

SEÑOR DEATH

The true story of how *THE CREED OF VIOLENCE*
came to be -

from the Author's journals

B. Teran

Señor Death

"Mr. Teran, you're chasing a ghost."

"Chasing is not the right word."

"Your father, after all, would be very old. If... he were still alive. Very old, indeed."

"Hunt... I prefer the word hunt."

"Yes. You have the look of someone to whom that word is better suited. Hunting a ghost."

"But not to erase years."

"No, they don't count much anyway... in the end. But as most people are just a lifetime of, well... tested explanations. You do not seem that type."

The old man paused. He sat in a high-backed chair with his hands poised on the top of a cane. His name was Lazaro, but at the racetrack he had been nicknamed Leche. Leche means milk. This Lazaro had white, white hair, and a white, white moustache cut in the thin style of movie stars from the days of his youth.

He watched me without a word. His eyes were cold and when he smiled, there was something painful and restless to the expression. The light from the courtyard window fell across the room where he sat. The furniture, the shelves

crowded with mementoes -- all had a painterly shine, and yet, he was this dark and still figure.

"Mr. Teran, you say you are a writer. So, I assume you to be a thoughtful man." When he spoke, there was this uneasy alliance of passion and indifference in his voice.

"Can you tell me what is most important when it comes to hunting the ghosts of one's life? What the hunter must be aware of? And understand? Can you tell me?"

...what you are reading are notes taken from a section of my journal begun in the church of the Espiritu Santo, which was just a few blocks up the street from the home where I met Lazaro. I am piecing this together because by a strange fortune... The hunt for my father which covered years and continents, the days I spent in that room with Lazaro and his timeworn stories, those saved mementoes from the years of the Revolution, and a moment of moral failure he described when confronted by his Señor Death, which haunted him still -- all echoed of the future. Through the secret channelway of creativity that I have never fully understood, those touches of life and history became a living drama, one drop of sentence at a time till, I was carrying a book - *The Creed of Violence*.

...My father was an insatiable gambler. Racetracks and dog tracks were his heroin. A racetrack is where I came to learn about his association with Lazaro. It seems that among his many asides, Lazaro had spent time as a bookmaker, and my father preferred the company of those whose activities carried with them considerable prison time.

Lazaro, it turned out, was in Hermosillo, which is the largest city and capitol of Sonora, and a close couple of hundred miles from the U.S. Border.

He lived in a neighborhood known as the Colonia Pitic. It had been a new subdivision in the forties, when the former President of Mexico, and then governor of the state, General Abelardo Rodriguez, built a magnificent edifice there. Soon other wealth followed. The General ushered in a period of civic beautification and cultural upheaval. Worlds that stood for generations were razed to make way for a grand boulevard named Hermosillo, with its tree-lined parkway that ran for three miles.

Today, there are still beautiful homes, but there are also fortresses built by drug dealers, some of which stand graffitied and empty, their owners in lockdowns from Sonora

to El Norte. Another sobering touch to the wretchednesses of the world.

...Lazaro lived in a small house in a tight row of homes on a narrow street born before the advent of the automobile. One entered through a gated tunnelway to a courtyard where unkempt bougainvillea draped down from the walls. There was a fountain in the tiny courtyard whose tiles once burned with color in the sunlight. On the day I arrived, there were tiles missing and a lifeless pool of water was covered with a toxic veneer of algae and dead bugs.

... He'd requested I bring a snapshot of my father. He'd asked for this not minutes after we met. I'd assumed it was somehow to prove I was who I said I was. I learned later that was not the reason at all. The days we spent talking, he always sat in the high-backed chair lit by the courtyard window. That was his station. I sat near him at a table just out of the windowlight. It was a spartan table that had a prosecutorial feel to it. When I told him this, he laughed and his expression took on this satanic luster at such a notion.

... The years of drinking were behind him, as were the drugs. He smoked incessantly; the fingers where he held the cigarettes looked as if stained by a tincture of iodine. I have been around men, and some women, like him all my life, and I know how to move among them. And since I was the son of someone with whom Lazaro had shared what I describe as "dark time," he spoke with candor and rich humor about violations of trust, betrayals, acts untouched by human virtue. Of course, he was wily enough to relate these incidents in such a way as to personally leave no fingerprints on them. They became stories he had somehow taken possession of, incidents passed on to him as if he were the keeper of some oral tradition.

As much as I hate to admit it, there was a malevolent beauty to what I was hearing, and how it was being presented, that touched me like some secret language. It was not the first time that had happened, nor would it be the last.

It was at the end of that day when Lazaro asked, "Can you tell me what is most important when it comes to hunting the ghosts of one's life? What the hunter must be most aware of? And understand? Can you tell me?"

I answered, "I want to think on this."

"Tomorrow, maybe."

As I stood to leave, he said, "The table you are sitting at... it is right for you."

"Meaning?"

"You have a prosecutorial demeanor, even when you don't mean to. Even as you listen."

...I went to the church those few blocks away and sat in the quiet and wrote down all that had transpired. I like writing in churches; for me they always have the feel of dusk about them, even during the brightest days. Dusk gives me a sense of the eternal, and a feeling of transcendent calm. Sometimes, at these moments, ideas wash up on the shores of my mind, and the unknown begins to make its intentions clear.

When Lazaro had asked, "Can you tell me what is most important when it comes to hunting the ghosts of one's life?" his expression was placid, even detached, yet his voice... It was uncertain, nervous. He was afraid of the answer, and he could see I'd heard he was afraid.

On the wall in the living room, not far from where he sat, someone had taken a quote from the Bible, had it printed on parchment, then modestly framed.

*See then that ye walk circumspectly,
not as fools, but as wise,*

Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

I sat in the church thinking on Lazaro's question till vespers had come and gone, and as the trembling night silence settled, in the answer came. Or should I say, the answer was there all along. I only needed to let the world get dark around the answer, so it could be seen more clearly. I'd sensed from Lazaro's voice how my answer would affect him. What I did not know, not until the last day, was how it would affect me.

...The room where we sat and talked was crowded with a menagerie of mementoes and antiques I would not expect interested Lazaro.

There was a well-traveled windup Victrola and music from the earliest days of Mexican recording. Lazaro played for me the first Spanish version of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game". There were plastic radios and a reliquary of guns, and hats, all kinds of hats -- sombreros, derby's, Stetsons, gentleman's wear and tramp wear. On a desk were boxes of fading letters and snapshots and another smaller box of finely polished wood that spilled over with penny postcards from the days of the Mexican Revolution.

Penny postcards have always held a particular fascination for me, as it was the first time a war, in this case the Revolution of 1910, was captured on film. (Penny postcards, for those who don't know, were exactly that. Photographers in the field took a photo; a print was made and pressed on a postcard; copies could be had; and they were fit for mailing.)

That I was immeasurably interested in these artifacts tapped into an aspect of Lazaro's past that he was more than happy - and genuinely so - to share.

He had me carry the box of postcards over to the table where we sat facing each other. He spread the postcards about. Some he had personal knowledge of and narrated effusively about their history; others he just pointed at with his discolored fingers and said, "Look there... at that image... Ahh!"

There were literally hundreds. It was a grand visual of time and place to every conceivable human eventuality, a memory documentary to an era and a war... a young girl in a white dress stands near the bodies of dead revolutionaries... rebels with ammunition belts strung like bauldrics across their chests enjoy lunch at a sidewalk café... a 1910 truck loaded down with ammunition and a name painted across its side flashes past the camera on a dusty road... men crowd up on

a huge, black steam locomotive as if they were a wild, gun-wielding flock of birds... a couple is married in a bombed-out church... men in sombreros try to put out an oil-well fire in the Tampico heat... poor women huddle together in the train yards...

They went on and on, this endless river of moments, and it was not hard to envision there were universes to be unearthed out of each aesthetic, and that this was some secret tapestry with one memory, waiting for a voice.

"I was a letter writer," he said.

I looked up from the photos.

"Back in the fifties. When I was young. In Mexico City. Do you know what a professional letter writer is? Or are you too young?"

I did know. There were men who would set up at a table or desk, usually near a *la oficina de correos* (post office), to help those who could not read nor write deal with those mysterious documents that came through the mail.

Whether there were confidences to be shared, forms to be filled out, deaths to be dealt with, actions to be taken, weddings to be announced, this was the purview of "the letter writer." To read, to understand, to explain, to answer, to address.

"I was part of many lives. I made many true friends. I shared many joys and many sorrows. What you see about me, are... payments... presents... for the little I could do to make those peoples' lives---

He stopped abruptly and seemed to draw in upon himself. He began to dig at the table with his thumb. There was, it seemed, a begrudging introspection going on within him as he went about this repetition with a thumb, working at the table. "My question," he said, without looking at me.

"About the ghosts of one's life? What the hunter must be aware of and understand?"

He looked up then, "Yes. I would like your opinion on this."

The postcard with the truck carrying all that ammunition was in my hand. I put it down before I answered. "What the hunter must be most aware of when hunting the ghosts of one's life... is never to find them. Never."

At first he stared at me as if what I'd said meant nothing, or that it was, at the very most, inconsequential. But within moments he stopped digging at the wood with his thumb and his expression began to go through a series of ever-darkening metamorphoses to ultimately be one of resentful hostility.

"Leave," he said.

I did not move right away, I wanted to take inventory of this moment.

"Get out," he ordered. "Out of my house!"

...I spent long hours in the hotel bar that night detailing page after page about those penny postcards. My fingers were anxious I might lose an impression here or there so I wrote quickly, which was a good sign that these postcards were leaving some kind of creative footprint.

I had every intention of blowing out of Hermosillo at first light. But when I got back to my room, there was a message from Lazaro apologizing. It sounded heartfelt enough, and he asked if I would come to his residence in the morning, so that we might talk a little longer.

I guess we've all considered the different versions our lives might have taken at the crossroad of certain moments. The next day would be a tutorial on that subject, though I had no idea at the time.

I decided I'd go. But I sat up in the dark for quite some while and I could not answer to myself - why.

...When I arrived the next morning, Lazaro was sitting in the courtyard on a simple wooden chair with its back against the sunlit wall. His eyes were closed and the cane rested across his lap. Through the open window I could hear the old Victrola and the soft classical strings of a lullaby, all scratchy and harsh.

As I approached, Lazaro opened his eyes. They were bloodshot and red. He might well have been crying at some point, but he was certainly drunk.

"I have been... gloomy... all night. And so I drank. My body will torture me tomorrow."

"Is this because of what I said?"

"Because of who I am. You see, I confronted the ghost of my own life. And finding him, I proved to be unworthy."

Lazaro made me help him to his feet.

"Do you know," he continued, "how he is called with me?"

I, of course, did not.

"Señor Death. He was Señor Death then, he is Señor Death now. But he is not a ghost like you hunt. No."

He walked unsteadily, even with the cane. He had me help him back inside and over to the desk.

"I have never been able to smooth away the discord of my own life," he said.

The box of penny postcards had been emptied and they were spread about the desk. There was also a bottle of tequila on the desk alongside a glass, and there was a bowl that had ice in it. I could see on the wooden table a dozen small wet circles where the glass had been lifted and then set down again. Lazaro had me go to the kitchen to get more ice and a glass for myself, if I was so inclined. He was sitting when I returned, and he had an envelope in his hand, and in the envelope was a small bundle of postcards.

"When I was a letter writer I was at my happiest. So many lives I... spoke for. I used an Oliver. It was an old typewriter. That was the kind many letter writers used back then. They were hand downs from the U.S."

He looked at the postcards, at the mementoes. The light tapestried the room. "All those lives," he said. "They live still..." He put a hand to his chest.

At that moment, he was a picture of such intimate recollection, of a world that had slipped from his fingers, that it would touch your heart to see it. If you were so inclined to pity.

"I should have... been that all my life. But there was another part of me. The part you know about. That part that is your father. You understand what I mean?"

"Yes," I said.

He had me pour a drink. From the envelope in his hand, he took out a packet of penny postcards. He laid them down in a neat order so I might see.

They first showed a Latin man and a young boy in one of those antique formal poses. There was another of a woman, about the same age as the man, possibly a little younger. She, too, was Latin. Lazaro assumed this was the man's wife. There was another postcard, this of the famous grotto of Lourdes in France. There was a small circular hole with burned edges in the photo. And there were postcards of other people that were part of the bundle.

Lazaro began to narrate. The young boy on the postcard had been an old man when Lazaro met him. He was nearly blind then and on occasion needed someone to handle certain correspondence. The old man and he became friendly, and the old man talked, as old men will.

It seemed the boy had become a peace officer of some sort far to the south, and his father had been a man not unlike Lazaro, or my own father. It had fallen to the son to execute the laws of the state. This charge he took on and so hunted down the man that birthed him.

These postcards Lazaro was given by the housekeeper of the old man, after he died. Some he could not account for. The postcard of Lourdes he did not understand at all. He had

often wondered if the hole in it had been caused by a cigarette, for it was the right size. Or, was it something more malevolent, such as a bullet hole?

Lazaro sipped from his drink.

"If only I had decided differently." He pointed to the boy in the postcard. "He warned me, but..."

I watched as flesh and blood sorrow played itself out.

"I was also a bookie back then," said Lazaro. And I sold narcotics. This was in the early fifties. More than the money, what excited me... That life fed something in me. There were times I felt beyond the grasp of the physical world. Understand, by the way, I have never been to jail. Never once has the law had a hand on me. I was, am, that good."

Lazaro took up the snapshot of the boy and his father. "He knew me. Nearly blind, he knew me. And I was not one to talk about myself. I understood secrecy."

Lazaro went on to explain how the old man had warned him not to enjoin the infamy of spirit. That world belongs to Señor Death. Señor Death, according to the old man, represented the refutation of a life touched by virtue; he stood for a life ordained with indifference, a life where the divine was a malediction.

The old man confessed to Lazaro that he had fallen prey to Señor Death in the hunt for his own father. It had not been a righteous act, or an honorable act. It had been meant to settle old scores, even up past harms. And there had been a touch of desire in the old man to fill the earth with glory, by performing this deed.

It had been done with indifference and impunity. And the old man did not comprehend until later, much later, too late, that in the hunt for his father, he was trying to destroy that part of himself that was the father. And in the killing of the one, he brought down the other.

"Mr. Teran, I learned too late. I have everything, except what I need."

...Lazaro was the tragic consequence of his character traits. He reminded me of a painting, or a poster, torn in places, and when seamed together just well enough, one could get a glimpse of all that the image might have been.

"All these boxes," he said, "the letters, the snapshots, my mementoes, the postcards... yes. In my head are so many people I met, so many stories. If there is no value to me, maybe there would be value in them. If I give them to you, pass them on to you, *will* them to you..."

He hesitated; he was exhausted from his trying.

"I think you understand me," he said.

I understood too well what he wanted. The economy of redemption. A lifetime recomposed in a few paragraphs. And all by handing over boxes full of lives that did not belong to him in the first place. He did, of course, include his confessionary. And, the sorrows attenuated to it.

Cool and dispassionate reason might suggest some part, some, of what I'd been told, whether truth or lie, was meant to hustle me, for some future purpose or profit. That kind of manipulation was right out of my own father's playbook, and something which I, unfortunately, had been poisoned by.

This could also be exactly what it was. A pared-to-the-bone plea to salvage whatever humanity was left to be had. I don't have direct contact with any divinity, but... they say, if you can earn one man's goodwill, you are on the path of returning to the world.

A book I was to write - *The Creed of Violence* - had been born, though I did not know it. It was there, in the room. In Lazaro's confession, in my father's ghostly shadow.

Somewhere in the dusty past, a son would be the agent for another law, in another country. His father would be a

criminal and common assassin. They would become tethered together by fate and history. They would journey side by side through Mexico in revolution, where they would confront grandeur and finality and their own personal destinies with Señor Death. It was all there in that room, on that table. The characters were already hunting me down. Of course, they may have been hunting me long before that.

Over time I wondered - in order to have that book, was it invaluable I met Lazaro, was it influential he be like my father, was it imperative my father be the man he was, and then disappeared? Was the book actually the implacable imprint of us all?

Before I parted company with Lazaro, there was another thought I had, which I wanted to share with him. As we sat and had one last drink together, I remarked, "The question about what is most important when it comes to hunting the ghosts of one's life?"

"For yourself?"

"Yes... I must never find my father," I said.

"If your father is still alive?"

"Yes."

"Because?"

"I can feel the infamy of spirit within myself."

"I see. What will you do?"

"Keep hunting... when opportunity allows."

"Why? Especially if you know this about yourself."

"To face the moment... will I be a match for your Señor
Death."

"Even after our discussions? Mr. Teran, what would you
say about a man who would do such a thing?"

"The more pertinent question is... What would I say about
the writer, who would not?"