

Las Abuelas

The appearance of the director filled Di3n with a prophet's terror.

There was nothing strange about the director's arrival. He was as familiar in the office as the coffee machine, as ordinary as the cubicles, and yet this day, when his eyes swept across the clutter of half-empty mugs and neatly stacked papers and haphazardly organized humanity, they lingered for a moment too long on Di3n, long enough for something heavier than death to escape. God seared out from those eyes today, and Di3n quailed beneath His unforgiving gaze. Then the director had disappeared, gone to handle some crisis or alter some deadline, leaving Di3n breathless, impaled by a foreboding justice he could not yet see.

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As Di3n snapped closed his briefcase, he heard the director's mild voice rise behind him. A ghost's fingers tightened around his throat, desperate fingers fed by a memory, fueled by a haunting plea.

"*Chau, Luis, Guillermo.*" The other cubicles mumbled back acknowledgements. The director was close behind him. Di3n stood quickly, scattering a few papers, and strode toward the corridor, the shining exit sign alight above it. As the director fell into step beside him, a mantle of doom fell across Di3n's shoulders. The Argentinean flag on the wall rippled with their passing, its edges fluttering as though afraid, and Di3n was caught by a shudder, resonating with its fear.

"A long day," said the director to Di3n, casually. They were not friends. There was, however, a heavy chain that bound the two together, a rusty monstrosity caked with filth that everyone else pretended not to see. It was a relic of the unholy, a demonic reminder of things unspoken, a torturous brand from ten years ago. Di3n felt its incredible weight, heard it screech

across the floor, and recognized it as what it was—proof that he and the director were soiled, unpunished, and unforgiven.

Surely the director suffered as well, for he said quietly to Di3n, “They are calling it ‘The Dirty War,’ now. Aptly named, is it not?” The sinful chain between them clanked, its links trailing out doors and windows, tightening the bond between Di3n and all his fellow perpetrators, every man and woman who had killed in the name of Operation Condor. Ahead, the elevator doors slid open to release a man pushing a wheeled filing case. The director stepped into the empty elevator. “I don’t know that I’ll ever really feel clean again.” He looked expectantly at Di3n, frozen at the threshold.

Di3n stared at the floor of the elevator. He imagined the door sliding closed before him, and the feeling of falling, his stomach plunging as he rushed past thirteen stories. He pictured the floor dropping away, the dark emptiness of the ocean below, the rushing wind as the hatch of the airplane flew open, and people screaming, falling...

The elevator door was shutting now, and Di3n could see the ghost again, his fingers clinging to the wall, scrabbling to keep their hold. He was saying something, but the wind stole his words and cast them away, sending them spiraling toward the sea. Someone was shouting.

“Kill him! *Maldita sea*, just kill him!”

Dion grabbed at the gun on his hip. Kill him. Do your job. He moved toward the hatch, his uniform flapping, whipping him. The ghost looked up, into the eyes of his killer. So desperate, so defiant, and now, he was pleading.

Words flew past him like birds, like bodies. “Need—to—save—” but Di3n, the obedient dog, smashed the ghost’s face with the butt of his gun, and he was gone, another strange fading form, falling.

Real fingers caught the elevator door, and Di3n returned to the present, shaking and nauseous. The director stepped off the elevator, looking hard at Di3n. His face was unreadable. Di3n's chest heaved, and he struggled to swallow the bile that had risen in his throat. The director turned his back and disappeared down the staircase. Di3n followed him, coerced by divinity.

They walked half a flight in silence. When the director spoke, it was not God Di3n heard, but only a compatriot in sin. "I've been looking at your files, *Señor* Valdez. You were security on the deathflights."

It was not an accusation, but Di3n felt his eyes flood with shame. He did not look at the director.

"Do not feel threatened, Di3n. As you've guessed, I've killed more of them than you could imagine. Perhaps not with my hands, but with my signature."

"I'm not threatened. We're protected now, aren't we? The *Leyes* prevent any prosecution now."

The director acknowledged this with a nod. "Ah, yes—due obedience holds us unaccountable. The victims cannot touch their torturers; what do you think of this?"

Di3n did not want to think about that at all. The director was kind enough not to push him. They were quiet for a time.

Di3n had his own questions for this man. He fought with himself for a moment, then said, "They weren't guerillas, were they?"

The director snorted. "*¡Claro que no!* They were university students and trade-unionists. Oh, the first ones probably were dangerous. The rest? Ha!" The pulse of their footsteps on the stairs—doom, doom—echoed in cadence to Di3n's heartbeat as it pounded behind his eyes.

“You lost your taste for killing sooner than I did, it seems. According to what little records remain, you requested a department transfer after a single trip. A dangerous thing to do, in 1981. That government usually frowned on its murderers on backing out.”

Di3n bit down on his tongue. Murderer. Murderer. He tasted blood.

The director pulled a small bottle from his pocket as he walked, and squeezed a generous amount of sanitizer to his hands. He offered the Purell to Di3n, who refused, noticing for the first time the cracked rawness of the director’s hands, so thoroughly, uselessly clean. With a shrug that seemed almost ashamed, the director pocketed the bottle and rubbed at his hands with a disturbing savagery. “Why didn’t they kill you, I wonder?”

Di3n tried to swallow. His guilt nearly choked him. Why didn’t they? They should have. “It was only weeks after we received our son. I was reminded of this when I transferred. He would have lost his parents.”

“Ah, but he already had, hadn’t he?” Di3n stumbled, and the director seized his shoulder. “Tell me, do you ever think of the woman who bore him, or of the man who must have loved her? Someone like you shoved him out of an airplane, Di3n. Someone like me signed the warrant for the mother of your son, and destroyed all record of her to make it seem she had never existed.”

Shoving the director’s hand away, Di3n staggered into the wall of the staircase, blinded. He felt the hand of God seize his mind, surging with a truth too awful to survive. Clinging to his anger, he surfaced and raged at the man in front of him, spat at this vessel of the omniscient.

“Mateo is my son. Mine! I am his father, his only father, and no one can take him from me.”

The director grasped his wrist. “There is something you need to know, Dión. There is a reason I am speaking with you today.” Chilled by his tone, Dión felt his anger dissipate, dispersed by a new rush of fear. “Someone has made a mistake, a stupid mistake. The *abuelas* have found you. They will come for Mateo.”

The Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo. It didn’t make sense. Dión blinked. “Those women who search for the children of the disappeared?” He waved a hand, brushing aside the creeping terror. “But they haven’t found anyone. They don’t know where to look.”

The director’s fingers tightened, pressing tendon to bone, numbing him. “They didn’t,” he whispered. “They shouldn’t. But your papers were not treated as they should have been. You are exposed, Dión, and your son will become the first they will find.”

“We’ll run. I’ll take Mateo and leave before they can find us.”

The slow shake of the director’s head filled Dión with ice. “It’s too late, my friend. They know where you are. It’s a matter of hours until you are confronted.”

Dión’s heart hardened within him. So be it. They had reached the final flight of stairs. “I see. Thank you, *señor*, but they shan’t have him. There is no need to worry.”

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The Argentinean sun was pale today, muted by roiling, thoughtless clouds, so Dión did not need to shade his eyes as he looked ahead to the house on the corner. The director was not the only one who had access to archives better left forgotten. Dión had learned enough to know whose home he was now approaching, and, as he always did, he slowed his step as he past by.

He preferred to walk to and from work, rather than take a bus or drive himself. He had told his wife that he enjoyed walking, that he did it for his health, but they both knew the truth. Dión noticed that the fuchsias below the windows were drooping, the petals withered, the

brilliant red fading before its season. Most December days, Dión wanted to sprawl across that lawn and dig his toes deep into the thick carpet of grass, so well-kempt and cared for. But today, just like the last few weeks, neglect and despair had sown themselves into the earth beneath this house, and now strangled the flowers and smothered the color with the killing power of grief. Dión's throat clenched, and he rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, feeling sick, feeling the guilt of the acquitted.

The little house had billowing curtains, always falling closed like eyelids, the tears of light leaking through to illuminate a picture of a living room that wasn't seen, but painted with beautiful clarity of Dión's mind. The Passion, he was sure, hung on most of the walls, painted and sculpted in brass. The eyes of many Christs followed the sole occupant as she moved, little more than a phantom in her own home. There were not pictures on the wall—Dión imagined a cabinet, the warm wood golden with age, with glass doors that were washed every day. Behind those doors the ghost laughed, frozen in a smile echoed within each image—here he was a wild youth, a soccer ball balanced on his foot, his calves taut in mid-flight—here a boy, the eerie image of Mateo, dark curls floating to hide shining eyes and a gap-toothed grin—here a man, his arm around a faceless woman dressed in regal white, his face turned away to whisper in her ear.

Dión wondered about her, the one who owned the ghost's last words. They would have taken his wife, of course. She would have died just as he had, and Dión felt a passing moment's pity for the poor man who carried her blood on his soul. His thoughts did not dwell on a faceless wife for long, however; the house captivated him again, and he stared hard at that curtained window, and willed the other woman, aged and grieving, the one who mattered, to appear.

Her name was Aldanza. He knew her full name, but somehow *Señora* seemed brash. Dión felt he knew her as intimately as a lover, more so, because no lover could be so close, so

near to the source of her sorrow. He could call her Aldanza, for he had watched her march la Plaza de Mayo for years, her head covered with a white scarf embroidered with the name of Dión's desperate ghost. He had heard her cry to the government, to God, to the great domed heavens, her voice rising with other mothers wearing scarves that carried the names of the disappeared. Every Thursday, he hid among the innocent and listened only to her, alone among the masses of the mourning. Where is my child? How did he die?

To him, she was ever and only Aldanza, for he had killed her son.

Dión imagined her silhouette in profile, little more than a shadow behind the shivering white eyelids of the window. Her strong jaw would tighten, death-like, when he finally told her, and her hands, trembling with age, would likely seize his with a strength born from years of pain. She could do nothing to him, of course—*las Leyes* protected him better than any law had protected those poor souls like the one he had killed. But he did not deceive himself. Aldanza, dearer now to him than his own mother, would look upon him with such loathing as he could not imagine, and he did not know that he could endure the condemnation he would see in her face. The coward within Dión made him walk on. He could not face the consequences of telling her, not yet, not today. And yet even as he fought to rising urge to run, to flee in panic, he looked back again. The long brown grasses stirred, though there was no wind, and the wilting fuchsias tried to wave him back. Aldanza's anguish would not end today, and it was Dión who was her tormenter, for he knew in the deep, raw depths of his soul that, on that future day of confession, her relief would be stronger than her loathing. Because at long last, the futile hoping would be over, and after so many years left unanswered, she would finally know the truth.

But Di3n could not yet tell her, because his sin would be reflected back at him from her hate-filled eyes, and he could not quite steel himself for the damnation he knew he deserved. He gave in to his terror and ran, the swelling weight of God behind him.

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Di3n's wife was barren.

The very idea still made him ill. He loved his wife dearly, and she loved children with a ferocity unrivaled by any bond of matrimony. Sometimes the sight of her nearly made him weep; to think that warm and sacred center of her being was blighted, to see that same emptiness reflected in her eyes when she watched the children running through the streets caused him pain he could not put to words. She was life—but she carried death inside her, a hollow oblivion that had threatened to consume her when they finally stopped trying.

When Di3n arrived home, his son raced to greet him. At ten, the boy could run forever, glorying in motion. Di3n relived for an instant an earlier age of awkward toddling, remembered the moment when his son had first discovered he could run. Bittersweet, now—but he couldn't help feeling a strange gratitude for the *abuelas*, who had inadvertently given him time.

"*Papá*, I have missed you!" Mateo cried, bouncing before his father, arms outstretched toward Di3n's face, quivering to be hugged.

Di3n dropped his briefcase and scooped his son into his arms. He was years too big to be held, but on this day Di3n found the strength to raise him over his head and spin him once through the air. Mateo gasped and chortled with delight at the treat.

His wife was framed in the doorway, that vast vacuum inside her obscured by her smile. Tenderness softened Di3n's heart at the sight of her.

"Come in, *mis pardales*," she called, and Di3n carried his son through the threshold.



Dión had not forgotten what was coming, but he waited until Mateo was in bed to warn his wife. She took the news with stoicism; only the sudden transparency of her face revealed her despair. Drawing a slow breath through her nose, she closed her eyes in a single moment of grief. Dión thought he could see her crystal irises beneath the eyelids, so little blood was left in her face.

“You said the *abuelas* will not wait. They will be here in the morning, won’t they? We’ll wake to hear them shouting at our door.” Her voice was like steel—hard, strong, without weakness.

Dión nodded. Down the hall, Mateo slept, not knowing his second family was about to be ripped away from him.

His wife spoke again. “We’ll fight them.” There was no doubt in her voice, but her hand slid blindly into his, seeking reassurance. He squeezed it, hard, sealing his words with a promise.

“They won’t take him away. So long as we fight, they can’t take custody. We have *las Leyes*.”

He knew his family would win. The *abuelas* had found no other children. *Las Leyes*, the laws that protected people like Dión, who had committed crimes against humanity because they were commanded to by the government, would surely shield a family like Mateo’s. There was no precedent that required Dión to yield. And he and his wife had a secret, a secret that would save them; Mateo knew his mother had not carried him in her body, knew that the woman who had delivered him had been killed. His parents had told him that someday his *abuela* would find him and ask him to live with her.

“I would like to meet my *abuela*,” he had told Di3n seriously, his small brow wrinkled with thought. “But I want to stay here. She is my *abuela*, not *Mamá*.”

His wife wanted Di3n to tell Mateo everything, but he could not face it. Like a coward, he was afraid to look his son in the eyes and tell him of murder. He was not ready, not until he could also tell him of punishment, not until he could redeem himself by confessing to Aldanza. If he had to tell his son about his sin, it could not be before his purgatory.

But this was not about Di3n. They were coming to take his son, and if they took Mateo, the candle of his wife’s purpose would burn low, and her barren darkness would define her once again.

“Di3n?” his wife whispered. “Are we wrong to fight for him?”

A blackness filled his mind and encroached on the edges of his vision, the color of a certainty he had never known before. Such a stupid, stupid question.

“He’s our son. He belongs to us. No one else will ever have him, if I have to bury them all myself.”

Sleep should have been long in coming, but Di3n’s surety, so foreign, so heartening, eased him into dreams that, for the first time in five years, held no oceans, no airplanes, no ghosts.

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They woke, as they had expected, to the wailing of old women.

Di3n flew out of bed, seizing at clothes, driven by a wild determination that was reflected in the face of his wife. “I’m going to Mateo,” she said, and sure enough, Di3n could hear his curious voice calling for them, telling them to look out the window.

“*Mamá, Papá*, there are ladies! Why are they here? Why are they crying?”

Dión felt as though his blood had become lightning. The air around him crackled as he moved through the house, and his body felt maddeningly alive. He would walk among the women and find his son's *abuela*, and take her to the office that handled such things. They would argue back and forth across hours, for months—surely both of them would weep. There would be mockeries and threats, cameras and reporters, and questions, so many questions—it chilled him to imagine the questions. It would be another Dirty War, a more personal one, and it too would drag on in courtrooms and press conferences for years. But it didn't matter, because he would battle the *abuela* until she surrendered or died, and no pity for her plight would ever take root in his heart.

His wife appeared behind him, an excited Mateo close behind her. Her face was stone. The boy was writhing with questions—somehow, he knew better than to ask them just yet. Dión knelt before his son.

“Mateo, listen to me carefully.”

His son nodded, his eyes huge in his little face, dark curls still ruffled with sleep.

“Your *abuela* is outside, but you must not see her yet. She loves you, but she thinks your mother and I are bad people. She wants to take you away with her.”

Mateo's gaze slid to the window. “My *abuela*,” he said, wonderingly.

“You'll meet her, Mateo. You'll eat lunch with her and visit on Sundays, and you'll love her, too. But not today, *mi hijo*. Do you understand?”

His son's eyes returned to his, and the world spun away from Dión, leaving him stranded and gasping. Those pupils were depthless and infinite, and the soul of Mateo was, for the space of a moment, swept away by the herald of the divine.

“*Papá*, you will protect me?” It was God’s voice that spoke Mateo’s words, God’s hand that shaped Mateo’s fingers as he pointed at himself. Doom sounded in each syllable, rang like a gong in Dión’s stained and pitted soul. He knew then that his son was lost to him, even if he didn’t know why. Yet he answered in the only way he knew how.

“From anything, Mateo. From everything.”

As he stood, Dión felt a rush of heat, a wild surge of instinct. This must end now. He must die fighting—for death it was, this moment, this confrontation. He turned toward the door, charged it, and threw it wide. The Argentinean sun blinded him for a moment, and blinking, still filled with a vicious determination, he stared at the old woman standing alone before the ululating crowd, bathed in light like an angel, clutching to her heart a framed picture of a girl, her fingers spread protectively over her swollen belly, and a ghost, his hand on her cheek, his head thrown back, laughing.

The *abuela* was Aldanza.

Time seemed to fracture, to crack all across its surface, and everything was held in its place. Aldanza’s strong jaw was set in triumph, but nothing could erase the quiet tension that came with always wondering, the softened eye that defined the grief without surcease. She was the gospel Exodus personified, the fulfillment of laws held sacred beyond the sphere of mankind. Son for son. Justice, Dión thought, and as that word flickered to light at the back of his mind, time whirled on. The lamenting demands of the *abuelas* made him flinch. He had been standing at the threshold for a long moment now.

“Dión,” said his wife behind, her voice a shameless plea. Her dead motherhood rushed at him, and when he turned he found he could not see. She would die the death of barrenness again, but that was nothing to the brightness of Aldanza, to whom he owed more of life than to

any other soul. Blindly, he picked up his briefcase from the floor by the door. He was only wearing a t-shirt and wrinkled, dirty khaki pants, but what did it matter anymore?

“¿*Papá?* *Papá*, fight for me!”

Mateo’s cries slid off his back as Dión stepped into the furious wailing women, and walked past them, down his usual route to work, his face blank and unseeing. Sensing their success, the *abuelas* followed behind him, wailing their sorrow and their victory, the heavy judgment of God borne behind them like a cresting wave.