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From the novel *Cómo maté a mi padre*

Chapter 1

The Fallen Lord

I have been shot many times, but I never die. I wake up every time the bullet is about to impact me. I wonder what will happen the day I don't wake up. Maybe I will really die. Maybe not. These are things you can't know in advance. For example, I didn't know they were going to kill my father. No child can believe this is going to happen. But it does happen. I still have a hard time believing that 35 grams of lead and a gram of powder has the ability to destroy a family. But I can tell you this is true. It destroyed mine.

If my dream of that bullet is always repeating itself, it must be because of the many times I have imagined the way it impacted my father's body. And also because I have been threatened with a gun more times than you can imagine. Once it was to rob me, another to rob me again, yet another time to warn me to turn back and walk away when I saw a man about to kill another. But the time I remember most clearly was the first. It happened through the car window of our family car. I hated how fragile glass was, how slow our car was, how fast the motorcycle that was chasing us on the highway was. The first time they pointed a gun at me was also the first time I hated my father for making us do the trip to Girardota. I would have the rest of my life to recriminate him for withholding the reason he wanted to bring us there to pray in front the statue of the Fallen Lord.

He wasn't a man of silences, my father; on the contrary, he knew all the words in the world, and when they were not enough, he invented his own. Talking with him was quite an experience-- it seemed as if the world was being invented as he spoke. He mentioned places that didn't appear on maps and they planted themselves in our minds as if we had spent our vacations there. What he really liked was giving nicknames to everyone and making funny faces. Especially that. No one could beat him at that.

He used to hide our most precious possessions, then charge a penalty to give them back: make us walk on our hands, stand on one foot for ten minutes, carry a bucket full of water over our heads without spilling one single drop, repeat impossible tongue twisters without making a mistake. He also made us pull weeds in our garden. He was obsessed by having a weed-free garden. Even though we had a gardener, when my father returned from his office he loved to cut grass, fertilize the trees, pick up fruit in the orchard and pull out the bad weeds that could harm his garden. Sometimes I helped him, not that I was worried about the garden or the weeds-- it was just an excuse to spend the afternoon with him.

He was a lawyer and never lost a case. When he was preparing to go to court, it was impossible to walk through our living room with all his notes, books and papers covering the floor. On the walls he put up huge paper sheets on which he wrote things we couldn't understand when my brothers and I spied on him through the window. His appearances in court were followed closely by law students, lawyers, reporters, and people in general because they wanted to hear how he defended those who paid him to do so.

But during those days he was silent, as if he had run out of words. At night he was sleepless; when he drove us to school, he would stop at the green light staring at a fixed point, lost who knows where, maybe in one of the many places he invented. The cars behind us honked and yelled, telling us to move; if he remained motionless, I would touch his shoulder, gently, otherwise he would react in a way that frightened me. It was at that point he got the idea to go and make a promise to the Fallen Lord. My brothers and I laughed because we didn't know who this lord was and why he had fallen, much less why our father wanted to go and visit him to make a promise.

Those were strange days in Medellín. On TV you could see how bombs exploded, killing people. But there was nothing more dangerous than having to stop at red with a motorcycle pulling up right beside you. Anything other than that: if you were lucky, they would rob your car; if not, they would kill you, then steal the car. They were nothing more than kids playing at hitmen, kids from the poorest neighborhoods with nothing to lose and something to gain just by pulling a trigger. Children who had two altars at home; one to pray to Pablo Escobar so he would keep giving them jobs and another one to pray to the Miraculous Virgin to help them perfect their aim when they had to shoot. Both were very effective.

Those days were strange enough to make us change our routines. We found different routes to get to school, we changed our schedules, and bought a different

car in order to mislead the enemy. And there were enemies everywhere-- at traffic lights, on every motorcycle. We put duct tape over windows to protect us from pieces of glass when a bomb exploded. You learned to open your mouth as wide as possible, cover your ears and stay very still after you heard an explosion. They taught me that at school. Earlier we used to have emergency drills in case of an earthquake, but now bomb explosions were more frequent than earthquakes, so there was a change in the priority of these rehearsals. When someone had to leave the house, the family waited anxiously for him to call back to let them know he had arrived safe and sound.

I was 11 and I wasn't afraid of ghosts or monsters. I feared the devil a little bit because the nuns at my school were always talking about him; I was also a little bit scared of God because according to them he always knew what you were doing, and no one capable of constantly keeping an eye on you is worth being trusted. But the thing that really scared me were the motorcycles. Just seeing one I started to tremble and feel a void in my stomach that couldn't be filled, my heart beating so hard as if someone inside me was trying to escape.

Then came the Saturday when my father packed us all, my four brothers and me in the back seat of our car. Mom was in the front. The triplets had grown, and we had to squeeze in to fit. We complained but father insisted we were driving to this mysterious place. As always, I fought with my brothers so I could sit next to the window. And as always, I won, because the one good thing about being the only girl with four male siblings was that my father would give his life to please me. Sometimes he would look at me as if there was nothing else in the world to stare at and I got lost in his eyes, in his laughter, and in the faces he made, not knowing I would spend the rest of my life recalling them so I wouldn't forget.

We drove on the highway making a lot of noise: we sang, we laughed, we fought, were told to be quiet, then started to sing, laugh and fight again. We played making up new words using the letters of the license plates of the cars in front of us. Then suddenly father hit the gas pedal and started to pass other cars at top speed, making us feel like we were characters of an action movie.

Then I noticed he was looking in the rearview mirror while exchanging glances with my mother, sweat dropping down his forehead, the collar of his shirt mopping up the drops. I turned around and saw the motorcycle, and on the motorcycle two men, both carrying guns. The one in front had a pistol, the one in the back a machine gun. They were catching up with us, looking inside our car and arguing. My father drove faster, leaving them behind until they caught up again.

Things went this way for a long time, or maybe not so long, but to me it felt long, so much that I had time to wonder whether God wasn't keeping an eye on us and who was going to take care of my turtles. I thought about not needing to study for my math test. I thought that no one would call back to let family know we had arrived safely, about my father not being able to make his promise, and that we would never know who the Fallen Lord was.

I wished that I hadn't fought with my brothers to sit next to the window, also that the car was bullet proof, that it had wings, that we were invisible and that this was just a movie where the good guys win. The week before we saw one in which the main character could make a person's dreams come true by just looking in their eyes. I wished I was in front of my TV seeing how this came out instead of having my own dream.

The motorcycle started to catch up until it was right besides us. I saw the hitmen and their tattoos. Each of them had a rosary around his neck. I wondered whether God was looking out for them too, whether the Miraculous Virgin paid attention to their prayers when they asked for perfect aim. I thought that God had to receive some peculiar petitions. They kept on arguing, but I couldn't hear about what because the motorcycle was too loud.

Then the one in the back pulled up his machine gun. He was aiming at my father, but when my father sped up he ended up pointing at me. I looked at my Brothers--they were petrified, like statues of salt. I looked at my mother holding her breath, her eyes out of orbit, wanting to escape to the places my father used to invent, and in that very moment I knew those places didn't exist. I looked at my father reflected in the rearview mirror, and the face he was making wasn't one that made you laugh. A cold chill went down my back looking at it.

I was so close to the hitman that I noticed the sweat on his forehead his, teeth biting down on his lip, the tremor of his hand, the finger on the trigger. He had a tattoo in the shape of a cross on this forearm. I saw that Deep black hole where bullets exit from a gun, the same hole I now see in my dreams. It was so small it seemed impossible it could swallow lives, but there it was, about to swallow ours.

We looked in each other's eyes. The hitman stared at me. I stared back. We looked at each other for a second that seemed like a lifetime. My eyes had never been locked in such a dark space, fixed, powerless, scared, while the index finger of a stranger was deciding whether to shoot or not. When my science teacher asks

what a centimeter is, I will answer that it is the distance a finger must move to pull a trigger.

I never understood why he didn't shoot. Maybe I reminded him of his daughter if he had one, or his family was like ours, gathered in the living room waiting for their father to call telling them he was fine. I don't know if he got paid, or if he got himself in trouble because he didn't complete his hit. I don't know if he needed the money for something important, or if he had someone else to kill, someone who didn't drive a car with five kids in the back seat. I like to think that sometimes life is that movie where you only have to look into somebody's eyes and make a wish for it to happen.

The motorcycle slowed down. In the distance you could see the hitmen becoming two dots, finally swallowed by the asphalt. We, meanwhile, kept heading towards Girardota in endless silence, avoiding each other's eyes, lips sealed, teeth clenched. The triplets couldn't understand what just happened, but something told them it was better not to ask. I had an unbearable urge to cry but made myself think about other things so I wouldn't. I still remember how thick my saliva was in my mouth and the pain in my throat that wouldn't let me swallow; my feet hurt from pushing so hard on the car's floor, and a waterfall of sweat ran down my back.

After a few minutes, at the next exit, my father changed his mind and drove back home. There was no singing, no laughter, no fights, no nagging. Never before was there so much silence as that day in our car. We never had the chance to meet the Fallen Lord, and for my father to keep his promise. Perhaps that was why he was killed a few days later.

Translated from the Spanish by Juan Roberto López and Sylvia Wrobel