

Excerpt from the novel-in-progress, 1279 words

Before they pounded on the door, Enrique Farrar knew who they were and why they were there. Was it the conversation of gravel against gravel, repeating and repeating on the lane? Or the stillness of the old Virginia house, an expectant, omniscient holding of its breath where usually the walls sighed and the floors creaked with the ghostly footsteps of earlier husbands and wives, children long grown and gone? Enrique Farrar hadn't lived fifty some years on four continents not to know when a bad thing was about to happen.

He'd been six when the guerillas had murdered his mother on her way home from the village. Shot twice in the head and hung by her feet at the hilltop, she swung for hours, far past the time it took for the blood to drain into a puddled stain below her, far past the sun's desertion of its zenith, far past when the swelling of her neck and hands was merely unnatural, and then grotesque. Until his father, hard at work in the back field, looked up to measure the daylight hours left and squinted at the odd shape of twisting silhouette against that same sun, exactly as the gang leader knew he would.

It was payback for Papa's refusal to grow the coco plants the gangs needed for their burgeoning international enterprise. An everyday farmer, only that, was all his father pretended to be after the university in Buenos Aires denied tenure. But the drug lords knew differently and would not let him forget the indiscretions of a passionate student member of the Communist party.

The day of Rique's mother's murder he was building a bridge over the stream out of old lumber. Papa, eager to get the boy out from under foot, lent him the hammer and an old jar of iron nails. His two sisters were away at the convent school. The youngest and the only boy,

Rique was accustomed to playing by himself. After dragging the boards from behind the back shed one by one, he wedged the largest plank crosswise between two rocks to form the bridge's base. Although the other scraps were different lengths and one was split partway, he lined them up and hammered happily in the humid afternoon. He had been about to christen the bridge, four boards wide and just short of the stream's far bank by only inches. It was easily breeched with a small leap. Rique was an optimistic child, not a perfectionist.

The noise his father made came from the other side of the field, far across the hillside. It needed no breeze to carry it. Before raising his head Rique heard the depth of pain in the unnatural cry. He immediately envisioned his father bent double. Higher pitched than train wheels screeching before the station, his father's cry sliced through sunshine and atmosphere as if a gigantic guillotine had cracked the world in two. The boy froze, willing himself to run but unable to make his legs obey.

While the wail continued, Rique managed to keep his gaze steady and probing until it settled on his father where he charged through a fresh green sea of spring wheat to the road and then, along the bleached dirt to the rise. There at the crest he flung himself at the burst of color swinging from the single tree and was silent.

Enrique Farrar the shopkeeper heard the knocking at the front door quite clearly despite the beginnings of the deafness that comes from old age and proximity to gunfire. The boy from all those years ago shrank back into his subconscious. The old man finished the page before he put down the book he had been reading. His self-imposed training, too ingrained to overcome. Breathing heavily, he watched the odd shapes of color from the stained glass above the back door splash the worn floorboards before he stood.

He loved this small room at the back of the store. For a decade he had come here each morning to keep the records of his life with Etta and their daughter. And every afternoon to catch up on his reading, books mostly and the newspaper when someone discarded one at the coffee shop across the street. He was as he appeared, a simple antique dealer, a proprietor of small treasures.

The house, built at the turn of the century, was never meant for a business. In this small town where nothing much happened, the narrow front porch created a moat around the faded siding, a stiff attempt to protect its inhabitants from worldly evils. The glass-paned front door barricaded the world inside. An outsider peering in through the gauzy curtain down the long narrow hallway might glimpse rooms filled with bottomed-out chairs and scraped bureaus and sway-backed beds, collected from families who had moved away or from grown children of widows who had finally let go of possessions in death. It was something Enrique Farrar had understood from the age of six, not surprisingly.

Perhaps at the beginning, when the clapboards were freshly cut and still smelled of the woods, this back room had been a laundry room or a mud room, a place to discard worldly things before entering the sanctuary of the cool, high-ceilinged rooms with their braggadocio pairs of full-paned windows, so typical of houses in rural Virginia where railroad tracks cut towns into halves of poor and well-to-do. That air of safety lingered.

Enrique had planned to paint the house come summer if sales from the import business continued to grow. Antiques drew customers in, but the profit was in the fine woven throws of alpaca wool, the blown glass vases hinting of tropical seas, the alligator bags, the rooster crockery. Palma's Place had been Etta's idea of a name, both old world and new, though she had

not grown up in Argentina as he had and she had no reason to acknowledge the old world nor the need to erase it as he did.

A harsh voice blasted from beyond the raggedy hedge. “Enrique Timor Endrada, we know you are in there. Do not attempt to flee. U.S. Department of Immigration, FBI, State Police. The house is surrounded. We repeat, do not attempt to flee.”

Enrique the old man hoped his daughter was still at school. Although he had never put much faith in prayer, he now prayed silently that his wife Etta was chatting gaily with the produce man at the local grocery. He did not want his family to see this, this bad thing that he had known would come to pass despite all his precautions. It was as inevitable as sparrows roosting in an unused chimney.

When he opened the door, a handful of uniformed men swarmed into the front parlor. They crowded the spindle-legged tables, the bentwood frames without seats, the glass case with silver spoons and enamel thimbles. Through the back door two men with guns drawn slid along the cracked plaster wall, polished barrels drilled on their quarry. The floorboards shook. The windows rattled. The ghosts rose up and fled. Even in America, the old man understood, men with guns were commonplace.

“Hands up,” one of the uniforms ordered. And Enrique Farrar, or Enrique Endrada, whoever he was, did as he was told, head bowed, hands steady, only the dryness of his throat a giveaway that the existence of a crime, not yet enunciated, was no surprise.