The Story from Rosendo Juárez

It was about eleven o’clock one night; I had gone into the old-fashioned general-store-and-bar, which is now simply a bar, on the corner of Bolivar and Venezuela.* As I went in, I noticed that over in a corner, sitting at one of the little tables, was a man I had never seen before. He hissed to catch my eye and motioned me to come over. He must have looked like a man that one didn’t want to cross, because I went at once toward his table. I felt, inexplicably, that he had been sitting there for some time, in that chair, before that empty glass. He was neither tall nor short; he looked like an honest craftsman, or perhaps an old-fashioned country fellow. His sparse mustache was grizzled. A bit stiff, as Porteños tend to be, he had not taken off his neck scarf.* He offered to buy me a drink; I sat down and we chatted. All this happened in nineteen-thirty-something.

“You’ve heard of me, sir, though we’ve never met,” the man began, “but I know you. My name is Rosendo Juárez. It was Nicolás Paredes, no doubt, God rest his soul, that told you about me. That old man was something. I’ll tell you—the stories he’d tell. . . . Not so as to fool anyone, of course—just to be entertaining. But since you and I are here with nothing else on our hands just now, I’d like to tell you what really happened that night . . . the night the Yardmaster was murdered. You’ve put the story in a novel,* sir—and I’m hardly qualified to judge that novel—but I want you to know the truth behind the lies you wrote.”

He paused, as though to put his recollections in order, and then he began. . . .

Things happen to a man, you see, and a man only understands them as the years go by. What happened to me that night had been waiting to happen for a long time. I was brought up in the neighborhood of the Maldonado,* out beyond Floresta. It was one big open sewage ditch back then, if you know what I mean, but fortunately they’ve run sewer lines in there now. I’ve always been of the opinion that nobody has the right to stand in the way of progress. You just do the best you can with the hand you’re dealt. . . .

It never occurred to me to find out the name of the father that begot me. Clementina Juárez, my mother, was a good honest woman that earned her living with her iron. If you were to ask me, I’d say she was from Entre Ríos or the Banda Oriental, what people now call Uruguay; be that as it may, she would always talk about her relatives over in Uruguay, in Concepción. For myself, I grew up the best I could. I learned to knife fight with the other boys, using a charred piece of stick. That was before we were all taken over by soccer, which back at that time was still just something the English did.

Anyway, while I was sitting in the bar one night, this fellow named Garmendia started trying to pick a fight with me. I ignored him for a while—playing deaf, you might say—but this Garmendia, who was feeling his liquor, kept egging me on. We finally took it outside; out on the sidewalk, Garmendia turned back a second, pushed the door open again a little, and announced—“Not to worry, boys, I’ll be right back.”

I had borrowed a knife. We walked down toward the Maldonado, slow, watching each other. He was a few years older than I was; he and I had practiced knife fighting together lots of times, and I had a feeling I was going to get positively gutted. I was walking down the right-hand side of the alley, and him down the left. Suddenly, he tripped over some big chunks of cement that were laying there. The second he tripped, I jumped him, almost without thinking about it. I cut his cheek open with one slash, then we locked together—there was a second when anything could’ve happened—and then I stabbed him once, which was all it took. . . . It was only sometime later that I realized he’d left his mark on me, too—scratches, though, that was about it. I learned that night that it isn’t hard to kill a man, or get killed yourself. The creek was down; to keep the body from being found too soon, I half-hid it behind a brick kiln. I was so stunned I suppose I just stopped thinking, because I slipped off the ring Garmendia always wore and put it on. Then I straightened my hat and went back to the bar. I walked in as easy as you please.

“Looks like it’s me that’s come back,” I said.

I ordered a shot of brandy, and the truth is, I needed it. That was when somebody pointed out the bloodstain.
That night I tossed and turned on my bunk all night; I didn't fall asleep till nearly dawn. About the time of early mass, two cops came looking for me. You should have seen the way my mother carried on, may she rest in peace, poor thing. I was dragged off like a criminal. Two days and two nights I sat in that stinking cell. Nobody came to visit me—except for Luis Irala, a true friend if ever there was one. But they wouldn't let him see me. Then one morning the captain sent for me. He was sitting there in his chair; he didn't even look at me at first, but he did speak.

"So you put Garmendia out of his misery?" he said.

"If you say so," I answered.

"It's 'sir' to you. And we'll have no ducking or dodging, now. Here are the statements from the witnesses, and here's the ring that was found in your house. Just sign the confession and get this over with."

He dipped the pen in the inkwell and handed it to me.

"Let me think about this, captain. —Sir," I added.

"I'll give you twenty-four hours to think about it real good, in your very own cell. I won't rush you. But if you decide not to see things in a reasonable way, you'd best start getting used to the idea of a vacation down on Calle Las Heras."

As you might imagine, I didn't understand that right away.

"If you decide to come around, you'll just be in for a few days. I'll let you go—don Nicolás Paredes has promised me he'll fix it for you."

But it was ten days. I'd almost given up hope when they finally remembered me. I signed what they put in front of me to sign and one of the cops took me over to Calle Cabrera. . . .*

There were horses tied to the hitching post, and standing out on the porch and all inside the place there were more people than a Saturday night at the whorehouse. It looked like a party committee headquarters. Don Nicolás, who was sipping at a mate, finally called me over. As calm as you please, he told me he was going to send me out to Morón, where they were setting up for the elections. He told me to look up a certain Sr. Laferre; he'd try me out, he said. The letter I was to take was written by a kid in black that wrote poems* about tenement houses and riffraff—or anyway, that's what I was told. I can't imagine that educated people would be much interested in that sort of thing, much less if it's told in poetry. Anyway, I thanked Paredes for the favor, and I left. The cop didn't stay so infernally glued to me on the way back.

So it all turned out for the best. Providence knows what it's doing. Garmendia's killing, which at first had got me in such hot water, was now start-
“I couldn’t care less about her,” he said. “A man that thinks longer than five minutes running about a woman is no man, he’s a pansy. And Casilda’s heartless, anyway. The last night we spent together she told me I was getting old.”

“She was telling you the truth.”

“And it hurts, but it’s beside the point—Rufino’s the one I’m after now.”

“You want to be careful there,” I told him. “I’ve seen Rufino in action, in the Merlo elections. He’s like greased lightning.”

“You think I’m afraid of Rufino Aguilera?”

“I know you’re not afraid of him, but think about it—one of two things will happen: either you kill him and you get sent off to stir, or he kills you and you get sent off to Chacarita”.

“One of two things. So tell me, what would you do in my place?”

“I don’t know, but then I’m not exactly the best example to follow. I’m a guy that gets his backside out of jail has turned into a gorilla for the party.”

“I’m not planning to turn into a gorilla for the party, I’m planning to collect a debt a man owes me.”

“You mean you’re going to stake your peace of mind on a stranger you’ve never met and a woman you don’t even love anymore?”

But Luis Irala wasn’t interested in hearing what I had to say, so he left. The next day we heard that he’d picked a fight with Rufino in some bar over in Morón and that Rufino had killed him.

He went off to get killed, and he got himself killed right honorably, too—man to man. I’d done the best I could, I’d given him a friend’s advice, but I still felt guilty.

A few days after the wake, I went to the cockfights. I’d never been all that keen on cockfights, but that Sunday, I’ll tell you the truth, they made me sick. What in the world’s wrong with those animals, I thought, that they tear each other to pieces this way, for no good reason?

The night of this story I’m telling you, the night of the end of the story, the boys and I had all gone to a dance over at the place that a black woman we called La Parda ran. Funny—all these years, and I still remember the flowered dress La Lujanera was wearing that night. . . . The party was out in the patio. There was the usual drunk trying to pick a fight, but I made sure things went the way they were supposed to go. It was early, couldn’t have been midnight yet, when the strangers showed up. One of them—they called him the Yardmaster, and he was stabbed in the back and killed that very night, just the way you wrote it, sir—anyway, this one fellow bought a round of drinks for the house. By coincidence this Yardmaster and I were dead ringers for each other. He had something up his sleeve that night: he came up to me and started laying it on pretty thick—he was from up north, he said, and he’d been hearing about me. He couldn’t say enough about my reputation. I let him talk, but I was beginning to suspect what was coming. He was hitting the gin hard, too, and I figured it was to get his courage up—and sure enough, pretty soon he challenged me to a fight. That was when it happened—what nobody wants to understand. I looked at that swaggering drunk just spoiling for a fight, and it was like I was looking at myself in a mirror, and all of a sudden I was ashamed of myself. I wasn’t afraid of him; if I had been, I might’ve gone outside and fought him. I just stood there. This other guy, this Yardmaster, who by now had his face about this far from mine, raised his voice so everybody could hear him:

“You know what’s wrong with you? You’re yellow, that’s what’s wrong with you!”

“That may be,” I said. “I can live with being called yellow. You can tell people you called me a son of a whore, too, and say I let you spit in my face. Now then, does that make you feel better?”

La Lujanera slipped her hand up my sleeve and pulled out the knife I always carried there and slipped it into my hand. And to make sure I got the message, she also said, “Rosendo, I think you’re needing this.” Her eyes were blazing.

I dropped the knife and walked out—taking my time about it. People stepped back to make way for me. They couldn’t believe their eyes. What did I care what they thought.

To get out of that life, I moved over to Uruguay and became an oxcart driver. Since I came back, I’ve made my place here. San Telmo* has always been a peaceful place to live.
...gloss this nickname (in Spanish el rusto, literally “Little Russian”) as being a “slang term for Ashkenazi Jews...” as opposed to immigrants from the Middle East, who were known as turcos, “Turks”). An earlier English translation gave this, therefore, as “sheeny,” and I follow that solution. The slang used in Buenos Aires for ethnic groups was (and is) of course different from that of the English-speaking world, which leads to a barber of Italian extraction being called, strange to our ears, a gringo in the original Spanish version of the story “Juan Muraña” in this volume.

Calle Junín: In Buenos Aires, running from the Plaza del Once to the prosperous northern district of the city; during the early years of the century, a stretch of Junín near the center of the city was the brothel district.

Lunfardo: For an explanation of this supposed “thieves’ jargon,” see the Foreword to this volume, p. 347.

The Encounter

The story of Rosendo Juárez

p. 358: The corner of Bolívar and Venezuela: Now in the center of the city, near the Plaza de Mayo, and about two blocks from the National Library, where Borges was the director. Thus the narrator (“Borges”) is entering a place he would probably have been known to frequent (in “Guayaquil,” the narrator says that “every time he sees that he lives on Calle Chile, which is also a bit of a street or so distant); the impression the man gives, of having been sitting at the table a good while, reinforces the impression that he’s been waiting for “Borges.” But this area, some six blocks south of Rivadavia, the street where the Southside began, also marks more or less the northern boundary of the neighborhood known as San Telmo, where Rosendo Juárez says he himself lives.

His neck scarf: Here Rosendo Juárez is wearing the tough guy’s equivalent of a tie, the chalina, a scarf worn much like an ascot, doubled over, the jacket buttoned up tight to make a large “bloom” under the chin. This garb marks a certain “type” of character.

You’ve put the story in a novel: Here “the man sitting at the table,” Rosendo Juárez, is referring to what was once perhaps JLB’s most famous story, “Man on Pink Corner,” in A Universal History of Iniquity, q.v., though he calls it a novel rather than a story.

Neighborhood of the Maldonado: The Maldonado was the creek marking the northern boundary of the city of Buenos Aires around the turn of the century; Rosendo Juárez’ words about the creek are true and mark the story as being told many years after the fact. The neighborhood itself would have been Palermo.

calle Cabrera: In Palermo, a street in a rough neighborhood not far from the center of the city.

A kid in black that wrote poems: Probably Evaristo Carriego, JLB’s neighbor in Palermo who was the first to make poetry about the “ritafra”—the knife fighters and petty thieves—of the slums. JLB wrote a volume of essays dedicated to Carriego.


Chacarita: one of the city’s two large cemeteries; La Recoleta was where the elite buried their dead, so Chacarita was the graveyard of the “commoners.”

San Telmo: One of the city’s oldest districts, it was a famously rough neighborhood by the time of the story’s telling. Fishburn and Hughes associate it with a popular song that boasts of its “fighting spirit” and note that the song would have given “an ironic twist to the last sentence of the story.”

The Encounter

p. 365: Lunfardo: For an explanation of this supposed “thieves’ jargon,” see the Foreword to this volume, p. 347.


p. 365: Martin Fierro and Don Segundo Sombra: Unlike the real-life Juan Moreira, Martín Fierro and Don Segundo Sombra were fictional gauchos. Martín Fierro is the hero of the famous poem of the same name by José Hernández; the poem is centrally important in Argentine literature and often figures in JLB’s work, as a reference, as a subject of meditation in essays, or rewritten (in “The End,” in the volume Fictions, q.v.); his headstrong bravery and anti-authoritarianism are perhaps the traits that were most approved by the “cult of the gaucho” to which JLB alludes here. Don Segundo Sombra is the protagonist of a novel by Ricardo Güiraldes; for this novel, see the note, below, to “The Gospel According to Mark,” p. 399. It is interesting that JLB notes that the model for the gaucho shifts from a real-life person to fictional characters, perhaps to indicate that the true gaucho has faded from the Argentine scene and that (in a common Borges trope) all that’s left is the memory of the gaucho.

p. 365: “The Pedestals and the Gutiérreces: The Pedestal family were circus actors, in 1884, some ten years after the outlaw gauchos Juan Moreira’s death, Juan de Pedestal put on a pantomime version of the life of Moreira. “Two years later,” Fishburn and Hughes tell us, “he added extracts from the novel [by Eduardo Gutiérrez] to his performance.” The plays were extraordinarily successful. Eduardo Gutiérrez was a prolific and relatively successful, if none too “literary,” novelist whose potboilers were published serially in various Argentine magazines. His Juan Moreira, however, brought himself and Moreira great fame, and (in the words of the Diccionario Oxford de Literatura Española e Hispano-American) “created the stereotype of the heroic gaucho.” The dictionary goes on to say that “Borges claims that Gutiérrez is much superior to Fenimore Cooper.”

Juan Muruña

p. 370: Palermo: A district in Buenos Aires, populated originally by the Italians who immigrated to Argentina in the nineteenth century. Trapani’s name marks him as a “native” of that quarter, while Borges and his family moved there probably in search of a less expensive place to live than the central district where they had been living. Borges always mentioned the “shabby genteel” people who lived in that “shabby genteel” neighborhood (Rodríguez Monengal, pp. 48–55).

p. 371: Juan Muruña: As noted in “The Encounter,” at one point Juan Moreira was the very model of the gaucho and therefore of a certain kind of swaggering masculinity; Juan Muruña’s name so closely resembles Moreira’s that one suspects that JLB is trading on it to create the shade that so literarily haunts this story. In the dream, especially, Muruña has the look of the gaucho: dressed all in black, with long hair and mustache, etc. Nor, one suspects, is it pure coincidence that the story “Juan Muruña” immediately follows the story in which Juan Moreira’s ghost plays such a large part.