La Fiesta de San Humberto el Menor

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LA FIESTA DE SAN HUMBERTO EL MENOR

It will be a hot day, the hottest we have had in years. It is only nine o’clock, yet sweat soaks my shirt as I sit alone in the shade of my fruit stand. It has not rained in weeks. The air is as still as San Humberto’s bones.

The great saint is buried in a vault beneath our church, along with the remains of the hyenas that followed him on his travels around the world. Each morning since his death three hundred years ago, the church bells have rung at eight o’clock, sounding the beginning of the daily Mass in his honor. The church bells woke me today. In my throbbing head it sounded like they were calling out “No…fruit! No…fruit! No…fruit!” scolding me for another late night with the bottle, for another wasted morning. Once again I have disappointed my early customers, the people who like to eat fruit on the church steps as they wait for the Mass to begin. The town is quiet except for the buzz of fat, dizzy flies as they circle and dive and swarm.

Someone is running towards me from the town square. Though I cannot see clearly, I know it is my friend Vargas, the woodworker. He is a fat man. He runs neither often nor well. When Vargas reaches the stand he leans on it to support himself. He holds his side and doubles over—like a man stuck by a knife. I give him the glass of lemonade I have made for myself; he looks like he needs it more than I do. “Manolo,” he says through shallow breaths. “Come to the square. You will not believe what you see.”

“Who will watch the stand?” I ask.

“Your fruit is safe. Everyone is inside the church.”

We walk toward the square, shading our eyes from the sharp morning sun.

“What news is so important that it makes you run?” I ask.

“You would know if you had been awake.” Vargas often feels the need to be a teacher. I am too old to learn his lessons.

He turns to look at me. “It was another one of those nights, yes? You drink and you clean the gun?” He says this quietly, with concern.
“I did not touch the gun,” I lie.

The square is at the exact center of the town, where the two roads cross. In one corner of the square is the town wishing well. As is my custom, I drop in a coin and mouth a prayer of contrition to the saint. There is no splash, just the flat sound of the coin landing in the muck below.

Vargas leads me through the square to the mayor’s office. A scroll is nailed to the door. The parchment is thick and smooth, with bright purple and yellow borders, long black leather fringes attached to the corners, and elegant script that seems to be written in gold. I touch it, to see what the gold feels like. The words are cool, slippery, like the skin of a pear.

“It must be for the Festival,” I say. “But such a scroll to announce Ayala?”

“That is the news,” he says. “It will not be Ayala. Let me read it for you.” Vargas knows I broke my eyeglasses in the bar last week defending my daughter’s honor, such as it is. “Attention citizens! El Gris the bandit has been captured in our town! Next Friday he will receive his punishment at the Festival of San Humberto, where the hyenas will run fast and hungry! Rejoice in safety! Rejoice in justice!”

El Gris! My pulse races. It is a feeling of triumph, a feeling that everyone in the town must share this morning. El Gris is a ruthless murderer, robber, and thief, a man who shoots then laughs then shoots again. It is said that he had his mane of gray hair even as a teenager, that it turned gray from the thrill of his first kill. El Gris was a plague on this land long before Lars Jarlsen ever came to town with all of his money and built his house with its swimming pool and bought the village bar and turned the back rooms into a brothel and cursed us with his verminous pet spider monkey and raised the price of tequila and stole my wife and my children away from me.

“We have never had such a famous person to hang,” Vargas says.

“It is San Humberto’s doing,” I say. “El Gris is too smart to be caught by any man.”

“Perhaps he wanted to be caught,” Vargas says. “Perhaps he wants to repent.”
I laugh and shake my head. “The heat makes you foolish,” I say. “One can bathe a hyena, but it will never smell clean.”

As I walk back to my stand, I see two boys run away with their arms full of my guavas. They yell and laugh. It is too hot to chase them.

Twice I have nearly been a victim of El Gris. The first time was twenty years ago. I was walking home from the bar—then owned by Vargas’s grandfather—where we had celebrated the engagement of one of Vargas’s sisters. I walked through the town square and turned onto the west road, toward the one-room house Madalena and I had shared since we were married the year before. I heard someone clear his throat behind me. I turned and saw El Gris leaning against the wishing well, his long gray hair bright in the moonlight. I had walked past him and not noticed. “Good evening, friend,” he said, in a voice that told me I was not his friend at all. I saw his right hand move toward his holster and my instincts took over. I leapt into the alley next to the bank and ran, taking a snake’s path through the west side of town, staying off the road. I hid behind the seafood seller’s shop, behind a stack of crates, kneeling among the old stinking fish that had been left out for the dogs. I remained there for two hours, trying not to breathe. When I thought it was safe, I ran and I did not look back. At home I fell into Madalena’s arms and told her my story. “You did the right thing,” she said. “You have too much to live for.” Then she bathed me and made love to me. It was the night Ysela was conceived.

The second encounter was four years ago. El Gris robbed and killed three shopkeepers on the west road. I would have been one of his targets, but I was not tending my stand that day. Madalena had left with the children only a week before, and I was at home, face down on the cool floor, trembling, sick with drink and the loss of my family. In the echo of each shot, I prayed a ricochet would take me.

The heat lingers into the evening like a stubborn guest. I am exhausted after hours of making change and smiling and ignoring the angry glances that said Where are the guavas today, Manolo? My wife needs them to make jelly for the feast. And where were you this
morning? But my day is far from over. I must go into the hills and
tell my son Ruben the good news about the Festival, about El
Gris. By my estimation, there will be just enough daylight for me
to find my way back.

Ruben left town four years ago, on the day his mother mar-
rried Lars. He left a trail of orange peels so I could find him. He
has never come back, not even for his mother's funeral. But each
day I tell myself maybe, just maybe, he has grown tired of living
alone, tired of punishing me, and only needs a reason, an excuse,
to come back. Perhaps the chance to run with the hyenas for El
Gris will be reason enough.

I leave the dirt path that runs south of the town and head
into the hills. I walk for an hour, follow the path I know by heart:
over a field of prickly maguey and fire-red bandilleros, across a
stream where dipper birds swim underwater, up a rock face flecked
with quartz. When I come to the apple tree, I stop and call his
name. Silence. I see the faintest movement of a shadow in the
branches. Then an apple shoots down and hits me in the boot,
square on the ankle. This is what usually happens: I talk, and he
throws fruit.

"Ruben," I say again. "There is exciting news from town.
They have captured El Gris. He will hang at the Festival next
Friday." Another apple, this time soft, rotting, hits me on the
knee and stains my pants.

I dream of bringing Ruben back into town with me; I will
cook him a magnificent dinner, then we will steal a bottle of
tequila from Lars and share it as we watch the sun set from the
bell tower, and Ruben will work with me at the stand and smile
as he makes change because he is so happy that we work to-
gether. But I have come to accept that, for now, he is a boy who
lives in a tree and throws fruit at his father.

I did not always accept this. When I followed the orange peels
and found him in the tree, I shouted at him, drunk and blind
with anger. These are the things I said:

_Come down from that tree! Boys do not live in trees!
You are bringing shame upon your family, such as it is!
You are as bad as your sister! Perhaps worse!
The lightning will hit you. San Humberto will see to it!
Squirrels will claw at your testicles, trying to gather them for the winter!_
If there is a drought, the branches of the tree may weaken and break, and you may fall and hurt yourself?

Why are you leaving your father alone?

Twice I have brought the gun to Ruben’s tree, drunk. On the day after Madalena was buried, I aimed it at my son, a shadow in an apple tree. Weeks later, on the day my daughter Ysela told me she was going to work in Lars’s back rooms, I held it to my head. On both occasions, San Humberto prevented me from pulling the trigger. For this I am grateful, most of the time.

“Do you not want to see El Gris?” I say to Ruben. “We have never had such a famous person to hang.”

Apple, apple, apple.

I turn and walk back to the road with the bruises growing under my clothes. But I have not given up. I have decided that the capture of El Gris is a sign from the saint, a sign of order restored, a sign that Ruben and I will run with the hyenas together this year.

It is pitch dark when I pass through the south gate into town, and I swear it is as hot as it was at noon. Though my clothes are stained with sweat and dirt and apple, I go to the bar for a bottle of tequila. It is the only way I will find sleep tonight. I do not want to see Lars, but, as is his custom, he sits at his desk in the loft overlooking the bar, calling out bawdy jokes as one of the girls sits on his lap and combs his thick blond beard. The sound of coins slapping the bar is as constant as the ticking of a clock.

There is a bottle of tequila on the corner of the bar, unattended. Lars has placed it here either as a mocking welcome or as a trap, an invitation for me to steal from him while he watches out of the corner of his cold blue eyes and salivates at the thought of the police taking me away. Lars is right to expect me to steal from him, but he underestimates me. I will not take something as insignificant as a bottle; I will steal something he loves. I do not yet have a plan, because Lars does not seem to love anything besides himself. It is an excellent defense, I admit.

I keep my eyes to the floor and pay the bartender. I turn to leave, the bottle of tequila in hand. “Manolo,” Lars shouts from his loft. “My very best customer.” I keep walking. Behind me I
hear whispers, stifled laughs. "You come for a glimpse of your daughter," he says. "But she will have nothing to do with you."

I turn and look up. Without my glasses I see his face as a blur, but I know his expression—a scornful curl of lip under blond mustache, a creeping lopsided smile, blue eyes wide with savage mockery. He sits in front of a bright lamp that casts a halo around his head so people who look up at him will think he is some kind of angel. I spit on his polished floor.

"Oh, Manolo. You must be so lonely," he says loudly. It is important to him that everybody hear. "A nice girl could comfort you more than that bottle. One of Ysela’s friends, perhaps? I’m sure they would love to see where she came from."

More laughter. The door seems very far away.

I know that every man in this room has paid his money to be with my daughter. Most have not said anything to me, but I can see it in their eyes when they come to buy my fruit. Some of them cannot look at me or talk to me. They squeeze the fruit silently and stare at the ground while they hunt for money in their pockets. The others look me in the eye too directly, speak too loudly, listen too earnestly. I do not know which bothers me more.

Even Vargas took his turn, once. Later that night he knocked on my door and confessed: he said he was sorry, he was drunk, he was fighting with his wife, and Ysela was just so beautiful. He begged me to blacken his eyes, so I did. We never spoke of it again. If I were to hold grudges, I would soon be out of friends.

"You are an evil man," I say, staring at the floor.

Swinging from a crossbeam, Lars’ monkey screeches and bares its teeth at me. I hate that monkey, that filthy little beast in its purple velveteen coat. Lars laughs. "Good-bye, Manolo, and thank you for your business," he says, waving me out.

"San Humberto punishes those like you," I say, my back to him and to everyone else.

As I walk through the door I hear him say, for the benefit of everyone having a drink or waiting for a girl, "But Manolo is wrong! San Humberto punishes people like El Gris!" It is not funny, but they laugh. He has the money. He gives the party. People laugh.
I open the bottle and drink. Tonight I will not touch the gun, will not clean it, will not cradle it like a baby. I swear it to myself.

In the morning, Vargas brings news from the jail, where Ayala and El Gris sit in adjoining cells. "Ayala does nothing but cry," he says, mopping his brow with his sleeve. "He cries so hard it is like a seizure."

"But Ayala will live," I say. Ayala had been the only criminal in jail. With the Festival so close, he must have expected he would be the one to die. The capture of El Gris is a reprieve for him. "Ayala wants to die," he says. "He wants to be with Concepción."

Concepción was Ayala's wife, Vargas's sister. She died of the fever six months ago. The night after she was buried, Ayala went to the bar and drank himself senseless. When the church bells tolled midnight, he jumped up and overturned his table, smashed bottles, kicked the monkey into the wall, and ran out. He went to the church, where he stripped off his clothes and relieved himself all over the front steps. "I piss on your apostles! I shit on your saints!" he said. He shouted this again and again, dancing naked around the church as we gathered in a crowd. He stopped, suddenly, and with a look like he had just seen the Revelation, he said, "I will burn your God." The police came as Ayala pushed through the crowd, asking people if he could borrow a book of matches.

I open a crate of sapotes delivered this morning. "And El Gris?" I ask Vargas. "You have seen him?"

"Yes," Vargas says. "He tries to comfort Ayala." Vargas eyes the sapotes. "Go ahead," I say. He chooses one and cuts into the fibrous brown skin with a pocket knife.

"It is sad to see Ayala," Vargas says. "A naked man in a bare cell. Even though the police do not need him for the Festival any more, they still will not give him his clothing."

"It is San Humberto's will," I say. "We live because it is our duty to live."

"You have never wanted to die?" Vargas asks. He cuts a crescent of pink flesh away from the rind.

"What we want is irrelevant," I say.
I too lost my wife to a fever—to the fever of money and power that Lars brought to our town. Her note, delivered by Lars’s coachman, explained it: Lars can give the children everything you cannot. He is a gentleman and you are a brute. He is a respected businessman and you sell fruit of poor quality. At Mass the next morning they all sat together in the front row, in the pew reserved for Lars. I have not been inside the church since. San Humberto understands.

Two years ago, Lars and Madalena traveled to the city for a vacation. Madalena never came back. It is said she was hit by a stray bullet when rebels stormed the palace. Whatever the story, she is gone, and there is nothing I can do.

The white marble tombstone that Lars’s money bought is as big as my house. It is a blindfolded angel pointing at the sky. When the shadows are longest, the wings of the angel darken forty-six other graves. I cannot read the epitaph because it is written in Latin. Worse, the stone gives her name as “De Los Pozos,” with capital D, capital L. What kind of man does not know how to spell his wife’s name? I asked Vargas if the stone could be corrected. “You do not have enough money,” he told me.

I know Madalena would have come back to me. Lars made her forget what is good and what is right, but one day the great saint would have opened her eyes, shown her that Lars is like the feijoa, a fruit which rots from the inside out, turning brown and foul-smelling underneath its shiny green skin. I may be a man who blackens eyes, who cleans his gun and dreams evil dreams, but I try to live by San Humberto’s example. I am not a bad man.

As much as El Gris deserves his punishment at the Festival, I would rather see Lars in his place, sweating and crying and helpless, knowing that the floor will fall away, that his neck will snap, that we will all run and lead the hyenas to him. That is the picture I have in my head when I drop my coin into the well. I hear it clink at the bottom, metal on metal.

I am stooped over in the pain of drink. The shade of the fruit stand is little comfort. It is so hot I can hardly breathe. I hear the sounds of hammers from the square. They have begun to build the gallows.
“The papayas are beautiful,” a voice says. It is my daughter.
“You do your job well.” I know she says this because she hears
people complain that they cannot get fruit early in the morning.
“Thank you,” I say.
“I hope you are well,” she says. “I worry.”
“I do not need your worry,” I say.
“How is Ruben?” she asks.
“The same. Always the same.”
She tucks a strand of her long black hair behind her ear. Ysela
is nearly twenty, and she is the most beautiful woman anyone in
town has ever seen. These are not the words of a proud father,
for I am deeply ashamed of her. Her beauty is just fact, like it is
fact that hyenas can smell dead meat from seven miles away
through a cross-wind. She looks around nervously. She opens
her basket and hands me a bottle of tequila, the best tequila Lars
sells. “I took it so you would not have to go to the bar.” I tell her
I can buy my own drinks, Lars or no Lars. But I take it from her
and hide it behind the stand.
She bites her lip. It is the same look she had before she told
me she was going to work in Lars’ back rooms:

Have you lost your mind now that your mother is gone?
— You can’t control me like you controlled Mama.
Do not talk to me that way. I am your father.
— I will talk any way I want to talk. And I will make my money any way
I wish.
I will drag you from there and beat sense into you.
— I will curse you whenever someone is inside me. Whenever I am fucking.
San Humberto will make you pay.
— San Humberto would pay me to fuck him.
I brace myself for her news.
“I want to see Ruben,” she says. “Will you show me the way?”
“Ruben does not want to see you,” I say. Not while she works
for Lars.
She looks at me but says nothing. Then she turns.
“May San Humberto guide you,” I say.
“May he guide you as well,” she says curtly, walking away. She
walks like Madalena walked, with confidence, even arrogance. In
my blurred vision she looks exactly like her mother. I cannot
stop watching her. I do not even notice the two boys making off
with all of my tamarinds until it is too late to chase them. The children are getting bolder these days.

Each day Vargas visits the jail and brings back the same news: Ayala is despondent, El Gris is strangely calm, and the two whisper together between the bars. I am filled with questions about El Gris. Does he have regrets? Does he pray? Is he conspiring with Ayala, planning a breakout with the man who wants to die in his place? Vargas shrugs and says he does not know; the bandit does not speak to him.

It is too hot to do anything but talk. The rumor today is that Zorrillo, who runs the hyena farm, has starved the animals for a week; they are so hungry that one of them escaped the pen last night and ate twenty chickens before Zorrillo captured it. People are also talking about the drinks and the meats and the jellies and pies we will share on the rooftops after the run. I want to share their excitement, but the thought of food makes me ill. I realize I have eaten nothing in days. The heat, the stillness, the flies, the tequila, they have robbed me of my appetite.

I pull my hat over my eyes and pretend to sleep. The children will try to steal again today; they are crazy, and the Festival makes them crazier. The gun is in my hand, hidden under my shirt. The bell at the schoolhouse rings. I wait. It will not be long.

Through the weave of the straw in my hat, I see the two boys emerge from behind the cobbler's shop and creep toward my stand. The shorter one pulls a small wagon behind him. They are more than bold, I think. They have gone insane with this stealing.

They are within arm's reach of my oranges before I can make out their faces. The short one is Zorrillo's son and the tall one is the son of the town doctor. They are not boys who have to steal because they are hungry. The wagon creaks and they stop, watching to see if I stir. I am patient. I am calm. I am completely still. But I am up quick and strong as a panther the moment they reach for my fruit. The gun is pointed at the tall boy's head before they can even pull their hands back. It is the fastest I have moved in years. They look at me, mouths open. "You are surprised?" I say. "Surprised that a man will defend his fruit?" I
walk out from behind the stand and kick over the wagon. "A wagon? Were you going to steal everything I have?"

The short boy starts to stay something, so I box him in the ear with my free hand. My hand thinks for me. "Shut your mouth," I say. "Do you know what San Humberto does to boys like you?" I hit him again. I see tears in his eyes. I feel tears in mine. "Go home now," I say, "and tell your fathers what you have done." I lower the gun. "Now leave me alone." I do not want them to see an old man cry.

They are slow to move, so I hit the tall one. "Go!" I yell, and they run. I sit and wipe my eyes with my shirt. I am so tired.

An hour later, their fathers come to the stand to pay for all the fruit the boys stole. "In the future, I would prefer that you not point your gun at children," Zorrillo says.

"In the future, I would prefer that children not steal my fruit," I say.

"Understood," he says. He puts the money in my hand, which is still shaking.

Some nights I dream about forgiveness. I do not mean that I dream about people forgiving people. I dream about forgiveness itself, curling around buildings and nuzzling people like the cool west winds. Vargas does not believe me. He says you cannot dream about something you cannot see or touch or hear or taste or smell.

I have not told Vargas this, but when I dream, forgiveness has a smell. Forgiveness smells like limes.

On the day of the Festival, I close the stand early so I can visit Ruben once more before the run. As I pack away the grapefruit I sense someone near me, watching me, so I look up. I do not know if it is the heat or the hangover or my bad eyes, but for an instant I see Ysela standing hand in hand with her mother. Then I see it is my daughter, alone.

She takes a pair of eyeglasses from her basket, hands them to me. "I found them in one of Mama's boxes," she says.

I put them on, and I feel my eyes adjust. The gallows in the square comes into focus. I feel my eyes shift again, and now I can see all the way to the east gate. I turn to Ysela, and I see thin
shallow wrinkles in her forehead that I have never noticed before. It makes me sad, to see my daughter look like she worries so much. But she has chosen what she has chosen. I cannot blame myself.

She is biting her lip again. “You know that I have made a lot of money,” she says.

I nod.

“I want you to visit Mama tomorrow. There is a surprise for both of you.”

Madalena’s name, I think. The way it should be, the way she would have wanted it. I feel like dropping this crate and running to the cemetery now. But then I realize how wrong it is. San Humberto would frown on such a tainted monument. He would curse it. “No,” I say. She looks surprised. “Have it removed,” I say. “I do not want your mother’s grave defiled by whore money.”

The slap hits me before I see her arm move. My eyeglasses, bent, hang from one ear. Her teeth are clenched and she shakes with anger. “You have not changed.” She grabs a large, ripe papaya and heaves it into the wall behind me. Pieces of the fruit spatter on the back of my head and neck. “And I no longer work for Lars,” she says. “Soon I will be a schoolteacher.”

“What can you teach them?” I say in a voice louder than I intend. “How to shame their fathers?”

She walks away. She stops in the middle of the road and shouts, “You think you are San Humberto himself! You are not! You are an old drunk fruit vendor, not a saint and not even a father!”

I want to go after her, but I do not know what I would say, so I close the crate of grapefruit and sit. I put on the glasses again and see that people have come out of the shops to stare. I take the glasses off. I cannot watch them watching me.

I bite into a lime and let the sour juice flood my mouth. I do not even blink when Lars’ monkey steals a tangerine and runs away tittering.

I am dry-throated and dripping with sweat when I get to Ruben’s tree. My heart is beating fast and a pulse drums in my ears. I sit on a flat mossy rock and stare up into the branches, but I can see no shadow, hear no movement. The only sound is the shrill cry of a chachalaca defending its nest. I wait, trying to think of what
to say. It is difficult. I feel it has been years since I have said the right thing to anyone, even to the saint himself. Finally, this comes out: "Ruben, I do not speak to you as your father but as a man. I am sorry for all I have done and all I have failed to do." The apples fly. I close my eyes and let them find their marks. When I arrive home I count the new bruises. Seventeen in all. One for each year of his life.

It is time. The last traces of sunset have disappeared and the gallows is lit only by the flickering torches on the roofs. We are all gathered in the square, packed in tightly, breathing on each other. I look through the crowd for Ruben, hoping, but I do not see him. It is a terrible thing for a father to say, but I am not sure I would recognize him even if he were here. I cannot find Vargas, either. I do not want to be here alone.

A boy climbs the gallows, faces the crowd, waves his fist in the air. "Bring him out!" he shouts. "Bring him out!" The crowd takes up the chant. I see Lars standing on the terrace of the hotel that overlooks the square shouting along, beating the railing with his fists. Ysela stands next to him, quietly, looking out at the crowd. I wonder if she is looking for me.

The door to the police station opens. The light from inside spills into the square, but no one comes out.

Underneath the shouting I hear Vargas, panting, saying, "Pardon me. Pardon me. Pardon me." He pushes his way to me. He is covered in sweat and dirt. He wipes his forehead, leaving a streak of clean.

"Where have you been?" I ask him.
"The police said I had to bury Ayala right away, before the hyenas are set free."
"Ayala is dead?" He nods. "How?" I ask.
"El Gris strangled him through the bars."
"One last kill," I say. "He could not resist."
"Ayala begged him," Vargas says.
"Then may San Humberto have mercy on Ayala's soul," I say. "He did not deserve to be buried." I find myself getting angry. Why should Ayala get away so easily when the rest of us must stay here and hurt?
“Do you want to know what I think?” Vargas says quietly, with his head down. “I think it was an act of kindness.” When he lifts his head I see tears in his eyes. He wipes them away with his fat fingers and suddenly I feel very old and lost. It was so much easier long ago. When husbands and wives stayed together. When children respected their parents. When we had nothing to fear but the infrequent visits of a legendary bandit.

The crowd quiets as the monsignor walks out of the police station. He takes his place to the right of the gallows. He chants San Humberto’s creed in the old sacred tongue and makes the sign of the cross. The Festival has begun.

The mayor walks into the square, followed by the police chief. El Gris comes through the door. His hands are shackled behind his back. He does not look so frightening now that they have shaved his head. He looks tired, thin. Still, the crowd gasps and ooohs and aaahs, just like they did when they saw Madalena, my wife, walk through the church in the wedding dress Lars bought her.

“If I were in charge, I would not have cut off his hair,” Vargas says. “Now his name does not fit him.”

El Gris is surrounded by policemen. One of them is the young man who has woken me up in the street several times and walked me home. He is friendly, not yet corrupted by age and money and crime. The policemen lead El Gris to the gallows. The young one walks up the steps with him.

I imagine El Gris jumping down from the gallows, catching a pistol thrown by a compadre hidden in the crowd, running to a waiting horse with his gun blazing. I imagine one of his bullets finding Lars up on the terrace and dropping him dead. I imagine El Gris getting away safely. I wish for it.

Perhaps I am the one who will throw him the gun.

But El Gris makes no move to escape. He stands still as the young policeman tightens the noose around his neck. The mayor motions for quiet. “As San Humberto punished evil, so do we in his name. Before you is the infamous outlaw El Gris. Many have tried to bring him to justice and have failed. But today, in our own town, he will die, thanks to Lars Jarlssen and to the young and beautiful Ysela María Rivera de los Pozos.”
Ysela? I think. The crowd roars approval.

El Gris looks up at my daughter, as if he wants her to be the last thing he sees before he dies. The young policeman reaches for the lever. Just before I close my eyes I see that Vargas cannot watch either. I hear the trapdoor slap and the rope jerk taut, and then the creak of wood as the bandit swings, dead.

Years ago, when Ysela was a little girl, I explained the Festival to her like this: 

First we impose justice like San Humberto himself would. After the hanging, we divide into four groups and wait at the gates for the hyenas to be let in. Then we run with the hyenas. We lead them to the dead man, and then we watch from high above. We are their guides. It is like we are the great saint and they are us. We lead them to justice, but we do so at great risk to ourselves.

But why? Couldn’t they find the dead man themselves? she asked. Couldn’t they smell him?

That is not the point, I said. Someday you will understand.

We are gathered together in front of the west gate, waiting for the signal. Jugs of sangría pass through the crowd. People drink quickly, in equal parts celebration and fear. Someone says the rabid ones are behind the south gate this year. Someone else says no, he knows they are here behind the west gate because Zorrillo himself said so. There is still no sign of Ruben.

I look down the road toward the square; though it is dark, I can make out the shape of El Gris’s body, now motionless at the end of the rope. I can hear the hyenas in their cages outside the gate, snarling, throwing themselves against the bars that confine them. I hear teeth on metal, and I realize that I am very frightened, frightened of the hyenas, of Lars, of the people around me. I am frightened that I will never see my son again, frightened of what I have done to Ysela. I realize I am becoming an old man, and I am frightened of myself. The more I have learned, the more frightened I have become.

I feel the strength leak from my tired, bruised legs. I drink a large mouthful from a jug but it does no good. “I want to go,” I say to Vargas. “I am too tired to run.”

A pistol fires from behind the gate. “Too late,” Vargas says. He throws the jug aside, grabs my hand, and we run.
The gate opens behind us. I hear the clanks of cage doors and the hyenas’ snarls turning to whoops. I do not look back. Past the feed store, past the animal doctor’s, past the bakery, a quarter of the way there. But Vargas and I fall behind the pack. He pulls me along with him. I can hardly breathe; the air is filled with dust and with the stink of dirty, murderous fur. I feel my heart thumping. I hear my feet pounding against the road. I hear the hyenas behind me, front legs long, hind legs short—ka-thup, ka-thup, ka-thup. Powerful jaws snapping. I have heard them every year of my life. I do not want to hear them ever again.

Past the tailor, past the barber, almost half way. Vargas is nearly dragging me. I am holding him back—fat, panting Vargas. I am so tired. I need to stop and I do not care what is behind me. Then I wonder: am I no better than Ayala, on his knees and begging to have his neck wrung? Oh, but this is different, so different. It is one thing to seek death; it is another simply to accept the inevitable, to embrace the fate that snaps at your heels. Everyone will be able to see how different it was. Even if they do not, I know San Humberto will. He will understand.

At the moment I let go of Vargas and try to plant my feet, I feel a prickly heat surge throughout my body, just as quickly the warmth turns to ice. I think I feel myself dying. Vargas clamps his soft hand around my arm and pulls, hard. He turns his head, and I can see by his eyes that the hyenas are close, closer than they have ever been to him before. “Run!” he yells, his high voice sharp, commanding. Without thinking I take his hand again, but I do not know how much longer I can run.

Just ahead is my fruit stand. My fruit stand. Where I have sold the fruit for every breakfast, every pie, every jar of jelly in this town for thirty years. In this town where people laugh at Lars’s jokes and forget where their pies come from. In this town where men come to do business with me after doing business with Lars, with my daughter.

I feel a sharp pain in my side, and I think, I have been shot. Lars has shot me. He is standing on the terrace, lowering a rifle, and laughing along with that damned monkey. But no, it is just a cramp, not enough air. Breathe, Manolo. Breathe. And I concentrate on breathing, breathing in everything that is in the air, the good with the bad, the forgiveness with the dust and the stench and the ghosts of
the dead, and the love with the fear. We pass the stand and now I think about Ysela coming there to tell me her good news. Ysela. My daughter who fixed her mother’s stone. My daughter the schoolteacher. My daughter who caught El Gris. And the pain still burns my side, but I pass Vargas and begin to pull him along with me.

And we pass the cobbler’s and the cooper’s and the saddle maker’s store, and I see in my mind how it happened. El Gris heard about the most beautiful woman in the land and knew he had to see her so he came to our town with his hair tucked under his hat and found Lars and told him he would pay twenty times the usual rate; he just had to be with this beautiful Ysela, this angel. And Lars took the money and sent him off with her, and maybe she was scared and maybe she was not, but she knew what she had to do for everyone else, and she knew Lars would never do it—could never do it—so she whispered to one of the other girls to run and get the police, and she took El Gris into her room and let him soil her, no, no, she took him, she had him, and she kept him there until the police knocked down the door. And Lars claimed credit, but of course that was a lie; it was only Ysela. Ysela, who now wants to surround herself with good people and do good things, who wants to teach children. And maybe that was not how it happened exactly but my legs are pumping and the bar and the church flash by me and everyone converges in the square and Vargas and I climb the ladders up the side of the hotel, safe, away from the beasts below.

The hyenas stop dead in front of the gallows. They hunch forward and eye the body swinging in the air. Their instincts will soon take over. We are silent as we watch them in the firelight. When this is over, we will have the rest of the night to celebrate. We will drink and dance and laugh on the roofs until sunrise, when Zorrillo and his riflemen clear out the hyenas and make it safe to come down. But now it is time to watch.

After the first hyena leaps onto the gallows and bites into a leg, the others fall into a frenzy, as if they had all shared the first taste of the dead. They swarm over the gallows, jaws snapping as they jump for their bounty. The body sways and jerks as the hyenas rip meat from bone. They knock each other over the side as they fight for the best pieces. They howl and laugh. We will all
hear these sounds in our nightmares, and that, I realize, is one reason we do this.

Lars watches from the edge of the roof, leaning against the railing, surrounded by three young girls, his latest recruits. I think about approaching him and demanding money for his monkey’s theft, but I tell myself that this is not the time. I see Ysela standing with her friends across the square. I tell Vargas I will return and make my way around the square, crossing between buildings on the wooden planks, trying not to look down. I tap her on the shoulder. Her friends look at me and turn away.

“I am so sorry,” I whisper to her. “I am proud of what you have done. And I think you will be an excellent teacher.”

I feel her warm breath in my ear as she whispers back, “San Humberto keep you well.” She smells like her mother, like the west wind and the winter rains. She kisses me and returns to her friends, some of whom are handsome young men. It occurs to me that she could be in love with one of them and I would not know.

I realize that I do not belong here, and while this saddens me, I understand that for now this is how it must be. I cross back to the roof of the hotel and stand with Vargas.

A hyena climbs the frame of the gallows and creeps out on the crossbeam. It gnaws at the rope. The body falls and is buried under a pile that twists and quivers and shrieks. “They figured it out more quickly this year,” Vargas says. The snapping and chewing and laughing get louder and louder until there is nothing left of the bandit.

The bells ring. It is time for the celebration.

People surround Lars, congratulating him for the capture of El Gris, fighting for position in his good graces because he owns the town. Vargas and I stand by ourselves, still watching as the hyenas sit and eat the pieces they have torn away. We do not say anything to each other. A light wind blows across the rooftops, cooling me through my wet shirt. It is a wind that promises a thunderstorm, a violent but merciful break in the weather. I think of all the times I stood on the roof with Madalena and we watched the sacrifice together. When the church bells rang, she would make the sign of the cross and begin to pray. Maybe it was just the bells ringing and the wind blowing through her hair and her
lips forming the words of a prayer, but every time I thought my God, she has never been more beautiful. For the first time I can remember her without anger. My feet throb, and I can feel a puddle of sweat in my boots. Is this how anger drains away?

I see Lars telling his story for a crowd of people, collecting handshakes and pats on the back. Someone whistles and the sound cuts through the wind. Lars turns toward the whistle, like a man who assumes all whistles are meant for him.

I hear the bone crunch as an apple hits him on the bridge of his nose. He recoils as if shot. Blood spills over his blond beard and down his white suit.

“Did you see?” I say to Vargas. “My son has good aim.”