

**Learning Lessons of
Forgiveness: A Meditation
on Oscar Hijuelos'
*Mr. Ives' Christmas***

A CHRISTMAS STORY

One of the best novels of recent years is Oscar Hijuelos' *Mr. Ives' Christmas*, a beautiful, poignant, and almost mystical story of a man's nearly thirty-year struggle to forgive. A few days before Christmas 1967, Mr. Ives' seventeen-year-old son Robert was murdered on the streets of New York by Daniel Gomez, an eighth-grade dropout whose father was in jail and whose mother was on welfare. Gomez had just been to a movie with his thirteen-year-old girlfriend and was "in a bad mood because of an argument about money" (Hijuelos 1995, 134). Robert, who was to enter the Franciscan seminary in six months, had just left an afternoon choir practice and was talking to a friend when Gomez approached. Robert turned to see the angry Gomez walking down the street, and noticed "his murderer's exaggerated and comic gait as he went by." Taking Robert's innocent glance as an insult, Gomez "reeled around asking, 'What chew looking at?'" and shot him (8).

From that day onward Mr. Ives' life was spent in mourning and pain. Bitterness too. He buried himself in a sorrow he did not know how to escape until all that loss and sadness defined Ives to the depths of his soul, shutting him off from the rivers of life. "He went to church and prayed for guidance, begging God to bring forgiveness into his heart. He would kneel before the creche, the crucifix, and wonder how and why all these things had happened," but instead of healing and life, he "felt a great numbness descending over him" (141).

Mr. Ives was a good man; in fact, he was an extraordinarily kind man. But almost thirty years of grieving had left him dead in his soul. Thus, when Fr. Jimenez asked him to visit Daniel Gomez on his release from prison, and possibly even forgive him,

Ives had listened, and although his face still had a pious cast, the years of longing and of missing his son, without being able to forget or forgive, had taken their toll on him. He'd turned into stone.

It had been difficult to show affection to his own wife, but to open himself to the man who had killed his son? . . . He had nothing left; his heart, in a sense, had died, years ago. The crazy part of it was that Ives hadn't realized it until his grandchildren were born. Yes, he said, I love you, yes, he rocked each one of them, but it was more a pretense—would the kids, he often wondered, grow up wondering about why their grandfather was so stricken-looking, so cold? (193–94).

At first Ives hated Daniel Gomez, but that cancerous animosity frightened him. He told his friend Pablo Ramirez, "I felt so bitter toward this young man that it was poisoning me inside, so I had to do something to get the poison out of myself" (172). He "gets the poison out" by befriending Gomez's grandmother, a woman who prays daily for her son's conversion and rehabilitation, and also by eventually befriending Gomez himself. He begins to write encouraging letters to his son's murderer and sends him books and pamphlets to help him learn how to read and write; he would even send an occasional gift package filled with "sausages and crackers and bars of chocolate and cigarettes" (176).

But he cannot forgive, and Hijuelos makes clear that as long as Ives is unable to forgive he will not be free of the hurt. The pain, the loss, the sorrow all continue to grow, soon coming between Ives and his wife Annie, whose life too had been shattered by her son's murder, but who was eventually able to put her son's death behind her, not because she no longer cared, but because she wanted to live again. Not so with Ives, whose endless mourning had made his son's death "the defining event of his middle-aged life" (180). It is not that Ives did not want to forgive or that he chose to turn his heart into stone; rather, it is that when he prayed to be able to forgive he never found the freedom to do so. His friend, Fr. Tom, tries to convince Ives that perhaps he will find the freedom to forgive *in forgiving*, and thus beseeches Ives to visit Daniel Gomez and offer him the gift that might be liberating for both of them. But Ives is not sure. He sees the need for forgiveness, and he even sees what not being able to forgive has done to him; but what he does not see is how forgiveness ought to begin. Hijuelos writes,

He had wanted to go on with Father Tom about how he really felt. That forgiveness was something he had struggled with for years. That he spent thousands of hours in church kneeling until his legs went numb, waiting for his burdens to be lifted. That he had started to calcify inside and, if anything, grown more rigid with

time. That for all his prayers he had somehow felt cheated, especially when he thought about how he had allowed himself to become so indifferent to his wife's feelings. That nothing had come *from without* and he resented that (204).

Finally, Ives' burdens are lifted. His deliverance comes in a dream in which he sees himself walking in a field in Riverside Park. Looking up, he also sees his son Robert, standing in the middle of a gently flowing stream, vested "in choristers' white-and-black robes, handsome, serenely wise, wading waist high in the water. The sight of him made Ives both happy and frightened" (237). Robert motions Ives to come to him and to join him in the stream. Touching his shoulder, he says to Ives, "'Pop, why do you keep doing this to yourself?' Then, bending, his hands cupped, his son scooped out a handful of water, and this he poured over his father's head, and then he brought up some more and washed his limbs with that water; and then he was gone" (237-38).

That baptism in a dream, a cleansing rich in overtones of mercy, freedom, healing, and new life, is the beginning of Mr. Ives' final restoration. Set free by that nighttime's sweet grace, Ives finds the courage and generosity he needs to go to Daniel Gomez and forgive him. It is not an easy gift for him to offer, but thanks to his son's saving action in the dream, Ives is able to overcome thirty years of loss and sorrow and brokenness and grief in order to extend to Gomez the same gracious mercy his son, in the dream, had extended to Ives.

But he controlled himself and, like a fine gentleman, his smile restrained, he strode forward and put his arms around Gomez, who had started to cry, over the very goodness he had glimpsed so briefly just then in Ives' gaze. Gomez awkwardly reciprocated, and he was touched by the scent of cologne about the face of a man who had quite carefully shaved that morning, his skin, in those moments, releasing so much pent-up grief and forgiveness, sweet as church incense. And Gomez found himself repeating, "Thank you for coming here, sir. Thank you, and God bless you."

In those moments, Ives knew, his son was somewhere in that room, and approving of what he beheld (242).

FORGIVENESS: THE GIFT OF DARING GENEROSITY AND UNCALCULATING LOVE

On their way home, Fr. Jimenez, who had accompanied Ives on his errand of mercy, said to him, "'Only God knows how

much good you have done'" (243). That is true, but Ives did immeasurable good not only for Daniel Gomez, but also for his wife Annie and for their marriage, and most certainly for himself. Having forgiven Gomez, Ives was free to live again in hope, and possibly even joy. *Mr. Ives' Christmas* offers important lessons in forgiveness. It demonstrates eloquently that even though forgiveness can seem foolhardy, maddeningly impossible, and sometimes even unjust, it is the only way back to life for people who are dying from sorrow and loss. Yes, Mr. Ives has to grieve, and yes, he has to embrace the anger and bitterness and absolute desolation he feels at the death of his son, thanks to the stupid, senseless sin of a boy who was evil. But he also has to wrestle with the angel of forgiveness if his life is not forever to be ruled by the actions of someone he longs to forget. The story of Mr. Ives makes clear that there is no new future without forgiveness, but only ongoing servitude to sorrows and pains that shatter us. Indeed, perhaps the greatest gift of the novel is to show that forgiveness is the key to freedom and the greatest gift victims can give themselves.

For without ultimately being able to forgive, Mr. Ives becomes another of Daniel Gomez's victims, dying not in cold blood but in frozen despair. It is a daring thing to forgive one's son's murderer—in the eyes of most it is recklessly foolish—but unless Mr. Ives can do so he will die too, not in body but in spirit, and will have nothing to show for his life but his grief. This is why forgiveness, contrary to Nietzsche and his contemporary disciples, is not a sign of weakness and impotence, but is indeed the most powerful and innovative act of all because out of unimaginable sorrow and loss it creates new possibilities for life. Forgiveness is never easy, but it is rehabilitating. And while without God's grace it may be unquestionably impossible, with God's grace it performs the Easter miracle all over again: It lifts us from a tomb of darkness and defeat, and draws us back to light, life, and hope.

And it really is a matter of God's grace. The pivotal scenes of the novel all occur around Christmas, that feast of divine graciousness and unexpected hope. There is no more unmerited gift for a world trapped in darkness and in desperate need of redeeming love than the birth of a child whose life will point the way to light, wholeness, peace, and love. Christmas is only the beginning, but the feast is enough to remind us that God is lavishly generous, foolishly merciful, and fearlessly loving; and our lives depend on just such godly extravagance. Thus, if we have

life on account of generosity and unmerited love, we give (and receive) life when we risk the same, and there is no more risky love than forgiveness. Forgiveness is the uncalculating, extravagant love modeled on the magnanimity of God, and what it teaches us is that daring generosity always gives birth to unexpected, and perhaps undeserved, new life. But the magnanimity of God, extended to us at Christmas and stretched to perfection on the Cross, also teaches us that rage and vindictiveness and bitterness are never the way to peace. Only forgiveness is, even when we seem to die, for a moment, in offering it.

Mr. Ives offered it to Daniel Gomez, and in that offering Gomez's story of awesome moral failure was transformed into a story of freedom and new life. In Mr. Ives' mercy, and especially in his gesture of reconciliation, Daniel Gomez, former murderer and now reborn child of life, encountered the scandal of forgiveness, namely that there is a love greater than even our worst failures, and thanks to this gracious, sweet mercy even our worst lapses need not be final.

THE CHALLENGE OF REAL FORGIVENESS: LEARNING A NEW WAY OF LIFE

But real forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that truly liberates and heals, is neither cheap nor easy. It is not the quick consolation that dismisses our sins or the easy pardon that tempts us to minimize and rationalize our failures. If Daniel Gomez is not just to *receive* forgiveness, but truly to *experience* forgiveness, he first has to realize that real forgiveness marks a *new beginning*, not a return to the past. Gomez is forgiven not so that he can repeat the past, but so that he can reconstruct his future in hope. This is why true reconciliation will occur only when Mr. Ives' gift of forgiveness is met by Gomez's commitment to learn and embrace a new way of life.

That new life began the moment Gomez recognized his need to be forgiven. This is not easy for any of us because even though we want the absolution forgiveness offers, we do not want the truthfulness forgiveness requires. And so we protect ourselves from the full measure of our actions through half-truths and evasive language. We distinguish sharply between who we are and what we have done because we want to disown our mistakes and distance ourselves from our failures (Wadell 1995, 38–39). We trivialize our transgressions because we do not want to pay whatever price truthfulness demands; in short, we are better at self-deception than genuine repentance.

But self-deception, as Daniel Gomez discovered, never brings the freedom burdened hearts need. Only forgiveness brings freedom, but ironically it brings freedom only when we are able to acknowledge that the sins we wish we could disown are not retractable, even though they may be redeemable. Daniel Gomez will never be without the most grievous error of his life—he will never not be the murderer of Robert—but he can find life on the other side of his sins through repentance and contrition. To repent and to have the biblical “contrite heart” is to know that our misdeeds are neither negligible nor erasable, but they can, through contrition and forgiveness, be pathways to new life.

What kind of new life is it? In a way, both Mr. Ives and Daniel Gomez are faced with the same question: How does life go on? How does life go on when it has been ravaged by some transgression either inflicted or endured? It goes on, *Mr. Ives’ Christ-mas*, and the gospels, suggest when we allow ourselves to be apprenticed into the life-changing craft of forgiveness. As L. Gregory Jones suggests in his marvelous book *Embodying Forgiveness*, forgiveness is not only something we offer or receive, but is also something we learn; this is why it can be compared to learning a craft or being apprenticed in a new skill (Jones 1995). Precisely because a life of forgiveness does not mean *more of the same*, both the forgiver and the forgiven must be initiated into the attitudes, skills, and practices of forgiveness. This not only requires *learning* liberating virtues such as justice, mercy, compassion, patience, truthfulness, gratitude, peacefulness, and joy; but it also requires *unlearning* such destructive and dissipating vices as bitterness, ceaseless anger, vindictiveness, thoughtlessness, self-centeredness, violence, and cruelty.

This is a hard message for us to accept because we like to think of forgiveness as a quick fix, something instant, easy, painless, and without cost. But such forgiveness is no more nourishing for our spirits than junk food is for our bodies. Real forgiveness never means that life goes on unchanged or unchallenged. And real forgiveness is never painless and without cost, which is why learning forgiveness and living into forgiveness is like learning to walk anew. We begin this new life as infants, neophytes who walk with feeble, uncertain steps. But as we follow the path of forgiveness we are rehabilitated and renewed, growing stronger with every stumbling step because now our life is constituted not by guilt or violence or bitterness or grief, but by mercy, love, and gratitude.

Still, we cannot live this new life alone. If our spirits have been rendered sickly through grief or loss or bitterness or coldness, on the one hand, or rage, violence, and cruelty, on the other, our convalescence requires the company of friends who will support us on our way back to health. Mr. Ives found that community in his wife Annie and in his priest friends. Daniel Gomez found it first in the steadfast love of his grandmother, later in the love of his wife, and finally in the kindness and benevolence of Mr. Ives. We need to find it too in households of faith, in communities of encouragement, support, and truthfulness, and in friends who teach us what it means to be merciful, compassionate, kind, and forgiving. The point is that embodying forgiveness as a way of life is not something we can sustain on our own, but something we do with and for one another in communities which are keenly aware of their failures, and, therefore, passionately committed to reconciliation and peace.

Hijuelos ends *Mr. Ives' Christmas* with a mystical experience. Ives sits in church and he prays. "He prayed for his dead adoptive father, and for his mother and father whom he had never known. For all the things he never knew" (247). The choir begins to sing "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," and Ives has a vision. He pictures Jesus walking down the center aisle of the church, his eyes focused on Ives. And then he watches as Jesus, "bearded and regal," places "His wounded hands upon Ives' brow," and gives him "His blessing before taking him away. . . ." But not only does Jesus come to take Ives away. No, he also takes with him "all others who were good in this world, off into His heaven, with its four mysterious winds, where they would be joined unto Him and all that is good forever and ever, without end" (248).

Such is paradise, a place of perfect communion and perfect peace, a place where goodness reigns and sadness is no more. Traditionally, Christians have called this beatitude, and as *Mr. Ives' Christmas* makes beautifully clear, it is forgiveness, God's first, and ours in grateful imitation, that takes us there.

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