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THE LAST POPE



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The Last Pope
by
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I

Why does a man run? What makes him run? He puts one leg in front of the other, the right foot follows the left. Some people seek glory. Others want to win a race or just lose a few pounds. But they always run for the same reason: they run for their lives.

Or at least that was what drove this man, his black cassock dissolving into the darkness of the place, running as fast as he could down the long interior staircase in the Secret Archives of the Vatican, a not-so-secret housing for supposedly secret documents. Those three imposing Vatican halls, and the buildings behind the Apostolic Palace, held documents of critical importance to the history of this small state and of the entire world. Only His Holiness, the pope, could examine them and decide who else could have access. The staff always said that any researcher could consult the Archives, but in Rome, and everywhere else on the planet, it was well known that not everybody

was admitted, and those who were could not look at everything. There were many hidden niches in the Secret Archives' fifty-three miles of shelves.

The clergyman dashed through a secret passageway, holding some papers yellowed with age. A sudden noise, distinct from his own steps, alarmed him. Had it come from upstairs? Downstairs? He froze, perspiration streaming down his face, but all he could hear was the accelerated rhythm of his own breathing. He ran toward his quarters in Vatican City – or Vatican country, rather – because that was what it really was, with its own rules, laws, beliefs, and political system.

Under his weak desk lamp, he scribbled his name – Monsignor Firenzi – on a large envelope into which he thrust the papers, then sealed it. The name of the addressee was illegible in the dim light. His hands, slippery with sweat, struggled to hold on to the envelope. Perspiration clouded his eyes so that he couldn't make out even his own handwriting. Apparently finished, Monsignor left the room.

The bell at Saint Peter's Basilica tolled – it was one o'clock in the morning – and then silence reigned again over the dark night. It was cold, but in his haste this servant of God did not even

notice. Soon he was out on the walkways that led to Saint Peter's Square, Bernini's marvelous ellipse, with its Christian and pagan symbols. Another sound caught Monsignor's ears. He stopped. Panting and in a cold sweat, he tried to catch his breath. It was surely the sound of steps. Maybe a Swiss Guard on nightly patrol. Monsignor Firenzi quickened his pace, still clutching the envelope. On any other night, he would have been in bed much earlier. As he reached the middle of the plaza, he glanced back and noticed a shadow in the background: not a Swiss Guard, or at least not dressed like one. The dark figure moved closer, but at the same steady pace. Now Monsignor Firenzi was running. He glanced back again, but at this time of night there was no one else but him and the briskly moving shadow.

His Excellency crossed the plaza and continued on Via della Conciliazione. Rome slept the sleep of the just, of the unjust, of the poor and the rich, of sinners and saints. Monsignor slowed down to a fast walk, and glanced behind him – the man was getting closer. Something glimmered in his hands. Firenzi saw it and started to run again, as fast as his aging joints would allow. There was a

dull burst of sound and he had to grab, staggering, the first thing he saw. It was over so fast. The sound, and then nothing. Still distant, the shadow got closer but the noise turned into a sharp pain darting through his ribs. Monsignor brought his hand to where it hurt, near his shoulder. He heard steps again; the shadow was approaching. His pain increased.

'Monsignor Firenzi, per favore.'

'Che cosa desiderano da me?'

'Io voglio a te.' The mysterious assailant took out a cell phone and spoke in a foreign tongue, perhaps from some eastern country. Monsignor Firenzi noticed the tattoo near his wrist: a serpent. Seconds later, a black car stopped beside the two men. The dark windows prevented anyone inside but the driver from being seen. Without violence or apparent effort, the man dragged the limp prelate into the car.

'Non si preoccupi. Non state andando a morire.'

Before climbing into the car, the man wiped the surface of the mailbox against which the prelate had fallen after being shot with such precision in the shoulder. Firenzi stared at him while pain racked his body. This is how it feels to be shot, he thought. The man was still wiping off any remain-

ing clues from a few moments before. How ironic, to be wiping away the clues. How ironic. His whole body hurt. Then memories of his home came to him and he blurted out something in Portuguese.

'Que Deus me perdoe.'

The man got quickly into the car, which cruised slowly so as not to arouse suspicion. They were professionals, they knew what to do and how to do it. The street was quiet again, everything in order. The erasing of the clues was successful, leaving no trace of blood on the mailbox the prelate had leaned on, and where, almost miraculously and unnoticed by his pursuer, he had managed to insert the envelope he was clutching.

2

Don Albino, September 29, a.m., 1978

*None of us lives to himself,
and none of us dies to himself.*

— ROMANS 14:7

For some people, routine crushed and ruined life. They hated the events and actions that constantly repeated themselves for seconds, minutes, days, weeks, and despised the repetitive scenario where they would line up again, as if on an assembly line.

For others, submission to fixed laws was a necessity not to be altered by chance elements. What was unthinkable or new should never change the order of their existence.

Still, life for both was wretched.

Sister Vincenza never complained about the lack of variety in her life. For most of the last twenty years the venerable old lady had been at

the service of Don Albino Luciani. That was the will of God, and who would dare question the ways of the Lord? Moreover, it was now God's will that after so many years Don Albino and Sister Vincenza would have a change of address. His Venetian home and his present one were 370 miles apart, but despite this severe disturbance in their lives, hardworking Sister Vincenza didn't complain.

The nun was up early that morning. The sun had not yet unveiled the grandeur of the immense plaza, still in semidarkness, weakly lit by yellowish bulbs. At exactly four twenty-five, Sister Vincenza humbly started her daily chores, part of a routine that she was quickly replicating in her new home.

She carried a pot of coffee with a cup and saucer on a silver tray, depositing it on a table by the door to Don Albino Luciani's sleeping quarters. The newly elected pope had undergone a surgical procedure for his sinusitis that left his mouth with a bitter, metallic taste, which he tried to mitigate with the coffee that Sister Vincenza brought him every morning.

Sister Vincenza had been here for over a month already, but she had not yet gotten used to the long, dark corridors. During the night hours only

a wan illumination made objects scarcely visible appear threatening in the shadows. 'It's very uncomfortable, Don Albino, being unable to see even what one is carrying,' she had once told him.

The passing of centuries was reflected in every stone, every statue, and in the paintings and richly ornate tapestries hanging on the imposing walls. All this darkened splendor frightened Sister Vincenza. She almost screamed while passing by an unruly cherub she mistook for a child crouching down, ready for mischief. How silly of me! she told herself. No child had ever set foot in those corridors. The magnificence and lavishness of the Apostolic Palace were capable of disturbing the souls of the most sensitive people, and Sister Vincenza felt overwhelmed by such a spectacle of power and proximity to God. If it weren't for Don Albino, she thought. If it weren't for Don Albino, she would never have set foot in these galleries herself. Sister Vincenza tried to calm down. At such an early hour, these corridors were a source of fearful discomfort, but soon the new day would break and they would become thrilling again, vitally throbbing with the busy coming and going of secretaries, assistants, priests, and cardinals.

John Paul I had no shortage of advisers concerning protocol, politics, and even theology. Sister Vincenza, on the other hand, simply took care of Don Albino Luciani: of his food, his health, and the little inconveniences of daily life. Don Albino Luciani had only two people in whom to confide his concerns about the swelling of his feet or any other minor discomfort. Even though he had been told that in the Vatican there were specialized physicians that could take care of any complaint, Don Albino preferred to complain to Sister Vincenza, and to his favorite doctor, Giuseppe de Rós. Don Giuseppe came to Rome every two weeks, traveling almost four hundred miles to see his patient. ‘I don’t know how you do it, Don Albino,’ the doctor said. ‘Are you sure you still have birthdays? Every year I find you healthier and hardier.’

‘I’m beginning to doubt you, Don Giuseppe. You’re the only one who doesn’t notice my ailments.’

Vincenza carried out all her duties with humble pleasure. To her, Albino Luciani was a good man who treated her with gentleness and affection, more like a friend than a mere assistant. For that reason he had brought her with him upon moving

into his new residence, considerably larger than the preceding one and much more sumptuous, of course. That magnificence and ostentation irritated Don Albino. He wasn't a man who appreciated a profusion of useless objects. He was interested in spiritual issues. However, like everyone else, he sometimes had to deal with practical matters, if only to make life more livable for those around him. Albino knew that in time he would have to organize his home either to his taste or to that of others.

A heart attack less than a year ago had left Vincenza lying in a hospital bed. She didn't heed her doctor's advice not to go back to work, but just to supervise the work of others, and preferably sitting down. Instead, she continued to personally take care of Don Albino.

In spite of her kind disposition, Sister Vincenza frowned at the suggestion that she abandon the common chores she enjoyed doing, like bringing him that tray of coffee through the half-lit galleries so early in the morning. Of course, in order to keep doing them and to be near Don Albino, Sister Vincenza had to join the congregation of Maria Bambina, in charge of the pope's residence. Elena, the mother superior, along with Sisters Margherita,

Assunta Gabriella, and Clorinda, all had been very kind to her, but none of them wanted to be in charge of anything having to do with Don Albino's daily matters. Only Sister Vincenza, with her skilled hands and delicate touch, was willing to take care of him. Usually when the nun reached the door of Don Albino's private quarters, she set the tray on a small table placed there especially for this purpose, and gently knocked twice.

'Good morning, Don Albino,' she almost whispered. And she waited. A similar greeting would come from the other side of the door; Don Albino usually woke up in a good mood. Sometimes he stuck his head out to Sister Vincenza for his first smile of the day. At other times, when important Vatican business dampened his spirits, Don Albino mumbled his 'good morning' and, to avoid complaining about the treasurers' or politicians' lack of diplomacy, lamented the swelling of his ankles.

But that morning, that morning, Don Albino kept silent. With Sister Vincenza's fastidious penchant for precision, any departure from the daily routine annoyed her. She leaned her head on the door, straining to hear something on the other side. But she heard nothing. She considered

knocking again, but finally decided against it. This is the first time Don Albino slept late, she thought as she was leaving. After all, it wouldn't be such a tragedy if he slept a few more minutes.

Sister Vincenza silently walked back to her room to say her morning prayers.

It was already four-thirty in the morning.

Muttering that he couldn't sleep, the man was tossing and turning in bed. This was so unusual. He had always been able to fall asleep anytime, anywhere, whatever the circumstances. Sergeant Hans Roggan was methodical, steady, reserved. His mother had come to Rome that day to visit him. He took her to dinner and it was probably the coffee he had with dessert, he thought, that was keeping him awake. At least that's what Sergeant Hans wanted to believe, but in fact it had been a tumultuous day, the afternoon in particular, with many prelates coming and going in and out of the private quarters of His Holiness.

He finally decided to get up. If sleep won't come, what can I do? I'm not going to lie here forever, waiting for it, he told himself. He opened his closet and put on his uniform, which had been designed in 1914 by Commandant Jules Repond.

If Commander Repond had known then that decades later people would attribute his design to Michelangelo, who knows whether he would have enjoyed the honor or felt bitter about being ignored. On this cool night when Sergeant Hans Roggan couldn't sleep, he was the one in charge of the Swiss Guard.

The vivid colors of his uniform, based on those in Michelangelo's frescoes, contrasted with his mood on this day. He felt deeply uneasy, an inexplicable anxiety like a premonition. Such a concern, for the moment at least, seemed totally baseless.

Hans Roggan had his dream job, the one he had yearned for since his earliest years: to be serving the pope as part of the Swiss Guard. He had had to pass many tests and lead a very disciplined life, in strict adherence to the Lord's teachings. Most important, though, he was graced with the basic requirements: being Swiss, unmarried, having the appropriate moral and ethical values, measuring more than five feet, nine inches tall, and above all, being Catholic.

Hans would never dishonor the image of the valiant soldiers of Pope Julius II. If need be, he was willing to die protecting his pope, as did the 689 Helvetian founders of the Swiss Guard, who,

on the sixth of May 1527, protected Clement VII against a thousand Spanish and German soldiers during the sack of Rome. Only forty-two of them survived, but under Commandant Göldi, they had led the pope to safety in Castel Sant'Angelo. They took him through a secret passageway, the *passetto*, that linked the Vatican with the fort. The others perished heroically, but not before claiming the lives of almost eight hundred enemy invaders. That was the heritage Hans carried on his shoulders every time he wore his uniform, a pride that filled his soul every day. But today, for no apparent reason, he felt disturbed.

He was responsible for the security of Vatican City. The protection system of the city consisted of only a few inner patrols and a few guards at the most relevant, emblematic posts. Pope John XXIII had abolished the practice of posting two soldiers nightly by the door to his private quarters. The closest guard now was at the top of the stairs of the *terza loggia*. This was just a symbolic post, since the third floor was little used even during the day. Anyone could see that someone with bad intentions could easily enter Vatican City, and he would be right.

Hans went into his office and sat at his desk.

He opened a dossier and leafed through it. It was just a list of bills that he had to pass on to his superior in the morning. He closed it after a few seconds. It was useless. He couldn't concentrate.

'What the hell!' he grumbled, 'I need to get some fresh air.'

He left his office not bothering to close the door and walked out of the Swiss Guard building, wandering through the inner gardens and then to the plaza. He passed two soldiers sitting on the steps. Both had dozed off.

I seem to be the only one who can't sleep, he thought as he woke them with a tap on the shoulder. The startled guards jumped up.

'Sir, pardon me, sir, excuse us,' they both said.

'Don't let it happen again,' Hans warned. He knew his men had just been through a very intense period of work. A little more than a month earlier, on the sixth of August 1978, Giovanni Battista Montini, better known as Pope Paul VI, had died in Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence. The funeral rites of a pontiff lasted several days, and the Swiss Guard did not leave the body of the deceased pope unattended for an instant. Four men stood in stationary guard, one on each corner of the catafalque. Numerous world leaders and

heads of state paraded by, paying their last respects to His Holiness.

Once the funeral ended, preparations began behind closed doors for the conclave. Days off were canceled and the amount of work doubled. The last conclave was held on August 25, exactly twenty days after the pope's death, close to the allowed limit of twenty-one days. Despite the brevity of the conclave, lasting only one day, the habitual frenzy around the new pope had begun. Only a few days before had things returned to normal.

Taking leave of the two sleepy guards, Hans continued his walk.

He couldn't avoid a feeling of ownership about everything around him. At a distance he saw Caligula's obelisk, in the middle of Saint Peter's Square. How ironic: a tribute to a psychopath right in the center of the most sacred place in Catholicism. He continued slowly, feeling the soft morning breeze on his face. Suddenly, something attracted his attention. To his left rose the Apostolic Palace, and on the third floor the lights in the pope's bedroom were on. He looked at his watch: 4:40 *a.m.*

'This pope wakes up early.' When Hans was

coming back with his mother after dinner, at about eleven, the lights were on then as well. Vigilant, like any proud Swiss Guard, he decided to go back to the soldiers he had caught dozing off. Now they were talking to each other. The sergeant had cured them of their sleepiness.

‘Sir,’ they greeted him in unison.

‘Tell me something, did His Holiness ever turn off his lights during the night?’

While one of them hesitated, the other answered with assurance.

‘The lights have been on since I started my patrol.’

Despite having caught them dozing, Hans knew they must have been inattentive for only a few minutes.

‘How odd,’ he mumbled.

‘His Holiness usually turns his lights on at about this time. But last night he didn’t turn them off at all,’ the guard added. ‘He must have been working on those changes people are talking about.’

‘That’s no concern of ours,’ Hans answered, and changed the subject. ‘Is everything in order?’

‘Everything’s in order, sir.’

‘Very well. I’ll see you later. Keep your eyes peeled.’

As he went back to the Swiss Guard building, he felt his eyelids finally getting heavy. He could still sleep for a couple of hours. He glanced again at the still-lighted pope's quarters. No doubt things are going to change around here, he thought, with a half grin. Now he could sleep in peace.

It had been fifteen minutes since Sister Vincenza had placed the silver tray on the small table by the door to Don Albino Luciani's private quarters. It was time to go back and make Don Albino get up and take his medication.

Again a chill went down her spine as she crossed the somber corridor. She would face Don Albino and stand respectfully but firmly until he had taken his blood pressure medication. It was too low, according to Don Giuseppe. The medication consisted of a few white, tasteless pills that the pontiff always took with a gesture of mock surprise. This was one of Vincenza's responsibilities, as was giving him an injection to stimulate his adrenal glands before he went to bed. Sometimes she also had to make sure he had taken his vitamins after meals.

Don Albino used to joke with Sister Vincenza and gently reproach her for being so punctual, coming 'religiously' between four thirty and four

forty-five every morning to administer the medication that kept his blood pressure at the appropriate level.

Then Don Albino took his bath. Between five and five thirty he tried to improve his English with a taped correspondence course, a routine he resisted changing. After that, the pontiff prayed in his private chapel until seven. That simple routine was a remnant of life in his former residence, and afforded him some relief from the enormous burden the cardinals had placed on him.

As the nun reached Don Albino's quarters, she couldn't help but show her distress. That morning the whole routine, maintained for years, was crumbling. The silver tray with the pot of coffee and cup and saucer was still in the same place she had left it a few minutes earlier. She lifted the lid of the coffeepot to see if it was still full. It was. In almost twenty years nothing like this had happened, and Don Albino Luciani had never failed to respond to her greeting with a kind 'Good morning, Vincenza.'

Actually, that wasn't exactly right; some of the details had been altered. Before moving here, Sister Vincenza used to knock at the door and come in with the coffee tray, personally handing it to

Don Albino. This routine was vehemently rejected when the new papal assistants found out. According to them, this was in flagrant violation of protocol. So, to please everybody, they reached a compromise. The nun was to continue to bring the coffee every morning but would leave the tray by the door to Don Albino's private quarters.

Leaning her head against the door again, Sister Vincenza held her breath, trying to listen for any sound coming from inside the room. She didn't hear anything or sense any movement. I don't know whether I should knock again, she thought, and finally knocked timidly on the wooden door.

'Good morning, Don Albino,' she whispered.

She stood back from the door and examined it, wondering what else to do. 'In Venice I just walked right in without a fuss,' she muttered.

From the bottom of the door, a fine line of light escaped. 'Well, this means that Don Albino must be up already.' She knocked decisively at the door.

'Don Albino?'

No response. She knocked again softly, but silence was the only answer. She had no alternative but to enter the room, despite the dictates of protocol. She placed her hand on the golden door-knob and turned it.

‘If I were to please all those secretaries, I would never find out whether Don Albino is up or still sleeping.’

She tiptoed in. The pope was still sitting in bed, propped up with pillows, his glasses on, some papers in his hand, his head turned a bit to the right. The happy expression and kind smile that used to charm everyone around him had turned to a grimace of agony. Vincenza quickly went to him with a tremulous heart. She paid no attention to her own weak condition. With red, teary eyes she held Don Albino’s hand to take his pulse. One, two, three, four, five seconds –

Sister Vincenza closed her eyes, tears streaming down her face.

‘Oh, my God!’

She violently yanked at the cord next to Don Albino’s bed, and the sound of the bell ringing was heard through the nearby halls and rooms.

I have to call the sisters, she thought, trembling nervously. No, first I must call Father Magee. No, he’s too far away. Better call Father Lorenzi.

The bell stopped ringing, but nobody answered Sister Vincenza’s call. She rushed out to the corridor and, without thinking, overlooking all the rules imposed by the rigid defenders of protocol,

opened the door to Father Lorenzi's room. He always slept near Don Albino's quarters. The secretary, Father John Magee, was staying in a room on another floor until the remodeling of his own room was finished.

'Father Lorenzi! Father Lorenzi, for God's sake!' Sister Vincenza screamed.

He woke up stunned, sleepy, and taken aback by such an unexpected visit.

'What's the matter, Sister Vincenza? What's happening?'

He could scarcely understand what was going on. The nun went up to him, pulling at his pyjamas and crying profusely.

'What's wrong, Sister Vincenza? What's going on?'

'Father Lorenzi – Don Albino! It's Don Albino, Father Lorenzi! Don Albino is dead! The pope is dead!'

The stars in the sky never failed in their routine, and on that day, September 29, 1978, the sun kept its daily appointment, spilling its golden beams on Saint Peter's Square in Rome. It was a gorgeous day.