



READING SELECTIONS

Don Luis de Granada stared down through bulletproof glass at his Argentine tango dance company. Its members lined the studio's main dance floor, as the final candidate auditioned for a coveted slot. World-class company dancers yawned, scowled. The young man's audition was doomed though it was hardly begun. Don Luis tugged the gnarled strands of his beard, thinking of Natalia. So young and talented, full of promise, yet her life had been doomed. His hard brown eyes strained from behind the one-way mirror. He scrutinized each face in turn. Was the killer among them? A source had said no. But Don Luis was a cautious man. And it was as though he could feel twisted energy permeating the entire

studio. Like a sickness infecting everything, rising up to his second-story office where he sat wheelchair-bound.

There was unavenged blood on Don Luis's hands; he had not been held to account for his every wrong. He had forgiven most of those who had wronged him. But this was different. For this killer's transgression there must be biblical retribution: a life for a life.

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The door buzzer rang; Candy turned and hit the lock's release. A disheveled young man wearing a jersey, training pants, and sneakers entered. Don Luis peered through vintage horn-rimmed glasses, holding the man's resplendent green eyes an instant too long. With a hint of an English accent, he said, "I am Luis Carlos de Granada, the show's producer."

"Mucho, mucho gusto conocerle estimado Señor Carlos de Granada."

"The pleasure is mine," he said, extending his hand. "Please call me Don Luis. And you are?"

"Miguel Andro Zanotto."

Don Luis's heart skipped a beat. His hand wanted to spring to his beard and tug as he absorbed every detail of the person. He grasped the wheelchair's armrests to still his nervous fingers and released his lower lip from his teeth's grip. Almost losing himself in the depths of those eyes.

A willowy young woman burst in with an apologetic grimace. "Sorry to interrupt, but I think I left my cell." Her hands shot up and her head skewed to one side, highlighting wavy black hair. "I was so nervous today. I don't suppose any of you have seen or heard a stray phone?"

"Well, Aggie," Don Luis said. "I believed we were going to have to wait to see you again."

Miguel stood motionless, processing his first impression of the bubbly young woman.

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Once inside the gentleman's lounge, Miguel marveled at the polished lockers' rich wood grain. Everything here was alien—just like him—save the artwork. Miguel stared at the gorgeous photos and posters from Buenos Aires's Golden Era of tango, the 1930s and '40s. He sat down on a bench between a row of lockers, studying Carlos Gardel's handsome face on the largest poster. Gardel seemed to smile at him, a comfort.

On a far wall, Miguel spied a poster of the most famous tango rogue of all, El Cachafaz, the rascal. The man grinned, intimately embracing a woman with a perfect heart-shaped face and flowing auburn hair. Miguel blinked. Blinked again. Her face resembled Natalia's. And her hair, although lighter in color, was styled

similarly. His hands involuntarily clenched into fists. Miguel's brain felt suddenly as if it might explode with rage. He had waited too long, scheming, studying, agonizing. The old-time *milongueros* would have quickly avenged a loved one's murder. And those *milongueros* were not depraved men. They were sons, brothers, many of them husbands and fathers. But they understood when the authorities forsook the search for a villain or hardly bothered that justice must be in their own hands. And these *milongueros* recognized that sometimes justice is just blind enough not to see a privileged person's guilt.

If only Miguel knew for certain who the culprit was, he would avenge her murder that very night. Odds were that he was in the studio right now, a member of the company. Soon enough, Miguel would strangle him, perhaps right there in the lounge. The killer would quake with fear and regret, until his final breath. He would feel the horror of dying Natalia's death of strangulation. Miguel looked away, trying to forget. He sought Gardel's friendly smile, but found a black-eyed glare. It was as though Gardel had seen her brutalized body lying on a pretty parquet dance floor. Miguel had read that after being strangled with her own scarf, Natalia had been slashed. He imagined gutting the killer. Miguel would watch the blood soil the shower's pristine tile floor en route to the drain, the murder's blood and soul heading to hell! Miguel knew he must compose himself, prepare for the audition. He was not in the mood for tango, but for revenge.

Miguel grasped Sarge's grimy door handle. He paused and felt for his new blade before pushing inside. He tracked the wall, not getting too close to avoid being scratched by peeling paint. His eyes adjusted gradually to the low-light, smoky den. It must be against the law in New York to smoke inside a place of business. Miguel assumed places of funny business were exempt. Even the milongas of Buenos Aires for years had been smoke-free. It had been a saving grace, enabled him to quit. Miguel's eyes watered, scanning the room. He didn't recognize anyone in particular, but he'd seen them all: coworkers at the meat packing plant, *vatos* at milongas, thieves lying in wait in the shadows of La Boca.

Speakers near the pool tables blared Tito Puente's music. Miguel liked the hot Caribbean vibe but wanted to be away from them. He strained to see a vacant two-top near the back corner. A deathtrap in the event of trouble. And Miguel assumed the place saw a lot of that. He approached the bar and ordered a beer from a dull-eyed, half-dressed girl. Miguel nodded thanks and slugged warm suds. Although midweek, the place was nearly full. It struck Miguel as a waiting room for the Caribbean penal system. He rubbed the chipped mug's greasy surface,

thankful the alcohol would kill the germs.

“*¡Bugarrón!* ” A homophobic slur from across the room grabbed Miguel’s attention. The crack of wood set him on his guard. He slewed around his head to face the action. A pair of threadbare men went at it in the corner. One was stretched across a pool table with the other trying to choke him with a broken cue stick. A third restrained the aggressor, holding him back, grimacing. No one else seemed to notice or to care. Typical *barrio* rage, they may have thought.

Suddenly Miguel felt the heart-wrenching disenfranchisement of these people. Here in a cruel *barrio* of a huge city, they held their isolation at bay by drinking and attacking any viable target, including a best friend. Sometimes just to reaffirm their existence. They may have no family here, no loving support group to reassure them they are valued. In tango terms, theirs was a hell of desolation and endless melancholia called *¡tangüidad!* For the first time in his life, Miguel identified with their plights of alienation and isolation. When he had danced in Europe and even as far away as Asia, he had taken the love of his family with him, nestled it safe in his heart. He was alone often, but never before had he been lonely. So much beauty lay in his past, yet his future seemed bleak. His was a hell of loss and revenge: *¡tangüidad!*

Miguel had only his miserable mission to guide him. He slugged the bitter beer, thinking he would track down Natalia’s killer and destroy him, if it were the last thing he did on Earth. No silver-tongued lawyer would represent the bastard as a nice person who got a little mixed up or had a bit much to drink. No jury would deliberate his fate and decide he deserved a tidy cell with three meals a day and all the pot he could smoke. And no early parole for being a good boy and snitching a lot. The murderer’s fate would be dictated by old-world justice. A man receiving a just sentence for pure evil. It was true that revenge would not bring Natalia back. But her soul hopefully would rest more easily once avenged. Miguel knew that his soul would, even if it were required of him in the act.

The drone of stale air-conditioning, the squeal of car brakes outside the paper-thin walls, and the stench of soured booze all faded when Miguel spoke to Aggie. He held her fast with his stare, the emerald flecks in his eyes softening, embracing her earnest gaze. He understood the enormous stakes of this game, but the first rule of playing it well was to forget them.

Miguel said, “This is nothing; we dance tango all the time, yes.”

She nodded.

Vinnie Rabbit Ears screeched, “Get the car ready. When this guy flops we’re going to take him for a little ride.”

Aggie shuddered. Miguel grasped her trembling hand.

“The first time I saw you,” Miguel said, “and you explained your idea of the *milonguero*, his devotion to pitiful friends, to tango culture, and, most of all to his family, I knew you could understand me.” He looked away. “Is not so, um, easy for me to reveal myself. Tango is a way for me to show who I am, and to be intimate with another person. This was the basis for the painful thing I did that hurt you. I was afraid for us to be intimate, so, I . . .”

Aggie bit her lip. She squeezed his hand and said, “I understand.”

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“In this song, the piano begins quietly. We are apart and alone in the world. We converge cautiously because we are afraid. I find the will to reach out for you, but you turn away. And then you encourage me to be with you. My mind is bent, and the eerie melody of the violin sings my twisted thoughts, the pain of my past and the hopelessness of my future.”

“Then what?”

“I begin to dream of love and union with you. Something even greater, perhaps union with myself. But you cannot settle your mind, cannot overcome your wounds from the past, to be free and embrace with your whole being a new lover.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she whispered. “My soul aches.”

“All souls ache for love and union,” he said. “Like the poorest *milonguero* who dances with a beautiful woman, but knows they will never be together when the dance is over. You must focus on the moment. Live for this moment, this dance, this union, now!” He sighed. “Damn the next. It may not exist for you, or more likely for me—”