



LA GLORIA

by Eric Stener Carlson

I was inspired to write “La Gloria” over ten years ago, while living through the flu epidemic in Argentina. Like today, I was quarantined with my family in our apartment. The streets were empty, the cinemas abandoned. There was a run on surgical masks and alcohol gel. These things are familiar to most of us by now. But, in my story, I imagined something different. I imagined a new sort of flu, to which the excluded people of the world, those who were discriminated against and abandoned, were immune. I wondered what society, religion, government would look like turned on its head. I wondered how we would all be transformed, and if that would give us hope.

Cruz trudged back up the stairs of the subway at 9 de Julio Avenue.

Great, no trains running this evening. Not enough engineers. First it was the protests, then the transport strike, and now this.

Raining again, and he'd left his umbrella at the Ministry. Shit. He turned up the collar of his trench coat. He'd quit smoking last month just to get his viral load down, and if he got a cold now, it was all wasted. July was the absolute worst month to be in Buenos Aires.

He rolled up his sleeve a little and wiped the condensation from the face of his wristwatch. After 6 p.m., and the government had stopped the special bus service at 5:00. There was nothing else to do but walk.

As he rolled his sleeve down, he saw the old tattoo on his wrist, “La gloria”, fading green on his skin, as if the rain were making it run.

He rubbed his thumb over the tat. He'd got it in a dingy basement in some dive in Constitución. He'd been so strung out, he hadn't even felt the puncture wounds. Didn't even know what it'd meant — “La gloria”. Must've been Diego. Some private joke of his he didn't get a chance to share before he OD'd.

As he passed under the obelisk and crisscrossed the empty 9 de Julio, Cruz thought how quickly he'd gotten used to not seeing crowds anymore.

Before, he'd have to dodge that murderous throng

of taxis and buses and all those self-important business people, coming and going from work in their fancy suits and ties. Now, it was just a nice, easy stroll — he could do it with his eyes closed. But it was still cold.

Up ahead, near the corner of Santa Fe Avenue, he passed a smashed-in storefront. Milk cartons, cooking oil and *mate* were scattered over the ground. The shop had graffiti sprayed all over it in red: “AIDS is a gift from God”. And then another message in green, “Who do the SPCs think they are?” And then another in blue, “Boca Juniors is still the champion of the world.”

He stared at the red graffiti, feeling empty inside. This shit's all over the city. It's God's gift, like I'm Mother Teresa.

Farther down, he saw a couple of figures with sweatshirt hoods pulled down over their heads. They were slowly shuffling down the avenue, carrying a box of liquor between them. As he skirted them, their eyes blurry, sweat streaming down their faces, one of them looked up.

“Hey, I seen you before,” one of the figures said, a frosty haze coming from his mouth. “You one of them, ain't you?”

Cruz picked up his pace. They changed directions and tried to keep up with him, still struggling with the box between them. The figure shouted again, “You a tough guy? You think you're better than us? Why don't you stop, so I can show you who's really tough?”

Breaking into a jog, Cruz called back over his shoulder, "I'll make you a deal. Let's meet back here in a week. If you're still alive, you can give it your best shot."

Right then, the cardboard box, soaked through by the rain, collapsed, sending bottles crashing onto the pavement, bits of broken glass shattering everywhere. "I'll kill you!" screamed the figure, as the two of them scrabbled over the bottles, trying to save what they could.

Cruz slowed to a walk, continuing down the avenue, past the empty newspaper boxes, past the empty garbage bins. The rain started coming down harder, so he stepped under the awning of a store. The evening news was playing on a television in the middle of a display of electronic goods.

Now that's determination, Cruz thought. Almost no one left to buy TVs, and they keep sellin' 'em. God bless capitalism.

The sound was off, but there were sub-titles. Two news people, a man and a woman, were reading from a teleprompter. They both had blue surgical masks over their mouths and noses, and their faces were pale and beaded with perspiration.

"Actually, Susana," the subtitles for the man read, "it's not as far-fetched as it sounds. Back in 1849 ..." and the broadcaster began a long-hacking cough, almost doubling over on the desk in front of him. Then he stopped and corrected himself, "Excuse me, back in 1949, Dr. J.B. Haldane, a British biologist, theorized that sickle-cell anemia carriers had more resistance to malaria. Also, GB Virus C carriers are known to have less severe cases of HIV and greater survival rates. So, it's a medical fact that one disease can actually block another. It's just that no one could have predicted what would happen with this latest mutation of the swine flu."

Then the man started coughing again and couldn't stop. The hacking cough continued, and the subtitles on the screen just showed a series of asterisks.

The woman shuffled some papers in front of her and said, "For our regular viewers, you'll recall Horacio and I were diagnosed two weeks ago, and that's why we volunteered to remain in the city." Here she began to cough, but she clenched the table and controlled herself, except for a thin thread

of blood that trickled down her throat from under her mask. "Given the rapid development of the flu, this is likely to be our last broadcast.

"This is Susana Cabrera and Horacio Gottlieb, signing off for Channel 7 News, from the sealed-off station at Figueroa street. For further health updates, please visit our website. And if there are any SPC's watching out there tonight, God bless you. You're the future."

By the way the skin on her throat was moving quickly up and down, she looked like she was choking on her own phlegm, but Cruz couldn't tell, because the sound was off.

Then the screen went to the station's colors, and the subtitles stopped.

Just then, Cruz noticed a taxi driving down the wrong way on Santa Fe Avenue, or what would have been the wrong way, if there'd been any traffic cops, or traffic.

It drew up to him and screeched to a stop. The taxi driver rolled down the window, a stocky, swarthy, little man. "You wanna lift?" he asked, in the sing-song accent of the northern provinces.

"Yeah, sure, what the hell," Cruz said.

He got in and told the cab driver to drop him on the corner of Agüero. As he drove off, the taxi driver asked, "Gettin' back from work, eh?"

"Yep."

"Where at?"

"Ministry of Justice."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"I bet you're high up there."

"Yeah, you're right. Just made me Deputy Minister yesterday."

"Well, they gotta retrain everyone and do it fast," said the cabbie. "Or soon the only things that're gonna be open in Buenos Aires are the docks, hair

salons and bordellos.” Cruz grimaced, as the cabbie continued, “As for myself, I’m on the list for the Transportation Minister spot. Now, that’s a sweet job.”

“Hhh-mm,” Cruz nodded.

The cab driver paused, then he said, “So ... you’re SPC?”

Sero-Positive Conversion, who ever thought up that acronym? It was bad enough when they used to call us “carriers” or “sufferers”, he thought. Even now, they’ve got to make up some stupid nick-name for us.

“It’s that obvious?” Cruz asked.

“Yeah, well,” the driver said, grinning from ear to ear, “you ain’t wearin’ no mask. And they figure you gonna live long enough to enjoy that promotion. How’d you get it? Lemme guess. Not MSM, right?”

“Nope.”

“Well, you never know. I ain’t judgin’ or nothin’, ‘cause us SPCs gotta stick together — right? Uh ... lemme see, lemme see. You’re kind’a gangly. Face is a bit gaunt, but nothin’ a few polyactic acid injections won’t fix.” The driver snapped his fingers, “IDU, right?”

“Yep. Guilty as charged.”

“What was it?”

“Heroin. Twenty years, give or take a few years when I was tryin’ to get clean. But I’m over it now.” Shit, why am I even talking to him?

“That’s awesome. I bet you got some stories.”

“You bet I do.”

“Myself,” the cab driver said, slapping himself on the chest, “I’m MMM.”

“You must be proud.”

“Damn right. But it wasn’t easy at first, I can tell you that. Get this — as soon as my Betina tested positive during her first trimester, she divorced me.

She wouldn’t even let me see our kid when he was born.”

God, why doesn’t he stop talking?, Cruz thought.

“I was sleepin’ in my cab, hardly had a penny to my name, and then this new swine flu hits — BAM! — and we’re suddenly a hot commodity. Now, you and me, if we stay healthy and keep off the booze and the smokes and the *torta frita* and all that shit that makes life so sweet, what we got left, 20, 30, 40 years, if we stick to the ARVs? Well, to one of those poor flu bastards, 20 more years looks like eternal life.”

Cruz thought of telling him to stop the cab and walking the rest of the way, but it was too cold outside.

“Then Betina finally gets the cops to find me,” the driver said. “To send a message, to *thank* me for saving her and the kid, ‘cause, since they both got it, they’re safe.

“And you know what? Now she’s beggin’ me to have another kid with her, ‘cause, with the new Land Reform Act, for every kid you got, you get a thousand hectares of land. If I keep this up, one day I’m gonna own the whole province of Tucumán.”

Cruz couldn’t take it any longer. “Man, just ‘cause you can’t get the flu, don’t make you a fuckin’ hero.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Justice Minister. I’m one of the biggest heroes this country’s ever seen. One day, I’m gonna tie chains around the statue of General San Martín and hook ‘em up to my taxi and tear it down. Then I’ll put a statue of me in its place, ‘cause I’m the new founding father, and my kids are gonna run this country. Then we’ll see who gets remembered more, San Martín, the revolutionary hero, or Guillermo Alfredo Sacristán, the taxicab driver.”

“Here, just stop the car at Agüero. I can walk the rest of the way. What do I owe you?”

“It’s on the house.”

As he got out of the car, Cruz leaned into the driver’s open window and said, “Piss off.”

“You know,” the cab driver said, grinning, “next

time you see me at a Cabinet meeting, you might wanna treat me with a little more respect . . . if you want my support for the President's new budget." Then he gunned the engine and made a screeching U-turn, speeding off the opposite way down Santa Fe.

The wind picked up, and the rain was falling almost horizontal now. Cruz crossed the street and headed down Agüero. He passed by a little, green mansion on the corner, with a high wall around the garden. The tall shutters were boarded up.

Man, how many times had I sat on those front steps and got wasted? I dreamed about that garden and havin' tea around a little, white Victorian table, with a bowl of pink roses in the middle of it. Me, havin' tea? What was that fantasy all about? Now, if I wanted to, with my housing coupons, it could be all mine. But what would I do with a garden?

He approached the apartment building and felt the smooth sandstone face. For a moment, he thought about wiggling the doorknob a bit and pushing back the bolt with a pencil, like he used to do. But he didn't want to upset her, so he rang the doorbell.

A second later, the crackling voice came over the intercom, "Y-es?"

"It's me, Cruz," he said.

"Thank God," said the voice and buzzed him in.

He walked up the three flights of steps, past a stained-glass mural of an aqua-marine peacock, half a story tall. Each feature — the head, the neck, the wings, the long, graceful plumage — was a separate square of cut glass. He always used to hate seeing that fucking bird, 'cause it always meant coming home and getting a lecture. But now, in the fading light, and, with the raindrops beating shadows down on it from the outside, it looked different. He couldn't quite say how.

He stopped in front of the large, oak door with the brass number plaque screwed into it. He brushed the rain off his shoulders, pushed his hair back and knocked.

Immediately, a tall, thin woman wearing a surgical mask opened the door. Her pale eyes were more blood-shot now, and she'd lost a patch of hair on

one side of her head — probably from the stress. He tried to smile the best he could and said, "Hi, Sis."

The woman hugged him hard and for a long time. "Thank you, thank you for coming, Cruz! You have no idea how much this means to me. Come in, she's in the kitchen. It's warmer in there."

They walked, arm in arm, down the long hallway covered in black-and-yellow checkered tile. Then they turned into a little kitchen. The gas stove was on full, a fiery blue, and a kettle was boiling. At the small, metal table sat a young girl, 14 years old, with long, dirty-blond hair. She was looking down at the floor. She also had on a surgical mask and wore pink rubber gloves.

"Say hello to your uncle, Alejandra."

She looked up, fleetingly, at his eyes, then back down to the floor. "Hello, Cruz."

"Hello," he said, and then he took off his coat and sat down at the opposite end of the table from her.

His sister brought them over a tea tray. "Here, Cruz, I've got *masas secas* and tiny chocolate *alfajores*. They're a little dry, 'cause they're a couple weeks' old, but they're still good. And I've got two *mates*, one for me and one that you and Alejandra can share. I sterilized the metal straw, so you don't have to worry, Ale."

"I told you, I'm not hungry, *mamá*."

Then his sister said in a low voice, "I told you, it's only *polite*. After all, your uncle's come a long way for this, and we should show him the respect he deserves." She made a little sound in her throat and turned her head away from them, stifling a cough.

"Look, Sis, you don't have to do this for me."

"Nonsense," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "It's the least I can do for my little brother. You're an important man now, in an important position. Alejandra's going to have to learn some manners, if she's going to make it in the world."

She put on some disposable gloves and began measuring the green *mate* into two gourds. "So, tell me, Cruz. How many of . . . of *you* are there in the country?"

“What — SPCs?” he asked. Shit, even *he* was doing it now. “The last estimate was 100,000. But, you know, most people don’t know their status, so we’ll be carrying out mass testing and bussing in everyone we can find to Buenos Aires. We gotta get organized, find ‘em housing, drinking water, jobs. Then we’ll get the pill-a-day for everyone who needs it, as soon as production picks up.”

“100,000 out of 45 million,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “Well, you know Juan de Garay started the settlement in 1580 with only a few hundred men. And even by 1869, there were still less than 200,000 inhabitants in Buenos Aires.” Stifling a cough, she said, “You’ve got farmers and teachers and lawyers, just like the first settlers ... and half of you are women and children, right?”

Cruz nodded. “Yeah, that’s about right.”

Wiping away her tears with the back of her hands, she said, “Well, then there’s no reason why you can’t start again. In fact, I just heard on the radio the Americans are putting all their aid into sub-Saharan Africa. With 30 million SPCs, it’s the best chance for the world’s survival. Imagine that — Africa’s going to be the cradle of civilization again. I would have liked to have seen that.”

Then she burst out crying, gripping onto the sink with both hands and looking out the little window. Alejandra got up and tried to put her arms around her. But her mother shrieked and pushed her away with her elbows, “Don’t touch me. Don’t you *dare* touch me.”

“But, *mamá*, you know you can’t give me the flu by touching. I’ve got my mask and gloves on.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care. You haven’t gotten it yet, and I’m not going to take any chances.” Then she took out a plastic bottle and started spraying down the counter with bleach. “Now, sit back down,” she said, “and we’re going to have a *nice* tea.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Cruz and Alejandra passed the gourd between themselves, Alejandra slipping the metal straw under her mask. The sister didn’t drink but refilled the gourd every now and then with hot water from the kettle. No one touched the food.

Cruz looked at his watch and said, “Look, I don’t

mean to be rude, but I gotta go home soon. I need to prepare for a big meeting tomorrow. Could we ... could we do this now?”

“Sure, sure,” the sister said. “I’m sorry. I know you have things to do. Just wait a minute while I bring the stuff in.”

She got up and cleared the table. Then she excused herself and left the kitchen.

The gusts of wind made the kitchen window rattle, and the rain was coming down harder now. Alejandra looked down at the floor, and Cruz started counting the handles on the kitchen cabinets. There were 17 in all.

His sister came back with a metal tray and placed it on the table. On it, there was a sealed syringe, a bottle of alcohol, some cotton balls and a couple of rubber strips. “Cruz?” she said, “would you please ...?”

“Sure,” he said. He got up and washed his hands in the sink. Then he sat back down and tied the rubber strip around his arm, tying it off with his teeth. Then he tapped the rising vein, like a bloated, blue earthworm. What I wouldn’t have given for a vein like that a couple years ago.

He cleaned off his skin with a bit of alcohol, opened the sealed syringe and plunged the needle into his own arm. After he filled it, he set it back down on the tray and covered the needle with a plastic cap. He took off the rubber strip.

Then he said to Alejandra, “Okay, please give me your arm.”

“Wait ...” his sister said. “Before you do it, Cruz, I have to tell you something ... about when you left. I never told you.”

Looking up at her, he said, “Don’t. There’s nothing to say.”

“I’ve got to, for my own sake ... for my own *soul’s* sake.”

“No, you don’t.”

His sister blurted out, “It wasn’t *mamá* who convinced *papá* to kick you out. She was willing to

give you another chance. It was *me*. I did it. I'd just come back from that church mission to Santiago del Estero, and the two of them were screaming in the living room about you, really going at it — I'd never seen them like that. I pushed them apart, and I shouted at them. I remember the exact words I used — 'den of iniquity'. I said the bridge where you used to get high with your friends was a den of iniquity, that you were dragging us down, that we had to cut ourselves off from you if we were going to survive."

"That was 20 years ago ..." Cruz said in a soft voice.

She screamed at him, covering her eyes, "It was *yesterday*. Then I went off to college in the fall without thinking twice about you. I got a scholarship, I studied history, and I got married, and I had a baby, and I paid taxes, and I prayed every, single night that she'd be healthy and good, and I was on the PTA at her school and on the baking committee for Christ's sake." Then she laughed hysterically, "And now my *worthless*, drug addict brother is going to save my little baby."

Still laughing, trembling all over, she said, "You were right. When you were shooting up with your friends, you were saving all of us, and everything I've done with my life has been a complete waste of time."

"Look, Sis, I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I ..."

"I didn't know what I was doing either! And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what our intentions are. If there's a God out there, in a month's time almost everyone who believes in Him — I mean the *old* God, I don't know ... the *angry* God, the Old Testament God ... Oh, Christ, I'm not saying you don't have a God — it's just we're all going to be gone. Just ... and I know I don't have the right to ask you this." Claspng her hands together, she said, "But just, *please*, take care of my baby. Treat her better than I treated you. Please, I'm begging you."

He reached out for his sister's gloved hand and squeezed it. "I promise. Now, look, I really gotta go."

"Couldn't we just prick our fingers with pins?" asked Alejandra's voice, coming small from behind

her mask. "I ... I really don't like syringes."

"No," he said. "The most efficient way is a hollow injecting instrument straight into the vein."

"Okay," Alejandra said. "Okay then, just do it."

He cleaned her arm and tied it off. When he stuck the needle in, she winced. He pushed the plunger down and watched his blood emptying out into her vein.

When it was over, he wiped the puncture wound with a swab and put a band-aid on it.

He got up, hugged his sister and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll make sure you get food coupons for this week. Alejandra will be eligible for more benefits once we're sure."

"Will I get it right away?" Alejandra asked.

"Maybe," he said. "We'll have to do a test in a couple weeks to make sure. But, yeah, chances are you'll have it in a few days."

As he buttoned up his coat, he saw Alejandra looking up at him with her bright, hazel eyes. He could tell she was smiling — there it was, the crinkled skin at the edge of her eyes around the gauze mask. That was the first smile he'd seen in God only knows how long. And then it dawned on him, like the fantasy he'd had about the green mansion, and the garden, and the roses on the table. The freshness in her cheeks, the promise of years to come.

La gloria.

La Gloria
by Eric Stener Carlson

ericstenercarlson@gmail.com

Edited and published by Jonas J. Ploeger

ZAGAVA® in the spring of 2020

Text: © Eric Stener Carlson

Illustrations: © by Stephen J. Clark

Design and typeset by Jan-Marco Schmitz

All rights reserved.

www.zagava.de