

***The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared, had some one pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: "Do not listen to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!"***

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
The Social Contract and The Discourses**

***It was possible, no doubt, to imagine a society in which wealth, in the sense of personal possessions and luxuries, should be evenly distributed, while power remained in the hands of a small privileged caste. But in practice such a society could not long remain stable. For if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once they had done this, they would sooner or later realise that the privileged minority had no function, and they would sweep it away. In the long run, a hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and ignorance.***

**George Orwell**

# **WAR GAME: Día de Muertos**

**By Renier Palland**

## THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE MASS

1AM

Beyond the sparks shaped like silhouettes, beyond the black-blue and back to black midnight lights, Flora Hernandez spotted the farmhouse where she left her uncle behind on that cold December morning back in 1971. Decades had passed since her departure and although they communicated semi-regularly, Flora was uncertain whether Uncle Rodrigo ever forgave her for abandoning him. She had to find a proper job, as she needed to feed herself and her uncle. Subsequently, Flora ended up at Samuel Murray's house - the infamous mansion she lived and worked at for four decades.

Samuel Murray was an Anti-Semitic billionaire who had orchestrated the intricate and barbarous event at the *Murray* building, colloquially known as *War Game*. Maddy Murray, Samuel's daughter, had given her a check worth \$5 million USD a mere hour prior to midnight. Flora understood the Murray family - she loved Maddy like her own daughter who didn't survive the drug wars in Mexico, and Samuel, despite his flaws, was an unkempt man with a cracked heart beneath his voracious exterior. Flora fled the Murray mansion when she overheard a discussion between Maddy and a strange man. Maddy planned on interfering with "the death toll by implementing the final phase". Flora held her halcyon of unbroken composure for as long as she could, which offered her enough leeway to escape the house before crumbling into a ball of iced veins and fearsome rage.

A frenetic iPhone fumble, an hour-long Uber drive and a weeping session later, Flora flipped her fingers through the wildflowers at the edge of the dark farmhouse. Crickets and creepy crawlies crackled and cackled at Flora like atheists in a Catholic Church. Something snagged Flora's dress. An odd shriek escaped her breath. "Mother Mary!" She whispered loudly. She untangled herself from whatever was grabbing hold of her in the darkness.

Ominous. Odorous. Omnipotent.

She recited several prayers in Spanish as she carefully tread the path towards the porch. Some insects squashed beneath her shoes, while others crept into their hiding places like junkies near an alleyway in Harlem. "Oh God, let him answer," she pleaded with her existential higher power. "Let him allow me to explain. That's all I want. And need." Flora pressed the button for the doorbell, but her attempts were in vain. The doorbell was a mute reverie and not the reprieve she

had yearned for. A tyrannical silence befell the farm. The crickets and creepy crawlies' crackles and cackles halted with a rude serendipity, as if the doorbell switched off the universe for a moment. Flora fumbled for her iPhone in her handbag. "Putal!" She swore under her breath in Spanish as a roll of Chapstick smacked against the porch's floorboards, shattering the aberrant silence. Flora waited for something to erupt, for a gunshot to deafen her, or a comet to incinerate her forever, but sound's hushed harmonic hues didn't impregnate the air like it should have done under normal circumstances.

Although normalcy wasn't on the agenda for the night, Flora knew how fastidious any semblance of the ordinary could transmogrify into rapidly abhorrent hedonism and violence. If a single bullet could set off a civil war, what could a hundred bullets set off?

1:30AM

Rodrigo Gabriel Ruiz kept to himself mostly. He wasn't the interfering type, especially since he didn't communicate too well and lacked the basic social skills to form a proper conversation. Only a year older than Flora, his niece, Rodrigo had turned 60-years-old a month prior. If he had any comprehension of the meaning of time, Rodrigo would have been aware that his lethargic hazel eyes and that abashed smile he always carried with him created a prolific, albeit enigmatic, kind gentleman who the local community referred to as "The Real Omar Sharif". They needed a face, a name, a facade to explain away the curiosity. Despite Omar Sharif's death a decade earlier and the actor's highly publicized drinking habits, the local community refused to believe in the gossip mill. Rodrigo, their very own Omar Sharif, their Doctor Zhivago, was alive and well. Quiet, tender, difficult to read, yet preternaturally handsome and mysterious.

Rodrigo knew none of this. He didn't possess the skills to be as aware as others. Although Rodrigo was highly intelligent and spoke seven languages, his past - being abandoned by the only person he ever loved as family at a young age - didn't bode well for Rodrigo's emotional intelligence, nor did decades of farm work and zero social interaction aid him.

*Hudsonwood Farm* was a generational business. Prior to Rodrigo's retirement, Margot Hudsonwood, the great-granddaughter of John J. Hudsonwood (Rodrigo's first boss and *father figure*), kept the promise made to Rodrigo by the Hudsonwood family:

***Should an heir and/or heiress of the Hudsonwood family legacy be unable to fulfill their duties as owner and manager of Hudsonwood Farm due to illness/death/exceptional circumstances/education and/or lack of interest, they are hereby ordered to immediately transfer the Hudsonwood Farm, including any and all assets, to Rodrigo Gabriel Ruiz and his extended family. He shall retain legal ownership until his death, whereupon he shall decide the future heir/heiress.***

**Margot, the only surviving heiress to the legacy, didn't want the responsibility of running the farm, therefore she handed over the estate to Rodrigo with a smile, a kiss on the cheek and a spinning of the wheels as she drove off in her convertible Chevrolet into the distant setting of the sun. Ever since the Hudsonwood Farm became his property, Rodrigo had kept it under control and managed it with more efficiency and frugality than the Hudsonwood family ever did. Trespassers came and never went. Rodrigo set traps for the common thieves who pinched a truck or a tractor for a couple months' of heroin supply. But the bear traps kept them at bay. And if they screamed too much, Rodrigo used his machete to silence them. Common thieves weren't allowed near the farm. Those were the rules. And Rodrigo didn't make exceptions.**

**Therefore, when the doorbell alerted him of an intruder and stirred his light slumber at nearly two in the morning, Rodrigo was both annoyed and agitated. Age did it to him. Age and the memories - the missing memories.**

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**An intumescent melancholy filled Flora's spirit when she realized that the tenebrous and infinite stretch of raw rural farmland served as karmic justice for allowing her roots to burn like Amazonian wildfires, for abandoning her birthright, for giving up on her dreams. Flora understood why her late father always said, "Florância, nothing is worse than experiencing existential enmity. It is the ultimate form of suffering. Worse than torture. Worse than being alive."**

**Always the philosopher. Always the activist. Always the hero. And, as Flora wept, always the first to take a bullet.**

As the memory flashed like a loose heartbeat through Flora's neurons, a war-wild, snap-click-shutter sound interrupted the silence. Flora, too terrified to move, held her hands up to indicate a universal sign of surrender. A husky grunting noise touched the hairs on the back of her neck. She spoke cautiously, gently and empathically, "Uncle Rodrigo... Please don't hurt me. I want to talk to you. Don't sh-"

A flash of light exploded near Flora. She glanced at the floorboards - he shot the porch steps to pieces. Flora fell to her knees. She ripped her rosary from her neck and prayed in rabid, frenzied Spanish.

*"Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo. Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres, y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús. Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte."*

*"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."*

Rodrigo grabbed Flora by the arm and tossed her onto the lawn. She shrieked, yet continued hysterically praying for an absolution. Rodrigo fierily stormed towards her as two sharpened machetes glistened in the brief sliver of moonlight. Flora prayed for a momentary reprieve from the clouded dark night, even if this was it - an infinitesimal glimpse at the light of a sick moon before she died at the hands of Uncle Rodrigo. Oddly enough, these ubiquitous moments of ephemeral lucidity are always remembered once we're old and sick and too forgetful to beg the nostalgia to return to our shores like wayward ships lost at sea. We have memories of memories, indirectly placing us in a paradox - a War Game writhing with our own psyches. And try as we might, we'll always be unable to solve the paradoxes within us.

Flora was well-versed in the language of paradoxes: from choosing between servitude or death as a child on the shores of the Rio Grande, to choosing Uncle Rodrigo instead of her father when asked to do so by a cocaine smuggler from the south, to being forced to watch the consequences of that decision unfold as the drug lord's bullet pierced her father's unblemished skin and tunnel through Papa's brain. Every action had a reaction - it was as universally accepted as the Theory of Relativity.

But this... This was a preternatural madness unlike anything Flora had ever experienced before. Uncle Rodrigo's dual machetes sliced into one of Flora's frenzied exhalation - mere inches from her face. The machetes' slip-slashing sounds reminded Flora of the streaming silk scarves she snipped up after a Murray soiree. *Who wears a fashion season twice in one year?. Snip the silk, Flora! Snip, snip, snip...* And as the slithering silk settled on the floor like euthanized snakes, Flora wept and screamed and sliced silver silk scarves until her hands turned red like the red silk and the red silk turned into her hands and Flora didn't know if her hands had been silk or if the silk belonged to her hands.

"Flora?" A voice, borrowed from the depths of the earth, ripped Flora from her temporary post traumatic flashback. She was still on the lawn, but her body was curled into the fetal position, as if it had instinctively protected itself from the inevitable. "Flora? Is that you?" That voice again. It was closer than before. She turned towards the sound. And suddenly, a past was a present. Unfortunately, much like two cars heading towards an unknown collision course - one coming from the east and one coming from the west - Flora was the car which missed the exit towards the north by a nanosecond, and Rodrigo was the car who left its destination a mere two seconds earlier than usual. Neither of their destinations had changed - they were still headed towards that intersection with the faulty traffic lights blinking green-green-green-red at exactly five minutes past two in the morning.

Flora gasped when she put a face to the voice and realized that they neglected to install airbags a moment before impact.

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## BREAKING BREAD WITH THE DEAD DISCIPLES

2:45AM

“And that’s how it all came to an end. Unbelievable,” Flora shook her head in disbelief as she took another bite out of Rodrigo’s homemade bread. She had told him about the check Maddy gave her and how the Murray family affected her life. The kitchen, a quaintly modest room with faded blue wallpaper and late-60’s appliances, smelled musky and famished like a murder of crows clawing their way into a corpse. As it was neither pungent nor curiously insidious, Flora ignored what the possible source could have been and wolfed down her dinner instead. Rodrigo’s haunted eyes shifted slightly. He was curious about Flora’s life, but simply not curious enough to feign an iota of interest in the Multiverse Theorem and Quantum Foam. Rodrigo’s facial expressions rapidly shifted from endearment to enmity - an idiosyncratic trait he inherited from his father, Rafael, a man who had fortitude in his leathery hands and hatred in the barrel of his gun.

“What’s the matter?” Flora asked between bites. Rodrigo’s eyes were fixated on the handbag she tossed so haphazardly on the seat beside her. She followed his gaze. “Why are you looking at my handbag like that?” She asked incredulously.

“Flora?”

“Yes, Rodrigo?”

The conversation, albeit eccentric, simmered with the humming electricity of imminent danger.

“I kill people,” Rodrigo confessed. “I murder them. Thieves. Vagabonds. *Banditos*. I like killing them.” Rodrigo cracked a quarter smile like a pageant queen who had just responded with the “World Peace” cliché.

Flora dropped her utensils on the plate. She looked at this man whom she regarded as her brother once upon a time and didn’t know how to adequately respond. The smile lingered on his face like a haunted masterpiece. Flora, fretful and fearful, eyed Rodrigo quizzically. “What do you mean?”

Rodrigo laughed. “Are you being rhetorical?”

“Not in the slightest,” Flora snapped. “I’m not in the mood for this. What have you done?”

Rodrigo shrugged. “I’ve made the world great again. Or at least that’s the plan.”

“Are you *loco*? Have you completely lost it?” Flora demanded. She snatched her coat and handbag. Rodrigo grabbed her by the arm. “Not. So. Fast.”

Flora froze like a cardiac arrest. She clenched her jaw. "Let go of me!" She screamed.

"No," Rodrigo whispered, the insidious smile still lingered like shadows on his face.

"So you're going to kill me too? For what?" Flora asked. She forced the tears not to escape by biting the inside of her cheek.

"I'm not going to kill you..." Rodrigo whisper-sighed. "Why would I kill you?" He searched Flora's terror for a response. He was confused as to why Flora, who was like his sister, feared him so.

"Y-y-you're not?" Flora whimpered with a tear flashing in the flickering light. Rodrigo cursed. "What's wrong?" She mustered the courage to sneak in feigned sympathy. The flickering electricity caused her heartbeat to rapidly intensify. Rodrigo glanced at her. "I'll show you."

**3AM**  
**BUTTERFLIES WITHOUT WINGS**

A secret passageway behind the fridge led to a terrified staircase, darkened by the same vapid apathy as the rest of the farm. Rodrigo led Flora by the hand. Each stair whimpered and wailed like a torture victim. A beat-beat-beatbeat in Flora's chest muted the agonized soundscape. Rodrigo, who was clearly more acquainted with the staircase, descended rapidly. Flora followed suit, but in the back of her mind she knew that her life had drawn to a close. Rodrigo was a serial killer. He admitted it. And who was Flora? The one who caused it? The one who maimed him emotionally? The morose questions instantly gave way to a myriad of hysterical questions when they reached a snapping, flickering fluorescent light at the bottom. Flora gasped. Rodrigo wasn't fazed by her surprise - he had waited for her for as long as he could. Mounted above a solid steel door cut into rock, shimmering and stunning in its audacity, hung a golden plaque inscribed with the words "Abandon all prejudice ye who enter here." Rodrigo pressed a fingertip to a small scanner. The rouge turned a stark green as the steel door breathed open. Flora exhaled. He stepped inside with Flora's hand clenched in his. She expected a morgue to assault her senses, but what she witnessed instead was the most peculiar juxtaposition she'd ever encountered before.

A system of caves and tunnels spread out beneath the earth like an untangled spider's web. The main entrance room was garishly bright and the ceiling was decorated in bright faux replicas of the Sistine Chapel's religious regalia - an amalgam between Michelangelo and other masters from the Renaissance period. The left wall carried the weight of a hundred screens, while the right side was stuffed with deep mahogany desks. Lights whirled in tandem with flickering screens, keyboards tapped and hushed tones spoke into Bluetooth headsets. Initially the room appeared to be bustling with people, but as Flora's eyes adjusted to the surreal scene before her, she spotted five people in total. Rodrigo clapped his hands together twice to draw their attention away from whatever they were doing. Everyone stopped in unison and smiled at their leader. Flora's uneasiness only worsened when Rodrigo winked at her.

"My wingless *mariposas*! Allow me to introduce to you the one and only Flora. She is, for lack of a better term, like my sister. And *she*... She is the key we've discussed over the years."

Flora smiled weakly and waved. "The key?" She asked Rodrigo.

**“I told Flora that I kill people, much like I’ve told all of you when you first arrived on my doorstep.” A delicate girl with hurried eyes nodded in agreement. “As my sister, Flora, you must now know the truth.”**

**Flora shook her head. A sudden dryness in her mouth was a sign of her impending fatigue. “The truth...” She trailed off as if to search for a response from someone.**

**“Flora, there is currently a battle going on at the Murray Building. They call it *War Game*. There’s more to this than meets the eye. The annual Lume Ball?” Rodrigo searched her eyes for an answer. Flora nodded. “Yes, Maddy Murray’s charity. The Lume Foundation. They sell art pieces to the elite and use that money to fund educational and-“**

**The girl who was delicate upon first inspection, snapped at Flora, “Do you believe that?” The accent was accentuated by a Middle Eastern vibrato. Flora coughed. “Well, you have to understand, I only worked-“**

**“You only worked there for four decades and you tell me you never knew about The Lume Foundation’s true purpose?” The rage intensified as the girl arose from her seat and rushed towards Flora. Rodrigo stomped his foot and glared at the girl. “Arifa! How dare you question Flora’s integrity? Get back into position!” The veins throbbed in his neck. Flora, taken aback by the sudden onslaught of questions - cacophonous and frenzied - held up her hands in protest. “Can you all shut up?” Flora’s tone was intense and angry. “I am exhausted. I haven’t had a chance to get my bearings and you’re all treating me like the enemy. I *don’t know what is going on!*”**

**A rushed silence befell the cavernous, albeit preternaturally elegant room. An attractive young man with paint splashed across his face like the vernacular of a country Flora had never visited before spoke first. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Flora. Welcome to *The Wingless Butterflies*. Unlike my colleague over there,” - Arifa shot him a glance, - “I am very thankful for your brother- Ahem. Uncle’s work and what he has done for us. We are all unequal in the eyes of society. We were all once washed up garbage on the shores of humanity, and look at us now? Now we’re fighting back.” The young man’s smile exploded with light. He stepped forward. “My name’s Scotty. And it’s an honor to meet you.”**

Flora, who hadn't been bashful in quite some time, smiled back at Scotty and shook his hand. Rodrigo nodded - a symbolic gesture of agreement with Scotty's cordial welcome. . "Flora." Rodrigo said in that garishly important tone of his. "Before we go any further... We need to know if you will join the war?"

An infinite tide of momentary silences swept through the room like engorged tornadoes.

Flora closed her eyes.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

And decided...

**THE END OF EPISODE ONE**

**TO BE CONTINUED**