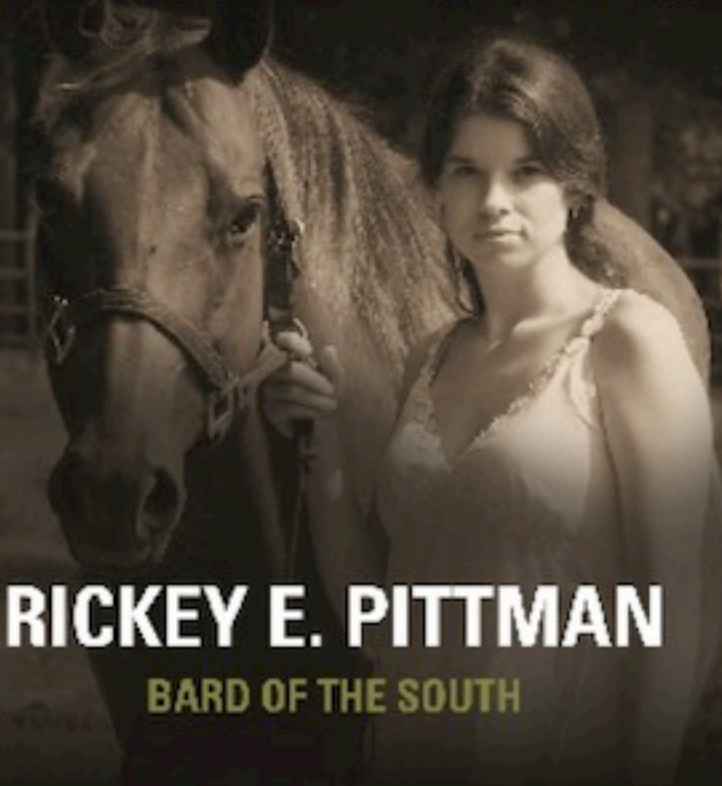


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and other stories



RICKEY E. PITTMAN

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The Satanic Bridegroom

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The Satanic Bridegroom

a novel

Joe Gola

Wednesday, March 10

Through my open window I feel the wind that blows across the city night. The gauze curtains flutter crosswise as the breeze wheels round, rushing to the east, carrying with it the stench of the bay. Then it turns again, combing the mountain for scents of leaves and grass. There is arguing in the streets below, and a dog, and somewhere a guitar, and a girl's laughter, bright and hard like chimes. Tonight I feel far from home, farther than ever before, and the sky is new and strange. The stars hang down over the city just a stone's throw away; I look at them and they seem to be the lights of a vanguard fleet from elsewhere, hovering, the travelers silent and unseen, watching from the bows.

Before me is the carved mahogany plain of this writing-desk, my raft, my asylum, my retreat. Everything of importance is here: my pen, my pocket watch, the handbook of the Company, my photograph of Mother, the Bible, coins, rubber bands, glass decanter of rainwater, a lime, this little diary. The desk is heavy and well-made, and of a pleasing size; even the very sound of it, when I rap it with a knuckle, is comforting and deep, the knock of a friend on a chamber door. I rap it again and the dollars ring, Mrs. Liberty and the man with the golden moustache.

Here too, stacked with care, are my volumes of Longfellow, his translation of the poet Dante and the tales of the other worlds. I had carried them here with me to Cuba in hopes of bettering myself and finally reaching Paradise, but, weary of Purgatory, I keep finding myself turning back to the Inferno. Who can resist peeping at the terrors of that great pit, with its rivers of boiling blood, its midnight cities, the titans in chains, and, at the nadir, the furious bat-winged

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beast? While wandering among the roster of devils and torments this evening I stumbled across a passage that struck the heart of me, namely that level of Hell where the cheap and greedy roll great weights before them and eternally clash with their neighbors. How much like my life today! I visit the offices of would-be sugar barons and watch scurrying inkstained clerks collide in the halls while hulking red-faced managers scream. Strange correspondences! Cuba today is mad with greed, of that there is no doubt, and if the Fourth Chasm were to be found anywhere on surface Earth surely it must be here. And what part do I play in that? What share of the blame is mine?

Young men in the street now, drunken, crooning, sing-song Spanish, a rallentando of Os. From above I only see a brace of straw boaters golden in the lamplight, like a string of coins. The silhouette of the dark Cuban daughter across the way looks down from her bedroom window, fingers touching the glass, but they are already gone.

Ah, so I have strayed from the point, and just as the light of thought threatened to shine on my own affairs. How wriggly we are! No, I will say it: some share of the blame is mine, to be sure. Yes: I am here with the rest. The money beckons. And yet: a man has to make his way in the world and improve his station. He who does not move forward is falling behind; that is what my father said. Dante too is a pragmatic poet, and is forgiving of the man of business, I think. Fortune he describes as a blind and blissful agent in the Divine Machine:

That she might change at times the empty treasures
From race to race, from one blood to another,
Beyond resistance of all human wisdom.

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Therefore one people triumphs, and another
Languishes, in pursuance of her judgment
Which hidden is, as in the grass a serpent.

Here, though, is my own small thought to add to Dante's: beyond the fear of the pit there is something else which argues against greed, something which tears away at us in this life, for just as the chiefest sorrow of damnation is to be denied the presence of God, the sorrow of greed is to be denied the presence of thankfulness.

And what am I thankful for? Tonight I am thankful to be in my room, here at my desk, neither sickly full nor tipsy-weary. I had to beg off from yet another dinner with Hal C— of Cuban-American and his noisy flabfaced chummie from United Fruit. I could not take another night of excess for the sake of excess, third-rate champagne poured into the slops like sauce, cigars lit and thrown away. I knew too that they would look on me askance if I once more parted ways with them at the doorstep of their final destination, that place in the alley with the orange-shaded lamps and the vacant, slatternly girls.

No, tonight I dined here in the boarding house instead, or rather I should say I endeavored to dine, for the meal was rough going and an uphill climb. The maid Ayana was effecting a kind of revenge against me for something that had happened this morning: she had come into my room early to undertake some chore while I still lay in bed, and I had scolded her and pushed her back out into the hall like a sack of laundry; after all, she hardly knows what sort of character I might be, and if nothing else there would have been a world of trouble for her if Doña Calvo y López had caught her in my quarters at that hour. So, for doing her the

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grave disservice of ejecting her from the bedroom of a half-clothed unmarried traveling man, my evening meal of pork chop had been grilled into a crispy bootsole, and it was only for my incisors and youthful vigor that I was able to make headway against my own dinner. Don Peppo, who had become accustomed to receiving the secondbest cut of meat at mealtimes, gave me puzzled and chuckling glances, and he was no doubt wondering how I had fallen so far from favor with the hired help.

And so it was in precisely this awkward state, with my mouth full of dry, intractable pig leather, that something rather extraordinary happened: here in the depths of the Caribbean I heard English being spoken in the adjoining room. A surprise, to be sure! I was at the one moment both delighted by the familiar cadence and on alert for business rivals, but before I could decide on the right attitude of welcome or aloofness an exultant Doña Calvo y López whirled into the room with two young ladies in tow. The Don and I hastily stood in greeting, he silent because of his lack of English and I because of the impenetrable bolus in my mouth, and the Doña hastily introduced her two new American boarders, Miss Pulver and Miss Karas; such was her excitement that she failed to mention that I too was a citizen of the great country to the north. The newcomers politely returned our bows and sat down at the opposite end of the table while Ayana produced place settings and a meal. Our hostess then breezed back out to attend to their rooms, and Don Peppo and I were left alone with the females.

The two young ladies I judged to be in their early twenties, though both had the practiced poise of older women. Their appearance I assumed to be fashionable, if only because it was slightly outrageous: they both wore tube-like

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sheaths that missed the ankles by several inches and showed off pearl-colored stockings with serpentine archaeopteryx embroidery climbing up into the darkness. Miss Pulver's blonde hair was fixed into rigid, improbable waves, crafted as if by a sculptor's adze, while Miss Karas's black hair was slightly longer and somehow less precise, straying this way and that as it saw fit. Their eyebrows had been all but removed and then reapplied with paint, for reasons which were as unknown and mysterious to me as the comings and goings of Venus and the tides.

Miss Pulver is a beauty, of that there is no question. Her face has an endearing sweetness to it, each element so finely drawn, and beneath the surface I could see gentleness and liveliness mixed in the proportions most pleasing to gentlemen, as sweetness with the salt, each element tiresome without the other but together more than the sum of the parts. Her eyes moved here and there, attending, distant, now hidden beneath lashes, now running and bright. I could see, however, that her mind was worried by some difficulty that weighed upon her, for her brows were knitted and her two white hands were restless, roughly choking her napkin or slowly breaking the back of a spoon.

Miss Karas is the mathematical opposite of Miss Pulver; where Miss Pulver's cheeks are pink and plump, Miss Karas's face is pale and angular. She keeps her mouth tightly closed to hide flat, ungainly teeth which seem too big for her mouth, and, in contrast to the lively eyes of her friend, Miss Karas's eyes seem to slide away from the room, always evasive. Her face has a serious, almost mannish cast, though I would not say that it was unattractive—just unusual. Her voice is flat, artless and matter-of-fact, her speech dry and almost clownishly candid, but somehow I

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liked her for this, as one might find an awkward child more endearing than a clever one who has already tamed her masters.

I could not help but notice that Miss Pulver had a ring of engagement on her finger, though no accompanying wedding band, whereas Miss Karas was unencumbered by that sort of jewelry.

I had every intention of introducing myself as a fellow countryman the moment that my mouth was cleared of Ayana's cooking, but, apparently assuming that no one could understand them, the two young women suddenly began speaking openly together as they ate, and I was so amazed by the strangeness of their conversation that I held my tongue so that they would continue and I could puzzle out what it was that they were talking about. It was wrong of me, to be sure—I admit it and regret it—but it was purely unpremeditated, for I truly was as if dumbstruck by the very oddness of it all. I will try to set it down as best as I recall it, though I will say that it is easier to remember sense than nonsense, and I may have not perfectly retained some of the more baffling utterances.

It was Miss Karas who had broken the silence: "This underwater city folderol, oh, I can't understand it, Helen. Why would he make up such a story? Surely he must be mad. He ran amok, killed them, drowned them, oh, I don't know. Why on Earth aren't they questioning him further? Isn't it clear that he has *done* something?" She rubbed a spot on the tablecloth with her finger. "There must be money involved in it somehow, that's all it is, the usual baseness."

"Well, which is it, money or the other?" asked Miss Pulver with an edge in her voice (which, I must interject, I

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found quite musical and pleasant, even in this moment of crossness).

“Oh, I don’t know. Both. Or one caused by the other.”

Miss Pulver addressed this with cool logic. “First of all, his crew is corroborating his story to a man, and while I don’t rule out the possibility that they are all working together for some purpose, even so, in a group of ten or twelve people there will always be one who is greedier than the rest, or one who has more of a conscience, or one who is simply too dim-witted to keep the story straight; it would be a solid miracle if ten men all lied in perfect concert, even for a good purpose. So, I find that far-fetched, to be frank. Second, if he had ...”—here she glanced over to see if we were listening, and I hid behind a sip of water—“... you know ... *murdered* the others, why bring back Mordecai? Surely he might come to his senses and tell what really happened.”

“Poor Mordecai,” said Miss Karas. “Poor Seagrave.”

Miss Pulver swallowed thickly and blinked, and two teardrops fell from her lashes onto the table before her. “I just don’t understand it. It just can’t be.” At this point there was a loud, honking sob from her quarter, which sent a previously oblivious Don Peppo rummaging through his pockets. I dumbfoundedly proffered a mostly clean handkerchief, but the young woman instead accepted a rather tattered one from Ayana, who began fussing over her in Spanish and who even went so far as to stroke the shining blonde hair which was clearly fascinating her. If Miss Pulver minded this imposition, she did not show it, and after collecting herself opened a little purse that had been sitting on her lap and extricated a compact mirror. In the course of digging this item out (I will make no jokes about women

and their overloaded handbags) she removed and set aside an unusual object the likes of which I had never seen before.

“Ah, is that it?” asked Miss Karas in something akin to awe, and she took it up and held it in front of her. It was a thick black cylinder, perhaps four inches long and an inch and a half crosswise in diameter; it seemed to be made of stone, though some parts shone like glass, and there was a thick, flat loop on the end, almost like a handle. Beyond this it was devoid of any adornment except for a line or scoring that circled it a half inch from the end opposite the loop. Don Peppo gasped in admiration; he produced a pair of spectacles, leaned across the table, examined it briefly, and then pronounced the word “*obsidiana*” with satisfaction, nodding to each of us in turn. “*De un volcán,*” he added to Miss Karas dramatically. When she gave him a puzzled look he put his finger to his chin, looked at the ceiling, and then performed an elaborate flapping pantomime of an eruption with his hands. “*Un volcán.*”

“Ah,” said Miss Karas. “A volcano.”

“*Volcano,*” beamed Don Peppo. He repeated the performance for Ayana, who chuckled and frowned at him. Miss Karas then handed the object to Ayana for her examination. Ayana hefted it and looked at every side, then held it at arm’s length and studied it with a cocked eyebrow, as if she were uncertain whether it was a thing of any worth. She held it to her breastbone like a pendant, thought for a second, looked at it again, and returned it to Miss Karas with a polite smile. Miss Karas handed it back to Miss Pulver, who put it on the table and regarded it sullenly.

“Do they have volcanoes underwater?” asked Miss Pulver.

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“Of course they do, stupid, where do you think Bora Bora came from?”

“Witch,” said Pulver. She casually reached under the table and, it would seem, pinched Miss Karas, as the latter squeaked and bounced upon the chair and then glowered at the water jug in silence.

It was at that point that a hired wagon arrived with the young women’s traveling cases, and they skipped out to supervise the transfer of their belongings. Weary, bewildered, and gustatorially compromised, I chose that moment to excuse myself and retreat to my room. I lay on my couch listening to the laden tramp of feet up the stairs and wondered about underwater cities; before my mind’s eye I saw the face of Helen Pulver, young and bright, and her dark, strange friend. Even now I hear the padding of their feet as they move to and fro, and muffled words like ocean waves float down from above. I feel underwater and alone.

But enough of that. This country is restless, and loitering is forbidden.

Thursday, March 11

Lying in bed last night my thoughts circled around the events of the evening, and I wondered about my new housemates and why two young American women would be in south Cuba talking of madness and murder. My first thought was that Miss Pulver must be the sweetheart of some officer at the American naval base in Guantánamo Bay, but if that were the case, why was she not there instead of here? It was all quite curious. Images of her face and her tears hovered before me until my own weary world closed in and I disappeared into nothing.

The mind works in strange ways, I think, for upon waking this morning I found myself recalling a newspaper article that I had glanced through a couple of days prior; at the time I had been distracted by business affairs and so gave it very little of my attention, but in this morning's idle moments it struck me as being important—capturing my imagination, as it were. It concerned an ill-fated underwater expedition carried out via submarine, and, according to the article, a portion of the scientific team had inexplicably gone missing. How it was that a number of people could disappear while confined to the insides of a sealed underwater vessel was rather a mystery, and as I recall the news item was generating a fair amount of excitement and interest among the local population. I myself would have certainly been intrigued by the affair had it not been for the soaring sugar prices and upcoming political election, which were demanding my attention in a rather more pressing way.

As I dressed myself I let my imagination wander the doomed bathysphere, picturing the smooth metal egg diving into the gloom, until my reveries were disturbed by strange

sudden noises from above my head. There were heavy footfalls and thumpings which seemed to adhere to no pattern of ordinary human activity; now it was as if there were a foottrace, then a heavy rhythmic squeaking of the floorboards, and next a heavy slam that shook dust from the moldings. And then further sounds of an even more unfathomable purpose.

It was, of course, our new house-mates—the American ladies occupying the third floor—and as I stood listening to the cacophony in amazement it suddenly struck me that these two separate mysteries, the ladies' presence and the underwater disaster, must be somehow related. Had they not mentioned an undersea city and disappearances? Suddenly everything made sense, or at the very least everything became a bit more connected, which had to be some kind of improvement. I descended the stairs feeling that there was an eerie sense of portent in the air.

Ayana had some thankfully edible eggs and leftover pork ready for breakfast, and when I asked her about the early-morning noises from the feminine quarter of the house she informed me with a certain thrilled wonderment that the ladies were engaged in an exercise regimen designed to promote health and beauty. Without a word of warning the girl then began demonstrating one of the purportedly salubrious techniques, raising her arms over her head and swinging up and down at the waist like some kind of pinwheel or out-of-control oil derrick. The display was actually somewhat alarming, and I began to feel anxious that the lady of the house would enter the room and be scandalized by the frenetic carryings-on; it was all well and good for wealthy guests to behave like lunatics, but the servants were expected to maintain a certain reserve and

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decorum. When Ayana began puffing like a bullfrog and performing back-bends I gulped down my coffee and bolted out the door.

I had a luncheon scheduled with the agent Valdes today, and we were to meet in a café near the Plaza de la Libertad, also known as the Plaza of Mars, where men in grave moustaches walked alone or in pairs, oblivious to the radiating blue of the sky, the high white zeppelin clouds casting no shadow. The day was fine and still, the time moving by with typical Caribbean slow fecundity, as though anything could happen but only at its own pace. My skin prickled.

Señor Valdes turned out to be a lean, middle-aged man with a creased brown face and dark, expressive eyes. Though the meeting had been arranged with much apparent enthusiasm by both sides, something must have changed in the intervening time, for as we talked I began to feel that the tide was inexorably turning against me; my attempts to broach the subject of the Cieloverde plantation were met with bluff and digression, and Valdes seemed more inclined to discuss the qualities of the coffee and the waitstaff—the former acceptable, the latter in doubt. Unsure if I were truly being rebuffed or if it were just my companion's nature to be slow to come to the point, I made a stronger push towards the matter at hand, advancing to the very edge of what was permissible to force him to either step forward or back away. As I waited for a response, Valdes looked across the plaza, then back to the table. Time halted. Then he caught sight of the dubious waiter, frowned and signaled him over. An elaborate order was made, a plate of shellfish that was to be seasoned in a very particular way and then

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garnished with plantains and stewed papaya slices arranged in a interweaving loop at the periphery of the plate, the fruit in an over-under arrangement in the clockwise direction. As the thin, pockmarked steward retreated to the kitchen, Valdes touched his nose gravely and informed me that he would be watching to see how closely the old man would be able to reproduce that for which was asked, for upon this task the very gratuity hung in the balance, so to speak.

The message was clear. It was as though I had been performing on stage and the backdrop had suddenly fallen to the ground, the footlights abruptly snapped off to reveal a darkness of empty seats. An unseen stagehand advanced from the wings and whispered into my ear in a stony workman's voice that not only was the play over, but that the tickets had never been sold.

I sat in stunned silence for a moment, and then I shrugged and made conversation. What else could I do? My companion seemed relieved and became a bit more expansive, perhaps by way of apology. In spite of my professional disappointment, I found myself rather liking the man; he had a warm, busy intelligence to him, and beneath his severe exterior I thought I glimpsed a foxy kind of wit about him. It suddenly occurred to me to broach the subject of the mysterious newspaper article that I had half-read earlier this week, and it turned out that Señor Valdes was an authority on the topic. What follows is the gist of the incident that he related to me.

It had all started some years ago. During the war, the Americans had begun to take an understandable interest in hydrography and the mapping of their surrounding waters, in particular the Caribbean, home not only to their naval base here on Cuba but also to the strategically important

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canal in Panama and their new submarine base in Coco Solo. One noteworthy item they had discovered in the course of their watery inquiries was an undersea ridgeline running straight as an arrow from the southwestern tip of Cuba all the way to Belize City, and to demonstrate this terrain Señor Valdes hastily arranged a map composed of silverware and salt cellars, with a creased napkin standing for the ridge. He pointed to a particular point halfway between the soup spoon of the Cuban coast and a jumble of lime seeds representing the Caymans, for it was at precisely this location on the ridge that a promontory was discovered—an underwater mountain or failed island, depending on one's point of view—with the peak of this rocky, miles-wide reef being only some thirty feet below the surface. Even more curious, peculiar animal specimens were seen in the vicinity—unheard-of octopi and new crustaceans—and so the biological department of a *famoso* American university organized a diving expedition to collect specimens. What they discovered was ... *something else*, though no one in Cuba knew what exactly that something else might have been. What *was* known was that another expedition had been undertaken this very month, funded by that same American University, or rather by some of its more well-connected trustees. However, this time around the expedition was not undertaken by divers but rather by an underwater vehicle. What was also known was that the American scientists involved were not biologists but rather experts in human archaea. Had they found the ruins of an ancient civilization, sunken into the sea after some antediluvian earthquake had crumbled its foundations? Perhaps fabled Atlantis itself? Señor Valdes performed a theatrical Latin-American shrug. It seemed the expedition had only found

disaster, for—and here Señor Valdes leaned in close and whispered for dramatic effect—*three of the four scientists did not return*, and the one who had made it back was brought to a private hospital in Santiago in some kind of cataleptic state and had not spoken a word to anyone in the five days since. The police had interrogated the submarine crew (though the question of jurisdiction was of course somewhat fuzzy and complicated by the wealth and position of the expedition's backers) but no arrests had been made.

At this point the waiter returned with the platter of mussels, which my companion began examining with the care of an engineer, sniffing shells and checking the undersides of plantains. It was deemed unsatisfactory, and the waiter was informed of the many divergences from his original instructions, but in the end Señor Valdes chose to suffer the inadequate luncheon rather than waste hope on a second attempt, which of course might go just as poorly as the first. The waiter was dismissed, and for his many faults was left with a tip that was merely extravagant instead of princely, after Valdes had demolished the plate with blithe and well-mannered ferocity.

I left the restaurant and wandered the streets in a funk, playing hide and seek with the bay and worming away from the thoughts of defeat and the voyage by sea that would send me home. I lost myself in the white pillars and red clay roofs spilling down to the shore, the slopes and steps, the thin dark faces in doorways, the drays and trolleys, the starched young ladies behind their ironwork gates, sudden lovely dictators with Spanish faces. It was a boon to be lost, a roaming stranger in the wild and beautiful city, a kind of freedom known only in the dreamiest moments of child-

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hood, when we wandered into the meadows and trees looking for arrowheads, hardly speaking, every stick a sword, every deer trail an outlaw highway. I stopped to watch a gang of boys climb a pair of trees; they saw my gaze, warned me to go on my way, told me that they were pirates waiting in ambush for a rival band of buccaneers. I asked them if they went to church on Sundays, and grudgingly they admitted that they did. I gave them the coins in my pockets and went on my way. For what is a pirate without treasure?

Later, as I crossed the thoroughfare and rounded a standing streetcar, a colossal square building with an imposing façade caught my eye. It seemed to have an air of ill luck about it, for no idlers sat on the broad steps leading up through the arches, and those who moved in and out scurried like shades. As I looked over its yellowing cornice and eerie blank-eyed windows I realized that this was the very hospital to which Señor Valdes had said that the young American archaeologist had been brought. The unlucky hero of the ill-starred expedition that had baffled Cuba was just behind those walls, perhaps only a few staircases away.

My skin tingled again. Dreamy thoughts of adventure still clung to me like smoke, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could go inside the hospital and try to learn more about the young man, to see if it was in fact the Mordecai Seagrave that the two young ladies had mentioned the night prior. As an American I could pose as a relative of the cataleptic, and I might find out some little piece of information about his condition. Perhaps I might even encounter the winsome Miss Pulver.

I hesitated a moment more and then strode forward. My mind was a blank; I did not know precisely what I was

about, but I went on nonetheless. At the desk I informed a young woman that I was there to see a cousin, Mr. Mordecai Seagrave, all the while feigning a hesitating, apologetic Spanish, as if I were recalling the words from a very great distance, and I pitched my voice to the somber sad church-tones of one who calls at a sickbed. I knew not what to expect, and readied myself for rebuff, but the woman only looked at me with a moment of reciprocated solemnity and then skittered off her chair through the crisscrossing functionaries to an office in the rear. Like an elastic ball she bounced out again, this time with a small, bald, professional man in a doctor's white gown. With extreme courtesy Dr. Seguredad shook my hand and steered me by the arm to the great bustling hallway in the rear.

We walked through a doorway maze of beds and invalids, the doctor all the while informing me of the patient's condition in overconfident, incomprehensible English, extrapolating on his technical terms by making odd gestures with his free hand, now fluttering like a caught bird, now moving across an invisible flatness, now still with fingers curled to thumb in quiet. There were shrugs and lip-pursings and brief appeals to the ceiling or what hung above, and then finally he opened a door into a sunlit room and gestured inside. Red rays poured in from the west, and facing the windows was a single bed in which a young man lay. The doctor remained in the doorway as I stepped forward and then withdrew.

The patient was a well-proportioned and handsome young man with a broad, clear face, thick dark hair, and irregular patches of beard growing in tufts along his lip, jowls and chin. Looking at his form as it lay beneath the sheet I could see that his primary vocation must be book-

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study and the warehouse of the mind, but that he also had some little bit of athleticism to him as well, perhaps as a rower or a stalwart of some New England track and field team. Nevertheless, he lay slack and still in an odd position, like a rag doll that had rolled off a table onto the floor; his face was tilted away from me to his right while his left arm was thrown back away from him across the bright yellow coverlet. I could see that his eyes were open but that the gaze was as blank as snow, staring off at something which was not there or perhaps anywhere. The lids were unblinking but now and then closed and opened slowly, deliberately, like a lizard on a stone. So this was Mordecai Seagrave.

I watched him for some time, lying still, unheeding, and then I clasped my hands before me and silently asked Christ to help the young man. Quaint as it may seem to some in this modern age, I do believe in the power of intercessory prayer; I have seen some minor miracles in my life, and my mother and grandparents have related as many or more to me from their own times. It requires only a certain sincerity, a concentration of caring and good will, and just this in itself I find to be a worthwhile exercise—a stretching of the empathetic muscles, one might say. Were the prayers to flutter off and be trapped in eaves and trees like shining paper kites, never reaching the ears of God on high, still they would have a purpose and usefulness in the world, for I would be a better man for them. This much I believe.

When I looked down again Seagrave was staring at me, and I started. Had his senses returned? My voice seemed stuck in my throat, and I could not speak. He was clearly looking *at me*, but not as one man looks at another, but rather as an animal might look at a patch of peeling paint or a shadow upon the wall—blank, incurious, beyond. Then he

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turned away, back to the west and the setting sun, and closed his eyes, slowly, and then opened them again.

It occurred to me then that I had rather much to do, still terribly much to do, and so I departed, eager to leave the inmates to their dinners and to be free to pursue my own.



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