

The Death of Tarzan

by Thomas J. Ventimiglia

Martín stood over the slow, labored panting as if it were a mystery he could not explain. The dog lay on the frayed pillow bed, a knot of fur and skin, in his father's office. One eye, like an almond floating in milk, stared up at the boy. Finally, Martín could not stand it anymore and ran to his father.

“Papá, Papá, I think he's sick. Come, look.”

In the next room, Martín's father was making himself ready for work. It was his usual custom to sit in the office, take a coffee and toast, and read the paper apart from the hustle of the family breakfast. But today, his father did not enter his office or notice the family pet. He was still in his bedroom getting ready, as if he were late. But he was never late.

Martín tiptoed into his parent's bedroom which smelled of cologne and sleep. His father stood at the mirror, his jaw jutting out as he pinched and fastened his tie. He took his time over every detail so that even after a long and hot day he came back from work looking exactly as he had when he left.

“Papá? Tarzan doesn't look so good.”

“No?”

“No, he doesn't move and doesn't take any food.”

His father did not stop what he was doing, but continued with his careful grooming. For a second, Martín regarded his father's profile and the furrowed brow which was there at all times, whether a dog was dying or not. Martín waited a long time for a response. But, just as his father was about to leave the room, he said:

“Well, you'd better sit with it.”

“Sit with him?”

“To give it comfort.”

The thought seemed perverse to Martín. He wanted to say that it was not his fault. It was only his bad luck to have been

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the one to find him. It could have been Rosalie, his sister, who found him. Would she then need to stay? "But I..."

His father's fierce profile cut him off. He walked past Martín into the hall and down the stairs and did not stop to look in on Tarzan.

Downstairs, there was a discussion. His mother said it was not good for Martín to miss school, that his studies were more important. Martín listened from the top of the stairs.

"No, it's fine," said his father. "It's good for him."

"Good for him?" asked his mother.

Even Martín was interested in how this was so, but his mother did not pursue that line of argument with his father. Instead, she took a more practical angle. "But you know I must go to Montevideo today. I have many appointments."

"Then he will stay here alone."

"Alone?"

"Of course."

There was no more talking after that. Once his father had made a decision, rarely did he change his mind. And the more one asked, the more concrete that decision became.

Martín heard his father's car pull out of the driveway and watched his sister Rosalie kiss their mother and make her way to the bus. The sound of people leaving made Martín feel lonely. His mother followed Martín up the stairs and stood in the doorway looking at Tarzan with disgust and worry.

"There are *empanadas* in the refrigerator for when you are hungry. And rice too. Maybe you should move him to another room, somewhere you have TV. The voices will comfort him."

But this did not ease Martín's discomfort. There was a smell in the room, like foul breath or rotting. Tarzan wheezed ever so slightly so that it reminded him of his father's Aunt Carmen, who wore a lot of makeup to hide the fact that she was dying of cancer.

Martín stood beside his mother hoping that something would change. She seemed revolted by the task and stared at the dog for a long time. Then, as if shaking herself out of a trance, she

yelled at Martín for slouching and told him that if he was going to miss school that he'd better spend the day reading. She thrust a book from his father's shelf into his arms.

“But this is in English, Mamá.”

“Well, then read it slowly, eh? I'll be back at four. I will test you! Call your father if there is any trouble with Tarzan.”

“Trouble? Like what kind of trouble?”

She took a breath and walked out the door.

For the better part of the day, Martín did not enter the office. He ate his breakfast and watched a game show on television whose carnival music and jumping and clapping contestants seemed out of place for morning. He showered and cut his nails. But all the while, Tarzan hung above him. The dog confused Martín. He liked Tarzan very much, but he did not like to watch him sick and did not want to sit with him. Even when Martín had the chicken pox, he could hardly look at himself in the mirror. His mother took care of him and did not mind touching his sores. Martín was not like that.

It was his father who had named the dog Tarzan. One afternoon, his father drove up the long dirt driveway after work. Sitting in the back seat like some kind of chauffeured aristocrat was a fully grown Dalmatian. It jumped out of the car and followed his father to the mailbox and then to the front door. The whole family looked on as if his father had just brought home his mistress for dinner. He said nothing, however, only his usual request to have his coffee in his office because he had much work to do before dinner. He had nearly made his way into the house before Mother, who seemed almost amused at Father's strange behavior, said “Well? Will you tell us its name?”

This made his father pause and turn around to look at the dog almost tenderly. A slight grin emerged on his cheeks.

“He has none.”

“Well he's going to need a name if he's to stay in my house,” said Mother.

At that Martín jumped up with an idea.

“Call him Perdito! Perdito!” The name from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* amused him as sounding like the word *perdido*. Lost. “Cruella di Vil! Cruella di Vil” he yelled and raced around the Dalmatian as if he too desired the pelts of dogs.

But his Father said “No” very quickly which put a stop to Martín's jumping and made the beautiful movie of spotted dogs disappear.

“Tarzan,” he said. “His name is Tarzan.”

“Oh, Juan, that is no Tarzan! Anyone can see that. It's a Dalmatian, after all.”

But his father did not respond. He only called for it to “come.” The dog followed his father into his study, and the door was closed.

Martín knew his father had always liked the figure of Tarzan. He sometimes said to guests, especially artists and foreigners, that the house they lived in was designed with the express purpose of giving the feeling that one was living in the forest. Bushes and trees were transplanted to cast shadow over the house and Father made trips yearly to the Amazon and loved to know the names of plants and the people who live there. He did not like having neighbors, but there were one or two on the road who would occasionally walk down the driveway to say hello. Martín remembered one time, Father was fixing something on the house and Tarzan was sitting on the hard dirt beside the tool box, obedient and quiet.

“Hello, Juan!” said Mr. Iturralde, the retired professor from next door who gave Martín books in English for Christmas. He came down the path with his Maté gourd in his hand and a thermos under his arm. Martín thought his pointy beard made him look like a doll.

Tarzan immediately began to bark and howl at the man approaching father. His father turned to the dog and hit him very hard with an open hand.

“Oh, Juan! You ought not to treat a dog like that,” said Mr. Iturralde.

“You do not understand animals, Óscar. For a dog, this is preferable. Better than to let it do what it likes, and then when you want to control the dog, you can't.”

“We've never had to beat our animals. Actually, I've come to adore our two dogs.”

“Well, then perhaps you underestimate how cruel your love can be to an animal that doesn't understand it,” said his father. He did not like being told what to do. Martín guessed it was another reason why he liked Tarzan; it is very nice to be a man all alone in the forest.

At a young age Martín had begun to imitate his father. Often he would wrestle with the dog and try to get the animal to bare its teeth at him. He liked when Tarzan growled, for it felt a little bit like danger. He would slap the dog and in turn Tarzan would snap at Martín. Of course, his father would have been very angry if he found Martín being rough with Tarzan. But for much of the day, his father was not at home. It was only his mother and sister and Martín.

One afternoon, Martín had come home from school to find his mother cooking and muttering to herself and scratching the pan with a wooden spoon.

“What is it, Mamá?”

“I could kill that dog,” she said. “Look!”

She fanned out the hem of her house dress and displayed the ragged tear that Tarzan had made. In all the years that Martín was growing up, it had not been permitted for anyone to enter his father's office. It was filled with many books and papers which were piled high on his desk and everywhere stood models of tiny buildings and houses that were fully constructed and dusty—projects that had failed—or in the process of being built—projects of hope. It was not easy to be an architect in Uruguay, or so Mother sometimes said. “Dreams, Juan. You build dreams. But not reality. Not now. Not in Uruguay.” Sometimes his mother would go into his father's room to straighten up the papers and dust off the models. Though he was

meticulous in the manner in which he dressed or drew his designs, he was not organized. He was moody and passionate. The room reflected his state of mind. "Madness," his mother would say. "This is why your Father has his own room!" Martín knew it made her feel that the rest of the house was hers.

But on this day, his mother said that she had entered the office after many months to put away some papers that Father had left in the kitchen. And when she entered, Tarzan growled as if she were an intruder. Of course, she paid no mind to the dog, but as she approached Father's desk, the dog stood up from its pillow and pressed its paws stiffly into the carpet and growled more loudly, showing its teeth.

"What's this, then," said his mother. "Sit!"

But Tarzan did not respond.

"Sit! Sit, I say," repeated his mother and went to punish Tarzan as Father would, with a smack on the nose. Without a moment's indecision, Tarzan attacked Mother.

Martín's mother told this story in tears. She said that this was her house. That she had a right. "But your father..." she began, but stopped herself.

Martín grew very angry hearing this. It was unacceptable for an animal to behave in this way. He felt at once to be something of a man with a responsibility to protect his mother—for *this was what his father would do*—and yet, perverted by the same sense that the family had been wronged in the manner in which the dog behaved—for *this is what his father had done*. Without a word, Martín strode up the stairs and toward the office. His mother called after him. "No, Martín. What are you doing? Your father! You mustn't!"

He picked up a thick branch from the upstairs fireplace. It felt awkward and heavy in his hand, but he swung it with a feeling of satisfaction. Martín was never in his father's office, except when he was being yelled at, always for terrible things, terrible feelings, fear, anger. Tarzan was lying in his usual place. The dog did not growl and posture as it had when his mother was present. In fact, Martín

was surprised how calm the dog was, as if it were loyal not only to his father, but also to him. Still, he had enough. He brought his branch down on a very pleasant looking, serene, and loving dog.

Tarzan yelped and Martín went to swing again. But this time the wood landed on the model of an arena built for the '76 Olympics when Father's company had considered putting in a bid. It crushed the spidery coliseum. Tarzan made for the door and Martín chased him in a rage.

In the yard, Tarzan hopped from side to side, growling in self-defense. Mr. Iturralde, who was on his daily walk, saw what was going on and yelled: "Martín! Boy! Leave that dog alone! You hear me?"

Martín made another swing at Tarzan, but missed. Mr. Iturralde came running over and caught the wood in his hand. He tore it away from Martín and threw the branch into the bushes. He adjusted his spectacles and shook the boy.

"Only the worst kind of man is cruel to animals. A man who would kick a dog is the lowest piece of dirt there is. Do you want to be that way? Do you want to be lower than dirt?"

At that Martín burst into tears. He could not say where they came from or why, but they sprung deep. Mr. Iturralde put his hand on Martín's shoulder and said: "There, there. Now don't cry. It's really no big deal. You'll see. A dog forgets." Martín could feel the hand of Iturralde on his shoulder. It was like a hot ember that did not burn the skin.

When Martín's father came home and saw the smashed model, he wrung from mother what had occurred. He marched over to Mr. Iturralde's house with Martín in tow and told him that he should never punish his boy again, that he was an old man who didn't know where his own business ended or began. Martín hung his head in shame and felt bad for Mr. Iturralde, who only laughed at the intrusion.

"I'm too old to listen to half-talents! Juan. You should know that," he said.

Martín thought that he'd get a beating for sure, but instead, his father spent the rest of the evening locked in his office, Chopin blasting, perhaps rebuilding the coliseum.

It had been many years since then. Martín never hit Tarzan again, even when the dog continued to threaten Mother when she entered Father's office. It was an act of love, not meanness that Tarzan was displaying. And with that, now he decided to sit with the dog for awhile.

The smell of decay in the room had become more pronounced, and he took many small steps toward the pillow bed. He placed his hand on Tarzan's rib cage and lightly pet Tarzan, but the dog gave no indication that someone was touching him. His pillow was wet and the almond eye remained unmoved. Martín thought the dog had died. But at a closer look, he could see that Tarzan's tongue trembled.

He decided to call his father. He dialed the number to his office and he heard the voice of his secretary.

"Architectura, Madeline speaking, can I help you?"

"Yes, hello, this is Martín. Is Papá there?"

"Oh, hello Martín! Not in school, eh? Lucky boy. Your father is in a meeting right now, love.

"But I need to speak to him."

He could hear Madeline rustling papers and typing on her computer. She seemed to have forgotten what she said because she repeated herself.

"Well, he's in a meeting right now."

"It's an emergency."

"What's wrong?"

"The dog is sick."

"Well, perhaps you should call a doctor."

"But Papá told me to sit with it."

"Well, that's a good boy. Give him comfort. Too bad there isn't chicken soup for dogs, eh? But on the other hand, why not try a little chicken soup?"

“We haven't any.”

“Or just meat then. Listen, Martín, it is very busy here. I will tell your father when he comes out of his meeting, okay?”

Martín hung up the phone and looked again at Tarzan who did not move. He thought about chicken soup, but opted instead to take one of the *empanadas*. He took a bite of the cold meat and dough that was not at all flakey, but like cardboard. Kneeling before the dog, he pressed the meat patty to Tarzan's nose. Only the subtlest of reactions could be seen in Tarzan's face: the twitching of the nose, the slight urge to lift his head, the automatic reaction to food, so minor and unlike the real Tarzan, who was always ravenous. He poked the food at the dog's mouth a few more times, but could feel in himself a great welling of despair and sadness. He went out to hold the dog in his arms and could feel a little warmth in his fur. But when he moved Tarzan, what little was left inside his bowels expelled onto the rug of the office.

The smell, putrid and penetrating, threw him into flight out of the room. Some of the filth was on his clothing and hands so that he scoured himself under scalding hot water and from the bathroom he heard a prolonged yelp that he mistook for the steam in the pipes. When he shut the water off, he ran back into the room and found Tarzan in convulsions upon his pillow. His legs kicked and shivered as if they were electrified and suffering.

“Stop! Stop!” yelled Martín, himself convulsing with a terrible desire to disappear, run away, escape his father's office and the death of his father's dog. Tears streamed down his face and he ripped the phone from its cradle and called, this time his father's cell phone, a number he was forbidden to use except in the most extreme circumstances.

“Yes?” answered his father.

“He's dying, he's dying! You have to come. Please.”

“Is he dying or is he dead?”

“I don't know.” Martín's voice sang with distress. “He's having fits. He's shit himself. Please come, Papá. Papá please.”

He heard his father talking to someone else. He heard something of frustration in his father's voice and was relieved a little that he was troubled by this event. Then, it occurred to him that his father had expressed almost nothing in the way of sadness or concern for the dog which had been so devoted to him. And this made Martín feel even more alone.

“Okay, I'll come. I'll come.”

“What should I do until then?”

“Just sit there.”

By four o'clock, the light had changed in his father's office. The sun broke through the leafy entanglements outside the window, painting the walls and books orange. Tarzan had quieted down, but something of a dreary breath still pulsed from the mouth and the nose. Martín took a bucket and some water and did his best to clean up the mess. Because the pillow was fouled, he threw it out. He found a collapsed box and an old towel for the dog to lie on. He found another blanket which he folded to make a headrest. He knelt before the body and looked into the spotted fur.

It was a terrible feeling to want something you love to die. Martín wished that he could end Tarzan's suffering. An image of his father emerged before him, rushing to come to Martín's rescue. Martín wondered what his father would say once Tarzan was no longer there to watch him work for hours at his desk, or to go on father's customary walks which Martín had asked many times to go on, but was so often refused. “If the dog could drink Mata tea, Juan would offer it to him!” That's what Mr. Iturralde had said the afternoon Martín hit the dog. Mr. Iturralde told this as a joke to try to get Martín to laugh—a simple, tender tactic. It worked. And now, after all these years, his father was not here, when all his authority and careful thinking could have eased the suffering of a dog, perhaps the simplest of all sufferings to assuage.

Martín realized that he was not alone. His mother and sister stood silently at the door looking at Martín kneeling before the dog. There were tears in Martín's mother's eyes, which Martín

thought were more for the dog than for him. His sister said it smelled terrible in the room. Martín's mother thought to get a bucket of hot water.

"But I did it, already," said Martín.

"Good boy. Then I'll just open the windows," she said.

Martín's mother made pasta and the three of them ate waiting for Martín's father. They laughed a little at the memories of Tarzan. "Imagine," said Martín. "A dog so obedient to Papá, so well trained, to be so difficult in death."

"Maybe he waits for his master" his mother said. "Anyway, where is your father?"

But right then, he came in through the door. He had the look of someone who had just walked from Montevideo. He was disheveled and sweat-stained.

Martín stood up before his father, like a tired soldier reporting for duty. His father took his suit jacket off and put on his house shoes.

"Where is he?"

"In the same place."

"You mean he's not dead yet?" asked his father, surprised.

"I don't know. He has been difficult all day. He has been fighting."

"It's a very brave dog, Juan," added his mother.

But all this sentiment seemed like a burden to his father. His eyes seem to narrow with each consoling word. Martín went to go see Tarzan, but found his father followed very slowly. First to his bedroom, then back to the kitchen, upstairs, then once again downstairs, a request for the mail, a request if anyone had called, he needed his glasses, he'd be there in a moment. Martín waited patiently, as he had waited for death the entire day.

When his father finally came, he walked very fast into the room and looked quickly down at the floor.

"See then, he's dead," said his father. "There's nothing more to do."

Tarzan did indeed lie there motionless, but only Martín came to his side and lay his ear quite near to the creature.

"Is he dead?" asked his father.

It took a few moments, but Martín could hear the barest breath escaping from Tarzan, and still the look of life in the eye, however dim and fading. Martín shook his head no.

"What do we do?" asked Martín. "I didn't think it would take so long."

His father put his hands on his hips and paced about the room. He looked over at his desk and under it as if he were looking for an easy solution. He pinched the bridge of his nose and then he quickly took a cricket bat from the corner of the room.

"Here." He handed the bat to Martín who only stared at his father with wide-eyed amazement.

"What?"

"Hit him!"

"Hit him?"

"Juan! You'll do no such thing!" said his mother, who had just come into the room. She spoke sharply, so that his father was flustered by her tone.

"Then what would you have me do? Wait around an eternity while he dies? It is a terrible thing. We should just kill him."

Mother saw the logic in this. It was true. Most would have put the dog down long ago, when Tarzan had become old and feeble. But now the whole family was at a loss. Martín's sister put her hand upon Martín's shoulder. His mother soon followed. Only his father stood there with a cricket bat in his hands as if waiting to make some plea for a crime he had not yet committed.

Then a sound escaped from Tarzan's mouth. It was a prolonged gurgling of some sort. It was the last call before death. Immediately, his father dropped the bat and put his hands around the dog's neck and squeezed. His red and white knuckled hands pumped and pumped. The dog—maybe more the body and not the

Tarzan himself—kicked and wheezed. Mother covered her mouth with a handkerchief, and sister was yelling, “No, Papá, No.”

But the act finally exhausted his father who let out a deep breath and threw himself away from the dog. Tarzan's body once again rose and fell with respiration. Mother turned away and started praying. His sister was crying and ran out of the room. Only Martín stood over Tarzan and his father.

“Help me,” said his father. “Help me kill my dog!”

