



In This Sacred Place

Poli Delano



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A World of Voices



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P.O. Box 236
Buffalo, NY 14201
(716) 627-4665 (Voice)
(716) 627-4665 (Fax)

Email: wpine@whitepine.org

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BEGINNING

IF YOU EVER have the misfortune of being locked up in the men's room of a downtown movie house for a relatively long period of time, rest assured that once your initial desperation has dissolved in water, you'll start to think about your life. Not because you'll feel that your life is the most important thing there is, but rather because you'll be obeying a vague impulse not to waste this rare opportunity to learn something about all that has happened to you and to begin, perhaps, to understand why it happened. I hope you, like me, are able to roll at a given speed the film of your life experiences and see them projected onto the screen of your astonished mind. Because you'll come to understand that before this involuntary lockup, you had never taken the time to question those things which determined everything you are, those forces that led you here and there, that made you take one trolley and not another, that made you fall madly in love with one woman and slam the door in another's face, those things that made one woman look upon you as someone sent from heaven and another see you as a simple worm whose head must be crushed under a heavy foot as soon as it peeks out from under the earth; in short, all those things that made you laugh or cry or complain, and that just now made you squirm and forced you to sit down on a filthy toilet bowl: the power of fate, in other words, to state it in more common, everyday terms. And besides, if you're the type of person whose youth has been placed in jeopardy and is now rapidly reaching the point of surrender to a maturity that is difficult to accept, you'll also have enough time (keeping in mind the various activities that can take place in a men's room) to begin somehow (and only begin) to understand the nature of the entire joke: the practical joke that's being played on you and of which you yourself, without realizing it, are the butt. But don't be too upset. Remember the wise thought that was once expressed on TV by one of our many contemporary geniuses: growing old is like climbing a mountain: as one climbs, one feels more and more tired and begins to breathe with greater and greater difficulty, but the view that one gets is much more panoramic. Remember this and reflect upon it after your initial desperation at being locked up has passed and before you idly set about to read whatever obscene or idiotic words—graffiti, to use the sophisticated language of today's sociologists—that may have been written on the walls of your new home; keep this in mind as you recall chapter after chapter of your own story, because you'll begin to feel like a stranger even though you are reviewing the facts of your own life. You should also take advantage of the opportunity to think about your closest friends, about the pain you may have caused them, about the hurt you may have received from them; think about the people you work with, about every dirty trick played, about all of the light moments, about the film you've just seen and its string of lies. Now if you're a member of the middle class, remember also to recall your stupid youth filled with whore houses, blackheads and very lofty ambitions. And take it easy: if you get tired, go to sleep, but later on, take a good look at yourself in the mirror and if red and callused spots show up on your face, don't waste time rinsing them with cold water: they won't go away. Not even with hot water.

The fact of the matter is that I had some beans for lunch, and, as sometimes happens to me, I wasn't satisfied with just one serving, so that even before the movie was over, right in the bombardment scenes, I began to squirm in my seat, knowing full well that as soon as "The End" flashed on the screen, I would be among the very first to leave in order to reach, before anyone else, "This sacred place where people come and sit," as one of the hundreds of lines that have been scrawled in ink states on the dirty toilet walls of this downtown movie house which I got the stupid notion to enter, stupid when you stop to consider that movies are not my favorite forms of entertainment, not because I dislike films or because I don't have any favorite movie stars, but because when you reach a certain age, it's not the most pleasant thing in the world to wait in line for thirty minutes just to enjoy the adventures of other people who are, perhaps, far removed from you—sometimes they even bore you—and just to relive those same adventures in a period that can run anywhere from an hour and twenty minutes to two hours, delighting in the triumphs of a John Wayne or a Belmondo and being completely oblivious to the things that may have happened to you, all of those things, which through the hidden forces of everyday life become lost in the dark recesses of a memory programmed by computers: and it isn't very pleasant either to go back out into the night and spend an eternity on a cold street corner waiting for a broken-down bus, or maybe a trolley, which will drop us off a few blocks from our house, where we probably will be expected to eat something, give some kind of explanation to the lady of the house (in this case, her name is Teresa), and be given a slight reprimand instead of a well-deserved glass of brandy, the reward for our sacrifice; but then there's always television, that stiff dose of poison ingested free of charge from a comfortable armchair with a glass of red wine at your side to compensate for everything else; and a very foul and corrupting influence it may well be, and we can rant, and rave against it constantly, as we have often done, but, all things considered, if you fall asleep, at least you haven't lost the twenty *esciidós* which is the price of admission to a movie. So that going to the movies, which is, generally speaking, an absurd thing to do, turns out to be utterly foolish, a truly stupid act, given the troubled days in which we live, days followed by nights with blackouts caused by stealthy, treacherous shadows, bombs that blow sky-high the houses of common citizens who collaborate with the food distribution councils created by the government, sporadic gunfire between groups of young people who won't allow their adversaries to write on walls or put up posters, and even murders committed without any risk of prosecution by hands hidden in the shadows, and so we continue to live like this, surrounded by bomb explosions and other terrifying incidents ever since the abortive "tank attack" of June 29th, nineteen hundred seventy-three, which occurred exactly on the day of my birthday. And in my own particular case, it's not only absurd but a downright dirty trick, because every time Teresa wants to go see a movie, I, of course, have just come home tired, or I have a blueprint to copy, or a meeting to run to, or I want to see the news, or I just want to have a quiet meal, with leisurely conversation, a bottle of good red wine, or if there isn't any, of good white wine, so we never go out, I never give in to what she wants. For this reason, as soon as I sat down to do my bowels a favor, the first thing I did, even before starting to read, like a driveling idiot, everything that dirty hands governed by idle minds had written on the inside of the door in front of me, was to feel a little guilty and say, "Gabriel Canales, you're a real prick." Because Teresa liked to go to the movies, because you'd never take her and she wouldn't go alone, because she specifically wanted

to see this film, because she'd told you a hundred times that the two of you should go see it, because Gregory Peck was one of her favorite actors and, finally, because you've not only gone to the movie by yourself but are now thinking of corn-pounding this sin by not even telling her you went—in other words, deceiving her twice—that is, if you're able to come up with a good excuse for getting home so late.

A thick penis with two testicles that look like melons: "This is where I laid S. Pinto." And in red: "Shit in peace, shit without pain, but remember you shithead, pull the chain."

At that point, right between one discharge and another of a severe case of diarrhea, the lights went out. I thought it might be a black-out like the one that took place the night we were eating at Tito Pezoa's and I tried not to worry about it. Back then it happened a little earlier, more or less in the middle of the Presidents television address. Suddenly the picture got smaller and smaller, a word was left floating in the air, and then everything went dark. All of the houses on the block were dark, all the street lights too. There wasn't even a moon. Dead radios and an occasional nervous telephone call from friends wondering if we knew anything, if by any chance the night of the long knives was about to begin. Terrorism made perfect. We wondered whether the forces of *Patria y Libertad** had now decided to move on to bigger and better things: they probably were no longer satisfied with killing one person here, another one there, or destroying just four or five houses a night by blowing them to smithereens, or assassinating military aids, or terrifying housewives, or simply going around threatening anyone who didn't agree with them and who happened to support the measures taken by the government. Now, more than likely, they were getting ready to do things on a grand scale, to annihilate, en masse, in a single thrust, the leaders of the Popular Unity coalition, the labor leaders, the peasants, the President himself, his ministers, the leftist members of Parliament. Yes, now, we believed, they were attempting the coup that had been expected to come at any moment. But when the radio stations, using emergency equipment, came back on the air and battery-powered radios began picking up their broadcasts, we heard the voice of Allende once again, this time urging everyone to remain calm, assuring them that the damage caused by the dynamite blast was being quickly repaired, that peace would soon return to their souls and light to their lives. And there was a moment of relief. So I didn't become alarmed. All of us had already become accustomed to this kind of surprise. A bomb explosion in the night near someone's home, several killed according to the morning news. I continued defecating in the dark until I felt that not a trace of that thick, burning liquid was left in my bowels, and I proceeded calmly to take things one at a time: the overly careful anal cleaning, the proper adjusting of the trousers, the putting on of the jacket. But my sense of peace came to a violent end when, groping in the dark, I reached the door and realized, as I turned the handle unsuccessfully, that I was locked in. I tried opening it over and over again and then began beating on it, first someone to come and get me the hell out of there, to open that god damned door right away, not to go away, not to lock up the movie house, because I was there inside, to open up, shit, to

*A political organization of the extreme right created immediately after the election of Salvador Allende with the objective of undermining his government.

please open up. At the end of what seemed like an eternity, I realized that I was the butt of some kind of practical joke. I struck another match, flipped the switch, and the light came on miraculously, fully exposing my new residence: a rectangle approximately thirty feet long by fifteen wide with a black mosaic floor. Three stalls in a row: the toilets. On the opposite wall, four sinks and a large mirror that covered the whole wall. At the farthest end, one right next to the other, three urinals, one of them filled to the top with a heavy, yellow liquid. I took a look at myself in the mirror and I not only saw the face of an imbecile but also noticed that my eyes had contracted and that my mouth was twisted, and I suddenly burst out howling like a rabid dog, an uncontrollable, fierce sobbing that was capable of depressing even a sadist. I tried once again to get out struggling fiercely with the door knob and kicking and pounding on the door, and I yelled and screamed until my throat ached. I then splashed some water in my face but could not escape the tremendous, pervasive, all-powerful feeling of resignation that had come over me. A second soaking, however, brought on a welcomed cool-headedness that demanded order and discipline and imposed the need to become organized and to adapt oneself to new circumstances. All right now, if you have to spend a night here and the whole morning too, until tomorrow's matinee, you'll have to make a schedule for yourself and rationally organize your activities. What time is it? Twenty-to-one. Tentative schedule subject to change: from one to two, read and analyze everything that's written on the walls of the three stalls, statements that were written down in unison with the flow of shit. From two to four, try to imagine Teresa's possible reactions to your not being home tonight. From four to five-thirty, remember your youth and feel sorry about all the things you never got around to doing and congratulate yourself for those things that you did do. From five-thirty to six, rest: walk from one end of the room to the other, do five to ten push-ups and cool off with water. From six to eight, letter writing: write a letter to Mamerto on toilet paper. Between eight and eight-fifteen, breakfast with Mariela (there's

Six

I.

So here I am surrounded by shit, "Hold your nose well/ or you'll choke from the smell"/ unable to keep to my own timetable and by now accustomed to the stench of various types of crap, telling you with a memory that's as clear as a crystal ball that one year had barely gone by and Lady Luck, with that typical slight-of-hand of hers, had already fused the kid from the provinces and the city kid into one solid mass.

Santiago had gotten completely into my system, inside my blood, inside my pockets, up my ass. It's like the wind: it gets in any way it can but it's also like a gigantic slot machine that swallows up everything in sight, or like one of those corner telephone booths that never returns any coins. I'm in Law School and I want to get ahead but I also have my doubts, because I'm going to get married and that will have to be the first item of business. Juan Pablo told me to stop being such a goddamn idiot, but Juan Pablo is Juan Pablo and who could swear, with his hand over the flame, that he's not saying this because of his own failure, because of the fact that everything went wrong for him: marriage, career, life in general. A guy who's been going out for God only knows how long with a married woman, breaks up with her, then goes back to her, a guy who has a card on which he has written: "Juan Pablo refilled his fountain pen to try it out on this paper to see if after all this time, it still works, because that's what it was made for," don't you tell me about him, he's crazy, he's a real birdbrain, and if by any chance he figures out what he wants, he's not smart enough to realize that what he wants isn't worth a goddamn thing to him. So, he can blabber away and call me whatever he damn well pleases, because if there's one thing I *can't* stand, it's being alone. It's really not very hard to learn this lesson. Maybe it's the only positive result you end up with after spending a whole year going straight to the dogs, a year in which a pretty little slut begins by seducing you and then throws you out slamming the door violently in your face, just as she's done to all the rest—I've got the letter to prove it right here, the one I found that December morning stuffed in a drawer along with a pile of other things that had belonged to Julian the missing person, a year in which another whore, a decrepit old hen, paid you off shamelessly with a few miserable bills just to give pleasure to her dis-gusting, pimply body and then threw you out on your ass too because you dared take too much money from her lousy handbag; a year in which a friend of yours probably died and went to hell without bothering to let anyone know and another one told you over and over again,

mercilessly, that you're just a piece of shit and that's all you'll ever be and who insists on saying that you and he are like two shipwrecked people, but with the basic difference that you're out there adrift in the middle of the goddamn ocean while he can see land and is steadily heading toward it; but it's also been a year, luckily, in which a sweet girl has not stopped trying to win you over and who has waited and waited for you. But enough of this crap; confusing details will only confuse us more, so let's take things one step at a time.

The letter that at that point must have twisted Julian's guts into knots goes like this:

My Love,

I miss you terribly and can't wait for this month to be over so you'll come back and we'll never be separated again. I've got to explain the snapshot I'm sending. It so happens that the other day Carmen asked me to go with her to this crazy party where she said we'd have a real blast. We got there and the first thing the owner of the house did was drink a toast in our honor with words that were absolutely assinine but which he spoke in a very serious tone of voice. The drinks he gave us were really potent. He had all kinds of liquor there and he made sure we all drank a lot. Then we danced and drank some more and later on someone had the bright idea to play that game where one person has to leave the room and the rest decide which one of them is going to be the mystery person everyone's thinking about and then the one who left the room comes back in and has to guess who that person is, asking each one in turn how that person would be if he were like the wind, or like the night, or whatever. It can be hilarious. The one who doesn't guess correctly has to forfeit an article of clothing and what's so great about this game is that almost no one ever guesses right and then everyone has to do something funny to get his clothes back.

By the third round we were right in the middle of the very best part of the game. The second mystery person to be chosen was me and the owner of the house was the one who had to leave the room and when he came back in the first thing he does is ask the guy who's in the photograph, "If he were a red-hot coal, what would he be like," and he said, "Hot," looking at me as if he wanted to eat me up. When it was his turn to be the mystery guest and they asked me, "If he were a lover, what would he be like," I said, "Delicious," without even thinking and the great thing about this game is that you can get into some pretty hilarious situations.

Well, the party got to be a real riot, after that. There's no need for me to tell you what penalties people had to pay. This photograph was taken by some idiot who spent the whole evening going around taking pictures with his flash camera. Don't take things the wrong way, dear Julian, we were only obeying the rules of the game so I could get my blouse back, which I had to forfeit earlier.

I'm absolutely bored without you, love. I hope you can finish your business there soon so you can come back here.

Your love loves you,
Mariela

I take another uneasy look at the picture and grind my teeth in anger. Mariela is lying down on a couch nude from the waist up, and some blond guy is kneeling on a cushion and kissing her tit—maybe he's sucking it—and rubbing her waist with his hands. Her expression seems to be one of pleasure. To the right of the couch you can see two other guys doubled over with laughter.

2.

And now for point number two, the scene with the Old Hen. Coming out of the movies we ran into two classmates of mine and I had to make the necessary introductions although I didn't want to.

I'm sure she already knew pretty damn well that when we were in crowded places, I didn't like her holding my hand or caressing me or calling me "sweetheart." So it really pissed me off to see her picking this specific occasion to kick up a fuss and to even say on top of everything else that we hadn't gone to a movie for a whole two weeks, in other words, putting on one hell of a big show while I kept getting hotter and hotter under the collar. And this also explains why on the way back I focused all of my attention on my driving—I always drove—and why I didn't look at her or speak to her and why I answered all of her questions with one syllable words, just so she'd be sure to understand how I felt, which she obviously did because when we reached her apartment she gave off a spark by firing a question at me that was very calm and well-measured, yes, but that was simply loaded with dynamite.

"Are you ashamed to be with me, baby?"

"Whatever gave you that idea, my love."

Calling her "my love" was one of the hardest things I had had to do.