

This book is for all those who welcomed me into their homes and hearts in Peru, Bolivia and Chile: the Mapuche community on the shores of the lagoon in Araucanía with whom I rode on horseback along the Pacific coast; Fortunata and her Quechua family on the island of Amantaní in the middle of Lake Titicaca; the Boras Indians in their houses on stilts in the shallows of the River Amazon. Also for the miners of Potosí who led me on hands and knees deep into the Bolivian earth; for the weavers' co-operative at Cuzco; and for Rosa and Adelina, my intrepid guides through the shanty-towns of Lima.

1

The outskirts of Santiago had been harrowing enough, with their plywood shanties, barefoot children and mothers in rags collecting fallen cabbage-leaves from the costermongers' barrows, and rotten pawpaws and apples thrown by the venders into the gutter. In Lima, from the back of the cab on its way south from the centre, the view might have been out of Hieronymus Bosch or the younger Brueghel: a vision of hell. Barely clothed men, women and children, their faces, arms and legs covered in sores, lay weakened from hunger in the ruins of houses they had neither the means nor the energy to rebuild after the earthquakes that periodically and without warning shake Lima to pieces. Those who were less ill and a little stronger had managed to dislodge paving-stones from what had once been a pavement to provide material for the reconstruction work they would never finish. The collapsed houses were no longer recognized as homes by the council, the taxi-driver told his fare, the shanties were not officially listed, no rates were paid and no refuse collected. The traveller peered out at the mountains of rubbish on the streets and remains of pavements, towering higher than the few buildings left standing. Rats kept an eye open for dogs as they feasted on the refuse side by side with men, women and children who were collecting it to burn. The emaciated mongrels lived on the streets where they were born, the driver went on, colouring in those details of privation that his client hadn't yet seen for himself; when they grew too weak to catch rats, they would die in the gutter, to be eaten by those who were still just alive, or bundled into plastic bags by no less starving human beings and taken away to be cooked for supper over fires of acrid refuse. Old men and women, weak from disease and hunger, were publicly robbed by gangs of children of the little food they had managed to buy. The same gangs would raid the colourful tin-plated buses as soon as the doors opened at a stop and strip passengers at knifepoint of their valuables. The unlocked doors or boots of cars that were still moving were opened and the contents snatched; locked cars had their wing-mirrors torn off, so that they could be sold for a few coins to garages and scrap merchants; those that pulled up promptly lost their wheels.

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The taxi slowed down. 'This is as far as I'm going,' said the driver. 'It's getting too dangerous. Even the buses don't come as far as this. Are you sure you don't want me to take you back to the centre?'

The traveller hesitated. A part of him longed to get away from this world of Brueghel and Bosch but he had a mission to accomplish. He paid the *mestizo* his ten-*sol* fare, which would have been more than twenty times the amount in Europe or North America, and gave him an extra two *soles* for his care and concern. The driver shook his passenger's hand, unlocked the door to let him out, turned his much-dented 1980s black Mercedes round and headed back towards the centre.

The stranger in his casual but smart new clothes, with his pristine canvas bag and oddly shaped black case, was conscious of being watched by hundreds of pairs of eyes as he stood beside the road wondering what to do next. The eyes were averted a split second before they met his, but he knew they would be fixed on him again as soon as he looked away. Indecision was fatal, he thought. He noticed two barefoot eleven- or twelve-year-old boys in what was left of a doorway a little way off. He walked over to them purposefully and asked if they knew Father Lorenzo.

'¿El comedor?' asked one of the boys.

The stranger didn't know if Lorenzo worked in a soup kitchen or not but anything was better than standing around in this unsafe place with its overpowering stench of refuse and diesel fumes. He nodded.

The boy waved in what seemed to be the direction of the Pacific Ocean.

'I'll give you ten *soles* each if you take me there.'

The two boys' eyes grew wider. 'Let's see the money,' said the bolder of the two.

The traveller managed to get two ten-*sol* notes out of his purse without taking the purse from his pocket and letting the boys see the larger-denomination notes it also held.

The boys led the way across the thoroughfare and up a sandy dirt road on to what the traveller guessed were dunes. Here he had a view eastwards for two or three kilometres of hundreds of tightly packed cardboard shelters. Behind them, beyond the dunes, he could see the mist that always hangs over the Pacific coast during autumn and winter. There was no one about: the cardboard-city-dwellers were either inside their shanties or searching for food and fuel back in Bosch-and-Brueghel-Land. There were no piles of rubbish. The only smell was of the sea.

'Can we carry your bags?' asked the boy who did the talking.

The traveller had been warned: let go of your bags in Peru and you would never see them again. 'No thanks. It's kind of you but I'm paying you to lead the way, not carry my luggage.'

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The boys walked on, treading over sharp stones in bare soles that must have been as thick as leather. Their shorts and T-shirts were torn and their arms and legs as thin as sticks, but their black hair was silky and thick in spite of their undernourishment, and their skin was like polished mahogany.

As he followed them along the dirt road, the traveller became aware of different categories of shanty. One- and two-star dwellings were made entirely of cardboard: cardboard walls and a cardboard roof, with a cardboard flap for a door. Three-star shanties had plywood instead of cardboard walls. Four stars were for plywood walls with a rusty corrugated-metal roof, five for plywood walls, a corrugated roof, a hinged door and window openings cut out of the plywood, with clear plastic squares for glass. Many of the shanties were painted in vivid colours – lime-green, canary yellow, scarlet, azure – with paint obtained from goodness knows where.

The traveller had been walking for fifteen or twenty minutes. The rhythm, and the pleasant warmth of the sun, had lulled him into a sense of semi-security, so that he was no longer thinking only about his two guides, the poverty around him and the possible dangers he faced. His mind was replaying the events of the day. It was now late afternoon – early afternoon in Spanish-speaking countries, where things only get started again at five or five thirty after lunch and the siesta. Less than six hours ago he was still two and a half thousand kilometres away, at Santiago in Chile. Eight hours ago he hadn't even heard of Father Lorenzo and had no plan to come to Lima. Then there was the flight north with all the way a view from his window seat of the highest peaks of the Andes. And Jorge Chávez Airport with its crowds of thieves and unsafe taxi-drivers.

The three walkers had come to a crossing of the ways. The two boys turned left and the traveller followed them. Hundreds – thousands – more shanties stretched into the distance. His chief guide waved towards a five-star construction fifty metres ahead that had all the appearance with its high walls and its transverse windows close to the corrugated roof of a public shower-room or lavatory.

The traveller stopped, seized with fear. The boys had never heard of Father Lorenzo and there was no *comedor*. They had brought him to this remote spot where their gang had its headquarters. The guide would whistle and another dozen boys would appear from among the shanties, armed with knives. They would march him into the shower-room, stab him a hundred times and make off with his money, passport and luggage.

2

*All my love is here:
as the rocks are to the sea,
so is my love to their memory.*

The words are in Spanish, engraved boldly along the top edge of a wall ten metres tall by thirty wide. Under them, in letters a fraction of the size, are the names of tens of thousands of *desaparecidos*, those who disappeared in Chile between 1973 and the 1990s: vanished men and women, boys and girls, whose reappearance after ten, twenty, thirty years remains a dim hope in the dreams of mothers, fathers, sisters, wives. The wall, as fresh as the memory of those it commemorates, stands in the main cemetery, the *Cementerio General*, of Santiago.

The traveller with his canvas bag and black case stood in front of the wall, at a distance that allowed him to survey it from end to end while still being able to read the names of all those sons, daughters, brothers, husbands for whom a light over the door is always left on at night. He was in his late fifties and wore casual straw-coloured trousers, a pale green smock and a straw sun-hat. The hair that covered half his neck and ears was more brown than grey, and he had the figure of a much younger man, but the loose skin and tissue on his face and neck, which suggested a dramatic loss of body mass, and the furrows and pockets made by the sag, had added the years back on. He read the words above the lists of names and translated them without hesitation into English, his lips moving voicelessly as he did so.

Out of a corner of his eye he noticed a man in green overalls watching him from the grass verge of the path leading from the wall to the main part of the cemetery. He was holding a rake: the month was May, the season autumn, and his job was to fight a losing battle against the falling leaves. The visitor continued to run his eyes down the columns of names.

‘Have you come to bury your cat or dog?’ The man in green had approached and was addressing the stranger in educated Spanish. The visitor looked round and saw a pair of large, black, intelligent eyes in a delicately structured face, thin, elegant hands and a shiny, tanned head with a rim of white hair. The gardener was pointing at the case in the stranger’s hand, which was a little the shape of a small coffin.

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Bafflement. Then it clicked. He laughed and held the case up for a moment to consider its shape. 'No cat or dog. And no machine-gun either.'

The gardener cast a quick glance at the backs of the group photographing the wall. The visitor caught a hint of alarm in his eyes. No one looked round: tourists probably, with a dozen words of Spanish between them.

'Have you always worked here?' asked the visitor.

'For nearly thirty years.'

'A steadfast gardener. And yet you seem... It doesn't matter.'

The gardener edged the stranger away from the wall. 'You're obviously a well-educated man,' he said quietly. 'I don't get much intelligent conversation. It's like manna from heaven. The other gardeners are decent enough fellows but our exchanges start and stop with the weather.'

The visitor was puzzled. 'If it's intelligent conversation you need, why—?'

'Because I have no choice.'

The gardener took him by the arm and led him slowly away from the group and along the path.

'I can trust you,' he said. 'You're not Chilean. In Chile today friends grass on friends, parents on their own children, children on parents.'

'What have you done wrong?'

'Nothing. Just the reverse. I supported Allende for the presidency in the early seventies. You may not be a Communist yourself, *señor*, but then you have probably never known the injustice and inequality that grow like weeds in Chile. Allende would have rooted them out after his massive election victory.'

'Allende was a hero all over the world,' the visitor assured him.

The gardener brandished his rake as if to attack the leaves falling like injustices and inequalities just after he had raked the grass clean. He used it to point at a bed of brightly coloured flowers. 'If the University Chancellor hadn't liked my work, and if he hadn't also been a relative of our military despot and usurper, I would be feeding the roots of those chrysanthemums over there from below, instead of watering them from above.'

'What work? Your work as a gardener?'

'At thirty I was already Head of the Department of Botany at Santiago University.'

The visitor would have been surprised if his articulate companion had always been a gardener but the violent change of fortune shocked him. 'All that's in the past, isn't it?' he said after a pause. 'Why aren't you back at the University?'

The ex-academic shook his head. 'Today's régime would like the world to think that it's all in the past. That's why they put up the wall you were looking at: for the eyes of the world. Not for Chileans. Fewer than ten per cent of the names are on that wall. It would have to be fifteen or twenty times the size to include everyone. And the list is still growing.'

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The path was no longer bordered by flowers and cypresses now but by tombs: vast, grandiose, marble sepulchres that defied anyone to say that death is a leveller. The occupants of these palaces of the dead had taken their status with them into eternity.

‘Chile has always been in the stranglehold of a small landowning élite,’ the professor went on. ‘Ninety-eight per cent of the land in the hands of two per cent of the population. Who was the first to dare attempt a radical redistribution of land, do you think?’

‘Salvador Allende?’

‘Exactly. For the landowners of Chile Allende was Satan. They were ready to hang, draw, quarter, crucify and garrotte him. One of their tribe, a creature by the name of Pinochet, did the job for them, with a great deal of help from the United States. Do you know how?’

‘He bombed the presidential palace and peppered your elected President with machine-gun bullets.’

‘You know our history as well as I do, *señor*. For twenty years the usurper defied the world and held Chile in his coils. Why, do you suppose? How?’

‘Thanks to the army, presumably. That’s how it usually is.’

‘The landowners have always been cunning enough to send one or two sons into the forces. As a result, all the senior officers belong to the landowning élite... It’s all in the past, you say, my friend. Why then, do you imagine, was Pinochet never brought to justice when he was extradited to Chile a few years ago?’

‘Because the important posts in the new government are also held by landowners,’ suggested the visitor, who was now fully drawn into the professor’s catechism.

‘Precisely. If any lawyer declared his intention of indicting the tyrant for crimes against humanity, he would be found in a ditch a few days later with his throat cut. Look at these tombs! This is where Chile’s landowners reside when they die. The rest of us are cremated, if we haven’t already been thrown down a disused mine-shaft by the secret police. We have to content ourselves with cubicles.’

The two men came to a crossroads and turned left on to a path that took them between rows of what to a child’s mind might be apartment blocks for dolls: row upon row, storey upon storey of squares smaller than the doors of left-luggage lockers, each with a name-tag like a post-office box, many of them with a posy of plastic flowers wired to the handle.

‘When an earthquake strikes this part of Santiago, the tombs collapse and the rotting corpses of the rich are disgorged like infected food on to the grass and paths and among the laurels and cypresses. The tombs are rebuilt by the landowning families, their decaying relatives are laid in fresh coffins, and everything returns to normal – that is to say to corruption and social injustice.’

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The professor emphasized his last few words by lunging with his rake, hoping perhaps to spear corruption and injustice as they slithered across the grass like vipers.

'You're taking a bit of a risk telling all this to a stranger,' said the visitor. 'I could be working for the CIA.'

That hint of alarm again in the professor's eyes. Then he shrugged and gave a bitter laugh. 'Would it matter if they cut my throat? I've wasted my life. I could have made my name internationally as a botanist. What better place to work than this part of South America, with Amazonia and the Galapagos on my doorstep? Thousands of species still undiscovered: I could have given my name to a flower or tree.'

'Why didn't you go abroad?'

'Because my place was in Chile,' the professor replied fiercely, 'helping other sympathizers escape the fangs of that cunning monster.'

'Then you haven't wasted your life. You've helped save the lives of others. In any case, it's never too late to start again. I... I know from personal ...'

The glazed look disappeared from the professor's eyes as he returned from what could have been to what was, and looked into his companion's face. 'I'm sorry, *señor*. I need to get these things off my chest sometimes. I've led you half a kilometre from the wall. You were looking for a name.'

The ten-minute walk had brought the two men to the main gate of the cemetery.

'I don't know if I'll find it on the wall,' said the visitor. 'I'm trying to trace a Mapuche from Araucanía. He would be almost forty now. I can't remember his full name. It was long and unpronounceable. I would recognize it if I saw it. He called himself Mawi.'

The professor paused for a moment, then said: 'You can save yourself the trouble of reading through all those lists. You won't find his name there. The story made headlines in the underground press in Chile and in the main newspapers in the rest of South America. Everyone who was reading those papers twenty years ago will remember Mawi.'

'How do I find him?'

'There's a priest who knows the story better than anyone. He used to live in Santiago but he escaped to Peru just before DINA, the secret police, came knocking on his door.'

'Where is he now?'

'He went to work in a shanty-town in Lima: El Salvador. Lorenzo is his name: Father Lorenzo.'

The visitor shook the gardener-professor warmly by the hand, promised to invite him to dinner to hear his own story next time he was in Santiago, and walked briskly through the main gate. He stopped for a moment to glance up

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at Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Andes, towering seven thousand metres above Santiago, white against the azure sky, then hailed a taxi. Half an hour later he was at the Lan Chile counter at Arturo Merino Benítez Airport buying a ticket to Lima. Another two hours and his aircraft was taxiing to the runway for the four-hour flight to the Peruvian capital.