

THE LAST POPE

By Luis M. Rocha

Translation by Dolores M. Koch

This book is dedicated to

John Paul I

Albino Luciani

17.X.1912

29.IX.1978

And, as for you, my dear Patriarch, Christ's crown and Christ's days.

Siste Lucia to Albino Luciani, Coimbra, Portugal, July 11, 1977

May God forgive you for what you have done to me.

Albino Luciani to the cardinals who elected him Pope on August 26, 1978

1.

Why does a man run? What makes him run? In a literal sense, 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 one common reason: their lives. That is the only real reason.

Or at least that was obviously the thing driving 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-at-all secret housing for such 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 them so long as they were from after 1939 or referred to Vatican II – 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 crannies in the fifty-three miles of shelves in the Secret Archives.

The clergyman ran through a secret passageway, holding some papers yellowed by time. A sudden noise, distinct from his own steps, alarmed him. Had it come from upstairs? downstairs? Where did it come from? He froze, perspiration streaming down his face, but all he could hear was the accelerated rhythm of his own breathing. He ran to 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 – as fast as he could on a large envelope into which he thrust the papers, and sealed it. Clearly he was the sender, but in the poor light the name of the addressee was illegible. His hands, slippery with sweat, struggled to hold on to the envelope. Perspiration clouded his eyes so much he couldn't even make out his own handwriting. Apparently finished, Monsignor left the room.

Where was Monsignor Firenzi headed, in such a hurry and so late? The bell at Saint Peter's basilica tolled: it was one o'clock in the morning. 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, Bellini's marvelous ellipse, with its Christian and pagan symbols (artists are never limited to a single style or faith). Another sound hurt Monsignor's ears. He stopped. In a cold sweat and panting, 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 long ago, but his anxious expression betrayed that this was not just any night. He held the envelope firmly, pressing his hands close to his body. 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. Or maybe it was, but not on duty. He kept an even pace while Monsignor Firenzi was almost running. The dark figure moved closer, but at the same steady rhythm without running. Only Monsignor Firenzi was running. Then he glanced back again, and anyone would think he was out of his mind, but at this time of night there was no one else but him, running, and the shadow moving briskly. There seemed to be no connection between the two, but who could be sure?

His Excellency crossed the plaza and continued on Via della Conciliazone. 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 running again as fast as his aging joints allowed. Run for your life, Monsignor Firenzi, your life depends on it! A dull burst of sound and he had to hold on, staggering, to the first thing he saw. It was over so fast. A strange, dull 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. Blood, the blood of both the new and the everlasting alliance between life and death, dictated the balance or imbalance of organs and extremities. 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: it was a serpent. Seconds later, a black car stopped beside the two men. The dark windows prevented seeing anyone inside but the driver. The man dragged the limp prelate into the car without violence or apparent effort.

“Non si preoccupi. Non state andando a morire.”

Before climbing into the car, the man wiped the surface of the mailbox where the prelate had fallen against after being so accurately shot in the shoulder. Firenzi stared at him while the pain racked his body. “This is how it feels to be shot,” he thought. The man was still wiping off any remaining 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 leaned on for support, and where, almost miraculously and unnoticed by his pursuer, he had managed to insert the envelope he was clutching.