

Carlos GAMERRO

Extracts from a novel

The Adventure of the Busts of Eva Perón

Prologue

The day Ernesto Marroné discovered, on returning to his home at *Los Ceibales* Country Estates after a beautiful afternoon playing golf, the poster of Che Guevara hanging in his teenage son's room, he knew the time had come to talk about his guerrilla days.

Not that it was a secret kept under lock and key. His wife knew, of course – they had been married at the time, after all, and something like that was harder to conceal than an affair – but Mabel, far from attempting to pry, had in fact always aborted his timid attempts at confession with a curt “I don't want to know”. His in-laws and, to a lesser extent, his parents, were in the know; how much they knew, he had never been tempted to enquire. And in the office, of course, it was public knowledge. How could they have been unaware of Marroné's involvement with the famous guerrilla organization which in those days had kidnapped the firm's own president? But, for better or for worse, his son and daughter had been spared the knowledge – until today.

That's the way it is, Marroné thought while unlacing his Jack Nicklaus golf shoes, you can't escape the past; no matter how fast you run it will always catch up with you - with all of us. Because Marroné's story, far from being exceptional, was rather emblematic of a whole generation, a generation now striving to erase the traces of a shameful past with the same energy it had once devoted to the construction of a utopian future. Who then, would dare point their finger at him, who would cast the first stone? In this very place, how many of those who led easy lives in the beautiful houses hiding in the foliage had, with the same hand that now gracefully slung a Slazenger racquet, aimed their guns against privileges far less unfair than those which were now theirs?

The hot shower warmed his body after the chill brought about by the onset of June cold and the bitter memories, and infused his soul with the determination not to falter. The time had come to tell his son the whole truth. He would not even ask Mabel first, as was his habit, in case she should weaken his resolve. After all, a couple could walk along together passing life's closed doors and avoiding its silent corners, but a son was a different matter. For a son, a father's secrets, or silences, or his indifference, might become an injunction, even a curse, the more insidious when the least outspoken. Perhaps, if this were about his Cynthia, daddy's pampered princess, he could have left it for a while yet. How could she understand, when only yesterday she was playing with Barbie dolls, and nowadays her hairstyles, diets and innocent flirting with young men of her age and class took up whatever free time her studies at the Estates' private high school left her? While it was true that back then the guerrilla movement, in its apparently unstoppable advance, had attracted thousands of young women to its ranks, it was equally true that, in this day and age, the possibility of that happening again was positively unimaginable. But with boys, you could never be entirely sure. It always started with them: their idealism, the romantic quest for adventure, danger for danger's sake, all that energy that was so much easier to set ablaze than to guide along the orderly channels of society. He trusted his son: he was a promising youth, prone to success, a natural leader, an excellent mate and, above all, endowed with a noble heart. But these were the very qualities that made him easy prey to the siren song of

the violent and the impatient. Marroné knew it well. Had he not himself succumbed? How then could he believe his son would be immune?

Now in the clothes he would wear until bedtime, once again he stood at the open door of his son's room, before the sharp contours in black and white (no nuances, no greys) of the Che Guevara poster. His eyes met the fierce burning ones of his all-too-famous countryman, but this time he held his gaze. "It might have worked with me," he mentally told him, "but you won't have it so easy with my son. Because he is not alone. He's got me. And I know you only too well." Marroné felt a pang of regret when he considered how many lives might have been saved if only parents had talked to their children on time. "We never noticed a thing," they would say, as if the eyes of the romantic revolutionary had not been warning them from hundreds of walls in hundreds of children's bedrooms. A whole generation had sacrificed itself on the altar of dubious idols, and Marroné was one of its survivors. And why had he survived, if not to tell his story and, in telling it, prevent it from repeating itself, and laying to rest the unquiet ghosts of the past?

The time, however, had not quite arrived: Tommy was not at home, but just finishing rugby practice at the CASI club, and by the time he came home, his mother and sister, now on their usual Sunday shopping spree, would be back as well, preventing with their presence the privacy the father-son chat demanded. Tomorrow in the car, when like every Monday morning, Ernesto and Tomás Marroné drove the seventy kilometers of freeway separating the father from his Puerto Madero office tower and the son from the University, would be the time to talk it over. And he would have a whole night to think about what to say.

One thing worried him above all else.

Would his son believe him? Could his son, or anybody looking at him today, believe that this Ernesto Marroné, financial manager of the country's most thriving real estate and construction company, had once hid in the lawless shadows, had called himself an enemy of the very society that now sheltered him, had not only raised his voice but aimed his weapons against so called injustices, which his endeavors had in any case only worsened?

That night, Ernesto Marroné did not sleep.

He lay wide awake, hands behind his head, eyes fixed on a spot on the ceiling where the streetlights, wind and twisted branches conspired to cast phantasmagoric shadows, letting the memories wash over him. There he watched from start to end the film of his rebellious past; the film that, for him at least, had started sixteen years ago, the evening he had been summoned for the first time to the basement of the Paseo Colón building, to the subterranean complex the president always referred to by the poetic and Wagnerian name of Nibelheim, but which all the employees called, more familiarly, Tamerlán's bunker.

THE FINGER OF TAMERLÁN

Chapter 1

"Señor Tamerlán's kidnappers have made fresh demands, Señor Marroné."

Sitting in front of the desk, Marroné let his eyes slide over the polished scalp of the accountant Govianus, who rarely looked up, preferring to follow the vague gestures of his own listless hands. Just hours after the news of Señor Tamerlán's kidnapping by the subversive Peronist organization the Montoneros had been confirmed, Govianus had taken possession of the imposing metal desk, resembling a safe on its side, and of the immense sealed vault in which it stood. From there, he'd taken charge of the negotiations over the last six months coordinating with the victim's family, but 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 initials 'FT' delicately engraved on the barrel seemed too big for his fingers. A dwarf, Govianus reminded him of a dwarf, a bald and bespectacled dwarf usurping a giant's realm.

"What do they want now? More money?"

"If only, Marroné, if only. Sometimes I wish the mafia would do the kidnapping in this country. At least with them you know where you are. We speak the same language. But all this about improving conditions for our workers – always the workers, mind you, they couldn't care less about the office staff, as if we never suffer – welcoming with open arms the worker's reps we'd kicked out the day before, handing out food in the slums... Give me a break! Do you know what they're asking for now? Wait till you hear the latest! They want us to put a bust of Eva Perón in every single one of our offices, they even want us to put one in here. Can you imagine anything more ridiculous?"

Marroné declined to answer as he was already working out in his head how many busts it would take to fill the new order. Eighth floor, the *Valhalla*, a conference room and two more offices; seventh floor, nine offices, hallway...

"The reception areas as well?"

"What do I know. Let's say so, just in case. Maybe they want her in the washrooms too, so she can watch us piss. I swear, Marroné, I've just about had enough. First Señor Fuchs, may he rest in peace, now Señor Tamerlán... Are we the only company in the country with presidents to kidnap? These kids should get themselves a proper system, like crop rotation. I'm telling you, they've got it in for us. Even though our entire staff is one hundred percent Argentinean. Fuchs got his citizenship ages ago, and Señor Tamerlán's lived here since he was ten. He arrived in the country on the October seventeenth, nineteen forty-five, of all days ... But these kids know nothing about history. Oh well. As long as they don't go and torch us, like they do to foreign companies..."

Govianus obviously needed to let off steam, and Marroné instantly recalled number four of the "Six ways to make people like you" listed in his well-thumbed copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: "Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves."

"But you and your family have good security, don't you?"

"Unfortunately. Do you know what it's like living with security guards twenty-four hours a day? One of them never flushes the toilet. Bit by bit they're taking over the whole house. Now they've got their hands on the remote control. Imagine: *Mod Squad*, *Police Woman*, *Starsky and Hutch*... at least there's a match on every once in a while. My wife and I had to buy another set for the bedroom. And no one dares ring the doorbell anymore. The other day they held the soda-man at gunpoint and made him drink a glass from each of the siphons he'd brought. Just in case someone was trying to poison me, they explained afterwards. You could hear the belch in Burzaco. But my problems are insignificant compared to Señor Tamerlán's. Time is running out, Señor Marroné. It's been six months. The kidnapers are losing patience. Look."

Govianus held out one of those rectangular stainless steel boxes used to keep syringes sterile, with a thin film of frost glistening on the surface. Marroné took it from his hands. It was ice cold, as if it had just come out of the freezer.

"Open it, open it."

Marroné tried but the box was frozen shut and his fingers kept slipping. Finally, wedging his nail under the rim he managed to prise it open. The moment he saw the contents he shrieked and flung it all up into the air.

"A finger! It's a finger!"

“Of course it’s a finger, Marroné! It’s Señor Tamerlán’s finger! Just be thankful its owner isn’t here to see how you’re treating it. Right then, don’t just stand there gawking. Come on, help me look for it.”

[..]

Translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean and the author

The Islands

from Chapter 1

Alone, I took stock of my new surroundings. Nosing around hadn't been explicitly banned, and growing restless I strolled towards the imposing central desk: a half -circle of thick tempered crystal set into three massive boulders. At one of its ends a small city of monitors and computer terminals, FAX machines and printers glowed and blipped and poured out rustling sheaves of printed paper. Objects of a more personal kind littered the other end: a whip, exquisitely inlaid in silver in the gaucho style; a tray of white sand raked in sinuous shapes around three tiny grey rocks; an ombú bonsai, beautifully executed except for the leaves, which were almost natural size - all ombú bonsai fail at this- set in an astoundingly faithful rendering of the boundless pampas. But what really caught my eye was an acrylic prism the size of a gold ingot, encased in what appeared as a large and opaque body. It must have been some twelve inches long and as thick as my wrist, uniformly brown and rather rough in texture: pointed, with a little tail, at one end, blunt with a pebbly relief at the other. I held it up to the light, rotating it in my fingers to better appreciate its iridescent sheen. Strange, I thought, seeing it so anyone would take it for...

"A turd".

I turned without surprise, still holding aloft the object in question. He was right, of course. A veritable masterpiece: not a bubble, not a crevice to mar the perfect joining of the opaque and the crystalline medium. Smiling, I handed it over to Mr. Tamerlán.

"A very fine piece."

"And useful", he added. "Whoever drops it in disgust after discovering its nature has done little to deserve my esteem. It's a moral barometer for the squeamish at heart. Even when forewarned and mentally prepared something always gives them away. I read body language well, and the hand that holds the turd never lies". He raised it up high, rotating it in his deft fingers to show off the beauty of the carving. Only then, for the first time, he turned his eye on me. "You have passed the test".

"And if I hadn't?"

He had rested his cheek on the ingot and dreamily closed his eyes. Eyes blue as an acetylene flame.

"Once, someone let it fall", he caressed, with a single fingernail, a notch on an edge. His cheeks were unshaven, and his opal-coloured shirt hung loosely over his prominent paunch, the underside of which he absently scratched.

"What happened to him?"

"I take it you understand this is not just any turd", he returned it to the desk, not letting go, leaning his full weight on it. "It is of great sentimental value. I could almost say it is worth its own weight in gold, were it not for the fact that its value is incalculably greater. Don't bother risking a sum. It is the seed, the bulb, the bud from which everything you see around us, my castle, has sprung. I must in the first place explain that it is *my* turd we are talking about, created by my body, my blood, my cells, my intestines - that perfect, unfathomably complex piece of machinery. Any industrial process, however elaborate, pales in comparison. Not even your latest generation computer could even approximate this miracle that our body performs for us, in humble obscurity, every day. But we are not talking about any day, any turd. The night that made me, that is what is preserved in this crystal sarcophagus, this casket wherein my fondest memories are stored. As you have proved worthy, I'll open it for you. My partner - you might have heard, or read, of his tabloid fate. It took me years. It wasn't easy, as it is for those of your trade - clean hands altering reality by pushing a button. No. It was long and complex and painful. Firstly I had to get him out of the way for a while, to ensure that the direction of Tamerlán and Sons - it went by another name then - would come to rest solely in my hands. Then I had to bury my head in paperwork, paperwork, paperwork, and convince people, people, people, buying dear and selling cheap, obsequiously paying back favours I had never received to those who deserved no better than a bullet in the head. Never did I sink so low, never festered so permanently the taste of humiliation in my mouth, but it was worth it, I relished every bit, because it was the end. When I made it, when the control of the firm had tilted, oh so imperceptibly, but undoubtedly and securely, to *my* side, I celebrated with a lavish dinner, alone - I had no-one to thank but myself. I was humming contentedly through the third course when I received news of his death. Then, and only then, I had the chalice and the gold chamber pot brought over. Gold, Mr. Félix, has been the basis of the family fortune, which stretches back to my father alone. We had it with us when, after escaping from a devastated and hostile Europe, we reached these shores, and spent most of it in establishing the empire stretching beneath you. But an infinitesimal part was saved - as a memento - in the chalice which that night like no other I held aloft. Its bottom was full of gold... nuggets, let's call them, which had passed directly into my hands when an accident took away my father's life and placed me helpless in those of his partner - a man who took advantage of my pain and youth to put them all over everything, including my body, sparing the chalice alone. I drank its content in one great gulp, washing it down with the most expensive brand of champagne, and experienced the unprecedented pleasure, inconceivable to the likes of you, of smooth nuggets cascading down my throat as down the bed of a pure mountain stream. A few hours later, and for the first time in years, the years I had lived constrained by fear of that monster, I shat with an exquisite loosening of the bowels, I shat that magnificent and endless turd you can now appreciate instead of the timid constipated balls which had always fallen into the toilet bowl with that puny pebbly noise which never failed to bring tears of humiliation to my eyes.

He opened them, staring at me fixedly.

"My son has killed", he said. "In this very room. He threw the body out of that window", he added, pointing at the one behind me, "five nights ago. So that you may know your mission", he said, "you have been awarded this privilege. To enter the heart of the diamond."

The moment had come to show I was worthy of the honour.

"You want me to erase all data from the police files. To mess up the investigation. No big deal. Rather below my abilities, if you ask..."

"You're not really human, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You've got insect eyes. Dead eyes, connected to the brain alone. The eyes of the living follow the heartbeats, on and off. Not yours. They've got a constant frequency, mechanical. Zzzzzzzzzzzzz. Like a buzzing. A humming. Just like mine. Just like my son's. That's why my

less fortunate employees must wear mirrorshades in presence of their inferiors. It aids ruthlessness.

"During the war...", I began.

"I'm in no mood for soap operas", his words cut into mine. "Besides, there wasn't any war. In a real war fortunes are made, and lost. If it were that easy", he continued, reminding me he had never really changed the subject, "we would've done it ourselves. But the whole system is sealed off. One has to enter in the flesh, use *their* machines. If you are any good you must've guessed it's not the police I'm talking about. Tell me all about your war now and I might listen. I know you haven't lost all your contacts."

He had extracted a large cigar from a translucent drawer and placed it lengthwise on the acrylic prism where the heroic turd had begun its million year sleep, like an insect in amber. I tried to make out in the suggestive glint of its relief the hidden presence of the gold nuggets, but to no avail; from the outside it was indistinguishable from a - a pauper's turd, let's say. Indifferent to the craning of my neck Mr. Tamerlán was comparing both lengths before loping off with a silver guillotine the tip of the cigar, which he chewed on before lighting. In great strides he measured his domains up to the murder window, where he froze in photomontage silhouette against the silver plate of the river, a painted canvas in which nothing moved except a cargo ship crawling upriver. Below us yellow bulldozers were kneading mounds of refuse, spreading it in layers over the yielding reeds of the reservation.

"Thirty floors", he finally said, exhaling. The slight nausea I had felt was beginning to wane and I started to envy his portly cigar, wishing he would offer me one too. "The body fell thirty floors down and left a crater in the new grass. We had to replace it. The grass. And the glass. Those over there", he pointed, "saw it happen. He did it on purpose, of course. He *wanted* them to see."

His finger was pointing at the razor-like edge of the silver tower, as if daring it to breach the minimal gap and cut him. If there were people watching when Mr. Tamerlán's son pushed his man through the window it must have been like watching it at home on TV.

Mr. Tamerlán dismissed our neighbour with an unimpressed gesture of contempt.

"It was my partner, peace be to his bones wherever they may lay, who first thought of the twin towers he would never live to see except on paper. They were meant to symbolise our society; mine, of course, would've been the poor relative. For old times' sake I decided not to improve on his project - after all, it suited what I had in mind for my two sons; but fate pulled a fast one on me too: my eldest son died, and it is now his abject brother, who had only to add murder to the list of his iniquities, who will inherit all. For the time being most of the office space," he said, returning to the topic of the silver tower, "is leased out, but as the project of the new capital city gets under way we will gradually reclaim it. I won't allow twenty-five persons who weren't wise enough to look the other way when common sense demanded, to endanger my dream. Their names, together with all other relevant data, is what you will obtain from the intelligence files and hand over to me. In return..."

"How do you know they have them?" I dared interrupt. "Your son..." I hesitated, amended, "If it is a common law crime..."

"Common law does not apply to us" he sneered, "and it is not him they are after. They are merely hustling the queen to checkmate the king. For the time being my influence is sufficient to keep it all hushed up. But I can hear them carrying on in the dark, biding their time, until they can use it against me, or against him, after the succession - he's got his weak spots, which they know about.

"What will you do about them?"

He flung his arms out to the heavens, tracing a dead arc of ashes in the air. "What a question! What *can* one do about them? If I took care of them, others would immediately take their place. When you realise you can't manage everything on your own you rely on service.

And they start treasuring their little secrets, putting their voodoo doll together with bits and pieces lifted from the floor, and will then use that doll to try and influence..."

"I was talking about the witnesses," I explained, following him two steps behind back to the desk.

"What about them?"

"What do you want their names for?"

"To bribe them, of course. Money, green cards for U.S., government posts, whatever they want. When my enemies turn to them, they'll be gone. I'll find out who they are, what makes them happy, and deliver. Santa Claus-like. It'll be cheap and easy. I've set a price."

"On them?"

"On you. A hundred thousand dollars."

I had often been told that in the U.S. I could fetch that much, if not more. But this was the first real bid. I mentally tried to turn it into an abstract cipher, no more than six digits under my name on a screen, something that could be deleted by the slight pressure on a button. All because I knew that such a number stretched beyond the ordinary reach of my willpower, would not be casually thought away, that it would pluck the "yes" from my lips with the ease of a dermatologist pressing out a blackhead between two thumbs. A hundred thousand dollars could take over and decide for me.

"You needn't answer right now," my master's voice awoke me, "or ever, because I already know the answer."

"I wasn't expecting that much", I admitted.

"You have no real motivations in life", he stated. "Someone like you cannot be tempted by the image of the material welfare or security money can temporarily buy. Only its pure brute presence can impress you. And money achieves such purity only in great quantity. You'll receive a down-payment today. Twenty-five names", he specified, "will get you the rest. How you come by them is none of my business, as long as you make sure they are all there. If this weren't the case, it would certainly spell trouble for my son, and ruin for you".

He used the silver guillotine to carefully clip off an ombú leaf which had reached an unadvisable size. He picked the thick healthy leaf from where it had fallen on the glass surface and twirled it between thumb and forefinger into a blur, a green tongue of flame raised by their friction.

"My first son's life was nipped in the bud. He had everything it took to be my successor, to extend my domains in space and prolong them in time. My second son on the other hand has nothing, you'll see by yourself when you meet him. He's simply a pale reflection of his brother, who had come to be a faithful reflection of his father, allowing for the imperfections every copy entails. This one is the fruit of his mother's foolish whim, who would insist in having her own doll to play with while I was engrossed in shaping my heir. A happy caprice - once again proving it's always good to have a replacement in handy, even if it is not the right one."

"Who was it he killed?" I suddenly asked.

He stared at me in disbelief, as if I had just landed in his lobster sauce and lay there buzzing.

"What?"

"Your s-s-son", I stammered. "You said he murdered somebody. Who was the ill... ah... unlucky one?"

"What on earth could that matter?"

"Er..." I had at first considered it a rather sensible question, but he was now making me doubt. "I thought it might help to locate the witnesses, to... Your son's name may not appear in the file. Suspects of substance often have their names coded for added protection, and that of the deceased might offer a readier pathway," I concluded, congratulating myself for my rush of resourcefulness, but I appeared to be the only one impressed. He lashed:

"Nobody knows. My son's natural inclination to perversity led him to commit his crime in front of an audience," he pointed once again at the neighbouring tower. "But he was smart enough not to murder a celebrity. One of the reasons, incidentally, why things haven't come to a head so far. The police don't know. I don't know. But there is a body out there somewhere, and it might be knocking on our door any moment now: swollen like a dead seal by river water, sprouting miraculously out of the bulldozed refuse, scattered in flapping polystyrene bags - but still recognisable in the glass slivers embedded in its face, ruptured internal organs and the general lassitude of a body with no unbroken bones in it. I'm not talking probabilities. I'm talking blackmail.

His hand held out a printed strip of continuous paper which took me but a minute to read.

*Give me a map: then let me see how much
Is left for me to conquer all the world,
That these, my boys, may finish all my wants.*

"I found it under my acrylic prism the morning after. It appears to be a fragment from a verse play which my people have been so far unable to trace - not literary types, I'm afraid."

"What makes you think it came from a blackmailer?"

"Who else would leave a poem on my desk? He, or they, will have probably established the identity of the body by now."

"What about your son?"

"What about him?"

"I don't mean to pry, but it seems hardly likely he would kill a total stranger."

"He meant to make his acquaintance up here, it would seem. He says he never thought of asking for the name, well, you know about these things."

I didn't, but felt it unwise to contradict him.

"Not one of the witnesses saw his face. He took his daredevil leap into space backwards, allowing them only to notice the outstanding quality of his garments. What's even stranger, when Security reached the spot, the body had vanished. Not on its own feet, as you can imagine. Is it finally dawning on you? This was no accident. Somebody set a baited trap for my son, and he walked right into it. And whatever the identity of the bait, it's not hard to see it was a fruit."

"Indeed".

"Just like my son", he went on. "He had made up his mind to get buggered in my office. He seems to like it best up here, I wonder why. I once came in late at night and found him in Mambo Queen drag. It must have something to do with humiliation, I suppose the closer to the summit the more intense it gets. Masochists are a mystery which I never tire of exploring."

Something imperceptible had changed in his demeanour. His eyes had turned inwards, as if drawn by images more pleasing than those of the outside world. His lower jaw dropping slightly open, the pink tortoise tongue emerging between the bony lips, his thighs rippling with suppressed desire, he spoke with a tremor in his voice.

"I can call him in now, if you'd like to meet him".

Translation from the Spanish by Ian Barnett and the author
