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# INTRODUCTION

## The Art of Loss

Ever since I left Chile as a child, I've been looking for a home, a piece of earth, a peace of mind, a place where my lives can rest for a while beneath the shade of a tree I have planted, a garden I have tended, under the roof of a house I can call my own. My journey has been a labyrinth of identities, a cosmic hall of broken mirrors reflecting all the lives, latitudes and multitudes I have whirled with during the first fifty years of my life.

As I look back, I see myself and my generation coming of age suspended between centuries and millennia, in a world marked by the catastrophe of the Reagan years and the inevitable fall of the Berlin Wall. I see the first generation in US history to experience the death of the American Dream and the aggravated childhood trauma of divorce and separation.

We are Generation Exile.

The X in our name marks the spot where the treasure lies; the X is the anonymous rebel, the crossroad and the riddle of the Sphinx, a phonetic chameleon and ancient symbol of transformation; the X-ray, the great multiplier, the mystery in any equation.

We got lost for what feels like a very long time.

And yet, what I've discovered in my travels and zigzags is that the experience of exile and migration has that rare quality that can illuminate some of the most intimate choices we make on

the path of becoming who we are. We are reborn, it seems, at the crossroads. We choose a life, and we leave one behind. What better way to travel into the unknown than to embody the power of the metaphor to shape not just our consciousness but also the physical world around us?

I remember my last day in Amsterdam, standing on one of those crossroads, the one that cuts like a knife between childhood and adolescence. It was the summer of 1981, I was fourteen, still young and wild, barely aware of myself. I was speaking French at school and street Dutch with my neighborhood friends. I had learned English watching *Benny Hill* and *I, Claudius* on the BBC and spoke Spanish, my mother tongue at home. Our small Dutch apartment was now empty; everything of value amassed during those past four sedentary years was packed away in numbered cardboard boxes ready to be shipped (along with us) on a cargo boat across the Atlantic toward our new home in the USA. The bulk of the boxes consisted of my father's improbably large library of books and writings he had accumulated since going into our exile from Chile under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. I was six years old then, barely hanging on to my stuffed rabbit as we made our escape one month after the CIA-backed military coup of September 11, 1973, that destroyed the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende and much of my childhood innocence along with it. My mother and I escaped first with just a couple of suitcases. My father stayed behind, hiding from the military death squads in the relative safety and sanctuary of the besieged Argentinian embassy in Santiago with only the clothes on his back and a donated blanket for comfort. The rest of our belongings remained behind in our house in Santiago a house we hoped the fascists wouldn't ransack and pillage during those first savage months of the military coup that claimed thousands of lives and forced one tenth of the Chilean population to flee in a mass exodus into the uncertain waters of political exile . . . like we did.

Like any good wandering Jew, my father loved his books. They were part of his identity as a writer and a lover of stories. Knowing that they were coming along with us across the waters must have offered him a glimmer of belonging in the midst of loss, just like my mother who loved to hang on to every bit of clothing she ever bought during those long days of our early exile. For me, back then in Amsterdam, those past four years had been the longest stretch of time I had ever lived anywhere in one place on this Earth. Still, I played along. I was ready to leave my childhood behind, and so I sold or gave away my bigger toys and my large collection of kids' books. But there was one bulky item I did not want to part with: a tall cylindrical laundry box filled with thousands of porcelain, glass and metal marbles. I had started collecting them when I landed in my first French school back in 1974, in Palaiseau, a small town on the outskirts of Paris. I had won many of those marbles during countless games of chance and dexterity. They were my treasure, the one palpable constant in my short life. Deep down, I must have known that they offered a sense of belonging in the same way that books were a refuge during my father's restless wanderings. Of course, back then, if I had been conscious of this powerful metaphor, all I would have had to do was look my father in the eyes and tell him that every single memory of my exile was contained within each one of those marbles. Tears would have flowed. He would have melted away with that pained look I have seen burdening him so many countless times. I know that he and my mother would have done anything to get those marbles on that ship. But I didn't. Back then, I didn't live in a world of metaphors the way I do today. Back then, I roamed the world armed only with my savage instinct for survival.

So instead, I took charge of my destiny. I carried the childhood object of my desire to our small brick terrace on the third floor of our apartment building. I took a peek at our perfectly trimmed and paved Dutch neighborhood built from the ashes of WWII. The coast was clear. With all the might of my pounding

little heart, I lifted the box and dropped all the marbles over the parapet into the clean and spotless symmetrical street.

A thousand jewels thrown to the winds.

I stood there, holding my breath, marveling that it would take years for all the kids in the neighborhood to find those hidden treasures of my exile . . . one shiny marbled memory after another.

I told this story, some thirty years later, to my two daughters. Isabella was ten and Catalina seven, both born in Durham, North Carolina. We were sitting around the kitchen table, dinner was over. My wife at the time was away on a research trip and we were talking about loss, a theme probably brought on by the sudden death of Catalina's classroom guinea pig the day before.

"I didn't have to throw those marbles out the window, did I?" I asked after they'd heard the story.

They shook their heads.

"That's right. But you see, if I was going to lose them anyway, well, I wanted to make sure I would never ever forget *how* I lost them. So, I did the most dramatic thing I could imagine. I threw them out the window."

They smiled. I have no idea what they were thinking.

"So, here's my question," I continued. "If you had to choose between having those marbles in the attic in a box somewhere or having a glorious story about how you left them behind, what would you choose? Take your time."

I stood up to get their chocolate ice cream out of the freezer. I paused, letting the cold breeze against my face take my mind, as it often does, to another place. A movie theatre. I had recently seen the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's book *The Road*, about a father who travels with his young son across a post-apocalyptic landscape in search of salvation. There was something, something I wondered, about Viggo Mortensen's heart-breaking performance that reminded me of this seemingly innocent question I had asked my children. Of course, the circumstances were different. I was in my bright, middle-class kitchen, scooping ice

cream for my daughters, while he was in that frigid nuclear winter confronted with the total breakdown of society, desperately trying to hang on to that fire, to that love, to that mystery that makes us human. I saw the film one winter afternoon with my father in a movie theatre whose heating system had absurdly decided to stop working. As we huddled against each other in the cold and witnessed *The Road* take us down that dark and ambiguous place of what it means to be a survivor, I couldn't help thinking about my daughters. Just like that desperate father, I wondered what words, what stories and metaphors I would give my children to describe the world we live in. How do you prepare them for that dawn that comes when you'll have to leave them behind and trust that you've poured every single drop of your humanity into them?

I don't remember what my daughters answered that night. But as I write these words, I know that my life was shaped by my choice to leave those childhood marbles behind, just like it was shaped by the many fateful choices I made during my long wandering years. They're the kind of choices that come after you take that primordial fall down a well and the darkness descends upon you and you have to make sense of the loss of a loved one, of a country or a home. And if you're patient and you allow the darkness to envelop you, to bury you in its mysterious loving shroud, if you can experience all the pain and all the joy that comes from swimming in that darkness, if you can withstand that savage, sweet burning, then your eyes will slowly begin to adjust and you'll begin to see.

This is where our journey begins. As we travel through the pages of this book—this pound of my flesh—and into the black ink from which these words are born, ask yourself: What gift will you carry with you as you emerge from the darkness into the light?



BOOK I  
SONGS OF EXILE

*AND I ALWAYS THOUGHT*

*And I always thought: the very simplest words  
Must be enough. When I say what things are like  
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.  
That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself  
Surely you see that.*

Bertolt Brecht



# IN THE GARDEN OF SOCIALIST DELIGHTS

(Chile, 1973)

I live in a world shaped by the senses, where I can still frolic naked in the rain in a constant state of blooming euphoria, and the wind in my hair is just that, a pure sensation, nothing more, nothing less. A soft tickle, a caress, an invisible kiss from a faraway star in the night. I am pre-abstract, even pre-historic. Wild, savage and free. In other words: joyfully illiterate and unstoppable. I'm sure there's a clinical description for this condition. When you're six, they call it hyperactive, and when it's a whole country, they call it a revolution. At least that's how I imagine myself in 1973, during those last glorious months of the Chilean Revolution before the military coup, before exile, before the Pinochets of this world entered my life and poisoned the well of my childhood paradise.

Never in history had a country decided, by democratic means, to peacefully attempt to dismantle its capitalist system and give millions of its peasants and working-class citizens the dignity and the power to finally be masters of their own destinies. It would be as if the United States Congress and President Joe Biden, after the 2020 elections, had ended corporate welfare as we know it, nationalized the energy sector, created universal health care, raised the minimum wage to an actual living wage and financed the creation of large public works that benefitted the 99%. That's just for

starters. Of course, history doesn't just happen, no matter how much our present global consumer culture of amnesia seduces us into believing that Facebook, Twitter and the Kardashians are central engines of historical processes. No, the historical Chilean elections of 1970 that brought to power a leftist coalition of political parties was the product of more than fifty years of revolutionary consciousness transmitted from generation to generation, with one of the highest literacy rates in the continent, and from uprising to uprising, in what was a bloody twentieth century.

Reflecting on the power of the Chilean Revolution during an interview for my documentary "Occupy the Imagination," my father told me, "Listen, Rodrigo, reality is up for grabs. I know it's difficult to think that this is possible. We can define reality any way we want. This was only possible because the whole of a country, the whole of a continent, the whole world was moving in the direction of saying, 'We can change everything.' You don't have to leave the world as it was when you were born. 'Yes, we can,' we said back then. And we said another world is possible. Another world is possible, right now!"

The whole of Chile seemed like an extension of my school playground. While adults worked to change the world, children played dangerous games of class warfare at recess, like factory takeovers, with the capitalist pigs holed up in an empty cracked swimming pool in the middle of our school yard while we fought, throwing sticks and stones at each other—literally. Nobody lost an eye, but I dreamt it once: an arrow shot straight into my eye. It must have been after I got into a political argument with the neighbor boy two houses down the street. I think I called him "a right-wing son of a bitch." The sad truth of those days of black and white, when everyone was at each other's throats, is that cursing became an essential tool of political expression. Sure, there are the harmless and absurd ones that rhymed like "*¡Blanco! ¡Amarillo! ¡Momio sin calzoncillos!*" (White! Yellow! Right-winger without underwear!), but more common was, "*¡Date una vuelta en el aire, momio concha de tu madre!*" (Why don't you do

a summersault, right-wing motherfucker!). It was bad, all right, and unfortunately, my neighbor, who was no more than a year older than me, hit me with a large branch right in the face, barely missing my eye. A taste of things to come? Before I knew it, I was bleeding and crying, and my mother was standing in front of their house shouting at the top of her lungs, “Shit’s going to happen,” or something like that.

Like so many of my generation, I was born into revolution. My father was named Vladimiro for Lenin and so, in turn, my parents made sure my middle name was Fidel, after Cuba’s Castro. And then there’s the classic poster of Karl Marx, the one with the giant gray beard, hanging on the wall above my father’s messy desk. We called him Papá Marx, sort of a Santa Claus figure without his magical reindeers or the elves with their pointy ears. I can’t exactly remember what Papá Marx did, but as good assimilated Jews, we celebrated Christmas with a big ham garnished with slices of roasted pineapple.

I confess: I did not know I was Jewish until my first month in exile, when some kids in Argentina called me “a dirty Jew.” But I digress. At age six, I could happily argue the non-existence of God because I was a proud fourth-generation atheist, and I knew all the greatest hits:

“If there’s a God, why are there poor children who go to bed hungry?”

“And if there’s a God and he lets children starve, then he’s a bad God.”

And my favorite: “Who needs God, anyway?”

I knew I was not just merely parroting my father trying to convert his best friends to atheism, because you cannot fake the power of your convictions. It was the early seventies, and the world was black and white. We were the good guys, and the fascists with their flags embroidered with white crosses were the bad guys. How can anyone argue with that? It’s like telling Jesus to get off the cross, asking the Soviets not to charge the Winter

Palace or trying to convince Rosa Parks to sit at the back of the bus. You can't.

My childhood drawings reflected this idealistic utopia. First, the customary triangular Andes mountains in the background with their eternal snow peaks and a bright yellow sun, smiling. Below, stick figures of factory workers in their yellow hard hats, raised fists, like little balls (because I didn't know how to draw fingers), hand in hand with students and peasants, their big straw hats and chickens everywhere. Learning how to read and write was fun. Drawing chickens was even better. My school was the experimental Colegio Latinoamericano de Integración, better known as *el Latino*, located at the time on Pedro de Valdivia Avenue in the heart of the fading aristocratic neighborhood of Providencia, with its magnificent tree-lined boulevards and a mix of ornate *fin-de-siècle* French-styled mansions, *petit bourgeois* apartments and upper middle-class stucco houses with their gardeners and maids reminding us that Chile had always been in the hands of the ruling class—and no dirty hippie commie was going to take that away from them. Of course, in Chile, nothing is as it ever seems. As a teenager, my father grew up not far from my school in one of those two-story houses with a maid and a cook. His parents had immigrated from the United States in 1954, after my grandfather Adolfo, who worked at the United Nations, was denounced as an agent of the great communist conspiracy by none other than Senator Joseph McCarthy, in the flesh. He told the Secretary General of the United Nations to “get that troublemaker Adolfo Dorfman out of here, or else.” The next thing you know, my grandfather Adolfo is re-assigned to Santiago, Chile, to work on the post-war industrialization of Latin America. And my father, in a figment of my imagination, is dragged away, kicking and screaming from his life as a hot-dog-eating, comic-book-collecting, Yankees fan, Howdy Doody all-American boy and forced into his new Chilean existence, where at some point he's lucky enough to meet my mother at a screening of Disney's *Pollyanna*. And, lo and behold, there I was, six years old, sitting in a class-

room full of children singing revolutionary anthems, joyfully dancing down the yellow brick road of democratic socialism, all the while oblivious to the irony that I am the historical (or was it coincidental?) creation of the sick and twisted mind of one Joseph McCarthy.

I would like to imagine that the malevolent ghost of Joe McCarthy was not haunting my story back then, that paradise was truly paradise, pure and unblemished in my mind, without a single tinge of regret. I mean, what six-year-old has regrets? “I should have known” is one of those beginnings that seem to lead nowhere, like an Escher staircase. There’s a mystery in those empty steps that mirrors the process of remembering, like the strip of negative space between the flickering frames of a projected movie reel creating the illusion of continuous motion in the intimate darkness of a theatre where I sit and see myself on a field trip to a brand-new, luminous poultry hatchery on the outskirts of Santiago. It’s mesmerizing. The eggs, the incubators, the thousands of puffy yellow chicks with their tiny beaks, squeaking, chirping at the world as they roll past us on those endless moving conveyer belts.

And all we wanted to do was to take a chick home, our excited glances told each other. And that’s exactly what happened. The next thing, as in a dream, I had two little chicks curled up in the deep pockets of my school apron. They were warm and fuzzy, and I did my best to ignore the look on my mother’s face when I stretched out my hands and showed them to her later that afternoon. What the heck were the teachers thinking? And what to do with them? Raise them in your city backyard? In your apartment complex? In the middle of a revolution? My mother put them in an old shoe box, and we mixed white cotton and grass leaves and some dirt and kept them in there at night. During the day, we let them run around the yard. They were safe because my parents had built a tall stucco wall around the house after a group of right-wingers specifically targeted our home, throwing stones and trash because my father, along with Armand Mattelart, a Belgian

sociologist, had recently published a book called *How to Read Donald Duck*, a fearless and humorous Marxist analysis of imperialist cultural ideology in the Disney comics exported to Latin America in the 60s and 70s. It was a book that would change my life. But, I'm getting ahead of myself, because before bringing to the surface the burning of books, I need to account for the tragic death of those two innocent chicks.

Pato, my best friend, was visiting and we were playing with the water hose. Chasing, splashing, frolicking in the muddy grass. It's easy to lose yourself when you're having so much fun and there is so little parental control. It was the seventies, after all, and in our intoxication we decided to give those stinky chicks a shower. We let them loose and chased them around the yard with the water hose and our squeaks of laughter. We terrorized them. There's no other way to describe it.

That night, they started shivering with an upper respiratory infection. We tried to warm them up under a hot lamp, but nothing really helped. There I was, standing over the shoe box with that glaring light exposing every wheezing sound, every tremor and spasm of their fragile little bodies, for what seemed like hours, silently punishing myself for what I had done. I had never seen death before. I was fascinated and horrified at the same time.

I'm too young to fantasize or even conjure up Henry Kissinger, the architect of the military coup and Nixon's national security advisor at the time, looking down on this sad episode, shaking his head, saying with a Peter Sellers, Dr. Strangelove accent, "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people." Of course, the reason Kissinger's hair was on fire was not the death of my innocent chicks; the real, real reason was that since 1958, the CIA had spent more than six million dollars directly intervening in Chile's electoral processes in an effort to make sure that Salvador Allende, or anyone like him, would never get elected. From creating fake news stories, having journalists on their payroll, subsidizing political parties and terrorism, produc-

ing radio spots and propaganda posters featuring hungry communists literally eating babies, the CIA wrote the book that Putin happily updated in 2016 to intervene in the US presidential elections. Kissinger's rhetorical question posed before the Forty Committee, a secret group in charge of greenlighting all covert "black" operations against any foreign government slipping out of the US orbit of influence, made it clear that they were ready to "make the Chilean economy scream." As Edward Korry, then US ambassador to Chile, described it, ". . . to do all within our power to condemn Chile and the Chileans to utmost deprivation and poverty." In other words, economic chaos.

By mid-June 1973, one gray winter morning, I was standing near the Canal San Carlos, a few blocks from the little bungalow that was our home on Vaticano Street, holding my father's hand as we waited for the public bus to take me to school. The ground was wet, and a cold drizzle chilled our bones and filled the air with a sense of dread and doom. I was late for school, and even smoking an invisible cigarette with the steam puffing from my breath was no longer fun. My father looked worried, angry, frustrated.

Today, I can imagine the weight that he was carrying. The country was in chaos and the CIA's campaign to destabilize Chile in full swing: fascist paramilitary organizations were bombing bridges, electric power pylons, water viaducts and railroads; shortages of basic staples like flour and sugar became rampant; a trucker strike almost paralyzed the country; radical left-wing groups taking advantage of the situation were illegally occupying land and seizing factories; and the tightening of the US economic and financial embargo was devastating the economy. One third of all private and public buses were completely inoperative due to the lack of spare parts and tires because manufacturers such as Ford had stopped selling them to Chile. And that, in a nutshell, is my epic excuse as to why I was late for school. It didn't make the cold any warmer or the waiting any shorter, and little did I

that this was probably the last time I would stand on that corner with my father waiting for a bus that would never come.

Soon, everything was going to change. Rapidly.

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, a rogue tank division took to the streets of Santiago in a seemingly improvised military coup. Shots were fired; there was hesitation from certain factions of the Army, but at the end of the day, the civilian conspirators fled into the Ecuadorian embassy and a certain General Augusto Pinochet, undistinguished until then, demonstrated a particular zest in putting the rebellion down. Pinochet, of course, was secretly preparing to lead the successful military coup a few months later, proving that this episode was nothing more than a setup to test how the population would react and, more importantly, to find out who was truly loyal to the government of President Salvador Allende. Many of those loyalists would be the first ones to be shot in the early hours of September 11, 1973.

After the failed coup in June, we moved out of our bungalow for security reasons and went to live with my grandparents in the heart of Providencia, surrounded by many of the very people who would soon cheer and welcome, with the popping sound of champagne bottles, the destruction of my paradise.

I would never see my childhood home again.