



**MEMOIRS OF A**

**REVOLUTIONARY DAUGHTER**

**SOMETHING  
FIERCE**

**CARMEN AGUIRRE**

"Aguirre's writing is, indeed, something fierce.  
That she has finally told this story is a triumph."

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## FIERCE

CARMEN AGUIRRE



Douglas & McIntyre  
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*Vancouver/Toronto*

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For my son, Santiago, love of my life, the greatest teacher of all  
In memory of Bob Everton, 1949–2004

VALOR

Te dije:

“Se necesita mucho valor  
para tanta muerte inútil.”

Pensaste que me refería a América Latina.

No, hablaba

de morir en la cama,

en la gran ciudad,

a los ochenta o a los noventa años.

CRISTINA PERI ROSSI, *Estado de Exilio*

COURAGE

I said to you:

“One needs a lot of courage  
for so much useless death.”

You thought I was referring to Latin America.

No, I was talking

about dying in bed,

in a great city,

at eighty or ninety years old.

CRISTINA PERI ROSSI, *State of Exile*



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PART ONE  
THE  
RETURN  
PLAN

AS MY MOTHER bit into her Big Mac, her glasses caught the reflection of a purple neon light somewhere behind me. Barry White's "Love's Theme," my favourite song, blasted from the loudspeaker. Mami looked hilarious in her new aqua eyeshadow. Her plucked eyebrows gave her a surprised expression. Then there was her frosted pink lipstick, which was smeared across her chin now, and the unfamiliar scent of Charlie. I'd helped her choose that perfume. The picture on the box showed one of Charlie's Angels doing the splits in mid-air, wearing a white pantsuit and platform shoes. In dressing for our trip that morning, my mother had followed her lead, though not the splits part, because she was four foot ten and round. Now here we were in a food court at Los Angeles International Airport, which my mother referred to as "L-A-X." She and I and my sister, Ale, had walked for ages through the terminal, looking for our gate, and the whole time she'd rubbed the palm of her hands into the small of her back, muttering, "Firing squad to the woman hater who invented heels."

It was June 1979, and the day before, in Vancouver, Mami had been a hippie. She'd been a hippie for as long as I'd been her daughter, in fact, which was eleven years now. That's why Ale and I had giggled when we saw her this morning, and why we'd been shocked a few weeks earlier when Mami announced we were going to a mall. She'd tried on most of the inventory at Suzie Creamcheese before settling on the white polyester pantsuit and some matching platforms at Aggies. She was usually dressed in frayed jeans with patches on the ass and a pair of old clogs. But this was a special occasion requiring a new wardrobe to go with it, my mother had explained. We'd found her in the kitchen that morning blowing on her toenails, which were wet with red polish, humming Victor Jara's famous song "The Right To Live in Peace." Our passports were laid out like a fan on the table. The three of us hadn't looked back as we left our basement suite. Canada had taken us in after the coup in Chile five years earlier, but my mother had made it clear from day one that the refugee thing in the imperialist North was not for us. So our suitcases had been packed again, and our posters of Ho Chi Minh, Salvador Allende and Tupac Amaru taken down and given away. Rulo drove us to the airport in my mother's orange VW Bug, and Mami had several attacks of the giggles along the way, because he'd only just learned to drive. "Clutch, Rulo, clutch, you idiot!" she yelled. I'd never seen Rulo so excited and I knew it was because he'd get to keep the car from that day on.

This part of the imperialist North, LAX, was very different from anything I'd seen so far. In Vancouver, we and the few dozen other Chilean families had been the only Latinos. That city, where you could buy tropical fruit in the dead of winter, was full of white people who kept their bodies and faces perfectly still when they talked. At LAX we were surrounded by the sound of Mexican Spanish, and there were black people everywhere. I could see palm trees and turquoise sky just beyond the glass walls of the airport. The lady who'd sold me a cheeseburger with no patty (I'd been a strict vegetarian since I was eight) had touched my cheek and spoken to me in Spanish. She'd recognized herself in me, and somehow I understood that. For the first time in five years, I thought maybe I belonged somewhere. But it couldn't possibly be here, because the North was the forbidden place of belonging.

A Colombian family at the table next to us argued and laughed and broke into spontaneous cumbia. When I went up to the counter for a second banana milkshake, one of the Colombian ladies asked me if I was going to Bogotá, like her. I shook my head. I couldn't explain where I was going or where I was coming from. There were too many winding roads leading each way. But she had recognized herself in me, too, and I swallowed down some tears hard and fast.

Back at our table, Mami was finishing her hamburger, her eyes far away. I'd never seen her eat a Big Mac before. McDonald's was the ultimate symbol of imperialism, so we had always boycotted it. Ale showed off a new helium balloon featuring a portrait of Ronald McDonald. It had been given to her by Ronald himself, who'd passed through moments ago. Two years before, when she was eight, Ale had run away from home. My parents and the other adults had never learned about my sister's bold attempt at a new life; they'd been too busy printing *Victoria Final* (Final Victory), the monthly newsletter they put out from our dining room table. It was my cousins Gonzalo and Macarena and I who followed Ale down the street and brought her back. She'd been clutching her Easy-Bake Oven, given to us by a church group that helped refugees. I sucked the airport milkshake past the knot in my throat.

Our stepfather, Bob, had left Vancouver a few months earlier, and now we were flying to join him in Costa Rica, revolutionary Central America. Goodbye to my elementary school city, to the land of late-night janitor work, hand-me-down Barbie dolls and Salvation Army clothes. Goodbye to my father, who was staying behind.

My mother and father had gotten a divorce, joining so many other Chileans whose marriages had not withstood exile. One afternoon when Ale and I got home from school, my parents were waiting for us at opposite ends of the living room. Mami's glasses were all steamed up, and Papi was staring out the window, his chin quivering. My mother explained that she was moving out, that she couldn't be with my father anymore but she'd always be our best friend. She was going to live with some other women in a communal apartment, and we could visit her there and go to the park. After a long hug, she drove away in the orange VW, its trunk held down by a coat hanger, and just like that, our family was broken forever. The next time we saw Mami, she was on stage, singing with Rulo, my uncle Boris, and the other Chileans with whom she'd formed the folk group *Revolución*. When we met up with her after the show, a terrible shyness hit me. I'd never had to meet my mother anywhere before, the way you meet a stranger.

Our house got filthy, and my father and Ale and I ate hot dogs for weeks. But the plants always looked nice, because Papi watered and trimmed them. Whenever we walked through the botanical garden at the university, where he worked part time as a gardener, he would point out his favourite ferns. Then he'd ask us how to spell cloud and ocean and highway, because he was revalidating his physics degree and studying English at the same time. He was a car washer at a Toyota dealership and had a paper route and janitor gigs, but his favourite job was at the botanical garden. Papi was a great admirer of nature. That's what he always said. A couple of months after the separation, he'd found solace in the arms of another Chilean exile who had split with her husband. We called her Aunt Tita.

Ale was licking ketchup off her fingers. My mother looked around, lit up a *Matinée*, then cleared her throat.

"Girls, we're not going to Costa Rica," she said.

Ale and I stared at her, one of us mid-swallow, the other mid-lick.

"We were never headed to Costa Rica, actually. That was a facade."

"What's a facade?" Ale asked. Ronald McDonald spied on us from the balloon bobbing above her head.

“A facade is when you make up a story because it’s dangerous to tell the truth,” Mami said. “It’s a story you make up when you’re involved in something bigger than yourself and you don’t want to risk your life or the lives of others.”

My mind raced back to the afternoon in Seattle when my mother had addressed a crowd wearing a long-haired wig and cat’s-eye glasses. The organizers had introduced her as María. She’d explained to us later that it was safer that way; she’d been talking about the struggle in Chile, and not all of the photographers in the crowd had been with the newspapers. We’d stayed at a communal hippie house there, and a couple of the men had shaved off their beards and cut their long hair before we left for the rally. The men were in solidarity with us, my mother said. They were activists against the war in Vietnam, and they understood the danger of the situation.

Ale said, “You mean a facade is when you tell a big fat lie.”

My mother looked weary. Her eyes moved around, as if she was searching for the right words. She shifted in her seat, crossing her legs as she sucked on her cigarette. Finally, she said, “It’s not quite like that.”

“Well, where are we going then?” I asked.

She reached for our hands.

“I wish I could tell you, my precious girls, but I can’t. Right now, we’ll be taking a plane to Lima, Peru. Nobody else has this information about us. It has to do with being in the resistance, and I know you’ll understand because you are both so strong and so smart and so mature.”

I hadn’t realized we were in the resistance. I’d just thought we were in solidarity with the resistance. But I felt too embarrassed to say that.

The plane to Lima wasn’t leaving for two more hours, my mother told us. She leaned in close, her face super-serious. I knew better than to look away or to practise the hustle in my mind, as I sometimes did when I was worried. The resistance was underground, my mother said in a low voice. That meant it was top secret. We couldn’t tell anybody, under any circumstances. There was a story we had to memorize, and she was going to go over it with us many times, so that when somebody asked us about ourselves, we’d know exactly what to say.

“When someone asks where you were born, for example, you say Vancouver. If somebody asks you who Bob is, you say he’s your father. In the blood sense. I know I can trust you girls to do this. That’s why I brought you along. There are many other women going back to join the resistance, and they’ve left their kids behind or sent them to Cuba to be raised by volunteer families. But children belong with their mothers. I know that if we’re careful, everything will be okay. And we’ll all be together, the way we’re meant to be.”

Bob and my mother had moved in together after the divorce. He was a longshoreman, and he often brought us goodies from the port. He suffered from a terrible temper, but he kept a drawer full of Kit Kats in the kitchen and always offered us one after a fit of rage. We’d heard Bob’s story many times. When he was nineteen, he’d hitchhiked all over the world, and because of what he saw he became a revolutionary. After Salvador Allende was elected in Chile, Bob hitchhiked there to offer his support. Lots of foreigners had done that. Allende was the first Marxist president in the world to take power through an election. He believed it was possible to make revolutionary changes without a revolution. Bob spent a year in Santiago, helping to build houses in the New Havana shantytown. Then the coup happened, with General Augusto Pinochet, whom Allende had recently appointed commander-in-chief of the armed forces, at the helm. When the military raided New Havana, Bob was arrested and put in the national stadium, which wasn’t for soccer games anymore but had become a concentration camp. Bob had a line about that. “It was during my time there that I became a revolutionary with a capital

R,” he would say. He got this look in his eye sometimes, and his Adam’s apple started quivering. My mother explained that it had to do with what had happened to Bob in the stadium during those two weeks, and what he saw happen to other people.

Three Canadians were being held in Chile right after the coup, and the Canadian embassy got them out. Out of jail, out of the country and onto the dictatorship’s blacklist. When Bob got back to Canada he formed a solidarity committee and organized a cross-country caravan. They set up camp on Parliament Hill until the prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, agreed to offer asylum to Chilean refugees. We’d been one of the first families to arrive, and Bob had helped us from the start. He became my gringo uncle after a while, then my stepfather. And now he was supposed to be my father, which was kind of funny. I guessed people would believe Ale and me, because Bob was Black Irish. That’s how he explained his black hair and beard. Black Irish, raised on the wrong side of the tracks. My heart burst for him, for the fact he had almost died for Chile.

My mother continued with the new official story.

We were to tell people she was Peruvian, she said. The Chilean blood that ran through our veins could be no more. Our family was moving south because Bob was starting an import-export company. We’d shopped at the mall for the first time ever to put together a middle-class look. It all made sense now: my mother’s Charlie’s Angels attire, Ale and I in our brand-new shoes, all the rage with their white platforms and blue suede tops, the Pepsi logo stitched on the side. We had to look normal. Mainstream. We had to stand out for the right reasons from now on, not the wrong ones.

Lots of our friends in Vancouver had come straight from the detention centres in Chile. They’d arrived with crooked spines, missing an eye or their balls or nipples or fingernails. Like Rulo. He’d been held in the Dawson Island concentration camp, near Antarctica, and he was skinny as a skeleton when we picked him up at the airport. He was carrying a charango, a little guitar made from an armadillo shell. Rulo was seventeen when he landed in Vancouver, and Bob had taken him in. Rulo had tried to teach me how to play his tiny charango, but it was too hard to get my fingers into the right position. So I’d taught him the hustle instead. He really liked that.

I tuned back in to my mother as she squeezed our hands.

“To be in the resistance is a matter of life and death. To say the wrong thing to the wrong person is a matter of life and death. And it’s impossible to know who the wrong person is. You must assume that everybody is the wrong person. In the resistance, we agree to give our lives to the people, for a better society. I’m asking a lot of you, but you must remember that the sacrifices you’ll have to make are nothing compared with the majority of children in this world. So many of them die of curable diseases and work twelve-hour shifts in factories, without ever learning to read and write. We are fighting for a society in which all children have the right to a childhood. I’m so proud of you girls for being a part of that.”

I was glad my mother had chosen to take us along, because I wanted to fight for the children, for the people of the world. I thought about the sacrifices Rulo had made. He told us he’d handed his bones over to be broken methodically by the military, and he’d do it all again if he had to. He’d shown me his scars and let me touch them. Our sacrifice, my mother said, was a bit different. It would involve us acting as if we were rich, pretending to be something we were not. I swallowed past the stupid knot in my throat. It felt as if a huge vitamin pill had gotten stuck in there.

“That’s all I can say for now,” my mother was explaining. “So please don’t ask me any questions. When one is in the resistance, one simply does what one is told to do. And for the time being, you will not be able to send letters or postcards to anybody.” Her cigarette made a sizzling sound as she stamped it out in the ashtray. She kept her gaze down, avoiding our eyes. I thought of the stationery

from Chinatown in my carry-on bag. My father had given it to me, with explicit orders to write often. I remembered him that morning, seeing us off at the airport, his shoulders heaving. "My girls, my girls, my girls," he'd murmured in our ears, his hands clutching the backs of our heads.

Ale asked my mother if she could get some more french fries. As she dug in, I watched the long shadows created by the setting sun. Were the planes I could hear all around me coming or going, I wondered? What if I were to pick up my travel bag right now and walk to the Canadian Pacific counter and get on a plane back to Vancouver? What if I were to join the Colombian family at the next table and become one of them? What if I were to walk through the glass doors that led to the vast city of L.A. and get on a bus and just stay in the part of town that it took me to? When I looked over at my mother, she was hugging her canvas carry-on bag to her chest and gazing off somewhere unreachable. A fresh *Matinée* burned between her fingers.

When the time came, we lined up at the Braniff counter with the other passengers, Peruvians and Ecuadorians. Our plane was due to stop in Quito before reaching Lima, and a lady in a beehive and pearls asked me if that's where I was from. No, I said. I was from Santiago. The lady smiled. "Santiago is one of the jewels of South America," she said. Wow. I hadn't known that. But then my mother elbowed me, and I remembered I was from Vancouver now, a place so distant it was already as if it had never existed. We were no longer exiles. We were a resistance family headed who knows where.

There was a kerfuffle at the counter up ahead, and a lady who looked like Julie from *The Love Boat* explained over the loudspeaker that since our plane was having technical difficulties, the airline was going to put us up at a hotel near the airport until morning. Ale and I gave each other a high-five. The only hotel we'd ever stayed in was the hotel for refugees the Canadian government had paid for when we first got to Vancouver.

In the bus lineup, a woman who had gel nails decorated with the U.S. flag shyly approached my mother. "I'm from Ecuador," she said in a rush, clenching her white clutch purse. "I'm twenty-five years old, and I came to L.A. to visit my uncle and auntie. He's the baseball sportscaster on Radio La Raza. Do you know him? Anyway, my nerves have gotten the better of me because my plane is delayed. I noticed that you are a *señora* with two girls. Would you mind taking care of me as well?"

My mother nodded. I'd never spoken to one of these ladies before, with their feathered hair and heavy perfume. Ladies Mami had always referred to as a "bunch of fucking idiots." And now we'd go to share a room with one.

The hotel was actually a motel. Just like Malibu Barbie's house, I thought, except this motel was for economy-class Latinos whose flights had been delayed. The paint was peeling, and the Astroturf was stained. Ale and I smeared our faces with cream from the mini-containers in the bathroom and modelled the shower caps. There were so many channels on TV it made us dizzy.

It was four in the morning by the time we got into our beige double bed. My mother was supposed to share her bed with the lady, who was called Jackie. But Jackie was stationed at the plastic-wood vanity, rollers in her hair, putting different creams on her face and then wiping them off. From where I was lying, I could see her tweezing her eyebrows and then a trail of hair that led from her belly button to her vagina. My mother always called the private parts of the body by their proper names. If you said "down there," she would look you straight in the eye and say, "*Vagina*. Repeat after me: *va-gi-na*. Good." I wondered if Mami was asleep or just pretending.

Our plane took off without a hitch a few hours later. As we flew toward the equator, the passengers cheered and clapped and talked about their final destination: home. The last time Ale and my mother and I had been on a plane we'd flown north, in the middle of the night, as people wept into their

hankies. Someone had spread a Chilean flag and a banner of Allende in the aisle. When the pilot announced over the loudspeaker, “We have crossed the border into Peru. We are out of Chile,” the passengers, grown men and strong women, had cried even more loudly. Someone started singing the Chilean national anthem, and everyone joined in. My parents had put their arms around us and said, “You will never forget this. You. Will. Never. Forget.” Their faces were distorted from all the crying. And now here we were, five years later, heading somewhere else. Somewhere south again.



LIMA KNEED me in the gut. This city of cathedrals was full of people who looked like me, dressed in their best and smelling of cologne. Crowds jammed the cobblestone streets, and vendors sold shakes from stationary bicycles with blenders attached, whistling boleros as they pedalled. Flies landed on the papayas as fast as the vendors could peel them, but they threw the fruit into the blender anyway, topping it with milk that had been sitting in the sun for hours.

All around us there were people hawking jackets and gold chains and little trinkets, explaining that they needed money for the bus ticket to their grandma's funeral, and that's why they were selling this unique cuckoo clock that had been in the family for forty years. Indian peasant ladies sold seeds arranged in little mounds. Beggar children missing arms and legs were pushed around on homemade skateboards by bigger children whose feet were black with dirt. The boys who passed by winked their eyes and made kissing sounds, murmuring "Mamita" in your ear. Everywhere you looked, even on the cathedral steps, there were couples making out. Church bells rang and nuns asked for donations. Music blasted from every store, and groups of yelling men pressed up against shop windows to watch a soccer game on TV. Buses never stopped honking their horns. The honking and the yelling and the traffic noise made you think you were going to go deaf, but then you got used to it. The air stank of sewers and diesel. You got used to that, too. I stuck close to my mother, taking it all in with a quivering chest.

We had checked into a hotel for rich people in the centre of the city. We spent our days walking through the crowds, my mother in her white pantsuit, Ale and I in our new Adidas sweatshirts and Pepsi shoes. At night we stayed inside, because downtown Lima was the most dangerous place in the world when it was dark, my mother said, especially if you were a girl pretending to be rich. Night was when the uniformed men we saw during the day, driving around in their green trucks and monitoring everything with their machine guns, disappeared into the shantytowns.

It was still just the three of us. Mami hadn't said a word about how long we'd be there or where Boris was. She lit one cigarette after another up in our room, watching the news on TV non-stop, while Ale begged me to play Monopoly or Parcheesi, both of which she'd made sure to pack in her suitcase. I'd hit her on the arm when my mother wasn't looking, because I was trying to read my book, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Also, I had a lot to chew on. Now I realized what I'd been missing in Vancouver all those years: human heat. Heat coming from strangers, shoulder rubbing against shoulder, full eye contact with every person you passed. Here it was as if everyone on the street was a house with its windows wide open. By the end of the day, you'd encountered a thousand souls and looked into their hearts. Memories were flooding me now that we were south of the equator again. Before the coup, my grandmother Carmen, the person I loved most in the world, had lived in a big wooden house overlooking the ocean in Valparaíso, with my grandfather Armando, my uncle Boris—the greatest storyteller of all time—my aunt Magdalena and my cousins Gonzalo and Macarena. My uncle had been the first Chilean refugee to arrive in Vancouver after an epic solo journey that took him from Valparaíso to Santiago to Seattle and then across the border into Canada. My aunt and cousins had joined him there a few months later. But before all that happened, Mami, Papi, Ale and I

would get into our yellow Citroën every summer and drive all the way from Valdivia, where my parents taught at the university, to Valparaíso, the biggest port in Chile, to spend the summer in that wooden house on top of the hill. One morning, my grandmother had woken me up at the crack of dawn and quietly got me dressed, so no one else would hear. We'd walked to the train station together, and she'd taken me on an outing to Santiago, where she'd bought me churros at Santa Lucía Hill and cotton candy and glazed peanuts and anything else my heart desired. We'd come back late at night, and I'd slept on her lap on the train. It had been the happiest day of my life thus far.

On our third day in Lima, we were out walking when suddenly the crowds pressed into us full force. Mami, knocked off balance in her platforms, screamed out our names as we slammed against a wall. There was smoke everywhere, something like acid in my eyes, a cougar in my throat clawing it raw. Explosions, breaking glass, sirens so loud your ears popped and a stampede of feet.

"Whatever happens, don't let go of my hand!" my mother yelled at us.

Liquid poured from our eyes and noses. Ale was whimpering, and I knew I was going to puke any minute. But then a lady dressed like a secretary in patent-leather spike heels grabbed us and shouted: "All the women come with me!" The secretary was pressing an embroidered hanky to her mouth, smearing her red lipstick. She was about twenty, and obviously an expert on how to get out of sticky situations. We ran behind her through a set of bronze doors. She locked them just as some peasant Indian women were trying to get in, and the whole group of us ran up the spiral stairs with their gold railings to the top floor. When we stopped, I swallowed the puke that was sitting in my mouth, and it burned my insides all the way down. The tear gas wasn't so bad up here, the secretary was explaining. She looked Indian, though she acted and dressed as if there was no Indian in her at all. She was pretending to be something else, just like us.

From the windows we could see hundreds of teenagers, boys and girls both, fighting with the paramilitary, the militarized police force commonly deployed against protesters. Bandanas over their faces, the youths were hurling little balls with nails sticking out of them, tossing flaming Molotov cocktails made from Coke bottles and firing stones from slingshots. When the paramilitaries got their hands on a teenager, they'd beat the kid down with their batons and then drag him or her to a waiting military truck. They kept shooting tear gas, and their machine guns were at the ready. A water cannon drove by slowly, spraying acid water with so much force that it threw people to the ground. Some trapped bystanders had covered their faces with their hands, pressing the fronts of their bodies against the buildings. I could see them retching, and their legs wobbled like noodles. Street vendors had had their tables overturned and their trinkets smashed. The women scurried away with their babies on their backs. The men ran with their broken blender bicycles held up to protect their faces. A short man in a beat-up suit jacket dashed around opening up his jacket to display a collection of hankies. Some of them were big and striped, for men, and some were delicate and white, for ladies. People would give him a coin, snatch a hanky and then clamp it over their mouths and noses. Within a few minutes he was out of stock.

"There's a protest in Lima every day," the secretary informed us with a sigh. "Today it's these kids who've marched for hours from the shantytowns. They're mad because the hike in bus fare is meant to stop them from going to school. It's the third hike in fares this year. They'll go to the presidential square and light a few buses on fire." A gold tooth flashed in her mouth as she spoke.

The women around us were talking excitedly about the high cost of living, inflation, corruption and the escalating price of milk. It was impossible to come downtown anymore, they complained. If it wasn't the peasants protesting, it was the teachers, and if it wasn't the teachers, it was the students or the domestic workers or the miners or the doctors or the priests. My mother listened closely, but she

kept her mouth shut and her face still as she clung to Ale and me. Ale stood with her back to the window, but I was transfixed by the scene below. The teenagers didn't look scared. They just kept getting up from the ground when they fell, adjusting their bandanas and firing off another stone with their slingshots. The secretary popped a piece of gum into her mouth and blew a bubble half the size of her face. My mouth watered as the tear gas started to clear from my sinuses.

The fighting moved down the street, block by block, and after a while the secretary announced in her expert tone of voice that the path was clear. As we emerged into the aftermath, my mother took our hands again. I felt a tug on my jeans and looked down into the black eyes of a small boy.

"Do you have a Sublime, señorita?" he asked. His eyes had hooks that wouldn't let me go.

I'd been eating a Sublime chocolate bar, my new favourite snack, when the protest hit us. He must have seen me and been waiting outside the building the whole time. I knew my mother would disapprove of me buying the little boy a chocolate bar, because that would be charity, and we didn't believe in charity. Charity was vertical, keeping the relationship between the haves and have-nots intact. We believed in revolution. Back in Vancouver, when I'd come home from school once and said, "Please help UNICEF," my uncle Boris had declared he'd rather take a shit in the little box of coins I was holding up. "Hold that box still, Carmencita. Don't move it till I'm done taking a shit in it." He'd started unbuckling his belt, and my mother had fallen to the floor laughing. I laughed too. The image of my uncle, who was five foot five and weighed over three hundred pounds, trying to balance his big behind over the teeny box was just too much. A classless society was what we were fighting for, so I leaned down and kissed the boy all over his round face instead. We kept walking, and his little fingers clutched my jeans the entire way. When we reached the hotel, the guard at the door scared him away with the open palm of his hand: "Shoo, boy, shoo!" Before he dashed out of sight, the boy mouthed the words "No Sublime?" He shrugged his shoulders.

Upstairs, my mother collapsed onto the bed and pulled Ale down beside her. Ale was still whimpering a little, but before long both of them were asleep. I closed the bathroom door quietly and then crumpled onto the toilet, sobbing and sobbing. It was lifetimes since we'd left Vancouver. My father had explained to us that time and space didn't really exist; they were human constructs for trying to make sense of things that didn't make sense at all. Thinking of Papi, I wanted to go back to the exile land. To the solidarity dances, to the school where my friend Dewi and I climbed trees, to putting on plays with my cousins and spying on the late-night meetings where tactics and strategies were discussed. I wouldn't be able to wear my Ché Guevara red star here, or tell the story of the murder of Allende, because we were in the resistance. Instead, Ale and I would probably have to learn to fight like those teenagers in the street. My aim was really bad. I knew I'd aim a stone at those paramilitaries and miss, and then I'd be tortured with electric shocks and sent to the firing squad like my father's best friend, Jaime, who'd been taken from his house in Iquique during lunch for all to see.

When I came out, my mother and Ale were still fast asleep. Mami was usually a light sleeper, but today she was out like a log. I pried her denim handbag from her grip, reached for a coin and went downstairs into the street. Tear gas still hung in the air, and it took me a while to find a kiosk that hadn't been destroyed. But I did, and when I did I bought a Sublime, in its wax-paper wrapping with the swirly blue letters across the front. On my way back to the hotel, the teeny boy found me. His fist latched onto my shaking pants. They were shaking because I was scared to be walking alone in the centre of the city. I didn't have the balls those teenagers had. I never would. Why couldn't the revolution just hurry up and win? Couldn't it see that the teeny boy was hungry and just wanted to play in a sandbox somewhere?

ON OUR FIFTH DAY in Lima, just as Margaret in my book was getting her period, someone knocked on our hotel room door. It was nighttime, and my mother was taking a bath. I opened the door cautiously, to see a tall man wearing a beige corduroy suit and brown suede shoes. He had pale skin and very short black hair and a dimple in his chin. He was carrying a brown suitcase and a briefcase with combination locks. The man smiled and then spoke to me in perfect English.

“Hello, Carmencita.”

I stared at him. I was holding the Judy Blume book close to my chest, making sure not to lose my page.

“It’s Bob,” the man said.

I looked at him again. Bob with the long black hair and beard to match. Bob with the lumberjack shirt and kaffiyeh scarf from Palestine. Bob coming home from the port with bags full of groceries, making spaghetti and meatballs while he whistled along to a Pete Seeger album. Bob with his outbursts. Bob, who’d stay up till the wee hours working on the banner to be held up outside the grocery store, urging people to boycott the Chilean grapes sold inside. The great love I’d always felt for him flooded through me.

Bob chuckled. “So? Are you going to let me in?”

The next thing I knew, Mami was behind me, wrapped in the hotel robe. She pushed me aside and pulled Bob in and started climbing all over him. Ale was doing jumping jacks and Mami was crying and Bob was holding her and saying, “It’s okay. I’m okay. We’re all okay.” I understood now that my mother had been scared since we’d gotten to Lima. I couldn’t stop smiling, and I practised saying “This is my father” in my mind until this new Bob rubbed his hands together and said: “Let’s go get some fish and papa a la huancaína. I’m starving.”

Every afternoon for the next seven days, Ale and I stayed alone in the hotel room, playing Parcheesi. We had strict orders to keep the noise down and not to open the door to anyone. Mami and Bob would leave all decked out in their new looks and come back just in time for dinner.

Late at night, when they thought Ale and I were asleep, I’d spy them sitting cross-legged on their bed, talking in hushed tones while they studied photographs of papers and maps. It looked as though someone had covered a wall with papers and then taken a snapshot of every sheet. They would read the papers using a magnifying glass and then go into the bathroom and close the door. I’d hear the click of a lighter, then the toilet flushing over and over again.

I wasn’t worried during the times they were gone, except about one direction they’d left me with—only me, not my sister. “If twenty-four hours pass and we don’t come back, call this number and say you’re with the Tall One and Raquel. Then hang up. Within an hour someone will knock on the door. Answer it, and then you and Ale go with that person.”

The paper they’d handed me looked blank, but that’s where the lighter Bob had given me came in. In the circumstances required, I was to go into the bathroom, close the door, and hold the flame underneath the paper, making sure not to burn it. After a moment, a number would appear in brown letters. My instructions were to memorize the number, burn the paper and flush the ashes down the toilet before making the call. All of this should be done only at the twenty-four-hour mark. Not before. In the meantime, I was to keep the paper in a secret place. Above all, I must not mention this to anyone.

I folded the piece of paper in two, wrapped it in a small piece of cloth, and sewed it into the inside of my travel bag. I felt lonely after I’d done that. Up to that point, Ale and I had both been in on everything. Now I had secrets from her, too. But the twenty-four-hour thing never happened, and the only person who kept knocking on the door was the chambermaid, begging for money for her children who had chronic diarrhea. I never answered, because what if she was an informer for the secret police?

Ale and I would get really quiet until she gave up.

On the eighth day, Mami announced that we were leaving. She brushed out her hair, releasing it from its tidy bun, and both she and Bob pulled on jeans and sneakers. Ale and I stuffed the bare essentials in our new orange backpacks. Everything else would be packed into our Samsonites and sent away. We walked from the hotel to a massive bus station swirling with people, where we got onto a bus with the name HUANCAYO written on the front. Bob and I sat together, with Mami and Ale behind. I pressed my nose to the window to watch Lima disappearing. Vendors ran up to our bus at every traffic light. The people on the bus were poor, and we seemed to be the only non-Peruvians. My mother chatted with an older woman with callused hands.

“Oh, yes, I’m from Tacna,” she told the woman. “And my husband and daughters are Canadian. They’ve always wanted to see Peru, so here we are.”

As we reached the outskirts of the city, I thought again about my father. Papi was probably out in the garden right now. He’d be imagining us frolicking in the waves in Costa Rica, green parrots flying around our heads. I swallowed hard, and Bob rubbed my back.

“I love you, Carmencita. I love you.”

I nodded and looked out the window. My eyes met the steady gaze of a girl my age, a baby on her back, a barefoot toddler holding her hand. She stood on the island of the great boulevard, holding up a bag of oranges as we passed.

I'D NEVER BEEN on a bus like the one to Huancayo, packed to the rafters with families, chickens, piglets and giant sacks of fruit. Babies cooed and screamed throughout the ride, and the driver played a soccer game full blast on the radio. What should have been a six-hour journey ended up taking twelve, because of the bus breaking down every so often. A few of the wooden bridges along the way were missing sections, too, which meant we all had to disembark and walk across the planks put down to cover the holes. Then the driver, with the help of the male passengers, had to figure out how to get the vehicle across, going inch by inch to avoid the places that would snap and send the bus hurtling into the abyss. When we weren't hopping on and off, I was holding my breath as our bus hugged the side of one cliff after another, a green valley always waiting at the bottom to catch us if we fell.

We stayed for a few days in a rundown colonial hotel in Huancayo inhabited by European and North American hippies. There was only one bathroom and one shower for everyone, so the lineups in the morning were long. Each room had a pail for emergencies, though. Mami and Bob disappeared every day until dinnertime. This time, our only instructions were to stay in the hotel room. Nothing was said about making a phone call at the twenty-four-hour mark. I couldn't decide if that meant things were less dangerous here or more so.

On the all-night bus to Ayacucho, I watched the stars of the southern hemisphere from my window. We were in the Andes now, the mountains my parents and their friends referred to constantly, and it felt right to be there. At one point we passed a burning village in the distance. The flames licked the sky. Everyone around me was asleep, and I wondered if the bus driver would stop and get us to help, but he didn't. Our vessel continued on through this landscape of beauty and horror.

There were rallies in the streets of Ayacucho, and Mami and Bob whispered about a civil war. It was the first time I'd heard them use the term. Something was different here in Peru, and it had to do with those words. I knew from earlier conversations that the general in power, Francisco Morales Bermúdez, was dangerous to us because he participated in Operation Condor, which had been set up by Pinochet and the surrounding dictatorships to catch revolutionaries operating anywhere in South America. Operation Condor was an illegal, top secret affair, officially denied by the governments in question, but foreigners in Peru were disappearing all the time. There was a new movement rising in the country, based right here in Ayacucho, and its members believed that peasants, not the working class, should lead the war against the powers that be and take over the cities.

Late at night, when Ale and I were supposed to be sleeping, Bob took photographs of papers that he'd taped to the wall. In Lima, he and Mami had read photos of documents. Now they were the ones producing the photos. Whenever a roll of film was done, Bob would hide it deep in his backpack. On our last morning in Ayacucho, very early, Bob wrapped the rolls of film in plastic, put them in a small cardboard box and taped the box shut. He grabbed his wallet and passport and slipped out of the room. When he came back, he announced that we were going to have fun that day. We bought chirimoya ice cream and ate it sitting in the square. Then we all had diarrhea. That was the thing about Peru. If you didn't have diarrhea, you were either puking or doubled over in pain, because your gut was seizing.

My mother said it was good for us to build up our immune systems.

At dawn the following day we boarded a bus for Cusco, which Bob explained had been the capital of the Inca empire. For the next twenty-four hours we wound our way along narrow Andes roads so high up that sometimes we looked down on the clouds. We passed tiny villages and flocks of llamas tended by four-year-old shepherds wearing sandals made from tires. Every so often the bus would stop for a villager who needed to travel only a little ways, and he or she rode for free, chitchatting in Quechua with the driver. Quechua was the native tongue of the Andes, and ever since Huancayo, it was pretty much all we'd heard.

Every so often the driver would stop and yell out: "Time to go to the bathroom!" Everyone would scurry off the bus. Ale and I knew better by now than to look for the toilet; everyone just went over a little hill and squatted. The ladies and children went over one little hill, and the men went over another. In Peru, if you wanted to look up the definition of a word, you'd need two dictionaries: the Poor Peru dictionary and the Rich Peru dictionary. If you looked up the word *bathroom* in the Poor Peru dictionary, the definition would be: "Just over the hill there." If you looked it up in the Rich Peru dictionary, the definition would read: "Marble room with gold taps and its own servant to keep it sparkling." I'd been in a Rich Peru bathroom in Lima, when we'd gone to a fancy restaurant on our last night there.

Cusco was bustling with activity. My mother had bought us a kids' book about the history of Peru, and as we walked around town, I could see that the city was constructed on the foundations of Inca buildings destroyed by the invaders. When we got to the main square, I thought about Tupac Amaru, the native leader who had been murdered by the Spaniards here. They'd tied each of his limbs to a horse, and then each horse had galloped away in a different direction. Tupac Amaru had held on so tight, my uncle Boris told us, that the horses had had to use all their might.

We spent the day buying oranges, grapefruits, apples, chocolate—for energy, Bob said—and lots of quinoa, the local grain. We were going on a hike, and I was pretty sure I was starting to get the picture. Chile was lined by the Andes from north to south, and the only way to get there was by crossing those mountains, the highest in the Americas. We couldn't get into Chile by plane or bus or train or car, with Mami and Bob on the blacklist, so I figured we were headed there on foot. That night we redid our packs, making room for a few litres of water in canteens and a new pot to cook the quinoa in. At four the next morning, Bob woke us up, and we ran to the station and jumped on the train to the trailhead just as it was leaving.

The Inca trail was actually about twenty thousand miles long, Bob explained, but we took the stretch that led right to Machu Picchu. Bob was happier than I'd ever seen him as we set off up the towering mountain, whistling with his pack, stopping to admire the unbelievable beauty around us while he took a sip from his canteen. We were covered in dirt and sweat within minutes. In places the trail was only a sliver, and one wrong move would send you rolling down into the river hundreds of feet below. Ale spent most of the day crying, with Mami calling encouragement from behind. We pitched our tent that night under millions and millions of stars. It made my mother very emotional. "These are our mountains, Carmencita, these are our stars," she kept saying. As we hugged by the fire I felt proud that I belonged to the Andes too. The Urubamba River shone like silver at the bottom of the world.

We climbed and climbed for the next three days. Once I got lost, surging too far ahead of the others but Bob rescued me with the help of two Quechua men. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he carried me, backpack and all, up the trail to where my mother and Ale waited. The night before we reached Machu Picchu, we camped in an abandoned Inca city made of stone, bonfires burning around

us. Bob told us that the city had been deserted hundreds of years before, during the time of the Conquest. ~~The courtyards and houses and stairways were now open to the stars, which were the size of light bulbs in the ebony sky.~~ A group of Austrians joined us for a chat while a family of twenty Indians set a table with starched white tablecloths and gleaming silver forks.

I'd been the first to spot the group that afternoon. Rounding a corner of the trail, I'd seen a little army carrying tables, chairs, mattresses and trunks on their backs, winding their way along the side of the mountain. Even the youngest, a girl about four, was carrying a pillow. Her shoes had no laces, which made her ankles twist. Like the others, she chewed vigorously on a ball of coca leaves. The oldest woman, who looked about a hundred, transported an enormous pot on her back, secured with ropes. She grunted as she climbed. One of the Indian men walked with a giggling Austrian woman in his arms, sweat pouring down his back in a perfect stream. The rest of the Austrians were pointing at the scenery, putting their palms to their hearts before clicking away with their cameras.

The Austrians feasted at the table while the Indian family squatted around a bonfire, sucking on corncobs and drinking chicha morada and chicha amarilla, liquor made from purple and yellow corn. We'd pitched our tent close to theirs, and when Mami said it was time to get water from the stream at the bottom of the abandoned city, Bob stayed behind, sharing cigarettes and jokes with the Indian family.

There was a full moon lighting our passage, and my knees were wobbly from excitement as we clambered down the steep stone stairs: one of the boys from the Indian family had been peering at me across the fires. His skin was like copper, and he wore an alpaca sweater with little llamas frolicking on it. He carried himself as if he might break into a cumbia at any moment. His eyes were so black you could see the fire reflected in them, two little bonfires blazing away. Halfway down the steps made by his ancestors, I looked back, and sure enough, there he was, standing at the top, hands in his pockets. When his eyes met mine, I smiled and leaned into one of my hips, just as Olivia Newton-John had done after John Travolta collapsed at the sight of her in *Grease*.

But I'd leaned too far, because now I was rolling down the stairs. My head made knocking sounds against the stone. I tried to stop myself, but it was no use. I remembered what my father had told me about gravity: sometimes you just had to give in and let it pull you down. Hikers came running toward the steps from all over the abandoned city, yelling in a variety of languages. I landed like a flopping fish, then leapt to my feet, brushed off my knees and resumed my Sandy stance. I looked for the boy, but he was no longer at the top. I never saw him again. He left with the other men in his family the next day before dawn, carrying the furniture in order to get a head start.

THE TRACKS WE were following led to Quillabamba, a jungle town on the edge of the river. The Urubamba River was brown like chocolate here, and banana trees lined its shores. We'd started out on the train, but when it broke down and nobody came to fix it, we climbed out the window and started walking. Hours passed as we trudged along with our backpacks. Bob kept the wild dogs at bay with sticks. We still made it to town faster than the train, which arrived so late at night that we'd already eaten, bathed and gone to bed. But one of the passengers from the train started running through the streets, yelling that the Sandinistas had just won the revolution in Nicaragua, so we got up again and went out to a local bar. We ordered Inca Kolas and beer and then sat without uttering a word so Mami and Bob could hear what people were saying. The Sandinista National Liberation Front had been fighting for almost twenty years. They'd named themselves after Augusto César Sandino, leader of the resistance against the U.S. occupation in the 1930s, and they'd finally overthrown the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. Against all odds, another socialist revolution had won in Latin America—the



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