

# THE QUARRY

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## **All His Dead**

*NOTE: This short story is one of the collection 'Of Goodbyes and Mourning', which consists of twenty-two stories dealing with death, fear and loss.*

In every summer afternoon, when the entire city took refuge behind closed shutters and drawn curtains to escape the scorching Buenos Aires' heat, don Luciano Gómez sat in his usual neighbourhood café. Afflicted by the obstinate insomnia that sometimes heralds old age, he no longer managed to enjoy much sleep. There was a time when summer siestas were something to look forward to, a daily pleasure he would not have traded for anything. They had now become a luxury he could no longer afford. An afternoon siesta would trigger sleepless nights that he would spend listening to the buses screeching to a halt in the corner, counting the drunken voices climbing up the walls to his bedroom window. The beginning of old age had therefore forced him to sacrifice his siesta, and the corner café was an easy option that took him out of the house in those otherwise empty hours.

That's what being old was about, after all: spending one's hours in the best possible way. Luciano Gómez, or don Luciano, as he was known in the neighbourhood, did not have much to complain about. He had a good retirement pension, he owned the apartment where he lived and another one, smaller but situated

in a better area of the city, where his divorced daughter and his only grandson lived. Don Luciano had stopped expecting much from life some time ago, and the slow mundane development of his days did not bother him. Anger, jealousy and desire had progressively faded away, allowing him to make peace with himself and the others.

The morning was easily spent, even if don Luciano could no longer sleep past the first light of dawn. The prolonged *mate*<sup>1</sup> on the balcony, the watering of the many plants and flowerpots scattered around the apartment and the reading of two newspapers kept him busy throughout the morning hours. Then it was time for his usual round to the corner shop and the baker's, which provided many occasions for small talk with the neighbours and helped kill time until lunch.

After lunch, siesta time began, with its slow empty hours. Then don Luciano rolled up the third paper of the day under his arm, reserved for the occasion, and walked to the corner shop squinting under the glare of the furious afternoon sun.

The bored waiter usually made some idle conversation before taking his order; the high temperatures, soccer, the remote chance of rain. Don Luciano never sat at the same table or ordered the same thing: those small decisions contributed to break the monotony of the hour. Cappuccino, lemonade, black coffee, mineral water. A toasted sandwich or a biscuit later in the afternoon, once lunch digestion was well under way.

The waiter then disappeared behind the counter. Don Luciano opened his newspaper and started to read, but the silence around him and the fact that he had read the same news twice in the morning papers soon made his mind wander away. At that point his calm eyes, where old age had painted bluish hues in the brown, looked up to the open window, and don Luciano started once again to count his dead.

Sometimes he started at the very beginning: the blonde he had met in high school. He went over the features he had never forgotten, the way her hips swung by him in the breaks, his surprise at the hardness of the ground under the shovel. From then on it was easy. It was a question of caution and attention to detail; that was all there was to it.

Later, at the university, there had been two more; men this time. One of them stole his idea for the master thesis (it was actually his own fault, Luciano's, for failing

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<sup>1</sup> Mate: typical Argentinean drink, a kind of green tea drunk out of a pot by means of a straw, usually shared with others.

to keep his mouth shut; from then on he had learned his lesson though). So did the thief, of course. The second one was at the time Lupita's boyfriend. Lupita was don Luciano's wife, who had passed away five years ago. Don Luciano missed the muffled sound of her slippers on the kitchen floor in the morning, the shared rounds of *mate*, her sparse talk. Lupita had never been talkative, and he had known he'd marry her from the moment he saw her squinting her short-sighted eyes over a book at the library, the thick glasses half-hidden under a long blonde fringe. After her boyfriend's death it did not take Luciano long to convince her to join him for dinner and a movie. After forty years of marriage and two daughters she had died during her sleep without noise or fuss of any kind, the same way she had chosen to do everything else in her lifetime.

Some afternoon or other don Luciano inverted the order and counted from the end, starting by his most recent dead. The new neighbour at apartment D: young, noisy and bad-mannered, with her insolence and late-night parties at weekends. It had not been difficult.

The member of the club where he had spent his evenings for the last 20 years. Soon after don Luciano joined the club they had had a violent argument over political or religious matters. Don Luciano had clear, absolute ideas and opinions on every matter; he had always prided himself on that, even in his teenage years. That had made his life easier, there was no doubt about that. Life is better lived when there's no room for doubt or further possibilities: don Luciano went through life with the peace of mind of the blessed few who know that what they say or do is right and indisputable.

The day after the argument at the club, don Luciano had been the first to apologise. He had done so in public, in a low humble voice, in front of the other members of the daily card table. They had all looked at him with good eyes from that moment on, and his reputation for being a good-natured chap had been firmly established. Don Luciano had waited two years to pay his antagonist back, and all that time he treated as a friend the man he knew unworthy of sharing the air he breathed. It had not been hard; it had all been a question of patience, and don Luciano had always counted patience amongst his many virtues.

The hours of the afternoon kept dragging slowly past him; don Luciano called the waiter, ordered another coffee or an orange juice, sometimes a small croissant or

an ice-cream. The huge fan continued to blow warm air towards him, and don Luciano continued to count and re-count.

The blonde who though herself out of his league, who made fun of him in front of all the class on graduation day. The ideas' thief. Lupita's boyfriend; and later one of his friends, who had started to nose around too much. The guy from the club. The two from the soccer team, who had laughed for days at Luciano's poor attempts in the neighbourhood's Christmas championship. The head of department, lazy good-for-nothing who had denied him a well-deserved promotion. The noisy neighbour.

All of them obstacles in a methodical, orderly life. Don Luciano minded his business and expected the same from everyone else. That was why he had chosen Lupita: because he knew life by her side would be easy and comfortable, with no surprises of any kind. But people insisted in standing in the way of his life plan, which he knew was modest enough.

People started to walk past the café's windows, the worst heat of the day already over. Don Luciano called the waiter and paid the bill, thinking that his daughter and grandson would be at the apartment in less than half an hour. He'd buy some pastries or an apple tart, his grandson's favourite, at the bakery round the corner. It was still too hot to sit on the balcony; it'd be better to have *mate* or cold lemonade in the living-room, with the air-con on.

As he was leaving the bakery, holding the apple tart wrapped in crispy white paper with both hands, he stumbled upon his neighbour from the fifth floor, who was accompanied by a friend he did not know. He smiled and bowed his head as she walked past him; they had known each other for ages, Lupita used to go up to her flat for coffee and a chat on the odd day.

'That's don Luciano, from 1 B', whispered the neighbour to her companion as they walked away. 'A good man if there are any. Never in his life has he bothered a soul. If there were a few more like him around, the world would be a better place.'