

# Nicodemus

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**Now there was a young man named Renato Buendía, a second-generation Spanish-American and doctoral candidate in comparative literature at a prestigious university in a more or less dignified city located somewhere in the drear of New England, who, sitting across from a fair-skinned, lucid-eyed rascal of a woman at a trendy downtown eatery (Café Nonchalance), arrived, rather elliptically, at an epiphany: he was in love.**

Immediately, Renato Buendía distrusted this idea. What was love, anyway? Emotion? Commitment over a lengthy course? A transcendent spiritual connectedness? Just this thump in his chest? He thought of his father sermonizing to him on the subject when he was sixteen, skinny, and rather ugly. They were alone on the back porch of the family home in Georgia, sharing a cold Coors in the heat. “Never over-glorify it, son. The emotion comes and goes. Mostly it goes. In the end love is nothing more than an action.” José Arcadio was a sturdy pragmatist (oblivious to the irony of his name, though his son was not), a no-nonsense sort of man full of wisdom and bullshit in equal measure. Renato expected this advice was something of both. Certainly the emotion was there, and had been for the bulk of his seven-month relationship with Lara. The action was there, too, presenting itself in gestures large and small—repainting her house and cleaning the gutters; the time-sacrifices he made to accommodate her nursing schedule; the notes of encouragement he secreted about her home whenever he sensed she was melancholy or exhausted. But was seven months long enough a time to solidify that action, to prove its endurance? He suspected not, but had a strange urge to scream otherwise.

Lara was staring at him, challenging him through the chromatic dissonance of her eyes, waiting for him to say something, probably reading his mind. She spoke.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Shifting your glance. First you stare at my green eye, then at my blue eye. Then back again. Just pick one. You know it makes me self-conscious.”

“I’m sorry. I really can’t help it. *You* know that. It’s what people normally do in conversation. They look at one eye, then the other. It’s silly of you to be self-conscious about such a thing. It’s not like I called you Blugra.”

Lara narrowed her eyes. The sobriquet “Blugra,” an uninspired contraction of “blue-green,” had followed her from the second grade through the end of middle school, in permutations ranging from “Blago” to “Beluga.” Lara hated it. She sipped at her water and then spat a fine mist at Renato.

He swatted the air, cursed, and wiped his face. “I love you,” he said, and sat rigid. He had startled the hell out of himself.

“Are you sure?” Lara asked.

“What? God. Of course I’m sure.” He thought maybe he was losing his mind.

“Well, I’m not so sure. You look like you just pissed yourself.”

“I—” he paused, a heat creeping into his ears. “I caught myself off guard. It’s not something I thought I’d say for a while.”

“If it’s true, then why shouldn’t you say it?”

Renato sighed and leaned forward. “There’s no reason. Actually, I think it just now occurred to me that I am, that I do, that—” he lost it again. “Hell, you know what I mean?”

“Nope. But I love you, too.”

She leaned forward, grinning like a succubus, and grabbed him by the collar and pulled him across the table. The kiss was quick and fearsome, her tongue slashing through his mouth like an orthodontic instrument. Renato flailed his arms in surprise. Somehow, all of it was delightful.

When they unfastened, she wiped the saliva from his lips with the blade of her hand and sat back in her chair. “You know, women expect more from Spaniards. We have this deep-down lust for dark romanticism. We want to be conquered and swept away. Or at least I

do. I want a Conquistador. I expect a Conquistador. And you literally just flailed your arms when I kissed you. Literally. Flailed. *Conquistadors don't flail*. If we're going to be in love now, you need to get your shit together."

Her hot spew of verbiage made Renato's neck go flush. He never knew what to expect of her. Even though she was clearly teasing, he felt ashamed. He longed to be suave, self-assured, debonair. He longed to dash around on a white horse, brandishing a gilt rapier, rushing into danger. Longed to brush aside his tired, scholarly husk, to dive out the lone window of his ivory tower. For a moment he stared at Lara, imagining her in a glittering white gown, tied to her chair, at the mercy of some murderous rogue (the *Rogue Barista of Nonchalance*, perhaps). Suddenly, he was aware of men looking in their direction, or at least thought he was aware of them—scores of them, hundreds of them, thousands, hell, all of the men in New England seemed to have materialized within the walls of *Café Nonchalance*, or perhaps it was just their essences, or one single essence, the essence of the *other man*, the usurper, the scourge. He stood abruptly, absurdly. An ancestral wildness flung itself upon him, unearthed blood-memories, images of savagery, of brilliance, of men in round-ridged helmets with long spears and iron breastplates, of men dressed in flamboyant gold capes, of the deaths of bulls and the silver-throated cheers of dusty crowds. Without a word, without a clue as to what in holy hell he was doing, he strode around the table, lifted Lara over his shoulder and rushed out of the café.

He made it half a block before getting tired and regaining some sense of who and where he was. Lara was laughing like a hyena.

**They made their way to a nearby park and lay down under an oak tree, wanting desperately to touch each other, worried about the impropriety of doing so in public on a Sunday afternoon while still wearing their church clothes. Lara settled for laying her head on Renato's shoulder.**

A lovely silence ensued for half an hour. Then,

“Do you feel reborn?”

Lara spoke with her cheek against Renato’s clavicle. It felt as though his own body had produced the sound.

“I’ve been thinking—” she began.

“Oh, honey, don’t do *that*.” As soon as he said it, Renato felt the pinch of Lara’s teeth on his pectoral. “You bit me!”

“You interrupted me,” she said. “I was being serious.”

“Then be serious.” Renato rubbed his chest.

“What did you mean when you said you loved me?”

Renato froze. He became aware of an acorn digging into his back. “How am I supposed to answer that? I meant, I mean, that I love you.”

“But what is love? What does ‘love’ mean to you?”

“It means what it means to everyone—”

“Stop parrying.”

Renato sighed. He reached beneath him and removed the offending acorn. He held it in his hand and looked at it.

“I don’t want you to love me with some non-specific, off-brand love. I want juicy, idiosyncratic, weird-ass Renato love. Come on, tell me what that love is.”

Renato squeezed a fist around the acorn and sat up. He thought for the second time that day about his father. Jose Arcadio rarely said the word “love,” but Renato could always feel it—in his attentiveness, his patience with his wife and son.

“It isn’t non-specific,” he said. “It’s just new. Even right now I’m discovering what it means.”

“That’s better, but it still feels like a dodge.”

“Earlier, when I carried you, that was absurd. But it was right. It was like all of sudden I was incredibly jealous. But it was an abstract jealousy. Being around you, I want to conjure up enemies to contend with. I want someone to try and mug us so I can throw myself at the guy to protect you. I think I actually mean that. It’s all this hormonal bravado. Emotion that needs to translate itself into action.” He was

silent for a moment. “That’s it,” he said. “It’s the certainty that I’ll act on your behalf, for your good.”

Lara smiled. She took Renato’s hand and pried the acorn from his fingers.

“Your turn,” Renato said.

“I asked you earlier if you feel reborn,” she said.

“Reborn?”

“Into water and the spirit?”

He had retained only vagaries from that morning’s sermon—God’s love, spiritual rebirth, light bursting into the world and all that jazz. He had spent most of his time at church entertaining the horrific image of old Nicodemus clawing his way back inside his mother. “Yeah, I do. Of course I do.”

She rocked her head on his chest for a moment and then sat up. She looked at him and said, “I’ve been thinking that it’s more than that.”

“More than what?”

“More than purely spiritual. That it’s here and now, and messy. God’s love demands that we die and be reborn. I want all love to be that way. To force me to let go of things. Be a better me. I want your love for me to do that. And I want my love to do that for you.”

Renato leaned forward and kissed her once.

She smiled. “Now that we love each other, what are we leaving behind? What part of the old self is falling off?”

Renato was silent for a moment, pondering. “You go first,” he said. And she did.

She laid out for him all her insecurities, her dissatisfactions with past lovers, her expectations of future dissatisfaction. She told him about her distant father, the way she felt like a stereotype every time she chased a man’s approval, how she had never learned to simply be alone with herself. She told him she would leave it all behind and be reborn through their romance.

“Now you go,” she said.

Renato searched his mind. While reflective by nature, his self-inspection tended to be a passive affair, a search for self-knowledge for its own sake, rarely for application. He knew this in itself was something that had to go, and he told her as much. He also shared the full extent of his loneliness over the past several years. Renato was almost thirty years old and Lara was his first serious relationship. Because of her the loneliness had abated, but it was still there, waiting like a shadow under soft lights. He could not tell her about the specter of his shame, how he believed his long years of isolation to be a justice, that there was something sullied and off-balance within him that others could smell and knew to avoid.

As he spoke, he felt himself withdrawing from her into a half-honesty. Lara's gaze shifted down his face and he sensed her mood cooling. She knows I'm withholding, he thought. But he would not disclose himself further.

He returned to his apartment feeling that he had stalemated things, knowing that something awful had its claws in him.

**He could get no work done on his dissertation that night, only** false starts and dead ends. He would write a brilliant paragraph and lick his lips with excitement, only to realize that it had absolutely nothing to do with his thesis. He was about a fifth finished and his working title was *Awe of the Absurd: Borges, Garcia Marquez, and the Legacy of Existentialism*. Tonight, for the first time, he realized how pretentious that title sounded and beat his fist against the desk.

At one point he got cooking for about forty minutes and kicked out nearly three pages. He lifted his hands from the keyboard, rubbed his eyes and reviewed what he had written:

It is no exaggeration to say that Borges not only esteemed the melancholic Czech, but also found in him an inspiration which surpassed even that of Dante. This, of course, is no small claim. We see in *La Infernos*, the first of Borges' Seven Nights, the renowned lecture series given in Buenos Aires during the week of the week of the week of

the unspeakable the unspeakable the intractable the week of that thing which was done perpetrated exacted to and from you when your cosmic fool of a father took your blessed family to the gold and dusted land of your forebears and left you let alone you a poor babe alone with your uncle on that brown outskirt of Madrid in the gray room of that gray house left you to the foul unknown tastes of of of when he had left gone for sights and romance with mother touched you there in the grayness stole you there in the grayness voided you there held hands behind your back and slid jeans down twelve-year-old thighs placed ruddy laborer's thumb there in the sweet foulness licked salty tears from dirty cheeks stole made corrupt left chaff only chaff dry and salt and fuck and drained of innocence and this this this rips down all a blind white flat-headed worm sightless drinking darkness absorbing the blood the life the the Christ the the

The passage went on like this, folding back on itself, cyclic, inane, engorged with both nonsense and painful truth—a dark, solitary abreaction. Renato rose and walked steadily to the bathroom and began dry heaving over the sink. The image of a man's face sat dark and heavy over his mind. He felt very old. A long-buried self-hatred burned its way to the surface of his consciousness and Renato gripped the porcelain sink hard enough to pop his knuckles. He was breaking apart. Despair like a beast fell upon him.

He dropped to his knees and tried to cry out. But he spoke in a whisper, "*Forgive, forgive, oh. Burn it away.*"

He stood and lumbered his way to his bedroom. He collapsed into his covers and was overcome by a black sleep.

**What dreams he had were dark and fleeting, the shapeless** dreams of a fetus suspended in ether. When he awakened he blinked at the strange yellow light pouring through the window. He was in pain the likes of which he had never thought possible. He tried to move his toes but could not. He exhaled and the meat of his lungs rattled his ribcage. He touched his face and then looked at his hands.



He screamed, but what came out was mere dust and rasping. During sleep he had undergone a transformation. He struggled to prop himself up and look at his twisted body, naked though he knew he had gone to sleep in his clothes. What he saw was monstrous: he was an old man, ancient and rotting. He smelled of dead things and excrement. Renato let out a long moan. Tears ran from his eyes.

Suddenly, he felt an urge to be free of his bedroom and his apartment. He tried to move his legs, but they were useless logs, dead weight. He pushed himself upright and let his own miserable weight tumble him out of bed. His head thudded against the floor and violet lightning struck in his periphery. When he felt his head, he discovered that it had split open and that it was hairless. He began to crawl forward, knowing that something like gelatin was sliding down his face.

He made it to the stairway and began pulling himself down using the rungs of the banister. The carpet tore at the flesh of his belly and he knew it was peeling off and rubbing away. He felt like a skinned rabbit dumped into a salt-bin. At the bottom of the stairs he twisted his neck and saw that he was trailing gore. His carpet was thick with it. One leg had become detached from his hip and lay oozing three steps up. A brackish fluid gurgled from his mouth.

He arrived, miraculously, at his front door. Salvation lay beyond the threshold. He knew this, knew only this. All else was darkness. With all his strength he pushed forward and fumbled at the knob. He grasped it, organs falling out of his open chest, and turned.

The door fell ajar and the apartment was flooded with the crisp light of an October morning.

Renato slid forward over the slickness of his discharged viscera. He collapsed with his head just beyond the threshold, staring at the street, his mouth leering obscenely.

Something twisted in what remained of his chest, pushing itself upward. Soon it was in his neck, thick as a bowling ball and driving hard. It exploded out of his mouth in an excruciating splash of teeth and gums.

And then he was that something. He clawed his way forward,

pushing away at the bloody lips constricted around his chest. Then he was free.

He stood up, naked, hot with youth, covered in black blood and unspeakable fluids, and looked back at the withered mess of old man which sat like a pool of placenta in his doorway. Its mouth was the size of a toilet bowl.

An irrepressible joy filled him, head to foot.

Renato Buendía tore down the street, wanting desperately to embrace someone. It took him ten minutes of sprinting to reach Lara's small, yellow house. He pounded on the front door, unaware that he was dripping afterbirth on the welcome mat. A rustling came from within the white-shuttered window. The venetian blinds were cracked and a green eye stared out at him. Lara opened the door and stared wide-eyed at Renato. He stared right back.

She was stark naked, her body wrapped in the same bloody, gellatinous caul as his own, her long brown hair a dark curtain of mucous, napped and pasted to her back. Her breasts were slick, lidded with film like the eyes of bullfrogs. She reached out and picked a veiny tendril of gore from Renato's shoulder and looked at it before flicking it aside.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed her index finger to his lips and shook her head. Smiling, she pulled him inside and shut the door.