

MUERTO PARAO

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—WITH THANKS TO HUSSEIN EL-ALI

2017

Lake Worth, Florida

I want so much to be able to claim being a part of his life, belonging to him, his belonging to me. But he was just my student, and I am just a gringo he slept with. Once. And probably the last woman he slept with. But even that I don't know for sure.

My legs wobble a little as I walk into the funeral home. Not because my heels are high—I've always struggled with stilettos, but I haven't had feeling in my legs for a week. No feeling anywhere except for a pummeled sensation.

I'm the only gringo here. Over the past two months I have imagined the moment of meeting Jesus's family and friends with a torturous blend of eagerness and fear. If it were ever going to happen it would obviously be awkward, and potentially disastrous—an end right at the beginning. But at least I imagined there would be hope of something beyond. Instead, today there is only an end to almost nothing.

I don't see a coffin anywhere, and the people in the room do not seem especially sad. Have I come to the wrong place?

I see Jesus, standing in the corner. He's wearing a shiny outfit, a flat-billed cap, and sunglasses.

1859

Windsor Plantation, Mississippi

I shudder when I put my hand on Christina's shoulder.

"Abigail!"

"I'm sorry, mother."

"Be nice to your sister."

But this isn't my sister. Christina hasn't been here for three days. The smell of powder and roses trying to cover up the stench of the chemicals hits me so oversweet I feel I must vomit.

Meanwhile, my legs hurt from standing here so long. I'm actually a little jealous of Christina, which is an awful thing to say. She's propped up by an iron stand Mr. Lubitz has devised.

Mr. Lubitz bends over the camera, his face inclining into shadow, light laving his forehead in the pose of a Caravaggio painting. His hairline recedes, but where it grows it glistens dark and wiry. Father believes him to be the best photographer in Natchez, and he even sent our nice Sunday carriage to bring him and his equipment over. Mr. Lubitz stayed last night and will again tonight. He and Father talked through the evening about the Hebrew language, which interests Father greatly. He doesn't know the language well, but Grandfather is a Hebrew scholar and one of the founding faculty at Bethany College in Virginia.

I can't imagine what Mr. Lubitz must think about being here, with this slave-holding Gentile talking to him about Hebrew. I notice Mr. Lubitz's face souring whenever Mammy, Annie, or Julius wait on Mother or me. Tensions are running so high in this country.

2017

I feel my knees buckling, and I have to brace myself against the wall.

"Hello, Miss," an older woman says.

"Hello," I say, my voice breaking.

"Are you here for Jesus?"

"Y-yes."

"And you are?"

"Meagan Cobb. I teach at Palm Beach State. Jesus was . . . a student of mine."

"Oh," she says with a special smile for a teacher—a smile that comes with the confidence of now understanding the relation of things. She takes me by the hand. "Come over here. I'm his aunt. You need to meet his parents and sisters."

Jesus's family is standing around him talking to people. His aunt speaks to them in Spanish, still holding my hand. It is the kind of moment I have imagined, and it should be sweet.

"They want to know what do you teach?" Jesus's aunt asks.

"Art."

She tells them in Spanish and they nod, but I see no recognition or interest in their eyes, and I realize he hasn't told them about me. There's no reason he should have. Nothing even to tell, and I know that. But it hurts me deeply.

All the while I'm trying not to look at his face, which is so still. I know the cap covers up where a bullet shattered the back of his skull and that there are five more holes in his body. I immediately envision his chest and abdomen pristine and smooth, the gold chain he wore against his skin, remembering the way it felt under my fingertips. Then I envision his body with bloody, torn wounds.

Suddenly I feel hot embarrassment, looking around at all the Latinas here. Everything about them oozes sensuality. Who knows how many of these girls he slept with, and for all I know one of these "sisters" might actually be his girlfriend. I know a good-looking twenty-two-year old man with all these girls available didn't need somebody like me, a forty-something, out-of-shape art teacher. There's always an erotic dimension to a classroom, and maybe that gave him some kind of small thrill. But who am I kidding? His world is—was—flashy, fast, sizzling, dangerous. I'm just a woman who likes to stay home and draw.

Everybody in my family for generations has gone to the University of Mississippi (I refuse to call it Ole Miss) because they were rich aristocrats, originally slave-holders from Natchez, although I grew up in Canton. They went to footballs games and waved Confederate flags and drank. I didn't want any of that. I went to the University of Southern Mississippi because it has a strong art program. Then I escaped Mississippi and went to the University of Florida where I got my MFA. And then I got out of the South altogether ironically by going south to West Palm Beach. I've been here for ten years, and it's the kind of place I've always wanted to be, far away from all the stifling conservatism I grew up in. This state is as red as Mississippi, and my parents have listened to everything the president has to say about immigrants. But this county is a blue patch.

Even I have my lines I don't want to cross, though. I've always been the first one to condemn those awful smarmy male professors who sleep with their students. I always just assumed *those* men were predators.

I'm not so sure now. I mean, they probably are predators, but other things can happen in teacher-student trysts. Jesus wasn't the first attractive guy to enroll in one of my courses. And nothing about him screamed or even suggested a good student in a conventional sense. But art lives in the soul (however you want to define that), and I could sense his ability from the first moment I encountered him. He was sitting in the back, a gold chain around his wrist, a cap like the one he wears now except it had NY on it instead of the Nike emblem.

He didn't come onto me, didn't say or do anything inappropriate. I was the one who would brush my arm against his. I'm not sure he even noticed, but I felt myself come alive at the touch. One day I was making the rounds commenting on the students work, and when I looked at his drawings I leaned forward so my breast pushed against his arm. No way he could mistake that.

That was just three weeks ago. All this has happened since the spring semester started. That's how fast I went from a self-righteous smarmy-male-professor basher to a seducer of students. I guess I don't have much room to criticize anymore.

1859

Father has not entered this room today. He hasn't visited Christina at all. He has spent most of the last three days riding Maid of Cotton, a Lipizzaner mare with a beautiful white coat Father bought in Vienna during last summer's visit. He purchased her and shipped her here at no small price because Christina loved her so much.

She took to that horse the same way she took to Rome, with a sharp maturity that made her seem more like thirty than thirteen. Certainly she has always seemed older than I (which people we meet usually think), with her dark eyes that peer into you and her way of talking that seems so grown up. Even her posture seems woman-like, coming to her naturally where Mother always scolds me for not keeping my chin up. Parmenas has no idea how lucky he is not to be a girl.

"Mother, why isn't Parmenas in this portrait?" I ask.

“Please do not speak, young lady,” says Mr. Lubitz.

“Abigail,” Mother says again.

I do not reply but try to keep my face set.

“We’ll have one with him too,” Mother says. “But I want my two young ladies together in this portrait forever.” Her voices catches, and for a moment I feel my own chest lurching, and I want to tell Christina I’m sorry and that of course I love her and would never not want to touch her. But again this is not Christina, and that’s what feels so wrong. I want to shut my eyes, shut this scene out. But I know when I do I will see her dark piercing eyes.

I can’t help but cut my eyes to hers now, hoping to see them gleaming in their dark black-brown knowing depths.

But I can’t. All I see are the eyeballs painted on her sewn-shut lids. Apparently most photographers paint them on the photograph, but not Mr. Lubitz because he thinks it looks more natural on the eyelids themselves.

“Ach!” Mr. Lubitz says.

“Abigail! You are ruining everything!”

I know I am, bending over sobbing.

“Young lady!” Mr. Lubitz exclaims as he leaps from behind the camera, and I realize I have tipped Christina over, pitching her forward out of the stand.

2017

I let my gaze cut to Jesus’s arm now. It’s sheathed in that shiny material, but I know its thickness underneath, and I remember how his arms felt holding me, strong and muscled. *I* asked *him* out last Friday, claiming to want to talk about his art. Which I did, because it was so good. I didn’t have just lust for him. He had every promise of being a really good artist, maybe even a great one. We made love that night, and then he left right after and went off somewhere in Lake Worth and was shot, maybe by a drug dealer, or gang members. Oh, I sound like the man in the White House. For all I know, it was probably the police who killed him. News of it unzipped Palm Beach State like a bodybag. I sensed it before I actually found out he’d been killed. I felt that pummeled sensation, and it hasn’t left me.

What kind of funeral is this, standing somebody up like a doll in the corner?

As if reading my thoughts, his aunt tells me, “This is a different kind of funeral, yes? We are Puerto Rican, and lots of us do funerals this way recently. It is called *muerto parao*. Like standing up the dead. It’s like we have one more time with Jesus.”

“It’s . . .” I start, not sure what to say.

“Different,” she finishes.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

I wonder if this is what he would have wanted? A classroom is such a strange artificial space. The teacher sees only one side of the students, the students only one side of the teacher. Jesus had no reason to show me any other parts of his life. He was probably in reality very different from the person I knew him to be. The person I . . . loved. I’m letting myself claim that word.

Or maybe it’s his family who doesn’t know or understand him. Maybe this event is a grotesque misrepresentation of his life. Although he never said so, I *think* art was very important to him. But maybe I just want it to be. He didn’t tell his family about me. They probably didn’t even know about his ability. Probably didn’t value it.

I look away, feeling tears burning my eyes. And then I see pictures hanging on the back wall. Jesus’s work. Not just drawings but paintings. Paintings of people, of streets of Lake Worth, of just color.

His family did know he was an artist. Why else would they hang these pictures? There’s a long table under them with toys and caps. These are the things he loved, I know it, and here are his paintings with them.

Then I realize—he didn’t *need* to tell them about me. I had nothing to teach him. I was just one more art teacher, just as I was probably one more woman.

I’ve been here long enough. I turn to leave. I should say something to his family, but they are talking to other people. People on the inside of his life where I am not.

Still, part of me wants to walk over and kiss his lips, which are pulled together unnaturally tight. I want to say goodbye. Tell him I love him and am

so proud of him. But he is not here, and I have already given him everything he probably wanted from me or that I had to give him.

1859

The image of Christina falling forward on her face haunts my dreams and wakes me in the middle of the night. I can see her dark, dark eyes, much darker than Mother or Father's. There is something almost Mexican about her. I know because a circus of Mexicans come through here every year and set up on land Father owns close to town. Father loves the circus, especially the trapeze artists. I've seen him sit and watch them fly through the air as if nothing else existed on earth.

Mother does not care for the circus or anything in it. She rails against it every time it comes to town, but not in Father's hearing. When I said one time that Christina looked like the Mexicans, Mother snatched me away and told me never to say that again. I've never seen her that mad.

Not even when I knocked Christina over onto the floor. She didn't seem mad at all. She just walked over sadly and helped Mr. Lubitz stand her up again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taylor Hagood is Professor of American Literature at Florida Atlantic University, where he has specialized in the writing of William Faulkner and literature of the United States South, including Gothicism and undeadness in southern writing.