

“Father, I have sinned.” The prisoner looked at me from the shadows where he lay. I stood two feet away from his hospital bed, the only one of three being occupied in the whitewashed room. The penumbra sharpened the contrast of his deep-set eyes and jutting cheekbones.

The fifty-year-old former officer had been charged with ordering multiple cold-blooded political killings, but it was cancer that came to claim his life. He was at death’s door, and I had to overcome my repugnance to his crimes to minister to his soul.

The prisoner’s admission of guilt did not surprise me. Others, brutally confronting their mortality and the fear of hell, had cowered and cried in my presence, and begged for God’s mercy before it was too late. Pure self-interest motivated their actions until the end.

Dusk made it difficult to see the expression in the man’s eyes beyond the pool of light at his bedside, so I leaned in and moved the lamp slightly toward him. Pinprick pupils pinioned me in a sea-storm of green irides. This was not fear at all. It was torment. I made

an involuntary movement with my right hand toward his left, as I clutched the Bible against my chest.

“Confess your sins, my son. God will absolve you.” I took a seat and waited for him to begin.

“Padre, I’ve killed my brother. I’ve killed my brother.”

“What do you mean? I don’t recall that being on your record.”

My outburst was involuntary.

“He was like a brother to me.” The prisoner, ill and weakened as he was, exuded a certain vitality. Was it in the oblique cut of his heavy lids, or the feral nobility of his gaze?

“You’ve killed a fellow man, someone you actually cared about. Is that what you mean?”

“No, padre, that’s just it. I hated him. I hated him with an intensity I didn’t feel for anybody else. It consumed me, at times, how much I hated him.” The man lay still and closed his eyes, as if to remember.

“Gabriel and I grew up on the same street. Things came easily to him. His family had money and he was gifted. He had looks and he was charismatic.

“I had to work hard at everything. My family was of modest means. We weren’t poor, we weren’t rich. We were somewhere in the middle and struggled to make ends meet.

“Gabriel and I attended university together. We both studied politics and went to the same rallies, at first. He was so eloquent, entire crowds listened to him. I never had that kind of talent. This was over two decades ago — a few years before the coup.”

The man opened his eyes, as if suddenly conscious of me as a man. He examined my face, probably to ascertain my age. His confessor, I was also a peer.

“Gabriel and I socialized together as students. If girls ended up falling for me, it was because I paid attention to them. Gabriel was more interested in politics, and in Elena.

“Elena was in the first class we took at the university, and we both noticed her. Her straight dark hair flowed like silk down her back, her small face was expressive, and her smile radiated energy. She soon became Gabriel’s girlfriend.

“One day, when Gabriel was detained by a bus strike, I kept Elena company while she waited for him at the cafeteria. She spoke clearly in a low, melodic voice. Her red chiseled lips fluttered like butterfly wings and her almond-shaped eyes studied my face without any timidity. I fell hard for Elena.

“Gabriel arrived. He stood, framed by one side of the cafeteria’s double glass doors, and looked around for her. I watched the ease with which he carried himself — his shoulders, at rest in a

corduroy jacket, evoking power; his square jaw and bronzed leonine features commanding attention. He ran a hand nonchalantly through his mane of brown hair, and smiled when he spotted us. Elena followed my gaze. Her face lit up, and jealousy grew in my heart. As I said, everything came easily to Gabriel. He never struggled for anything or anyone, things just came to him. Father, it never occurred to me to think that Elena actually left Gabriel to go abroad. I just remembered that he got the girl.

“Our paths separated when I began a military career at the academy. After the coup, I served in the police force and Gabriel, who taught at the university, was involved in underground politics. One day, the police cracked down on suspects and he became a prisoner. My prisoner.

“Gabriel stood in front of me while I finished eating my lunch. The white shirt and khaki pants he’d worn during his arrest had become dusty and tattered. His body was gaunt and bloody. The two guards who had brought him in flanked him on either side.

“Raising my eyes, I faced Gabriel. ‘Why do you defy me like this? Don’t you know your fate is in my hands?’

‘Yes, I know, Tomás. You’ve all made sure I knew. But my heart is in the hands of my friends and I won’t betray them. Do what you will — my heart has more value to me than my life.’ Gabriel’s

half-veiled eyes seemed so disdainful of me.

“I bit into a piece of bread to conceal my emotion, and motioned to the guards to take him away. As Gabriel walked out the door with slow steps, I hurled one last comment in his direction. ‘We’ll see who gives in first, you or me.’

“Gabriel and I met one last time, for his execution. We were ordered to leave and regroup in another town. At dawn, the next day, I crept out of bed while everyone but the guards slept. When I pushed Gabriel out to the courtyard in the back of our barracks, he knew his last hour had come. He kneeled down and muttered a brief prayer under his breath — the Ave Maria.

“Slowly, I lifted my revolver, his face in my line of sight. The most extraordinary smile hovered around the corners of his lips, and I thought it was at my expense. I pulled the trigger, and all I saw was his smile mocking me, even when he fell backwards, dead.”

Silence shrouded the hospital room, sorrow abiding. The former officer narrowed his eyes and fixed a spot on the wall. “For years, that smile haunted me. I chased it away, only to watch it return. For years, my life disintegrated as I waded from post to post, woman to woman, and drink to drink. As much as I tried, I could not reach oblivion. For years, I struggled to gain control over myself through the regime, a failed marriage, and my children’s

estrangement. Then, cancer came and with it, for the first time, a bit of peace.”

*What kind of peace was that?* I wondered.

As if he had heard my unspoken question, he continued. “One night, I dreamt about Gabriel. He was not the gaunt, bearded shell of a man whom I killed. Instead, he looked exactly the same as on that day at the cafeteria, with his strong shoulders and thick, wavy hair. His dark eyes glinted, and he ran his hand through his mane in the old familiar way.

“When he spoke, I quivered with recognition. ‘Tomás, you were the furthest thing from my mind in the moment I died. All my adult life, when things came easily to me, as you so often told me when we were students, I practiced non-attachment to personal outcomes. Before I experienced a success, I had let it go. Before I experienced a failure, I had let it go. Then, when I saw the look in your eyes and knew I was about to die at your hands, I let it all go. I felt no regret, no resentment, only peace. I had overcome the limitations of my own self. That is why I smiled, brother.’ In my dream, he called me brother.

“Padre, when I awoke, I was suddenly released from my old anger, my fears, and my obsession. Something else took their place. A knot in my throat constricts me so hard, at times, I have difficulty

breathing and swallowing. This man whom I killed, why, he looked as if he could be my son. I'm middle-aged, and suddenly he looked so young. What have I done? What have I done?"

The sick man fell silent. He closed his eyes and, for an instant, I had the crazy notion that he was, perhaps, dead.

Holding his left hand between both of mine, I prayed. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

When I raised my eyes to the man's face, his lids were still closed. Down his right temple, tears had left a shiny trail. To my great surprise, the corners of his mouth were upturned in a ghost of a smile.