

**LA PINOCHETA**



by **SARAH MURPHY**

DUTTON

Early March, 2000. I sit with you less than one month from your death, though I do not know it yet, to watch the blonde reporter, microphone in hand, taking up the screen. Then a rapid switch to General Pinochet boarding a plane to leave England, his memory too compromised, it has been decided—at least that's what they're saying—to stand trial. While what I find myself remembering, looking at the General, is people remembering. Talk to you about it. Remembering all those years of translating people remembering. People whose memories—and whose dreams—were compromised by failure to forget. Wondering, puffing out my breath, leaning my head back, if the General's body remembers. Like so many other people's. If his nightmares ever overpower him even if he doesn't know where they are from. As I speculate on the nature of memory.

Those things we do not know. The way you will call me to say, the day before your death, I am afraid. I am afraid. I have been holding conversations with people I have not seen in thirty years. And I will answer, still chipper, perky, enough to remind myself of this reporter I see on the screen—I think I will think of her—that it is the Demerol. Adding with authority—as if I knew anything at all about the drug—synthetics tend to do that. While as we watch General Pinochet, it is simpler, this line of story, the door of memory opening on a housing development in southwest Calgary: small, brief, intense, squeezed between a strip mall and new upscale housing, as close as this city comes to a slum.

There is a blonde reporter here too, interviewing another woman—as dark haired as you before the grey—who walks over to the bench in front of the houses, sighs, sits down. The early spring sun shining brilliant to darken the shadows on her face. The dark bold circles around her eyes. Then there is how she sits. Smoothing her hands across her lap as if their rubbing could do anything to ameliorate the cold entering where her body touches the concrete. Shivering like in that car she begins to whisper of. The nausea rising as the other woman readies the camera. While I squat in front of her, running my hand along the bench, the grey bumps in imitation of carved stone, feeling too the rising cold.

I do not remember, even to tell you, who it is that has called me there. Whether it is the television station, aware of my work as a translator, or, perhaps, the community of Chileans in exile. This woman's community. Those who have been organizing for years to speak to the horror of death and torture when the powerful of the world cannot be called upon to intervene. When the powerful of the world may be the root cause of such horrors. A community who know my many translations of long and painful torture testimonials, and of the verifying testimony of torturers.

But I do remember the building. After all, we have passed it often, going to the Joey's Only where we still try, at least once a week, to have breakfast out. A tradition from before you became disabled. Meeting at the

end of your first shift, before my first class. And though I have not always seen her face or remembered how quickly she told me her story, staring at the square building in front of her, I've always remembered how all the Chileans called it La Pincoya for a shanty town in Santiago, for how so many of them lived there, in that building, poor, when they first arrived. Always laughing with that brittle gallows humour that fuelled the gaiety of the coffee houses, the peñas of those days. Though I cannot laugh looking at the face of General Pinochet. I have no humour to equal this, this return for lack of memory to a country that however much it tries cannot forget. I wonder what the Chileans might find to laugh at

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in the further adventures of their Pinocchio whose lies never lengthened his nose: what got longer was the list of those jailed, missing, dead. Something I do say to you, and squeeze your hand.

General Pinochet descends the steps of his plane, safe on Chilean soil, his followers cheering him. While I remember a desperate woman on a plane ride north, the rushing winter wind in her words as she tried to explain: how she could barely look out the window, barely speak, could not stop from crying. How she and her husband fled with their young family after her 20 hours alone in the car she can only whisper of. With the secret police who beat and humiliated her. To stop her work at the daycare centre for the children of los desaparecidos, the missing, the disappeared.

And then there is how she swears me to secrecy. This is what sets the brittle bright tone of the day. Makes it jangle as from a blow. The way my days will soon start to jangle, just as overly bright, constructing a secret whose nature I do not yet understand.

At first, quickly, the blonde reporter will fire questions at me, her voice awkward, tentative. Full of the ahhs and umms, the neologisms of the street. Where exactly is Chile? What is its form of government? Like, you know, it's a dictatorship, right? Then asking for the name of its dictator. The date of the coup. The nature of current Canadian refugee law. Other questions to me yet intended for the woman beside me: her background, her personal experience with hunger, with repression, with resistance. Then suddenly the show is on.

That's why I remember all this, watching the television. Why I tell you about it almost giggling. Because, the camera on, the reporter speaks without pauses, without awkward breaks, the facts which a moment before she did not know flowing smooth from her mouth. As if she

had always known them: just part of the seamless fabric of every day. Her blonde buoyant reporter's presence, perky with the sun on her face, like the one on the screen before me now, informing us the world is intact. How bright the teeth the hair the sun. The news. The products to make them brighter. How easily we feel in her voice, that we know the world and control it. Not our oyster but our backdrop. While we, of course, are safe.

Always safe.

I squeeze your dry hand again before I comment on this paradox. That in laughing at this false sense of safety these reporters create, I affirm it. Safe now,

too. The world in place. All of us as safe within our instant knowledge as General Pinochet is in his forgetting. This knowledge perhaps a form of forgetting. A shifting of memory into that place where it has no affect. Or effect. Attaches to nothing. News as costuming.

Yet it has never been the reporter's perky soothing voice that surprises me so much. That makes me talk of frames within frames as I speak to you. What still amazes me is my own voice off-camera. Repeating low and steady the story the woman beside me tells. The first visit to the daycare from the secret police. The second when they dragged her out by the hair. The long hours in the car. The interrogation. The beating. Then, the sudden ache in the pit of the stomach for what she will not tell, what she makes me promise not to say: how they raped her. How they made fun of her body. Over and over. How she felt herself to be the ugliest woman in the world. She whispered that: *Me sentí la mujer más fea del mundo.*

I will wonder, the ache in the stomach there still, what it is that does that. What dictates the boundary of the unsayable, tells us its location, instructs us what is not for public consumption. The place where the voice breaks to fill us with fear or shame. Even if we may know our story is worthy, could change the shape of the world. Help to change it.

With you I speak of underground knowledge, how the reporter did not even know to ask. Horribly enough an immigration official would have. Probably had asked at her hearing to determine eligibility for refugee status.

Where, We must be specific about torture, is a litany. Because it puts together a record. A catalogue of torture methods that profiles a country the way the police profile a psychotic killer. Until they can tell where you're from—and your legitimacy—from knowing what was done to you. Were you raped is one of the easier questions. While the reporter just wishes to keep the story within the boundaries dictated to her, the time she has between commercials. The woman beside me just an instrument. Cynically, I sometimes think, to sell pop, or life insurance.

Next to each other in the bed our eyes still on the television we will plan the story together. A good story, you think, to exemplify how we let laundered news replace memory.

Yet the truth is, whenever I try to write it, that good story, as I have tried to write it over the months of taking it up and putting it down, I find I cannot do it. Make it what it has always so obviously been: a story with a good beginning and a solid middle and a resonant end. That completes its circle, its turn of the screw. What I always tell students: match the end to the beginning like a rhyme. A moral rhyme. Only I can't. Not with the way it takes me back to that morning. Not with you still holding my hand. Grabbing now at my mind as you once did that edge of my flesh. But like a tangent touching the circumference of a circle

only to push out into space, unknown space, forever. Taking me with it. My voice incoherent, chaotic. This no longer a story at all. What we would call a story. Because I cannot keep you out.

I will begin to understand only months later. It will be fall. Hoarfrost on the trees again. You dead more than half a year. The federal elections in full swing. When my friend Claire Harris will urge me to write your story to *The Globe and Mail*. When, instead, that first weekend the hills are open, I invite our son skiing and take a fall. Hung up on my poles, I tear the ulnar collateral ligaments in both my hands: the ones that run between forefinger and thumb. When within hours, rigid splints will cover my arms from knuckles to elbow, the thumbs held stiffly out to crash into each other as I work the keyboard. Until, frustrated, I avoid the written word.

I will enjoy this place. This opportunity not to write.



To leave your story, and La Pincoya, alone. My only thought for that apartment complex will be of our last breakfast together. Our bacon and eggs at Joey's Only. Except we will no longer drive to meet each other. It will be weeks since you've driven. You, a professional driver. Us, a pair of old roadies. The last time, the joy of the twisting road out to Nelson for the millennium. And now that too, lost. You don't have the reactions for it, you tell me. Even as we notice the spring sun yellow on those barrack-like buildings. And speak again of her story. Until you start to shiver, reminding me once more of her. Then on the way home you request to go to the hospital. Where they will question your ability to correctly set your oxygen, not believing it possible that on seven litres per minute your blood oxygen levels could be so low. Angry at your being there. Too much of an emergency for the overworked staff of the emergency department. Themselves too tired or too distracted for the creative work of health care, what once gave this work its job satisfaction: the ability to take time. To comfort, and to aid and above all to notice what lies beneath the surface. Like democracy—what we spoke of so often with the Chileans—not just calling for participation but assuring it by paying attention, constant attention, to what may have been overlooked.

Something we can still talk about when your fever finally tells them you have not made a mistake and they give you a bed. We can still laugh. At how, whether on your feet or on your scooter, you never look sick enough for what is happening to you. How even that morning, a couple stared at us in condemnation as we pulled the pickup into the handicapped parking stall. Their darkest looks reserved for you, chunky, moonfaced—the bull-necked biker look given you by the corticosteroids used in an attempt to control the auto-immune syndrome destroying your lungs. Glowering until you got out and they could see the liquid oxygen pack hanging from your shoulder, the cannula up your nose: then they would not meet your eyes at all. You, the sign of a future they did not wish to see.

After that, time will compress. Into that one call in the middle of the Spanish class I teach at the University: you are being taken down to ICU. They want to put you on a full rebreathing mask. Sealed over your face so no oxygen is wasted: maximum delivery without intubation. They tell me there's no need to worry. No need to rush off if I'm doing something. But I know better. I leave the class with its irregular verbs. Hurry down to meet you. My running feet almost colliding with the wheels of your gurney. It is, after all, only four hours since you collapsed after going to the washroom. Fell into my arms and whispered: I'm dying. While, helping you into bed, I answered, Yes. Yes.

But not today.

That time too, the rushing nurses could not account for your blood oxygen levels, taken for the first time in over eight hours: so unaccountably, dangerously, low.

The arrival of the respiratory therapist will explain the irony: it is they who have not known how to adjust the flow from the wall. The nurses have not been trained in the use of this new type of mask. The therapist will complain quite openly as he tries to make more oxygen available to you by placing short pieces of plastic tubing through the holes in your mask. Apparently there is neither time nor money for that kind of in-service training. But we are all laughing still. It is just a small glitch in need of repair. You are still expected to recover. To have months, maybe years, if the transplant comes through: they will do better next time.

And besides, the tubing makes you look like a wild boar, its tusks sticking out beside its nose. As, with your own dark, wild humour, you will still manage to snort

## You should never have been ashamed of your illness. Ashamed to go into Emergency, before it was too late.

and roar at our twelve-year-old son. We do not say what we all know—what that extra tubing needed to bring your O<sub>2</sub> levels back up tells us—that somewhere in that small trip to the washroom, straining to breathe when not enough oxygen was being delivered, you have collapsed yet another piece of your lung. And somewhere, there is a critical moment, when between fibrosis and infection, not enough lung will be left. So that, perhaps, a next time to get that small procedure right, at least for us, will never come. Though I will be right, too. You will not die that day. But five hours into the morning of the next.

Yet, still, I do not write in protest. It is my tongue, not my arms, that seems coated in fibreglass as each day I hear Stockwell Day talk about his support for universal health care. Remember his days beside Klein, his cabinet days when we were all—the acutely ill, the chronically ill, the caretakers of the ill, those who dared to complain of the impact of health care cuts on our lives—each one just another “victim of the week.” The way we are still told we misuse emergency services when we arrive at the hospital, sick and unsure how sick we really are. When flu-like symptoms could easily be flu or some far more deadly infection. Your increased shortness of breath the inevitable slow progression of your disorder or pneumonia. Because it wasn't just one day's oxygen levels but the way you should never have been sent home so soon with that first pneumonia six months before your death. And more, how you should never have been ashamed of your illness. Ashamed to go into Emergency, before it was too late. Because I know how that works, too. The logic of that shame, and of that shaming. If it is nothing and you are sent home, you are wasting resources, but if you don't want to waste resources and you go home on your own, or fail to come in, and something does go terribly

wrong, it is your own error in judgment. A perfect Catch-22.

Yet, I feel it, too. Feel it still: that shame along my skin as if it were yours. As if I had to justify your illness. Your right to be ill. To be ill and then to die and to still be a good human being. Find I want to defend you. Talk of how you ate well, drank in moderation. A born-again, militant non-smoker, you hadn't touched a cigarette in over fifteen years. You even did karate with your oxygen tank on your back, trying to keep what muscle tone you could. But more even, I want to shout out the



## You will not be their victim of the week. Not you. Not your memory.

simplest of facts: we all die. No matter what our lifestyle, our good or bad habits, we all do get to die. Death is not some sort of dismissal for cause. It's right there in the job description. To comfort the dying—and to die—is as important an act as any to which we will ever have to commit ourselves.

And how I ache with it. The terror of that moment. Watch the blood leaking from your mouth, your gasping for breath, even after they have inserted the respirator. Hear echoing my muffled cry of Do something as I am pushed from the room. Shiver at the moment minutes later when the intensivist comes out to announce—oh, you would have laughed at such a euphemism—This has been a terminal event. Refusing even to acknowledge that beneath the anaesthesia applied to stop your desperate gasping, you still live. While, neither brain dead nor comatose, your fatal oxygen levels move you inexorably toward cardiac arrest. Against his wishes, I go back to say goodbye. Talk to you. Hold your hand. Even if, wherever you are, we can only dream each other.

And still I shelter your story as if with my hands, the way we used to cuddle our stoneware latte bowls in the coffee house across the street. Something else I can no longer do, feel that liquid warmth transferred through clay, my splinted fingers now only able to grasp and lift a narrow Styrofoam cup as, alone, I toast with bitterness the daily election news. And know this: it is not my mind's horror at that last scene that stops my speech. But my love of you contained there. My hand moving along your still living body, violated and made ugly by the doc-

tors' attempts to save you.

I will understand her now. The woman beside me who could tell the story of her torture but not her rape. Know finally why her story, though very different, so strongly informs yours. Know intimately this shame that overwhelms the facts, despite knowledge of its wrongness. Nor does it help that to argue the parallel has always been easy. How, just as the female body has always been made to represent the loss of control inherent in sex, now—to this culture of control freaks—the chronically ill body has come to represent the loss of control inherent not just in death but also in the witnessing of death. To make that body, too, a site of shame. Fierce, ongoing, shame.

It is the hate which comes of this I cannot stand to feel. A hate that goes far beyond the mere strategic disregard which wishes to make all Albertans so unsure of themselves they will cease to demand adequate care. No, this is the bone deep fear of us—the ill and the dying and the caretakers of the ill and the dying. Fear turned, as it always does, to hate. The way the needs of others will always symbolize to every bully his own weakness, to every narcissist his own death. You are the skeleton beneath Stockwell Day's wetsuit. I am the skull reflected in Ralph Klein's beer, as he blusters on and on. Yet I cannot say it.

Feel instead my need to protect you. The way she protected some small child self inside her body, some young girl who believed she would always be pretty. Silent, she would not expose that girl to laughter again. Nor will I expose you. You, too, a man who will always be beautiful and dignified and whole. No matter if you felt yourself to be the ugliest man in the world, there, violated, exposed, made so helpless, so vulnerable, before the end. You will not be their victim of the week. Not you. Not your memory. Nor is there any perky reporter voice I can adopt that will ever make this safe.

Yet I continue to write to you. Write this. Want you to understand my splinted silence whether anyone else ever does or not. And besides, it will be December soon. And there will be a morning. The elections over, when I will be driving past La Pincoya listening to the radio at the wheel of a U-Haul truck, moving our older son to a housing development just to its north, now that he no longer needs to stay with us to help attend to you. No perky blonde head will give this news. It is not important enough for television. But a Chilean judge, the memory of a nation, the radio tells me, has issued an arrest order for General Pinochet. I will flip my right hand out onto the seat, as if your hand could still come to rest there, and squeeze mine. As if still we could laugh together. Because I will want you to know this: that this time memory has triumphed.

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