

First 20 pages of

# In a Town Called Mundomuerto

**Randall Silvis**

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In a town called Mundomuerto there lives a woman who bore a dolphin's child. She is an old woman now, la vieja, and most of the villagers dare glance at her only when she is looking the other way. But this is never difficult for she is always looking the other way, out to sea, where she watches for silvery fins to flash across the horizon like distant signal flags. Whether standing on the cliff's edge or on the rocky shore below, the vieja waits there for one of the flags to turn ashore ... for a handsome man dressed all in white to climb toward her over the patient rocks, his clothes miraculously dry by the time he reaches her, his fingertips kissing hers, "Will you dance with me, Lucia Luna?" A tall and graceful man with hips that move like water, his smile thin but sweet, his arm hooked around her back now, fingers caressing quivers into her spine, his left hand always atop his porkpie hat ...

These days it is hard to believe that Lucia Luna was once a beauty. Her skin is darkly layered with years now, wrinkled with bitterness. Her hair is a tattered thundercloud that often wraps itself around the crag of her face. But there was a time, the grandfather says, when no man in town could keep his heart from dreaming of her.

The town was called Mundosuave then, and rightfully so, for in those days it was a tender place, a small village on a wide escarpment overlooking a generous sea ... a tiny world where, with hard work and kindness, life could be pleasant. But there is no one left to remember that time, there is only the grandfather and Lucia Luna herself. And because Lucia Luna will answer no questions except with a curse, a quick laceration of her jagged black eyes, it is left to the grandfather to tell the story. He tells it often, to anyone who will listen.

Now, after so many years, only the boy comes to request the story of how things came to be as they are. Each

day the boy asks to hear the story again, because each time the tale unravels he catches a new thread of it or sees a new crease unfolding in the fabric. It is not a complicated story but as simple as the lives of the people who lived it, yet it holds a fascination for him, not unlike the fascination a child might feel when, with fear and curiosity, he tiptoes alone through the house of a stranger.

Still, the boy is fifteen now and there is not much child left in him. Some day he will not show up in the village square to ask for the grandfather's story, and on that day the boy in him will be gone and maybe the story gone with it. This is what the grandfather fears.

The grandfather's name, already forgotten in *Mundo-muerto*, uttered now only by the tongues of his memory, had been Alberto when he was a boy. Years later he lost that name somehow, lost it like a handkerchief that falls from your pocket as you run too fast down an unmarked path. When you lose something in that manner you might try to retrieve it afterward but if you are not too dull you waste little time in this hopeless effort, you go on with your life nameless, trying on this name or that, but never again as certain of who you are as when you were young.

Were it not for his story and the boy who comes to listen, the old man would be as much a shadow as Lucia Luna as she passes unnoticed through the villagers' lives. But he is the grandfather for a while more at least, and in the late afternoon he sits on a broken chair in a corner of the clay-tiled square, gazing beyond the low stone wall that protects the plaza and its ghosts from tumbling into the sea. He sits in the gnarled shade of an acacia tree, a shade swept these days by nothing but the wind. Across his lap lays an old guitar, the veneer clouded and cracked, three strings missing. Behind him, the jungle has snaked its vines and branches onto the edge of the plaza, an en-

croachment which, like the dust and litter, goes unnoticed except by the grandfather, who likes to think that one of these days a vine will wrap itself around his ankles, and drag him, broken chair, tuneless guitar and all, back to that damp and shimmering place to which magic has retreated.

For now, the boy sits beside him on the dusty tiles. He too sits facing the ocean, though from his lower perspective he can see nothing but the most distant shimmering line against the burned-out blue of sky. The old man cannot see the shoreline either but his memory sees it clearly, the boulder in shallow water to which Lucia Luna would wade as the men returned home each night in their small boats, the boats riding low in the water, heavy with fish, Lucia Luna then seated atop the rock in her white dress with her strong brown legs widespread, feet bare, the hem of her dress pushed down between brown thighs.

“There was a time,” the boy says, because the old man is not as quick with beginnings as he used to be, not as adept at walking with one foot in then and the other in now, “when Lucia Luna’s smile was as warm as a night in August, as bright with promise as a Sunday’s dawn.”

The grandfather stares hard at the watery horizon glinting like metal, a fiery sun sinking toward it. He knows that below them, on the beach, an old woman in dirty rags is struggling toward a boulder.

The boy reaches up and softly plucks a guitar string. “Lucia Luna was seventeen that year,” he says. “And you were fifteen, Grandfather. The same age as I am now.”

After a moment, the old man looks down at him. “Surely you’re not fifteen already. You were only twelve the last time I told you this—”

Without warning his words are swallowed by the throbbing boom of a helicopter as it comes roaring over the jungle, over the plaza and then tilting wildly to disap-

pear down the coastline. The old man and the boy lower their heads and close their eyes against the whirl of dust these green and brown-mottled helicopters make. Outside the plaza a few chickens squawk and flutter for cover. A dog barks and chases the whirring bird, as ugly as a turkey vulture. A few moments later the dog turns and trots back and flops against the nearest house.

The old man waits until the engine throb is no louder than a heartbeat. Then he says, "You can't be fifteen already, nieto. You were only twelve the last time I told this story."

"The last time was yesterday."

"The world moves fast these days, doesn't it? It's leaving me behind."

The boy remembers when he did not have to coax the story from the old man, when all the boy had to do was to try to keep up with it. "In the days of Mundosuave," he says, his voice little more than a whisper, "no man could look at Lucia Luna without feeling the slow heaviness of her breasts in his own blood, is that right?"

The old man has been looking at his sandals, his dusty feet. But now a smile deepens the creases in his face. "Los melones de dios," he says, and he lifts his head and he looks out across the sea. "She would come to the beach at dusk to sing for us as we brought in the day's catch. Someone would hand me my guitar the moment I hopped off my father's boat, and I would sit below her on the rock ..."

As the old man talks the boy gazes into his red-rimmed eyes. There, as on the still surface of a tide pool, he looks for the image of a young Lucia Luna standing atop the boulder, stretching her arms and spine, tossing back her mane of raven hair. "She was like something wild, more animal than human," the old man says. "Can you see her, muchacho?"

The boy has found her now in the old man's eyes. "Yes, Grandfather."

"She's there?"

"Sí. You have her now."

The old man nods. For him, she is always there. "She would sit on the rock at dusk and sing to the ocean. All of Mundosuave would be gathered on the shore, unloading the boats and cleaning the fish. And all the young men would gaze up at her as she sang, their hearts throbbing nakedly."

"But only you," the boy says, "could get close to her. You would sit at her feet and play your guitar."

"I could feel her pulse in the strings of my guitar, *nito*. Each time I plucked a string, I was touching her. And she... she felt my hands on her, I could see it in her eyes, and in the smile she sometimes turned on me."

"And at night," the boy says, "when the singing would end..."

"Her voice would sail off into the redness of the sky, and her body would shudder as if with pleasure, and I would lay my hands across the strings to quiet their trembling. And with my eyes closed I could feel Lucia Luna quivering from the sureness of my touch."

The boy glances quickly around the plaza, but no one is watching or listening. He is always embarrassed when the grandfather speaks of such things, yet he is fifteen and anxious to hear of them, for he too feels a whispering inside his chest as the story does things to him that he wishes to keep private.

"Except for the dolphin-man," the grandfather says, "I am the only man alive who ever made love to Lucia Luna. And I have never laid a finger on her..."



“In those days,” the old man remembers, “we were still very much isolated from the world, and therefore older in many regards, with older ways of doing things. Men and women went about their business without stirring up a lot of dust, just as they had the day before and just as they expected to tomorrow. Seldom did anyone plan what he or she would do; one just did it, because the heart said *laugh*, the feet said *run*, or the belly said *eat*.”

“The missionaries had been passing through Mundosuave for over a hundred years, leaving us Bibles and statues and trying to open our eyes to our debasement. But we were all slow learners, I guess. It took us a long time to realize that God was an angry old man in the clouds. In our simplicity we thought God was everywhere, in the ocean and the jungle, in the rocks, and yes, in the pretty statues of Mary and baby Jesus as well as in our dreams and our pants and even in our tortillas.

“There was a spirit to life in Mundosuave then, a trust, una esperanza. But this spirit... think of it, nieto, as a beautiful woman whose lover either neglects her or who sees her every smile as a flirtation with strangers, every side-long glance as a betrayal, and who continually accuses her of deceit, and imprisons her, locks her in the house, never lets her beauty shine... Such a woman has no choice, I’m afraid, but to walk away into the sunset in search of a more tranquil home.”

The old man, dissatisfied with his description of things, purses his lips and frowns. In all the tellings of his story, he has never yet felt he has gotten it right. And so he continues.

“It’s hard to say what finally changed us. Maybe all that stuff from the missionaries finally sank in. I don’t think we were changed by what happened to Lucia Luna, but the other way around. Her fate would not have played itself

out as it did had we not already started down that twisted path of change.”

It was in the late spring, he says, the end of the day, an evening of soft yellow light with clouds as pink as flamingoes. As the fishermen hauled their boats ashore, one of the waiting women, a fisherman’s wife named Valencia Didi3n, always the first and last woman to speak, called out, “Another good day?”

Her husband answered, “They are all good days!”

Atop the wide round boulder which even at high tide protruded from the sea, Lucia Luna stood and stretched her arms to the sky, and every man who could risk it stole a glance at her as she rose onto her toes. Her skin was brown and her dress white and her hair and eyes as black and shiny as desire. “What song do you want to hear first?” she asked, her voice a melody in itself. Some of the men, when Lucia Luna spoke, were reminded of the pan flutes that are played by the Indians of the mountains far to the south; others thought they heard their mothers crooning lullabies; still others heard the harmony of the wind and sea calling out of sight of the land.

Jorge Canales, a man who was built like a barrel with four stubby limbs, said, “A song of love, what else? Sing about how you dream of me each night, bella.”

“Hurry up, Alberto,” the grandfather’s mother teased as he, still just a boy, hopped out of his father’s boat. She handed him his guitar and said, “Play something quick, before Jorge’s imagination tells him another lie.”

Fifteen-year-old Alberto, bare-chested and grinning, splashed toward the boulder. Careful not to get his guitar wet, he sat on the edge of the boulder and looked up at Lucia Luna. When she sat too, spreading her feet for balance and pushing the dress down between her thighs, his eyes were level with the calves of her naked legs.

“She needed only to look at me,” the grandfather says, “and I knew what song she wanted me to play.”

With the first chord Alberto strummed, the villagers fell silent. They worked with smiles, their hands finding the rhythms of Lucia’s songs, first a ballad of impossible and tragic romance, then a comic tale about a man whose wife is so lazy that he trades her for a goat that can cook, then another tragic song about a fisherman who drowns himself in search of a mermaid.

Alberto, as he played, caressed the neck and strings of his guitar as if he were caressing Lucia Luna herself, his left hand around the curve of her ankle, right hand strumming the inside of her thigh. With each song his hands became bolder, until he was holding her so hard against him that he could not tell where his throbbing ended and hers began.

“Good job, Alberto,” one of the men told him at the end of the third song. “You got almost half the chords right that time.”

Lucia reached down to tousle the boy’s hair. “Don’t pay any attention to him. You’re getting better all the time.”

“It’s because your beautiful voice tells my fingers what to do,” he said, so softly that even she did not appear to hear.

“Let’s have another one, chica,” someone called from the beach. “Something snappier this time.”

But Lucia Luna placed her hands on her knees and stood atop the boulder. “That’s enough for now,” she said. “Tonight at fiesta I will sing every song I know.”

“And I will play for only you,” Alberto whispered.

But she did not even look at him. She was standing with hands on her hips and looking instead at Jorge Canales, who had announced that Lucia Luna would dance her first dance with him tonight.

“Only if you wash the smell of fish off you first,” she said.

Jorge turned to the man working beside him, jabbed him in the ribs and said, “Some of us like the smell of fish, eh Pablo?”

Pablo said, “Personally, I would rather eat it than smell it.”

The other men hooted at this while the women, trying to hide their smiles, clicked their tongues and shook their heads. A woman who was nearly as round as Jorge Canales told him, “Maybe both of you should bring a tuna to the party tonight.”

Jorge answered, “If you’ll bring *your* tuna, I will bring my sperm whale.”

She picked out a fish no bigger than her little finger and threw it at him. “Here’s your whale, you dreamer!”

At this even the women laughed openly, especially when Jorge picked up the tiny fish and dangled it near his crotch, as if comparing the fish to his manhood. He pouted for a moment, wounded by the woman’s insult. Then his eyes brightened. Holding the fish’s tail against his crotch he ran after the woman, the little fish flopping between his legs. She screamed and ran a few steps this way, then turned heavily and fled in the other direction, Jorge bellowing like a whale as he chased after her.

“Stop running, you two,” somebody scolded. “You are making the ground shake.”

Only Alberto did not join in the laughter. His eyes never left Lucia Luna.



That night, after the boatloads of sardines had been laid out to dry, there was a fiesta in honor of one of the many

holidays which the people of Mundomuerto no longer celebrate. The square in the center of town was swept clean and set ablaze with torches. Along the stone wall sat tables heavy with roasted meats and fish, tall stacks of tortillas, earthen bowls of red and green picantes, gourds filled with pulque and pitchers brimming with red wine. For the children there were candied fruits and glazed sweets.

Young Alberto and three of his friends stood on a small platform and provided the music. They sang as well as played, and if they were not good musicians they were good fishermen who happened to own instruments and this was as much as anyone expected. The tempo was always bright and the dust raised by stomping feet was never too thick, it sparkled in the colored lights, as soothing a dance floor as crushed velvet.

Lucia Luna was seventeen that year, as full and ripe a woman as any man could envision. Flowing from the arms of one partner into those of another, she allowed each man a single dance, starting with the youngest because they had neither patience nor endurance, only the desire to stand close to her as soon as possible. Each man when dismissed would stagger back to the tables lined against the stone wall, needing to clear his head with something less intoxicating than the scent and heat of Lucia Luna. Then, knowing that his moment of grace had come and gone, he would take one of the plainer girls into his arms—they were all plain girls compared to Lucia Luna—and expiate his hunger in a more appreciative embrace.

The older men bided their time, waiting for their wives to grow sleepy with too much food or wine or indifference. Then each of these men in turn would sneak into Lucia Luna's arms, hoping to catch her off guard long enough that he might pull her close and feel the hardness of a breast stabbing his heart, and perhaps then to press his own hard-

ness against her, inflame her, maybe to drop his hand onto her buttock for one discreet squeeze of that heavenly muscle.

Lucia Luna, however, held each of her partners at a distance. In her arms each man occupied a position two feet short of intimacy. She would allow a partner close enough that he might be dizzied by the musky warmth that radiated from her, but never near enough that he could honestly claim to have felt the breeze of her laughter upon his neck, or to have truly known that delicious fatality of feeling the knife tips of her breasts carve initials into his heart.

Every man, when he wandered away from her, his arms profoundly empty, thought to himself something like *I failed to touch her soul*, and he spent the rest of the night trying to numb his misery. What only a few of the men realized—and those who did sensed it only as a wordless suspicion—was that Lucia Luna longed to have her soul touched by a man. In fact she wanted it as desperately as each of her partners wanted to give her that frightening joy.

To the other young women her laughter and whirling dress marked her as frivolous, all flesh and ego. But on occasion, between dances, in that murmuring stillness when the only music is the sound of insects flying at the torches, Lucia Luna's smile would falter, her gaze would wander to the stars or the jungle or across the open sea, and those villagers able to perceive it would guess that there was more to Lucia Luna than mere beauty, there was the sadness of those who, through no fault of their own, want too much and, because they have never yet achieved their extravagant desire, cannot even name it.

All evening long the young Alberto watched her from his vantage point on the bandstand. Through the haze of dust and the speckled clouds of gnats he followed her every step. He felt, from the very first note, that he was playing

for only her, and each time another man took Lucia Luna into his arms, Alberto felt that man's feet dancing on his shadow, trampling his swollen heart.

Once, when he plucked a guitar string in a certain way and its single high note reverberated like a shrill moan through the heavy air, Lucia spun in her partner's arms to stare at Alberto, her mouth slightly open as if she needed to pant for the next breath, her black eyes alive with golden sparks.

"When she turned and looked at me like that," the grandfather says, "my insides went hollow. I knew then that my misery had touched her in just the right place, a place of its own knowing. It was all I could do to keep from stumbling backward off the platform and falling unconscious into the bushes."

He managed, however, to play on, strumming only a few errant chords until he caught up with the other musicians again.

Lucia Luna licked her lips and grinned at him. Alberto went empty with everything but desire, and he knew in his heart that he existed only for this evening, to lie with her later that same night, to be her first and ever lover. He knew from her smile that now she understood this too.

And so, for the next hour, Alberto played in sweet delirium. His hardness throbbed against the back of the guitar. It grew harder, he imagined, with each chord he strummed, stretching like a tree root growing toward water. "The only thing that worried me," the grandfather says, "was the tremendous pressure I felt inside. I was afraid that when Lucia and I finally made love, the explosion might do her some damage."

The old man grins at the boy. "Have you ever felt that way yourself, muchacho? Do you feel the cannonball wanting to explode?"

The boy's face goes hot, and he looks away. He sits very still, hands clasped in his lap. "Perhaps we should continue with the story now."

The grandfather laughs softly and nods.

The merrymaking proceeded long into the night, he tells the boy. Lucia Luna exhausted one partner after another, each man enervated by his single dance with her. But as the men's faces paled with exhaustion, Lucia Luna's cheeks glowed. Some who watched imagined that she absorbed the men's energies. A few of the older folks thought they detected in her wild swirls an urgency, a desperation. In any case even the musicians soon drooped, each eventually laying down his instrument to make his way to a long table beneath a cieba tree, where he sought fortification in the tapas and wine.

"Only I remained on the stand," the grandfather says, "my left hand fingering the chords of her desire, my right hand stroking her resonating soul." Lucia Luna danced alone in the beaten dust, her only partner the sighing moonlight. "Her white dress billowed about her legs while her feet trod the heartbeat of the earth. And her scent! Even on the bandstand it came to me. At one point I saw it rather than smelled it. Her fragrance swarmed over me like a cloud of fireflies, and then enveloped me, a million hot pinpricks of her scent. She must have seen it too, because that was when she danced over close to me and faced me as she danced. Her smile was so luminous that it embarrassed even the torches. One by one I heard them sputtering out."

In silence the whole town watched. Slouched in their chairs or slunk against the stone wall, they made no move to stumble home. Alberto played song after song, and Lucia Luna sang more sweetly than ever.

"What only I realized," the grandfather says, "was that she was not merely singing, she was giving voice to ecstasy.

Her luxurious gyrations were not mere dance, they were a response to my long root of ardor as it wormed its way inside her.”

After a while, the grandfather says, he found it necessary to pause for a moment and catch his breath. Also, he felt that his lower body was about to detonate at any second. In fact when he looked down it seemed to be pulsating of its own volition. He attempted to conceal this activity behind his guitar, but then a loud knocking sound ensued, an especially curious sound—except to him—because his hands were perfectly motionless.

To keep from erupting in public, Alberto bowed once to Lucia Luna, then stepped discreetly off the rear of the platform and, after placing his guitar on the back of the bandstand, he melted into the darkness. He meant to return as soon as he had brought himself under control once more.

Lucia Luna softly laughed. Stretching and yawning she did a slow pirouette, one full turn so that she ended up facing the bandstand again. “It was at that moment,” the grandfather says, “when the stranger appeared. No one could later say from which direction the man had come.”

From out of the shadows he walked, a tall man, and thin, dressed, like Lucia Luna, all in white. He wore a linen suit, white shoes, and a collarless white shirt buttoned tight around his neck. Even his hat was white—a straw porkpie hat—but its band was bright yellow, as yellow as a rising moon. He walked with a carriage eminently erect without being rigid. His stride barely scuffed the earth. Some people later remarked that he moved like water; others said he was as fluid as an apparition.

In any case he was soon standing behind Lucia Luna. She must have felt his presence, for without turning she pulled her hair off the back of her neck and let it fall over

her shoulder. For a moment it seemed he would lean forward and kiss the knob of her spine. Instead he reached up and touched his fingertips to her arm.

At his touch Lucia Luna turned, smiling. And in that instant when she beheld him, his thin sweet smile, she gasped. This in itself was extraordinary—that the mere sight of a man, any man, could elicit such a response from her. Always before, it had been the men who gasped.

Alberto peered out from the darkness behind the bandstand. To his eyes the stranger was good-looking, yes, but not exceptional. His face was thin and his skin rough, maybe even pockmarked, though it was difficult to ascertain this by the meager light. Still, Alberto saw no reason why Lucia Luna should suddenly be trembling, or why she should assume such a submissive posture, her left arm laid across the small of her back, the middle fingertip of her right hand resting in the hollow of her throat.

With his own left hand the stranger held lightly to the brim of his hat, as if the wind might blow it away, though the night was still. He extended his right hand and touched his fingertips to hers. “Will you dance with me, Lucia Luna?”

Even the insects seemed to hush before his words. Then there was only the sound of waves on the rocky shore below, the crash of surf and then its sigh of capitulation. Lucia Luna said, her voice as small as a fledgling, “There is no music, señor.”

At this the stranger turned to the three musicians sprawled beneath a cieba tree. He smiled upon them as if they were all old friends, as if they had been babies in the same crib. “Compadres,” he said, “por favor? A night like this, without your music, is like a sky without the moon or stars.”

Without a word to one another the musicians stumbled to their feet, returned smiling to their instruments, and began to play. Lucia Luna moved into the stranger's arms—or, more accurately, into his arm, for his left hand never strayed far from the brim of his porkpie hat. But even with only one arm he managed to hold her closer than had any man before him. Their gazes locked. The stranger's hand lay flat between her shoulder blades, his skin a shade paler than her own, Lucia Luna's breasts crushed against his chest.

Alberto, crouching in pain in the bushes, felt a new pain shoot into his chest now, as if a jagged thread on a thick needle had been pushed down through his heart.

"How is it that you know my name?" he heard Lucia Luna inquire of the stranger.

"I have been hearing your name my entire life," the man said.

"From who?"

"From every bird that ever sang, hermosa. From every breeze that scrapes the sky."

"I never realized I was so famous," she teased.

"Even the ocean whispers your name. Can't you hear it? *Lucia Luna! Lucia Luna! Lucia Luna!*"

She made a slight turn then, fitting a hip between his legs. "Why don't you put your other arm around me too?" she asked.

"Because the joy of holding you in both arms would be too much for me to bear." Now and then as the couple danced, Alberto closed his eyes, hoping to erase this scene off the face of the night. But each time he peered out through the jewels of moisture shimmering on his eyelashes, there they were again, as beautiful and terrifying as a fever dream.

Valencia Didi3n had been squinting at the stranger ever since he arrived. The mother of three boys, the youngest a year older than Alberto, she had spent much of her life with her face screwed-up in a critical squint. For this fiesta she and her husband had sat side by side all night long in the cane chairs they dragged from their house. They had danced not a single dance—though her husband was, at that moment, swaying to the rhythm of his own snores, his arms filled with an ethereal Lucia Luna.

Valencia jabbed a very real elbow into his ribs. He sat upright and blinked. “Who is that man?” she hissed into his ear.

Se3or Didi3n needed a few moments to adjust to consciousness. Then he answered, “Ask him, not me.” A few seconds later he added, “That hat he wears looks like a little bucket for catching sardines.”

“Maybe it is,” Valencia said.

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Shhh,” she said. “Be quiet and let me study him a while.”

Alberto, too, had been studying the stranger. “And the more I studied him,” the grandfather remembers, “the more that ache in my testicles throbbed. It ceased to be the ache of love and became instead the hot red ache of having been kicked there. I felt too sore to walk, but I crawled to my feet anyway, and I managed to cross the plaza to him. It was like walking through a long dark tunnel, with only the glow of Lucia Luna’s smoldering eyes to light my way.”

Three times Alberto tapped on the stranger’s shoulder, attempting to cut in. But he might as well have been tapping on air. Finally he grasped Lucia Luna’s wrist and pulled it off the stranger’s waist. “Alberto, please,” Lucia Luna said, and barely bothered to look at him. “This gentleman and I are dancing.”

“But I want to dance with you now.”

“Later, chico.”

“I’ve been playing for you all night. It’s my turn to dance!”

“Then go find yourself a little girl to dance with, hermanito.”

Alberto stood there rigid with anger. Although the whole world had gone black for him, he could feel the grins of the villagers. Their chuckles were like mosquitoes to him, their whispers like snakes.

Lucia Luna was already oblivious to his presence. “Have we ever met before?” she asked the stranger.

“A thousand times at least,” he said.

“And where would that have been?”

“In my dreams, mariposa.”

She lay her head upon his shoulder. “That explains why you look so familiar.”

Alberto reeled away from them, breathless, one hand feeling for the knife that had been thrust into his heart. Even as he staggered out of the plaza he wondered what evil powers kept him upright when all he wanted was insentience, and how it was possible to keep walking with nothing but a black hole where your heart had been, and why God, so obviously malicious, did not now rush in at Alberto’s repeated invitation and finish the young man off.



It was not until morning, when Alberto came wandering back into the square—

“What about where you spent the night?” the boy interrupts.

The grandfather asks, “What about it?”

“You left out the part about where you spent the night.”

The old man thinks for a moment. He can see a fog-bank of gray, he can hear water spilling onto rocks, but that is all. “I’ve decided that it isn’t important,” he says. “It slows the story down.”

“It has always seemed important to me.”

“When you are a boy, everything is important. But when you are an old man, almost nothing is.”

“What you did that night,” the boy says, unwilling to let this hole in the story go unfilled, “is you just kept walking until your legs gave out on you. It was only then you realized that you were lying on the beach a mile from town. That’s when the thought occurred to you that if you walked into the ocean and drowned . . .”

The old man nods mournfully. “The tide might wash my body ashore where the fishermen would find it in the morning.”

“You knew that the sight of your body would pitch the entire village into sorrow.”

“And what remorse and guilt would seize Lucia Luna herself.”

“So you got up and you dragged yourself into the water. Out to where the moon lay like a golden doily on the sea.”

“Here comes the part you wouldn’t let me forget,” the old man says.

“But not even the ocean would have you. It spit you back onto the rocks, and slapped you so hard that a kick from a horse would have been more pleasant.”

“You’re a cruel boy for one so young,” the old man tells him.

“And so you lay there all night, neither awake nor asleep. The fog rolled in and tried to smother you, and you wished it success.”

“But too much pain immunizes a man from death,” the old man continues. “So finally the fog gave up and called it quits. Then a red-winged blackbird came and—”

“I thought it was a parrot,” the boy says.

“Who was it saw this bird, you or me?”

“Yesterday it was a parrot, Grandfather.”

“Then it must have been wearing a disguise, because today it is a blackbird. Take it or leave it.”

“All right,” says the boy. “A red-winged blackbird came and perched beside your head.”

“And all night long it laughed at me in a woman’s voice.”

“Lucia Luna’s.”

“Of course Lucia Luna’s. And its breath smelled like the fog. And its laughter was distant and muffled, as if it came from deep down the blackbird’s throat, which is what happens when a bird pecks out your memory and gobbles it down. I kept reaching for that bird, thinking I would wring its neck and shake my memory loose, but after a couple of tries I couldn’t lift my arm anymore and I just said ‘The hell with it, take it. Just make sure you get it all. Don’t leave a speck of it behind to haunt me.’”

The old man pauses now. He looks down at the face of his battered guitar.

The boy says, perhaps because he is feeling guilty for wounding the old man with this memory, “It is a significant part of the story, just as I thought.”

“Now that I’ve heard it again,” the old man answers, “I am less certain of that than ever.”



