

Lazaro dreams of the earth moving



by

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This story is dedicated to:

Amelia Galo
Thomas Long

and

John Avant

(excerpt)

Preface

Patrice Meursault, a convicted murderer, was executed this morning at dawn. You almost certainly have heard of his case, which was all over the newspapers this past summer. The court ruled that Meursault killed an Arab in cold blood and for no apparent reason – shooting him dead, and then shooting him four more times.

When asked why he had shot the Arab, Meursault replied, “Because the sun got in my eyes.”

Alexandre Camaix, France’s most celebrated writer, is currently at work on a novel about Meursault’s life. Camaix’s literary agent is also engaged in negotiations to have the author write a film scenario based on the book.

A curious twist in this entire narrative occurred hours after Meursault’s death when the following story (hand-written) was discovered hidden inside the mattress in his cell, along with an old newspaper clipping which appears to have inspired the story.

There are no clues as to how Meursault came into possession of the newspaper clipping or the paper on which he wrote the story.

The first page of the manuscript has the heading “Chapter Three”. No indication of any earlier or later chapters was found in Meursault’s cell.

31 October 1954
Barbarousse Prison
Algiers

Chapter 3

The nights have grown cold.

And the days aren't much warmer. Sometimes I spend the entire day with my blanket wrapped around my shoulders. I also have to close the shutters over the windows, which makes the cell feel even more closed in than ever.

Late one afternoon when I'm shaking out my bed mat, I notice that there's a tear in the fabric covering it. And that something is tucked inside the opening. I reach inside and find a folded page from a newspaper. Not a complete page. The top half – including the date – is torn off but it appears to be several years old. The paper is brittle and beginning to crumble. There are parts of different articles on the page, but only one that you can read from beginning to end.

The story is about this man in Spain trying to find his twin brother who has been missing for almost twenty years. The missing twin, Lazaro, became a priest in the early 1930s. The other brother, Franco, ran a successful grocery store. The two brothers were close but once the civil war began they quickly grew apart. Franco supported the Fascists while Lazaro sympathies were with the Republicans. One day, Lazaro travelled to a small village outside the city to administer last rites to an aging parishioner. Somewhere along the way, the priest vanished without a trace. The family assumes that he has been captured by Fascist forces, and then probably shot and dumped into an unmarked grave. Or simply left wherever he fell.

For a few months, however, the family clings to hope that Lazaro is still alive somewhere. In prison or perhaps fighting with the Republicans, but alive. Then the war finally ends and the detained and displaced slowly trickle back home, but Lazaro never appears and the family finally gives up hope of ever seeing him again.

And then fifteen years pass.

One day the surviving twin, Franco, opens up the newspaper and sees an article about a devastating earthquake a few days earlier in Managua, Nicaragua. The quake struck exactly a minute before midnight on Christmas Eve, leveling around the downtown and killing thousands.

It was like God dropped an enormous bomb on us.

A survivor said.

In the hours before the quake, thousands of demonstrators had descended onto the plaza outside the National Cathedral to protest against the government. Then the army arrived and started shooting and more than a hundred protesters were killed. Hundreds more escaped into the cathedral. The army was just about to storm the cathedral and finish the job when the earthquake rocked the city. By some miracle, all but one person made it out of the cathedral just before the entire roof caved in.

Back in Spain, Franco looks at the newspaper photograph of the barely standing shell of the cathedral, the clock on its spire frozen at a minute before twelve. He then looks at a second photo.

And sees himself.

And then looks more closely and sees a priest with haunted eyes gazing into the quake-ravaged cathedral. And Franco realizes that his twin brother Lazaro is appropriately named. And that he is not, in fact, buried in some unmarked grave after all. He is alive – if not exactly well – on the other side of the ocean.

* * *

The whole thing sounds pretty dubious to me. For one thing, the names Franco and Lazaro are too perfect. The fascist brother and the brother who rises from the dead. Most likely, the story is completely made up by some bored hack journalist with an overactive imagination and a lot of time on his hands. But it is interesting. And reading the article becomes a regular part of my day. Eat. Piss. Look out the window. Read the earthquake story. Take a nap.

After a while I start to think about the story while I'm napping.

Think about what might have happened to the priest, Lazaro, after the photo was taken.

And before the photo was taken.

Managua

24 December 19—

According to the clock on the tower atop the National Cathedral, it is exactly fifteen minutes before Christmas. On the Plaza de Independencia below, a peaceful demonstration is underway, students and workers protesting the usual outrages that occur in a country like this one.

Inside the cathedral, midnight mass is in full swing, the name speaking more to the hour the service will end rather than the time it began. Father Lazaro, whose life is at least half over, looks down on the hundred or so worshippers fervently singing *Jesus Refulsit Omnium*. Lazaro's lips move almost in unison with the congregation but very little in the way of song actually leaves him.

A few days shy of his forty-fifth birthday, faint lines have begun to etch their way across his face, rendering it slightly more haggard or slightly more handsome, depending on the beholder. He has spent the better part of two decades an ocean away from the land of his birth and has no desire to ever lay eyes on it again.

He is universally well-liked around the *centro*, perhaps because the only priest-like thing about him is the fact that he delivers mass seven times a week. Away from the church, he goes around town in normal street clothes and tends to fade into a crowd. Whenever he meets someone new, he introduces himself merely as *Lazaro*. These people – if they later happen to find themselves in church – are astonished to see the unassuming man they met now on the pulpit, delivering an unusual sermon in which God's name might come up only once or twice and sometimes not at all.

Lazaro has been known to marry young couples on short notice, without asking too many questions of the bride, whose figure has suddenly grown imperceptibly plumper. And contrary to custom, he never addresses members of the congregation as *my child*, neither the ones old enough to be his parents nor the ones young enough to actually be his children.

He smokes five cigarettes a day, crooked ones from crumpled packs that he is forever misplacing and then stumbling onto again days, weeks or months later. When he was younger, he purposely smoked stale tobacco because the bitter taste kept him from smoking too much. These days, he actually prefers the bitter taste but he still manages to limit himself to the daily five.

Lazaro frequents just about every bar in the centro, with the exception of the ones that offer exotic dancing. Not because he has anything against exotic dancing per se. He's rather intrigued with it, actually. He simply feels that his presence in such a place could send out a confusing message. Fortunately, the centro offers many non-exotic dancing establishments to sit with a cold beer after afternoon mass and, now and again, a glass of wine before evening mass.

Over the years, Lazaro has noticed that the sermons he delivers after a glass or two tend to go over a lot better than the ones delivered without. And since his job is to deliver the word of God to the people as best he can, he drinks with a perfectly clear conscience.

On this Christmas Eve night, scanning the faces of *the crowd* – as he calls it, for the mass is nothing if not spectacle – he sees many familiar ones. Amelia Galo is there, of course. She's compact, moving through life like a bantamweight boxer, more than a few drops of African blood in her from somewhere up the ancestral tributaries. Amelia presides over a house of women – five daughters and a husband who lives in fear of them all, even the youngest who is six years old. Lazaro has consumed more alcohol since lunchtime than Amelia has in her entire life. At communion, she happily receives the body of Christ but absolutely refuses to touch his blood or be touched by it. If Jesus himself were to offer her a glass of red, she would almost certainly turn it down and then proceed to give the Lord a piece of her mind.

Sitting a few rows behind Amelia is another worshipper who has sworn off alcohol, Mario Bruno, the proprietor of the Hotel Bruno, a crumbling house of colorful repute that seems to have been on the verge of collapse from the moment its last brick was laid. The hotel is a sanctuary of semi-illicit traders (both foreign and domestic), somewhat past their prime ladies of the evening, mercenaries between jobs, journalists accredited to distant and dubious-sounding news agencies, and other lively characters with no visible or invisible means of support. Mario's alcoholic temperance is more than made up for by his brother Diego who passes his days lounging in the hotel courtyard, drinking something that looks as harmless as water and sweeps him away on a gentle wave of poetic incoherence.

Behind Mario is Pablo el Jardinero, as he is known because he tends to the garden in the Plaza de Independencia. Pablo has an enormous sister who is diabetic and slowly killing herself with chocolate. She says *I know, I know* and then reaches

for another piece. Once Lazaro asked Pablo why his sister refuses to change her ways when she knows good and well that it's killing her. Pablo's answer made an indelible impression on Lazaro.

"Cada mente es un otro mundo."

Every mind is another world.

And then there is Arnaldo Sanchez, who in his confessions to Lazaro, vividly describes the young men he picks up at one of the rough bars down by the lake. Arnaldo doesn't confess because he feels guilty about having sex with nameless young men in dimly lit backrooms. What he feels guilty about is the fact that he betraying Jean Servan, an elderly gentleman who teaches French at la Universidad Nacional. Lazaro encourages Arnaldo to be careful – down by the lake and elsewhere.

Lazaro never judges the people who come to him for confession, mostly because their "sins" never seem to come from any kind of deliberate cruelty. The ones he worries about are those who come to him looking for some kind of help or advice. Because he's not so sure whether anything he has to say is really helpful, much less wise. Sometimes they want guidance which Lazaro feels completely unqualified to give. One of them is Jorge Fonseca, the only other person who wasn't singing or even pretending to sing.

Jorge is not a handsome man. He sells white cheese at the Mercado Oriente, a job which will never make him rich and, in fact, will barely save him from being poor. A year or so ago, without any realistic hope of success, he courted Gloria Quirarte, a young woman from a modest family who also had a stall at the market. Gloria was so lusciously exquisite that she caused physical pain in many of the men who walked past her stall and even more in the ones who stopped and bought something. Against all odds, Jorge succeeded in winning Gloria's hand and marrying her. Absolutely no one could explain the union, least of all Jorge himself. Gloria joined him at his cheese stall at the mercado and the two settled into a life of uncomplicated bliss.

A month ago – a month before the Christmas Mass that Jorge was sitting dazedly through – Gloria died while giving birth. The infant, a boy, survived. In confession just a few days ago, Jorge admitted to feeling an all-consuming hatred for the child and had contemplated throwing him in the lake.

"Why did God give me a son and take my wife?"

Jorge posed the question in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, as though certain that Lazaro would know the answer. And as it turned out, Lazaro did know the answer.

“God made a terrible mistake.”

* * *

As the Christmas hymn comes to a close, Lazaro's gaze comes to rest on a familiar face on the right aisle of the third row of pews. Esperanza de la Cruz. *Hope of the cross*. A rather problematic name from beginning to end, Lazaro thought, the first time he heard it. Parents should think long and hard before giving their children names that will put unnecessary pressure on them for the rest of their earthly lives – and perhaps even beyond.

Many years ago, when he first arrived in the Americas, Lazaro found himself posted in a country even more benighted than the one he's in now – which is no small feat. After just a week there, the bishop sent him on a three-month tour of the most far-flung corners of the so-called republic. At the time, a long simmering guerilla war was being waged in those distant parts and – for all anyone knows – is still simmering now. Thousands of peasants had fled the countryside to the illusory safety of the capitol or slipped across whatever border they could make it to.

Those who had stayed behind, either out of stubbornness or resignation, hadn't laid eyes on a priest in several years. Father Lazaro's mission was simple. He was to travel by whatever means available from village to village, celebrating mass and baptizing children so that they might be saved before dying.

One afternoon he rode an ancient bus along a mountainous dirt road through a torrential rain that seemed to have been falling since the beginning of time. The bus had once carried children to school in the United States until it was deemed no longer safe for that task, whereupon it was shipped south to carry out the same task for another twenty or thirty years in a place where children's lives are less precious. Arriving in the gloomy dusk, the bus deposited Lazaro in a tiny time-forsaken town tucked in the mountains just along the frontier. From the forlorn main plaza, the neighboring country was clearly visible, just a hillside away.

By then the rain had dissipated to a light but steady drizzle. As Lazaro walked across the empty plaza toward the church, he saw that the roof appeared to have been hit by an artillery shell long ago and had a gaping hole in it. The town, the name of which he never knew – if indeed it even had one – was set firmly in the no man's land of the long-simmering civil war. Sometimes it was occupied by government forces, other times by guerilla forces, and the rest of the time by darker forces that one cannot see. All of which left the residents suspicious of everyone, particularly themselves.

Lazaro tugged at the doors to the church but found them locked tight. Just then he sensed some presence behind him. He turned and a man seemed to materialize out of the darkness. Too tall and too thin and with a shock of unruly black hair swept back off his forehead and into the air. The skin of his face wrapped too tightly over the angular bones beneath it. His eyes a pair of windows opening onto the abyss. With just a glance, Lazaro was certain that the man had long ago gone quietly insane.

Barely speaking, the man took Lazaro to the quarters where the village priest had once lived. The priest had vanished so quickly and mysteriously that no one seemed to want to recall his name or what he looked like or anything about him. As Lazaro took in the small grim room, the madman slipped off into the shadows and then reappeared with blankets, candles and a box of soggy matches. Then he handed Father Lazaro the keys to the church.

“Why do you lock it?” Lazaro asked, but the madman answered him with silence and turned to go. It was only then that Lazaro realized his lapse in manners. In his exhaustion from the long journey, he had failed to properly introduce himself.

“My name is Lazaro,” he called out. “What’s your name?”

The silent madman stopped and turned back to him. His smoldering eyes locked onto Lazaro's with unintended fury.

“Jesus.”

Then he vanished.

In the three days that Lazaro spent in the village, he never saw Jesus again.

But he never forgot him. Through the years, Jesus’ face and eyes would come back to Lazaro and he would wonder what exactly had caused the man to slip into madness. Perhaps it was his name. Imagine – to be Jesus and be surrounded by eternal war. And powerless to change either one of those facts.

Esperanza de la Cruz is sitting in the same seat she has sat in every Wednesday and Sunday mass since Lazaro arrived in the capitol five years ago. She has never married. Her parents died many years ago and left her a modest fortune. In the decade that followed there were several offers of marriage from various gentlemen who undoubtedly were after her money – each of which she politely declined. The gentlemen and the marriage offers.

After a few more years passed, an uncle of Esperanza's suddenly decided that she was psychologically incapable of looking after her own affairs. This uncle, who was quite wealthy in his own right, apparently had dreams of even greater wealth. And so he managed to manipulate what passes for a legal system in this country to have his niece dragged before the court and obliged to prove the soundness of her mind. Which can be difficult in a culture that is rather skeptical of the soundness of women's minds in general.

Esperanza appeared completely indifferent to the proceedings until just before the very end – at which point she calmly made the following observation: “The most compelling proof of the soundness of my mind is the fact that I have refused to marry any of the so-called men in this god-forsaken country.”

Under normal circumstances, this utterance alone would have been sufficient to doom her to spend the rest of her days penniless and confined to a mental institution. However, it was Esperanza's good fortune to be standing before a judge who – many years before – had married a woman who had been the love of his life and then very quickly transformed into the bane of his existence.

The judge, with more than a bit of envy, commended Esperanza for her extraordinary good sense to have remained single. He then turned to uncle.

“As for you, Don Pedro – be advised that any further frivolous and covetous legal maneuvers on your part to steal your niece’s fortune will land you in prison. Or perhaps a mental institution – depending on my mood that day. For now, my advice to you is: get the fuck out of my courtroom.”

All this had occurred long before Father Lazaro had set foot in the country five years earlier – the country he’s in now. In those five years, Esperanza's story filtered its way to him as these stories tend to do. But he never spoke with her, other

than to exchange polite greetings the few times they happened to encounter each other around the centro. Beyond this, he never really thought about her.

Six months ago, however, something happened that made Father Lazaro think about Esperanza de la Cruz all the time.

Six months ago, after a Wednesday afternoon mass, Esperanza de la Cruz entered the confessional booth. Lazaro had never received her confession before. This in itself wasn't so unusual. Some parishioners have a particular priest they prefer to confess to. Lazaro had come to consider the whole practice of confession a bit strange, but he kept his thoughts on the matter to himself.

Every detail of the day leading up to Esperanza's confession are still etched into Father Lazaro's mind. The rainy season was about to begin and the skies had been foreboding all morning, the city shrouded with ominous clouds, flashes of lightning on the horizon followed by low rolling thunder that you felt in your chest. An invading enemy force slowly advancing on the capitol. The knee that Lazaro had injured years earlier playing football had been aching since dawn. The cigarette he smoked before mass had tasted particularly bitter, even though it had come from a fresh pack.

Esperanza de la Cruz declared that it had been seven days since her last confession and that she had committed two sins on several occasions. The first sin was that she had lied in her previous confession and in the hundred or so more before that.

"And what was the lie?" Lazaro asked, intrigued. Some confessions are simply more interesting than others.

"I lied by not confessing the second sin."

"What was the second sin?"

"I have committed adultery."

"*Really?*" Lazaro exclaimed, momentarily letting his surprise get the better of him. In theory, confession is an anonymous act, but a priest usually knows who is speaking to him from behind the gauze curtain. Before Esperanza had begun, Father Lazaro had no idea what sin she was about to confess to but he certainly hadn't expected this one.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"Last night was the most recent occasion."

“How long has...” he’s about to say *been going on* – but he knows it sounds odd. “How long have you been involved with this man?”

“Five years.”

“I see,” Lazaro replied, which wasn’t exactly true. He *didn’t* see. And couldn’t imagine. “And the man is married?”

“No, Father.”

“Well then, it's not the most serious kind of adultery,” Lazaro said, doing his best to sound upbeat about the whole affair. “Depending on how you look at it, it's not really adultery at all.”

On the other side of the curtain, Esperanza was visibly taken aback by his reaction. “But Father, the Bible teaches us that adultery is physical intimacy between two people who are not married, and that this intimacy is a sin.”

“Well...the Bible does say something more or less to that effect. But the important thing is that this fellow doesn't have a long-suffering wife on the other side of town. Does he have long-suffering *girlfriend* on the other side of town? Or boyfriend?”

“No, Father.”

“Then it's not the end of the world.”

Esperanza now looked completely bewildered by what she was hearing.

“It's true that he isn't married,” Esperanza conceded. “but the word of God is very clear that what we’re doing is a sin.

“What can I tell you, Esperanza?” Lazaro said, not even realizing that he had addressed her by name. “You have to remember that those words were written a long time ago. It was a completely different world back then.”

His words were met with a silence of mutual incomprehension that seemed like it might go on forever.

“Are you in love with him?” Lazaro finally asked. Esperanza said nothing, and no answer is an answer. “And the man, does he love you?”

“I have no way of knowing.”

“You could *ask* him.”

“*Should* I ask him?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to know?”

“Yes, I want to know.”

“So ask him.”

And Esperanza de la Cruz fell silent once more. Up until this point she had been staring steadily at the floor of the confessional. Suddenly she lifted her gaze up to the screen that separated them and in the split second before she spoke, Lazaro knew exactly what she was about to say.

“Father Lazaro, do you love me?”

End of Excerpt