

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BUSTS OF EVA PERÓN

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LONDON · NEW YORK



PROLOGUE

The day Ernesto Marroné returned home from the Los Ceibales Country Club after a splendid afternoon's golf and discovered the poster of Che Guevara hanging on his teenage son's bedroom wall, he knew the time had come to tell the truth about his guerrilla past.



Not that this had been a secret kept under lock and key: his wife had, of course, been partially privy to it – after all, they were already married at the time, and something of that magnitude was harder to hide than an extra-marital affair – but, far from attempting to pry, Mabel had always clipped his timid attempts at confession with a curt ‘I’d rather not know’. His in-laws, and to a lesser extent his parents, were aware of something; just how much he’d never dared find out. And at the office, of course, it was an open secret. Who hadn’t heard of Marroné’s rise through the ranks of the Montoneros, the far-left Peronist guerrilla force, who had taken hostage no less than his company’s president, Sr Fausto Tamerlán? But his children had, for better or worse, been spared this knowledge – until today.



That’s how it is, thought Marroné with a sigh as he unknotted the laces of his Jack Nicklaus golf shoes; there’s no escaping the past. No matter how far you run, sooner

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or later it catches up with you – with all of us. Because, far from being an exception, Marroné’s story was emblematic of a whole generation – a generation now striving to erase the traces of a shameful past with the same diligence it had once devoted to building a utopian future. Who then would dare to point the finger at him, who to cast the first stone? Take this very place, no need to look any further: how many of the current occupants of these beautiful houses half-hidden among leafy groves had, in the past, with the same hand that now gracefully swung a Slazenger, taken up arms against privileges far less unjust than those they now enjoyed?

The hot shower restored the warmth driven from his body by the June cold and the bitter memories, and strengthened his purpose: the time had come for his son to know the truth. He wouldn’t even discuss it with Mabel beforehand as he usually did, in case she challenged his decision and weakened his resolve. A couple could walk the path of life blithely avoiding silent corners and wisely passing closed doors. But a son was different. To a son, the secret, the silence, the indifference of a father was a message, a command, perhaps even a curse, all the more insidious for having gone unsaid. Perhaps if this had concerned his daughter Cynthia, Daddy’s pampered princess, he could have left it for a future date. What could she know, when only yesterday her Barbie games and today her hairdos, weekend discos, diets and innocent flirting with boys her own age and background occupied all the free time her studies at the Country Club school afforded her? If it was true that in those days the impetuous advance of the guerrilla movement had added thousands of women to its ranks, it was equally



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true that today any such possibility was well and truly dead. With boys, however, you could never be sure. They always went for them first, taking advantage of their idealism, their romantic yearnings for adventure, their worship of risk for risk's sake; of all that energy that was so much easier to detonate than to channel and conduct along the ordered circuits of society. He had faith in his son: he was a brilliant young man, 'fated to succeed', a born leader and true friend, and most of all he had a noble heart. But it was precisely these qualities – what was best in him – that made him easy prey to the siren song of the violent and impatient. Marroné knew better than anyone. Hadn't they succeeded with him? How could he believe then that his son was safe?



Dressed now in his casuals, which he would wear until bedtime, he passed the open door of his son's room and came, once again, face to face with the sharp, black and white outlines – no shades of grey – of the Che Guevara poster. His eyes looked into the intense, defiant ones of his all-too-famous compatriot, but, unlike other times, this time he met his gaze. 'It might have worked with me,' he said to him, 'but you won't have it so easy with my son. Because he's not alone; he has me. And I . . . I know you all too well.' Marroné felt a stab of pain in his chest on thinking about how many lives could have been saved if only parents had spoken to their children in time. 'We never realised,' they'd say later as if they'd never received the warning that flashed from the romantic revolutionary's fiery eyes on hundreds of walls, in hundreds of children's rooms. A whole generation had sacrificed itself on the altar of dubious idols – a generation of which he, Marroné, was a survivor. But what had he survived for if not to tell his story, and in the telling



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to prevent it being repeated and lay the unquiet ghosts of the past to rest in the slumber of the grave?

Now wasn't the time though: Tommy was out, just finishing his rugby training at the San Isidro Athletics Club, and by the time he got home his mother and sister would be back from their usual Sunday evening shopping spree at the mall, and their presence might encroach on the privacy a father-and-son talk demanded. Tomorrow, like every Monday when Ernesto and Tomás Marroné drove the seventy kilometres of freeway separating him from the office block in Puerto Madero and his son from the university, would be the time to talk it over at their ease. And, in the meantime, he'd have all night to think about what to say.

One thing worried him above all else.

Would he be believed? Could his son, could anyone looking at the Ernesto Marroné of today believe that he, the financial manager of the most powerful construction and real estate conglomerate in Argentina, had once crouched in the lawless shadows of clandestinity and declared himself the enemy of the very society that now sheltered him? That he had not only raised his voice, but taken up arms against so-called injustices which his intervention had in any case only helped to aggravate?

Ernesto Marroné didn't get a wink of sleep that night.

He lay there wide awake, hands folded behind his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling where the streetlights shining through the tree branches cast shadows of phantasmagorical crucifixions, and let the memories flood back. There, as on a blank screen, he watched the film of his rebellious past from beginning to end – a film that, for him at least, had begun sixteen years ago, the afternoon he was first summoned to



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the basement of the building on Paseo Colón – to the subterranean office complex that the company’s president had christened with the poetic, Valkyrian name ‘The Nibelheim’, but which all his employees had more familiarly christened ‘Tamerlán’s Bunker’.

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‘Sr Tamerlán’s kidnappers have set new demands, Sr Marroné.’

Seated on the other side of the desk, Marroné slid his eyes over the polished cranium of Govianus the accountant, who rarely looked up, preferring instead to follow the vague gestures with which his own languid hands accompanied the conversation. Within hours of the news of Sr Tamerlán’s kidnapping by the Montoneros, Govianus had taken possession of both the imposing metal desk – which looked for all the world like an over-turned safe – and the immense sealed vault in which it lay. From here he had, for the last six months, directed all the negotiations, in close liaison with the victim’s family, yet in all that time he still hadn’t grown into the place. The room was too big for him, the desk was too big for him, even the gold fountain pen with the monogram ‘FI’ finely engraved on its base looked too big between his fingers. A dwarf – that was what Govianus the accountant reminded Marroné of: a bald, bespectacled dwarf usurping the dominions of a giant.

‘What do they want now? More money?’

‘If only, Marroné, if only. I sometimes regret the fact that kidnappings in this country aren’t performed by the Mafia. At least with them you know where you are; we speak the

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same language. But all this nonsense about improving the conditions of our workers – always the workers, mind you; the office staff be damned, as if we didn't suffer too – all this welcoming like lords the delegates that yesterday we spurned like dogs, all this dishing out of food in the shanties . . . Give me a break! You know what they want now? You know the latest thing they've come up with? They want us to put a bust of Eva Perón in each of our offices. Even in this one! Can you think of anything more absurd?

Marroné didn't answer, as he was already mentally totting up the number of busts needed to meet the new demand. Eighth floor: the 'Valhalla', the meeting room and two other offices; seventh floor: nine offices, a hallway . . .

'The hallways too?'

'What do I know? You'd better include them, can't be too careful. Maybe they want them in the bathrooms as well, so she can watch us whip it out. I'm telling you, Marroné, I'm at the end of my tether. First Sr Fuchs – may he rest in peace – now Sr Tamerlán . . . Are we the only company in the country with presidents to kidnap? These boys ought to practise a more effective system, like crop rotation . . . They have it in for us, I reckon. Rather unfair considering our staff are 100 per cent Argentine. Fuchs had been a citizen for years and Sr Tamerlán has lived here since he was ten. No need to remind you that he arrived on the 17th of October 1945 of all days . . . But these boys don't know a thing about history. Oh well. Just so long as they don't take it into their heads to torch us, the way they do the foreign companies . . .'

Clearly Govianus the accountant needed to get this off his chest, and Marroné instantly recalled Principle Four of the 'Six Ways to Make People Like You' listed in Dale Carnegie's

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How to Win Friends and Influence People: ‘Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.’

‘But you and your family have very tight security, don’t you?’

‘Regrettably. Do you know what it’s like having guards in your living room from dusk till dawn? One of them never flushes. They’re taking over the house bit by bit. Now they’ve commandeered the remote control. Think about it. *The Mod Squad*, *Police Woman*, *Starsky & Hutch* . . . I only get a break on matchdays. My wife and I had to buy ourselves a telly set for the bedroom. And no one dares ring the bell any more. The other day they pulled a gun on the soda-man and had him drink a squirt from each of the siphons he was delivering. In case they were trying to poison me, they explained later. You could hear the belch all the way to Burzaco. But my problems are insignificant next to Sr Tamerlán’s. Time is running out, Marroné. It’s been six months. The kidnapers are losing their patience. Look.’

Govianus was holding out a rectangular stainless-steel box, the kind used to sterilise and store hypodermics in, coated with a thin film of frost. Marroné took it. It was ice-cold to the touch, as if it had just been taken out of the freezer.

‘Open it, open it.’

Marroné tried, but his fingers kept on slipping on the frost and the steel wouldn’t yield. Eventually he managed to work a nail into the groove and lifted the lid. The moment he laid eyes on the contents he let out a yell and flung them in the air.

‘A finger! It’s a finger!’

‘Of course it’s a finger, Marroné! It’s Sr Tamerlán’s finger! Thank your lucky stars its owner isn’t around to see the

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way you treat it. Well don't just stand there gawping. Help me find it!

They had to crawl about among electricity and phone cables, chair legs and wheels, to find the two halves of the box and its grim contents. Marroné was unfortunate enough to find the finger. It was livid, mottled with yellow and grey, and the nail, despite being neatly manicured ('as if deliberately spruced up for its big day' was the gruesome thought Marroné's mind whispered in his ear) had a menacing air about it, like one of those amulets made out of animal claws. He looked around queasily for something to pick it up with and, when Govianus looked away, he pulled a plastic bag out of the waste-paper basket, slid his hand in and bagged it like a dog turd. Through the plastic the cold of the dead flesh played up and down his spine like a xylophone. Carefully he replaced the finger in its hollow of cotton wool and returned the box to the surface of the desk. An incisive question flashed across his brain.

'Can we be sure it's Sr Tamerlán's finger?'

'It's tested positive with police forensics, which I needn't tell you is no guarantee in this country. But I daresay all of us in this company know that finger well. Correct me if I'm wrong, Sr Marroné.'

Govianus had tilted his head slightly and lowered his glasses to the bridge of his nose, his naked eyes staring at Marroné over the frames as if daring him to disagree. He wasn't wrong of course. Until that moment Marroné had not truly been aware of the degree of savagery or fanaticism of the men they were up against. Cutting off Sr Tamerlán's index finger was like cutting off Samson's hair, Cleopatra's nose, Caruso's tongue or Pelé's legs; like kicking Perón's

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teeth in or castrating Casanova. These men were capable of anything! Nothing was sacred to them! They were no doubt aware of the profound significance that Sr Tamerlán's finger held for all the employees in his company, and by mutilating him they had struck right at its innermost core. There had been no better-guarded secret in the company, yet they had uncovered it. But then again it was common knowledge that the subversives had infiltrated the government, the trade unions, even the army. Why should *they* be the exception? They're everywhere, thought Marroné with a shudder; you never really know who you're talking to. While Govianus answered a phone call, Marroné let his gaze rest on the once vital finger that had until recently ruled their lives and now lay inert in its steel sarcophagus, and for an instant his eyes welled with tears. It was the same one, no doubt about it. How could he have been in any doubt? He remembered the exact day he had made its acquaintance, together with the man it was still attached to, because it was, amongst other things, the very day that marked the onset of the inveterate constipation that had afflicted him ever since: the day Sr Tamerlán had interviewed him in person and offered him the post of head of procurement, which he still held. That meeting had changed his life, had had a profound effect on him. Thanks to his MBA in Marketing from Stanford and certain family contacts he had sailed comfortably through the pre-selection process, but it was common knowledge in the business world that the final requirement for joining any of the companies in the Tamerlán Group was a personal private interview with the great man himself. It was rumoured that, when it came to selecting management staff for his companies he had an infallible method for separating the wheat

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from the chaff, though none of the applicants – successful or otherwise – had wanted to divulge what it consisted in: a tacit pact of silence that only deepened the mystery and added grist to the mill of rumour and speculation. It was known that, after the kidnapping and death of Sr Fuchs, Sr Tamerlán had completely restructured the company, secretly sifting through the entire management staff, orchestrating rises and falls, and removing those whose loyalty to the new president was not what it should be, in order to create many a vacancy like the one Marroné had aspired to.

The week before the interview he had spent in eager anticipation of the meeting, which would mark a watershed in his life – if, that is, all went smoothly; if he could say the right thing at the right time, sit back and let Sr Tamerlán take the floor, smile a lot, offer condolences for the demise of his late partner, try to strike the proper balance between sincerity and formality. He could think of nothing else: each and every night of that interminable week he had bombarded his wife at dinner with stories of the mythical Tamerlán; he would dandle his son on his knees, and instead of ‘horsey-horsey’, would come out with ‘tam-tam-Tamerlán’; and in bed, before going to sleep, he and his wife would get embroiled in all kinds of monomaniacal speculation about the traps Sr Tamerlán might set him at the ever-so-mysterious interview, which he sought to pre-empt by reading and rereading Warren P Jonas’s *Are You Ready for Your Job Interview?*, until the pages dropped out. It was rumoured that many who had smoothly negotiated the hurdles of Rorschach, handwriting, psychological and a battery of other tests bit the dust on this final strait, Marroné would remark, fairly quaking with the thrill of it. And far from getting bored, his wife would feed

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the flames with newspaper and magazine cuttings about Sr Tamerlán. And, at night, in the breaks afforded them by the boy's night terrors, they made love with an ardour unknown even in their early days – although, as often happened in moments of great anxiety, Marroné usually came early. But once, almost without trying, he must have got a hole-in-one, for, exactly nine months later Mabel gave birth to little Cynthia, and when he first clapped eyes on her, Marroné thought he could make out the unmistakable traces of Sr Tamerlán's features in the little girl's, as if at the delicate moment of conception the mental image that never left his head had been imprinted on the malleable surface of her cells.

In those fraught days not even such releases of tension would allow Marroné to sleep: he would spend the rest of the night awake, running through all the possible variations of his impending conversation with the great company man, planning strategies and evaluating possible scenarios and outcomes. The most important thing – the real trick – was to stay off the beaten track, to dare to innovate – to be, in a word, creative. There could be nothing more tedious for a restless man of genius like Sr Tamerlán than the tawdry routine of a job interview. But this one Marroné would make unforgettable. He would seize the initiative from the off: for instance, he would find something in the office to praise sincerely – a picture, an antique lamp, the wood panelling – as had James Adamson, president of the Superior Seating Company, in his interview with Mr Eastman, as he had read in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Sr Tamerlán's stern face would immediately light up and he would go on to tell him the history of the object in question: 'It has been in my family for generations. My father, at the