knowing it preceded the urge to let go. He followed a scraping sound he was suddenly aware of and came to a man with a trowel standing next to a stack of bricks. He was rebuilding the shady side wall of a mausoleum, which badly

needed the work. Teddy saw a jug of cold water, a polished cowhorn with its metal straw. Every now and then the bricklayer would stop for a hit of *tereré*, which fortified him against the sun.

He noticed the American looking at him and said, "The vault belongs to a rich family. They want to go out in style."

"You're working in this heat?"

"I'm not getting any younger," the man said. "I need the money."

He was older than Teddy, possibly a lot older. Short and wiry with big hands, the kind of hands that served a bricklayer well. Under a straw hat his face was cracked leather. The eyes roved under shaggy brows.

"Come into the shade," he invited Teddy.

Teddy did so and told him, "I killed my cousin."

The man nodded. "It's in us, isn't it?"

"What's in us?"

"I used to beat the only woman I ever loved. Beat her bad. This was in Buenos Aires, a long time ago. I went there to work in construction. She was Bolivian, her name was Anahi. I was fond of *caña*, too fond. I used to blame the whiskey, but it was the thing in me, it was me. One night I knocked her down. We were in the kitchen. A brick floor. She fell. She bled. Shame overcame me, and I ran away. Ran all the way back to this country. Are you all right? This heat takes it out of a body."

"I'm fine."

"Here, sit on the bricks. Good as a chair."

Teddy sat obediently.

"Killing a cousin," the man said.

"What about it?"

"It's like beating a woman. There is no excuse for it."

"We were not close," Teddy said, realizing as he opened his mouth that it was a ridiculous statement.

The man nodded, handing him the cowhorn. Teddy sucked on the straw, and the cool green tea revived him. He was not about to die and knew it.

"It still bothers you," he said.

"Knocking down Anahi and running away?"

"Yes."

He nodded slowly. "It eats at me every day. Always will. Being sorry isn't much, is it?"

“No, it isn’t much.”

“Things used to be worse, until I figured out the pattern.”

“What pattern?”

“Every time I bend over to pick up a brick, I feel terrible. You’re a son of a bitch and a coward, I tell myself, and you’re going to burn in Hell.”

He picked up a brick by way of demonstration.

“As I lift the brick, I feel a little better. Lift a little higher, and I feel a tad bit better still. By the time I set the brick in place, I’m feeling pretty good. I know I can keep going. Slap on some mortar, square and level the brick, that’s just icing on the cake.”

He placed the brick on the top row of the wall he was erecting. He tapped it with his trowel, and Teddy said, “But you know you’re going to have to lean over and pick up another brick.”

The man studied him, searching for a polite answer to a dumb question. He said, “What kind of man would I be if I gave in?”

Teddy nodded. “I’m looking for the López mausoleum. It’s a big one.”

The man took off his hat and wiped his forehead with the back of a work-hard hand. He squinted. “I maybe went by it the other day, the one you’re looking for. You want, I’ll show you where it is.”

“Yes, please.”

“I suppose there’s no hurry. How about we rest here in the shade for another couple of minutes?”

It was Teddy’s turn to think before answering. With a deliberateness that gave him real pleasure, he told the man, “I’m not in any hurry.”

“All right, then,” the man said.

They sat in the shade drinking *tereré*. He pictured the López mausoleum, huge and stately in his imagination. The way things worked, picturing the crypt might turn out to be better than seeing it. In the meantime it was a fine thing, not being in any kind of hurry.