

Late Night Breakfast

a vision of hope

A Novel By
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Prologue

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9:53pm

The metallic taste of the icy, cold gun barrel felt at once terrifyingly mysterious, yet soothingly welcome. The aim, a small sliver of metal at the tip of the short-nosed weapon, was perched squarely in the center of his upper and lower teeth, just beneath the palate inside his mouth. Although the weapon may have appeared to be a steely foreign invader, to this man, it also felt like a welcoming specter of macabre hope.

Ironically, the small piece of metal tickled the roof of the man's mouth as he readied himself to enter into eternity. He was virtually mesmerized as mental flashes of foreboding shadows clashed with beams of desperate hope throughout his soul.

All that remained to do was to squeeze the trigger. The gun almost seemed eager; silently awaiting its lethal call of duty. The reality of the situation was literally staring directly into his eyes as this moment of truth for Juan Montoya awaited his final command.

His decision was made.

His pain must end.

The sweat from his right palm caused the wooden handle of the gun to be disconcertingly unsteady as Juan repositioned his wrist to ensure the bullet would pierce right into his skull, thereby terminating his agonizing sorrow.

In this sobering moment of truth, ambivalence ruled his soul. On the one hand, the emotional agony thrust upon him by the passing of his wife and three children simply had to end. Of that, there was no doubt. On the other hand, it seemed to Juan that the ending of one's life in an attempt to eliminate the incessant pain was definitely not a righteous way

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to solve the problem. He had thought about this conundrum for hours on end, but no other alternative now seemed plausible.

Where in the world is God??? Juan wondered, suddenly.

Juan's finger slid up and down the curved trigger as he attempted to muster the strength to take this one last step; a singular action that would emphatically put an end to his never-ending, horrifying thoughts about the bizarre events which caused his family to be taken from him several months before.

Juan had no idea how any of this could have possibly happened. Part of him felt ridiculous by sitting there, preparing to end his life. The other part of him knew that this bottomless pit of pain had to be eliminated—for good. He found himself no longer able to co-exist with this phantasm of relentless torment. He reasoned that the bullet lodged in the gun's chamber would surely spell an end to this ghastly newsreel of a nightmare, which repeated itself several times a day, over-and-over, and over again.

No more, he thought.

Juan knew that things would be fairly easy for the authorities to deal with after he pulled the trigger. The over-the-road truck driver had carefully spread out some tarps in the living room of his family's small home in Carson, California, which is not far from the port of Long Beach. Over the years, Juan had hauled many loads in-and-out of that busy southern California port. This had helped him to faithfully take care of his wife, son, and two daughters in their modest home, which he had inherited from his parents several years before.

Everything that was good in Juan's life had come to a screeching halt six months earlier, on an unusually cold January night—one which he would obviously never forget. On that night, Juan had bobtailed home from the port, arriving at their house around midnight. It was then that the ontological reality of every person's temporary life on Earth hit him squarely between the eyes, and it wasn't pretty.

Nothing could have prepared Juan for what he saw when he walked into his home that fateful night—the bloody, lifeless bodies of his wife Cecelia, ten-year old son Juan, six-year old daughter Isabella, and the apple of his eye—his three-year old daughter Lourdes. Oddly enough, he had stared blankly at the grisly crime scene for several moments; feeling that he had been transported into a surreal dimension—a true, living Hell.

Juan's wife and children had been tied-up and executed in the very spot in their living room where he now sat on a wooden dining room

chair, with a gun barrel tucked precariously in his mouth. He felt that if his family had to die in this haunting spot, he would do the very same thing. Juan wanted to be reunited with his wife and children so badly, but was this the way to do it?

Yes, it had to be now. It had to be tonight.

He shifted in his chair.

Pull the trigger, you coward!!! Juan thought.

Suddenly, one of his mobile phones rang—his personal one. Juan’s surprise at hearing this particular phone almost made him pull the trigger. He burst into a nervous laughter at the irony at almost having killed himself by accident—during the middle of his suicide attempt.

For years now, Juan had maintained two mobile phones—one for work, which he turned off when he needed to sleep out on the road, and a personal one, which he kept for his wife to call him any time, day or night. Hearing his personal phone ring was a shock because his wife was obviously gone.

Who in the world could this be? he wondered.

Juan slowly pulled the weapon out of his mouth and sighed. Something told him he needed to answer the phone. He certainly didn’t want to leave this Earth with any unfinished business. No, that would be far too rude, and Juan was a very considerate man. Because of his compassion towards others, he often wondered why he had to be the one to face such an earth-shattering event such as losing his family. It just didn’t seem fair.

Why God—why??? I’m a good person. This just isn’t fair.

Juan shook his head as the phone stopped ringing and went to voice mail. As he placed the gun on the floor to his right, the phone started ringing once again. Juan sighed as he stood up and went to retrieve the annoying, jingling beacon from the table by the front door.

The phone number on the caller ID reflected a “334” area code. That could only be one person—his good friend, Reggie Harper, who lived back east in Montgomery, Alabama. Reggie was one of the few people on Earth who had this particular phone number.

Juan answered, “Hello?”

“Are you okay?” said Reggie, urgency invading his voice.

“Why would you ask me a thing like that?” Juan said evasively, in his mild Hispanic accent. “You don’t usually call me this late, Reggie. What’s up?”

Juan could hear his fellow truck driver and friend sigh with relief on the other end of the phone.

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“Listen, Juan,” Reggie said. “This will probably sound a bit strange to you, but God put it on my heart to call you tonight—I mean, right away. I can’t really explain why, but I just felt this sudden urge to check and see if everything was okay with you.”

Juan’s brow furrowed. “What time is it in Alabama? It’s pretty late back there, isn’t it?”

“It’s almost midnight here,” Reggie said. “But that doesn’t matter. I just need to know if you’re doing okay.”

“Oh, I suppose I’m—”

“You said you were going to attend a local fireworks display tonight. Did you ever make it there?”

Juan sat back down in his chair in the middle of the large tarp. “No, Reggie. I actually didn’t make it—at least not all the way.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

Juan shook his head. “To be honest with you, I just stood in the parking lot and caught the beginning of the show. As I watched the colorful display, I felt a sudden urge to ... well ... seek a permanent end to all of this incessant pain. My soul is tired of hurting all the time.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Reggie shot back.

“Well—”

“I can’t explain why, but I was fixing to send the police to your house if I didn’t reach you on the phone, Juan. I need you to level with me, here. Were you having one of your low moments again? Were you thinking about doing something rash?”

After a few moments, Juan said, “I suppose you could say that.”

“C’mon, man! Why didn’t you call me? I’m your partner.”

“Oh, I know that, Reggie—”

“All day long, I’ve had this overwhelming feeling to spend some time with you. For some reason, you’ve been on my mind, and it won’t go away. I’m worried about you, my friend.”

“I certainly appreciate that, Reggie. But I’m okay—”

“No you’re obviously not okay,” Reggie interrupted. “Like I said, I had this terrible feeling in the pit of my gut that you were seriously about to do something very foolish. Am I wrong?”

Juan remained silent.

“I thought so,” Reggie continued. “I just want you to know this one, very simple-but-important thing, and it’s from my heart. Once you place your total and complete faith in Jesus Christ, dealing with life’s tragic events—including the extreme horror of what you’ve personally gone

through—somehow becomes much more tolerable through the hope that can only be found in the Lord.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“Whoa—you haven’t even heard me out, yet.”

“Look, Reggie. We’ve talked about God many times before. I’ve already told you that I believe in God, and I believe in Jesus Christ. I just feel that religion can’t fix what hurts in my soul. I’m going to need something else—something different. Perhaps something more tangible.”

“Religion—*are you kidding me???* Who said anything about religion?”

“Look, I understand—”

“No you don’t,” said Reggie. “Listen to me. I have three things I want to read to you. They’re from the book of *Psalms*. You’re familiar with the *Psalms*, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’ve heard of them, yes.”

“To me, many of the Psalms can serve as a band-aid to your broken spirit and give you hope. Now then, these three verses I’m about to read to you have provided me a lot of hope when I’ve gone through my own troubles. So please; I want you to listen to me closely and hear every word I’m fixing to read from my Bible. Okay?”

Juan sighed. “That’s fine, Reggie. Thank you. Please proceed.”

“The first one is *Psalms 147:3 ... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds*. Now the next one follows, especially based on what happened to your family—*Psalms 37:20 ... But the wicked will perish: Though the Lord’s enemies are like the flowers of the field, they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.*”

Juan felt a flood of tears forming behind his eyes. It felt like the Hoover Dam, getting ready to burst. “C’mon, Reggie. You know that my wife and children were executed by a drug lord’s henchmen who were so hopped-up on drugs—they killed my family due to mistaken identity. *For Pete’s sake, that hit-squad got the wrong Juan’s address.*”

Reggie remained quiet for a moment. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to explain to you. The first verse tells us that God will heal the brokenhearted—that’s you. The second verse tells us that God’s enemies—the wicked people in this world—will ultimately perish. The third verse completes the concept. It’s *Psalms 31:24 ... Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.*”

Juan shook his head. “I’m afraid that mere words won’t heal my soul, Reggie. Like I said, I’m going to need something else.”

“And something else is exactly what I have in mind for you.”

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“What do you mean by that?”

“Listen. Are you still planning on pulling that long-haul container tomorrow to Mobile?”

“At one point, that was my plan. After that, my dispatcher was going to send me up to Birmingham to pick up an empty flatbed to work in your division. As you know, I’m tired of pulling containers. I need a change.”

“I heard that. On behalf of my fellow-flatbedders, we’ll be glad to have you aboard. But first, I really need a favor from you.”

“What’s that?”

“After you pick up your flatbed trailer, can you bounce down to Montgomery and pick me up? My truck is up in northeast Georgia at a truck stop. I’m pretty sure that Billy in dispatch can get you a load heading that way.”

“Okaaay—?”

“I’m trying to tell you that I need to hitch a ride to get my truck.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

“So what’s wrong with your truck?”

“It’s up at the TA Truckstop in Commerce, Georgia, being repaired. If you’ll remember, I told you about it a few days ago.”

“Oh, that’s right. I remember now.”

“Juan, I really need a ride up to it. I’ve already checked with Billy, and he’s onboard with this plan. Since we both drive for the same company, it’ll actually save them a bunch of money if I can secure a ride with you.”

Juan was quiet for a moment. “Sure thing, Reggie. That actually sounds like a good plan. It’ll be nice to have some fellowship as I start my new endeavor in the flatbed division.”

Reggie smiled and pumped his fist on the other end of the phone. “Good deal. Listen, if you’ll just give me a reasonable opportunity, during our time together, I’ll show you what real hope is all about—I promise.”

“But why now? How come we haven’t discussed this before?”

“How about if I explain all of this when we get together? It’s kind of hard to do this over the phone.”

Juan shrugged. “Barring anything unforeseen, I’ll be out there in Alabama in a few days. Will that work for you?”

“It sure will. The truck stop had to back-order some parts, so the timing of this should work out great.”

“Good deal, Reggie. I’ll have to call my container dispatcher in the morning to let him know that I’ll actually take that load to Mobile after all. I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

“Let me guess,” Reggie began. “Since you’re always so considerate to others, you told your dispatcher you probably wouldn’t be able to take that load tomorrow, right?”

Sheepishly, Juan agreed. “Yes, that’s true. I left him a voice mail earlier tonight. You know, when I was—”

“I get it, Juan. Listen, if you’ll just hang in there with me, I promise that you’ve definitely seen your darkest days. They’re all behind you now. If you’ll simply indulge me just a little, I’ll show you what true hope is really all about. And trust me—unlike this world’s take on it, God’s version of hope is as comfortable as a silky-soft blanket. Not only that, but God’s hope never goes away.”

“I sure hope you’re right.”

“Believe me, I am. Look, I’ll email you those verses to think about until I see you later this week. Are we good?”

“Yes, Reggie. We’re good—I promise. Thanks much, my friend.”

“See you in a few days, brother.”

Juan smiled. “You sure will.”