

# **A T A C A M A**

a novel

**CARMEN RODRÍGUEZ**



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## Advance Praise for *Atacama*

*Atacama* is historical fiction at its best, taking us into the hearts and minds of those seeking change in tumultuous times. Carmen Rodríguez's new novel is a deep dive into the life of revolutionary activists, journalists and artists in Chile and Spain during the first half of the twentieth century. From the fight against fascism in Chile to the Spanish Civil War, we experience these historical battles through the intimate lives of Lucía González and Manuel Garay, the novel's two main characters. Set a century ago, the resonance for today's changing times is stunning. A great read.

— Judy Rebick, journalist, activist  
and author of *Ten Thousand Roses* and *Heroes in My Head*

In *Atacama*, Carmen Rodríguez opens a view that will be unfamiliar to most Canadians — that of Chile in the first half of the twentieth century, which makes her book as much a history primer as a novel. *Atacama*, however, is firmly of this century, as Rodríguez paints a sprawling scene whose twists and turns span decades and, through the Chilean diaspora, find echoes in contemporary Canada. An astute reader might discern the influence of Eduardo Galleano — using story as a tool for intellectual discourse. But *Atacama's* greatest strength is in scope and cinematic feel — reading it makes me crave a screen adaptation.

— Anna Marie Sewell, Edmonton Poet Laureate 2011-13  
and author of *Humane*

Carmen Rodríguez's illuminating historical novel is an homage to human resilience and to everyday people's ability to stand up to terror and oppression. Poignant, layered, and absorbing, *Atacama* demonstrates that biology doesn't have to shape destiny and that it is possible to choose individual values over the complex bonds of family.

— Ava Homa, author of *Echoes from the Other Land*  
and *Daughters of Smoke and Fire*

*Atacama* brings to life a variety of intensely moving, creative, dedicated characters whose lives intersect and fulfill one another in surprising ways, even under the shadow of unrelenting threat. It takes place over the span of a century, beginning during the mining strikes in the northern Chilean desert in the 1920s and moving through the artistic world of Valparaíso and Santiago and on to events of the Spanish Civil War. It reaches deep into Chilean history to reveal the courage and endurance of its people, whose rights have been repeatedly crushed by the military and the oligarchs that control it, but whose voices have never been silenced and that speak to us here.

— Hugh Hazelton, writer and translator, author of *Antimatter* and winner of the Governor General's Award for Translation

*Atacama* may be a novel, but it's written with the authority of memoir, the directness of history, and the magic of poetry. A story of heroism and depravity in politics, and the struggle of two young people caught between the two.

— Susan Crean, cultural critic and author of *The Laughing One* and *Finding Mr. Wong*

*Atacama* presents two of the twentieth century's great struggles for democratic freedom, in Chile and in Spain. From childhood on, Lucía and Manuel embody human efforts everywhere to make the world better and to make art. In telling their life-stories, Carmen Rodríguez has written a real page-turner — complete with an unexpected ending.

— Cynthia Flood, fiction writer and award-winning author of *My Father Took a Cake to France* and *Red Girl Rat Boy*, among others

From the mining camps of northern Chile to a dance studio in Valparaíso, and on to Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War and Pablo Neruda's office in a Parisian consulate... Carmen Rodríguez's new novel, *Atacama*, is wide-ranging and ambitious. At its centre are the inter-twined stories of an unlikely pairing: Manuel Garay,

son of a poor family of activists and union organizers; and Lucía Céspedes, daughter of the military officer responsible for Manuel's father's death (and many others). The novel's narrative switches deftly between these two characters' stories, as it takes us from the 1920s to the 1940s, a period of heroic struggle but also brutal repression in Latin America and around the world. Just when all seems lost, a glimmer of hope takes us to a surprising twist set in the present day. Rodríguez's narrative is ultimately a story about the power of writing, the power of art, both to dramatize grief and to encourage remembrance. As drama and as remembrance, this novel succeeds admirably.

— Jon Beasley-Murray, professor of Latin American Studies  
and author of *Posthegemony*

This is an extraordinary book. While it spans over seventy years of a personal drama, it also portrays—both accurately and poignantly—Chile's reality in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as that of the Spanish Civil War. But *Atacama* is much more than a sweeping historical novel, as it also delves deep into the psyche of its protagonists—Lucía and Manuel; who, as children, face up to horrendous personal tragedies and yet overcome them through their love of art and the written word, and their commitment to social justice. The crackling dramatic tension, the twists and turns in Lucía's and Manuel's lives, all the way to the conclusion of the story in present time Vancouver, Canada, are masterfully crafted. I cannot speak too highly of this work.

— John M. Kirk, professor of Latin American Studies and author  
of eighteen books, including *Cuba at the Crossroads*  
and *José Martí, Mentor of the Cuban Revolution*



PERU

BOLIVIA

CHILE

ARGENTINA

Tacna •

Iquique •

• La Coruña

Valparaíso •

• Santiago

EXCERPT

*The history of all existing societies  
is the history of class struggle.*  
— Karl Marx

*They haven't died! They're in the heart of the battle,  
standing, like burning torches.  
Their shadows have come together  
on the copper coloured plain  
like a shield made of ironclad wind,  
like a barrier the colour of fury,  
like the invisible chest of the sky itself.*  
— Pablo Neruda

*Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.  
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*  
— Arundhati Roy

**PART I**

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1925

EXCERPT



## MANUEL

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March – July 1925

### La Coruña

**THE PAMPA WAS STILL.** The acrid smell of the saltpetre fields filled my lungs while my eyes feasted on the outline of the Andes against the pearly sky. Soon they would be trimmed with sunlight.

I heard its hissing before I saw it — the buzzard chick I had been eyeing for days had finally decided to take a look at the world. It was standing on the jagged edge of the rock that hid its nest, flapping its wings and cranking its neck. My sling was stretched and loaded; all I had to do was aim and shoot. The bird shuddered and dropped. I picked it up and ran. This was my first day of work and I couldn't be late.

The chick was still warm when I got home. Without a word, my mama snatched it from my hands, dumped it in a pot and poured a kettle of boiling water over it. When the water started to cool down, she would take the bird out, pluck it and gut it. My mouth watered at the thought of the stew we'd eat later that day.

The sun was up now, and the chill of the desert night was starting to give way to the heat that would set everything on fire by the time the afternoon came around. My papa walked in the door, a pail of water in each hand. His hair was slicked back.

"Time to go," he said to me, putting down the pails.

He walked up to my mama wanting to kiss her on the cheek, but she turned her head and pushed him away.

I grabbed a piece of bread off the table and followed him.

“I bet you’ll be smiling and asking for kisses when the boy brings home his first pouch of tokens,” my papa said as he walked out the door.

“No, I won’t. I’ll be smiling and asking for kisses when he’s back in the classroom, where he belongs,” she yelled back.

Halfway down the lane I could still hear her banging pots and pans.

My mama had high hopes for me. She had taught me how to read and write way before I started school and wanted me to go to high school in Iquique.

“You can stay with Aunt Asunta,” she’d say, her hands busy at the stove, a smile on her face and her eyes dreamingly contemplating her younger days, which seemed to reside on the other side of the window.

Aunt Asunta was my mama’s best friend, who she called an “organizer and agitator.” Because of her, my mama had got involved in politics and had turned into an organizer and agitator herself.

“Asunta showed me how to use my noodle,” my mama would say, pointing to her head. “First as my teacher at school and then as a comrade; she made me see that the Catholic Church is in cahoots with the capitalists — the priests and the nuns are in charge of doing the brainwashing, of making sure that people stay ignorant and dumb, especially the women. ‘It’s God’s will,’ they’ll tell you, a fake smile on their face. God’s will, my ass! It’s *their* will to keep us all praying and hoping to go to heaven instead of fighting for a decent life right here on earth,” she’d add, raising her voice and punctuating every word with a knock on the table.

That’s how in 1912 she had set foot in La Coruña — to organize the women and form a new chapter of the National Women’s Council. My papa, three years her junior and a good four inches shorter than her, was smitten by her smarts, haughtiness and boisterous laughter. In that order. It took him five days to muster the courage to ask her to marry him.

By the age of six I knew the story by heart, but once in a while felt the urge to hear it again and my mama was quick to comply; the ending was always the same.

“What about you, Mama? Did you fall in love with Papa too?” I’d ask.

“At the beginning I wasn’t sure,” she’d respond. “I loved my freedom and to tell you the truth, I didn’t like men.”

“What do you mean you didn’t like men!” I’d shoot back.

“Well, most of the men I knew in Iquique were either sleazy or violent, and often both, like my dad. He’d stay out till the wee hours, come home drunk and proceed to yank us all out of bed and beat us up. That is until I grew to be stronger than him and sent him flying across the room one night. That was the end of his shenanigans. And in the street? Men would say gross things to us girls and even grope us. But as much as they tried, they couldn’t get *me* — I would punch them and kick them until I ran out of steam. It helped that I was taller and stronger than most of them,” she’d chuckle.

“But what about Papa? He isn’t sleazy or violent!” I’d counter.

“No, you’re right. He’s not. That’s why as much as I tried not to, I did fall in love with him. Because he’s gentle and strong at the same time, like you,” she’d answer, ruffling my hair. “Besides, he didn’t mind that I was tall and plump and that I looked like a skunk,” she’d chuckle again, referring to the naturally white tuft that split her black mane in two, right at the centre of her head.

My papa *was* gentle and strong. He was also smart. While I liked the idea of going to high school in Iquique, what I really wanted was to follow in his footsteps. He had worked in the saltpetre mines since he was a kid and had climbed the ladder to the best job of all: blaster. Blasters concocted the formulas for the explosives, assembled their own fuses and knew how to set everything up so that they could blast the exact patch of *pampa* they had picked out, no more, no less. They *had* to be smart. Also, they had to know how to handle their power.

At twelve years old, when I finished primary school, my papa gave

me a choice: go to high school in Iquique or stay in La Coruña and start working at the mine. To my mama's dismay, I chose to stay.

But that first day of work, I wasn't so sure about my decision anymore. The clashing and pounding of the machinery were deafening and the fresh, salty air I had breathed earlier that morning had been replaced by thick clouds of crushed rock and black smoke.

I had been to the mine a few times before and had felt exhilarated by the engrossing din and bustle of the place. Now that same din and that same bustle were getting on my nerves. Mama's descriptions of Iquique went through my mind — sandy beaches under a clear sky and a beautiful, quiet square with large, leafy trees like the ones in my geography books. The pictures in my mind certainly looked a lot prettier than the one I had in front of me. But it was too late for a change of heart. I'd rather die than disappoint my papa.

When he clapped me on the back by way of saying goodbye and pointed the way to the crushers yard, I lingered and watched him join the small group of blasters standing on the field. They all had a ball of juicy coca leaves inside their cheeks and a smoke dangling out of their mouths. Smiling with glee I reminded myself that now that I was a worker, soon enough I would be allowed to have a ball of coca leaves inside my own cheeks and a smoke dangling out of my own mouth. As for joining the blasters, I would have to wait another few years.

Like all kids, I had been hired as a crusher cleaner. When I got to the crushers yard, there was a large group of boys messing around while they waited for the boss. A handful of them were my friends; quite a few, my enemies — there were only so many buzzard chicks, vizcachas and iguanas up the *pampa* to hunt and trap but a lot of families to feed. So, territorial lines had to be drawn and defended. Fighting was not my strength — I was small and skinny — but I could outsmart the bullies. I had won over the younger kids by sharing some of my tactics with them, and now, whenever I was attacked, they didn't hesitate to come to my rescue.

My friends and the boss gave me pointers on how to do the job, but the first few times I dove into the crusher all I did was scream and kick around. I couldn't breathe and felt trapped inside the ugly beast — a clunky creature made of steel with the jaws of a crocodile and the tail of a rat, never mind its black and stuffy insides. When the boss finally pulled me out, I was gasping for air and falling over. He set me down on my feet, held me upright with one hand and slapped me on the face with the other until I started breathing again.

I was the laughingstock of my enemies, but not for long. By the second day, I could follow the steps to a T: fill your lungs with air before going in, hold your breath, keep your eyes peeled, use your poker and brush to get rid of the rocks and dust stuck inside the machine, and finally, when you feel yourself going woozy, use an economical one-two scissor-kick to let the boss know that you want out. At the beginning I wasn't able to stay in for long, but by the end of the first week I could hold my breath and keep my eyes open long enough to actually clean the beast's insides.

At the end of my first workday my papa took me to a workers' assembly. He was one of the union leaders and La Coruña's rep at FOCH, the Workers' Federation of Chile.

That evening we walked up the *pampa* and into the sand dunes, where we wouldn't be seen from town. I could hardly contain my excitement. I had been to political gatherings before — my mama had taken us kids to her meetings at the Women's Centre many times — but this was different. Now I was a worker myself and was joining the miners to discuss strike action.

Hundreds of men and boys were already there when we got to the dunes. I caught sight of a couple of my friends and a few of my enemies in the crowd. I couldn't help but see them as such, even though on our way my papa had explained that in the union there weren't any friends or enemies — just fellow workers striving for a single goal: justice.

By the time my papa made his way up a hillock and began to

address the crowd, the sun was nothing but an orange smudge on the horizon. A quarter moon had just started to rise from behind the mountains and dozens of torches pierced the growing darkness. My papa's outline against the twilight sky was barely visible, but his voice boomed with fortitude and truth.

"Comrades! Fellow workers have been walking out of the job all over the *pampa* to protest our living and working conditions. They have said 'Enough' and *we* say 'Enough.' Enough is enough! We can't go on living in shacks that turn into ovens by day and iceboxes by night, working twelve to fourteen hours a day, getting ill and dying from all the dust and smoke we breathe in and watching comrades suffer horrible deaths by falling into uncovered smelters! And to top it all off, our meagre wages are paid in tokens that can be used only at the company store!

"The time is ripe for a general strike, comrades!

"When we all join the strike, when we bring the Atacama region to its knees, they'll have to listen to us, comrades! Without us, they're nothing. Nothing! We make their profits, we pay for their luxuries, and we are the wheels that make their capitalist world turn.

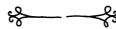
"They exploit us, they abuse us, and they kill us. They treat us and our families like beasts. But we're not beasts, comrades. We are human beings. We are workers. We are smart workers. We know better. We are the pro-le-tar-iat. We know that life doesn't have to be like this. Let's not forget the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union, where the state is in the hands of the proletariat and their allies. Let's also remember the Winnipeg General Strike, the Battle of Blair Mountain, the Guayaquil General Strike and all those *organized* workers who stood up to the bosses before us and are still struggling for justice all around the world. Let's follow in their footsteps.

"Today, we're asking for better working and living conditions *and* for the Chilean state to nationalize the mines. We don't want any more Norths, Gildemeisters, Nietos and Graces owning our places

of work. They don't give a damn about us, comrades! All they care about is their profits — profits that we Chileans make for them and that they're quick to take back to their countries — to England, to Germany, to Spain. And what about the Chilean state? Instead of making sure that these foreigners treat us like human beings, the state condones and supports their actions! This must stop. Saltpetre is Chilean and it must benefit Chileans, not foreigners!

“Comrades, we have to prepare for the long haul. This is only the beginning of our struggle because once we fulfill these demands, we must go on; we cannot rest; we will not rest; we will join forces with workers from the north, from the centre and from the south, and will keep on struggling until we realize our most cherished dream: to crush capitalism and establish a workers' socialist state. The future belongs to the working class, comrades!!”

The crowd was on fire and I was on fire. There and then I stopped having second thoughts about staying in La Coruña instead of going to school in Iquique. I was in the right place and had become the person I had always wanted to be — a proud miner and a member of the proletariat. Not only that, now I was also my father's comrade in arms. Under the Atacama night sky, my heart pounding, I joined my fellow workers in an impassioned rendition of the “Internationale,” an anthem my mama had taught me as soon as I could string two words together. I looked at my papa, standing on his rock, his left fist up in the air, and promised myself that I would fight under his leadership and alongside my comrades until final victory.



**FOLLOWING A FEW WEEKS** of negotiations, unions representing an array of trades reached an agreement and the whole region went on strike. Miners, railroad workers, cart operators and the longshoremen in the port of Iquique joined in. Everything came to a halt.

It didn't take long for the government to side with the companies. The army was deployed to key points all across the land, and the

minister of defence declared a state of siege and sent five warships with reinforcements to Iquique.

On June 3, our whole camp walked up the *pampa* to Alto San Antonio to attend a meeting called by FOCH. As we were stepping out the door, my mama handed me a black-and-red *chuspa* filled with coca leaves.

“You’re a man and a miner now,” she said. “Use just a few leaves. It’ll be enough to keep you going,” she advised.

Since starting work, I had been expecting to get a *chuspa* woven by my mama especially for me, but still I was taken by surprise. I admired the rows of tiny llamas and the playful tassels hanging from the corners before pulling the little bag’s shoulder strap over my head.

“It’s beautiful! Thank you, mama!” I said, planting a kiss on her cheek.

The walk up the *pampa* under the scorching sun took us more than three hours, but the bitter coca leaves worked their magic and I didn’t feel thirsty, hungry or tired at all. My mama carried baby Rufina on her back, bundled up in her *aguayo*, and papa and I took turns giving my brother Moncho and sister Eva piggyback rides whenever they got tired. We also had to help some of the other families and their kids, but in the end we all made it to Alto San Antonio in one piece.

Thousands of people from other camps were already there, waiting to listen to our leaders’ reports. There was optimism in the air, but it didn’t take long for it to fade away. A delegation had travelled to Santiago and presented our demands to the president himself. The president had listened attentively and made promises. But nearly a month later, nothing had changed.

The crowd became restless. Some wanted to put an end to the strike, but most of us called for more serious actions. “Let’s march to Iquique! Let’s take our demands to the governor himself!” many of us shouted. “Let’s blow the bastards up, set their houses on fire, kill their women and their kids,” a few men yelled. My papa and mama



had warned us that there would be company-paid agitators inciting violence and causing disturbances. Sure enough, next thing we knew, there was pushing and shoving, shouting and swearing, and in the blink of an eye skirmishes had erupted everywhere.

The mounted police, which until then had remained cool and composed, charged into the crowd. People started to run, tripping over each other, shrieking and crying. My papa and mama were up front, on the speakers' scaffold, and I was down below in charge of my brother and sisters. I held on tight to little Rufina and ordered Eva and Moncho to hang on to my pants. We managed to get away from the chaos and meet up with our mama, who had jumped off the platform, while my papa yelled "Stay calm, comrades, stay calm..." from up top.

It turned out that as he yelled into the megaphone, the police were being attacked by a mob. By the time the crowd dispersed, two policemen lay dead on the ground.

That afternoon, we walked back to La Coruña in bitter silence. There was no question about what would happen now: the government would revenge the policemen's deaths by sending in the troops.

We worked that whole night and the next day and night. By the early morning of June 5, everything that could be done had been done: we had occupied the mine; taken over the company store and parceled out provisions to every household; set up explosives in key spots; and dealt out borers, picks, shovels, pitchforks and hand bombs. Everything was in place and everybody knew what to do.

My parents were at the helm of the operations — my papa, as union leader and FOCH's representative at La Coruña; my mama, as president of the Women's Centre and member of the executive committee of the National Women's Council. I was there too, at union headquarters, listening to the urgent discussions on strategies and tactics, and running errands all over town.

One of those discussions had to do with the children. What to do with the children. My papa, supported by most, proposed that a few

women take all the children up to the dunes, well out of the reach of the army. My mama countered that the children must remain in town and act as a shield. After all, the soldiers were working class boys, just like the young men employed at the mine. They would not fire against their own, and particularly not against children, she argued.

“What about the Santa María School massacre??!! They didn’t care then; why should they care now??!!” some called out.

But my mama argued that the Santa María slaughter had happened eighteen years earlier and since then, the troops had become much more aware of their own exploitation as working-class boys and of the oppression they were subjected to by the officers.

In the end, it was agreed that it would be up to the parents to determine whether their children remained in town or went to hide in the dunes. My parents decided that Moncho and Eva would stay, but Rufina, the baby, would go up to the dunes with a neighbour.

Then my papa charged me with a very important task: to go out on the open *pampa*, watch the horizon and report back if I saw any signs of the troops coming. As I was walking out of the building, I saw my mama plant a peck on my papa’s cheek, which he reciprocated by taking her face in his hands and kissing her on the lips. This was their first display of affection since the morning I’d started working. I ran back in and gave them both a hug.

I hurried to the *tamarugo* forest at the edge of the camp. As far as I could remember I had been coming to this place whenever I wanted to be on my own. It had taken me a while to learn to navigate the thorny branches without ripping my pants or tearing my skin, but now I could climb my favourite tree — a particularly tall *tamarugo* with thick limbs shooting high up into the sky — in the wink of an eye. Sitting on its highest branch I pondered life and surveyed La Coruña and the landscape beyond.

Our collection of shacks on one side of the square was a sorry sight compared to the tidy blocks of cement row houses where the

white-collar employees lived. But nothing paralleled the sprawling grounds of the bosses' residences on the other side, not to mention their fancy theatre, social club, tennis courts and a riveted-steel swimming pool filled with clear water, which sat further back.

The soccer field, the train station and the mine were behind our camp, and beyond all that, the *caliche* fields covered the *pampa* with an uneven, motley crust. Past the dunes, the Atacama Desert spread out like the rugged skin of an old man's face, all the way up to the foothills of the Andes, where it gave way to the shimmering lagoons that nourished flamingoes, llamas and vicuñas. Finally, my eyes came to rest on the pointy snow-capped volcanoes and jagged peaks of the *cordillera*.

I had never walked that far, but one day I would — maybe after we won the revolution, and the mine, the swimming pool, the big houses and the theatre belonged to all of us miners and our families. Before then, there was no time to spare — we had to keep up the struggle.

As I pondered all of this, I scanned the *pampa* for anything unusual — vizcachas hopping out of their burrows, iguanas and lizards abandoning their sunny posts and scrambling under a rock, birds becoming restless... Those were signs that would signal the approach of the troops.

Soon enough a black-head lizard dashed off a rock and disappeared, while a family of finches began to trill and flew out of another *tamarugo* tree. I trained my eyes on the horizon, and sure enough, a barely discernible cloud of dust traversed the *pampa*. I didn't hesitate. I climbed down the tree and ran.

When I got to the union office I was so out of breath that I could hardly speak, but I did manage to shout "The troops are coming" as I burst through the door.

My papa handed me a burlap sling bag filled with hand bombs and sent me off to the soccer field to join my mama, the rest of the women and the kids. "If they start shooting, hurl the bombs right at them," he said.

The soccer field was crammed. The women had gathered in small groups and the kids were running around laughing and screeching as if this was just another normal day. The crusher cleaners were there too — standing in clusters, kicking the dirt and talking among themselves. I felt the weight of the hand bombs in my bag, pondered the power and responsibility that came with them and approached one of my enemies' groups. They made no attempt at tongue-lashing, just looked at me with slanted eyes.

"We're in this together," I said. "We're fellow workers now, comrades in arms."

I dipped into my bag and handed each one a few hand bombs. Then I repeated my papa's words: "If the troops start shooting, throw the bombs at them with all your strength."

It took me a while to find my mama, but as soon as she saw me she knew that I'd come to tell her that the troops were on their way. She cut through the crowd, grabbed her horn, stood on a soap box and began to shout: "Women, women! Women and children! The troops are on their way. The troops are on their way! We have to get ready. Remember: they have the weapons, but we have the truth! We all know that we cannot keep on living like this. Our men and our boys cannot keep on working like this. Our demands are just. So, be ready to face the soldiers with dignity. We will stand together. We will hold hands. We will hoist our banners and flags up high. We will chant our slogans loudly and with conviction. When the troops see and hear us, they'll understand that what we're asking for is nothing more than a decent life for our families. The same kind of life they want for *their* families. When they realize that we are as human as they are, they will not shoot! But if they do, you know what to do: those of us who chose to use hand bombs will throw them at the troops and the rest will retreat up the *pampa* and into the dunes. Are we ready??!!"

A resounding "Yes!!" erupted from the soccer field.

Soon after, we heard the first claps of the horses' hooves on the

saltpetre fields. The banners and the flags went up and we all reached for our neighbours' hands. My mama began to chant: "We want justice, we want justice."

It didn't take long for everybody to join in.

That first slogan was followed by many others: "No more tokens." "Decent housing for all." "Workers to power." "No more oppression." "Saltpetre is Chilean."

The tapping of the horses became louder and louder, and now we could also hear the wheels of the military carts crunching the *caliche* as they got closer to the mine and the camp. Then we saw them: hundreds of them coming towards us, on horseback and on foot.

"We are your mothers." "We are your children." "You are workers, we are workers." "We are your brothers, we are your sisters," we shouted.

I hardly had any voice left when the explosions began at the mine site, and as if on cue, the soldiers started shooting.

"Don't shoot! We're your mothers, we're your sisters, we're your children," I heard my mama and other women shout. But by then, I had already reached into my bag and begun hurling the hand bombs until there weren't any left.

They kept on shooting.

Bodies were falling all around me. I was petrified. In the midst of the inferno I heard Eva gasp. I reached out for her hand, but she wasn't there. She was on the ground, flat on her back, her eyes wide open and blood spurting out of a hole in her chest. I covered the hole with my hands, sat on it, got up, tore off a piece of my shirt, pressed the cloth against the wound. But the blood kept gushing out.

Then I heard my mama shout: "Manuel! Eva! Moncho! Run! Let's run!"

"Eva," I muttered, pointing at my sister.

My mom stopped in her tracks and fell on her knees. She looked at Eva, looked at me and then began to scream and shake Eva with both her hands.

“Mama, she’s dead! Let’s run!!” I shouted.

She picked Eva up, I grabbed Moncho’s hand, and we ran. Ran like crazy, urging the other women and kids to run too, while the bullets kept whistling past our ears.

After what felt like an eternity, we made it to a rock ridge that sat at the back of the soccer field. We scrambled up to the top and over to the other side, tripping, falling, crawling on our hands and knees, any which way we could. Then, right in front of us something fell out of the sky and exploded. I felt myself go up in the air and hit the rocks with a thump. I don’t know how long I was lying there, but when I opened my eyes, it was already dusk and everything was quiet.

I sat up. There were bodies everywhere. Some were squirming, others weren’t moving at all. A few women were walking around, calling their children’s names. Kids were crying. I got up. My whole body hurt, but I wasn’t bleeding anywhere. I called Moncho’s name. A little voice came back from between the rocks. I found him in a ball, all shaken up, but unhurt. I picked him up and carried him around as I looked for my mama.

When we found her, the first stars were starting to twinkle in the sky. She was sitting on a rock, her legs splayed out. She was holding Eva in her arms, against her chest, as if she were a baby.

I sat beside her, put Moncho on my lap, and we stayed there, in a daze, listening to the kids and women cry and call out. When the full moon — plump and shiny, as if nothing had ever happened — came up from behind the mountains, my mom laid Eva down on the ground, got up and began to speak.

“What did I do? What did I do? I sent my own child to her death. I sent all these children and all these women to their deaths. What led me to believe they wouldn’t shoot? What? How could they, the bastards! And to make sure that they’d finish us off, they sent the artillery in. The cannons. The deadly cannons!”

A few women started to yell at my mama, blaming her for the

massacre. A couple of them even tried to punch her and kick her. But I punched and kicked back with all my might, and a few other women also came to her defence.

“Flora didn’t kill your children. The army did!” Señora Carmela, one of my mom’s friends from the Women’s Centre shouted. “Don’t blame her! Blame the capitalist state!”

My mama dropped to the ground. Her teeth were chattering.

Señora Carmela took over then and ordered me to run to the mine site and come back with a report on the situation there.

Half the camp was flattened. The union office was in ruins. My papa should’ve been there because this was the centre of operations, but now there was no office. Had he been killed? Was his body trapped underneath the rubble? I turned a few pieces of debris over and looked underneath but found nothing.

Then I saw a few people heading towards the soccer field. They looked like phantoms in the silvery moonlight.

“Papa!” I called. “Papa, is that you?”

The phantoms stopped and turned, but only one opened his arms. I ran like crazy, tripping and jumping over the rubble.

“You’re alive, you’re alive!” I shouted when I finally felt his arms close around me.

“And you’re alive too!” he responded, squeezing me tight.

Then he asked: “Your mama, Eva, Moncho?”

I told him that the bastards had killed Eva.

He didn’t react. He just stood there. Then he asked: “Are they still on the soccer field?”

“No. We found cover behind the rock ridge at the back of the field,” I responded.

“Go tell your mama that I’ll be there soon. In the meantime, she has to round everybody up. We’ll take care of the wounded, bury our dead and then we’ll leave for the mountains. Well, *we* won’t leave. You guys will leave,” he said, starting to walk again. Then I noticed he had a limp.

“What about you, Papa? Aren’t you coming with us?” I asked.

He didn’t respond.

“Is it because of your foot? What happened to your foot, Papa?”  
I pressed on.

He cleared his throat: “No, well, yeah... my foot hurts. I twisted my ankle... that’s all.”

Then he pointed to the dark void down the *pampa*: “The troops set up camp over there, on the other side of the tracks. They’ll come back tomorrow at dawn, but by then everybody will be gone. Now, run!”

When my papa arrived, he stood on a rock and told the women what he had told me. He said that the wounded would be carried to town and taken care of as best we could; the dead would be buried in the soccer field, and then everybody would collect food and water and leave for the mountains.

Then he said that as soon as everybody was on their way, he would cross the tracks and turn himself in on condition that the troops not attack our people again and that the wounded be taken to the clinic in Alto San Antonio.

Before taking off, he knelt down and kissed Eva on the forehead.

By then, the women and the kids who had been hiding in the dunes were starting to come back. When we finally saw our neighbour walking towards us with Rufina in her arms, my mama and I ran to meet her, Moncho in tow. I had never loved my baby sister as much as I did that night.

The school was still standing, so we took the wounded there. In the meantime, the men dug graves for the dead in the soccer field. Many women went crazy when it was time to bury their kids, including my mama. She didn’t want to let go of Eva. Finally, I took my sister out of her arms and placed her gently in her grave. Oddly enough, the soap box my mama had stood on earlier was intact and in the same place. I pulled a plank off it and wrote with a pointy rock: Eva Gregoria Garay Zelaya, 1915–1925.



By the time the mass burial was over, the soccer field was covered with crosses. Eva's grave was one of the few without a cross because we didn't believe in god or in crosses.

People started to leave for the mountains, but my mama, papa, Moncho, baby Rufina and I went home instead. We sat quietly around the table, a candle flickering at its centre and an empty chair next to Moncho's. My mama broke the silence: "We're not leaving, José. We'll stay here with whoever else wants to stay. Carmela and other women have already said they won't leave either. Those who haven't found their dead and who have to take care of their wounded are also staying."

My papa tried to talk her into leaving, but she didn't budge. "You're a leader and I'm a leader. You're not leaving and I'm not leaving either. I can't just abandon the wounded, the women who haven't found their husbands and their children. I can't leave."

As soon as the first rays of sun made their way through the slats on the window, my papa kissed us all and left the house. By then, Rufina and Moncho had fallen asleep, so my mama bundled the baby up in her *aguayo* and tied her to my back, hoisted my little brother onto her shoulder, and we left for the school.

"We'll help out with the wounded and wait for news of your papa," she said, closing the door behind her.

News came about an hour later, when hundreds of soldiers took over the camp, rounded us up, made us walk, wounded and all, to the slaughterhouse and locked us up in the stockyards.

They left us there for a whole day and night. The soldiers had also gone after the people who were leaving for the mountains, so they rammed them into the stockyards with the rest of us. A lot of them were wounded, and we heard that many had been killed.

The next morning at dawn they brought my papa out from the tripe room. He was limping so badly he could hardly walk. His clothes were torn and his face black and blue. They blindfolded him and made him stand against the tripe room's brick wall. Several

soldiers were already standing on the other side of the yard, right across from him. Then a tall, square-shouldered military officer came out and strutted towards my father. He stood beside him, looked in our direction and grinned. His nostrils were flaring, one of his thick eyebrows was arched, and his eyes glowering with hatred. He took a piece of paper out of his coat pocket and began to read: “Yesterday, a war tribunal was convened and prosecuted José Cunac Garay Quispe on charges of crimes against the state and treason to the fatherland. The tribunal was unanimous in its verdict and sentence: José Garay was found guilty of all charges and condemned to death by firing squad.”

The women began to wail and the men to roar. As the military man raised his arm, my papa shouted “*Viva el proletariado!*” — “Long Live the Proletariat!” An indignant “*Viva!*” exploded from the crowd. For an instant, the army officer seemed to hesitate, but then he hollered “Fire!” at the top of his lungs.

The barrage of gunfire sent me up into the expanse of the bluest sky. Down below, in the desolate vastness and beauty of the *pampa*, our ruined camp and the mangled mine looked like nothing other than mistakes of nature. But they weren’t. My papa had explained it to me many times: La Coruña had been created by human greed and was just a sorry excuse for “progress” and “civilization.”

As I hovered over the *pampa* and watched the camp’s and the mine’s remains, I realized that they had always lived inside me as much as I had lived in them. But not anymore. No matter what, even if we were allowed to go back, I would take my family elsewhere and start a new life. What I didn’t realize then was that the space that La Coruña had occupied within me would become an everlasting black hole in my chest.

My mother’s wailing brought me back to the slaughterhouse. The stockyard gates burst open, and we were ordered to walk out. I put my arm around my mama’s waist, sat Rufina on my hip and urged Moncho to hold on to my pants. Tripping and stumbling, prodded

by the soldiers, we were carried to the train station by a sea of wobbly bodies.

A cargo train was waiting, wrapped in clouds of steam, its engines revved up. The cars were meant for carrying saltpetre, so they looked like big, open cages. By the time everybody got on, we were squeezed so tight together, we could hardly breathe. Then we heard the howl of the whistle, and the train began to move. Rumour had it they were taking us to Iquique.

## Iquique

**THE FIRST TIME** I saw the ocean, I didn't have enough eyes to take it in. We had been on the train for hours, breathing in dust and getting our heads baked by the sun, when Moncho started pulling at my pants: "What's that, what's that?" he kept asking.

I looked through the mesh. Down below and far away I saw a huge mass of blue shimmering in the sun. "Moncho, that's the Pacific Ocean," I responded in my most solemn of voices.

I knew because my mama had described it to me many times.

"How big is it?" I would ask her.

"Very big," she'd reply.

"Can you see where it ends?" I'd press on.

"No," she'd answer.

Now I understood. It was so big that it didn't fit inside my eyes.

"What's the Peciffy Oshan?" Moncho was asking now.

"It's that," I replied, pointing at it. "It's water. Tons of water. All that blue water is the Pacific Ocean. It's so big that we can't see where it ends," I explained.

"Oh!" Moncho commented, opening his eyes and his mouth as if that would help him see better.

"That's where we're going, Moncho, to all those houses down there, by the water," I went on. "That town is called Iquique and

that's where our mama grew up," I added.

"Oh!" Moncho commented again, his eyes and mouth still wide open.

As the train switched back and forth, making its way down the steep mountain, I offered my face to the breeze. It felt moist and fresh.

From the train station we were made to walk to the barracks. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon, there wasn't a soul in the streets because the word was that the government had imposed a day-long curfew so the city workers couldn't go to the station to greet us. When we got to the barracks, the wounded were taken to the infirmary and the rest of us herded into the training grounds.

For the first time in days we ate: we were given a bowl of beans, bread and water and told to wait. So, we waited. After two days, the same military man who had commanded my father's execution came out and stood on a platform in his fancy uniform, his boots as shiny as mirrors. He surveyed the scene from up there, the same contemptuous look in his eyes, an arched eyebrow, nostrils flaring and a derisive smile across his face. He sniffed the air and continued to stand ramrod straight while the soldiers prodded us with their rifles and made us get on our feet.

As I looked at the clean, well-fed, arrogant man on the platform, I saw the crowd through his eyes: our filthy bodies, our clothes in rags, our hungry eyes. Only then did I realize that after so many days of misery we didn't only look like paupers but also smelled like pigs. I don't know what came over me, but the next thing I knew I was yelling: "Murderer, dirty bastard! *You* are the pig! You! Not us!"

He turned his head in my direction, but my mama had been quick to pull me down, and now I was sitting on the ground, her hand weighing heavily on my head.

The crowd stirred. The soldiers ordered people to stop shuffling and shut up. My mama made sure I stayed put, so from down there, surrounded by smelly feet and grungy pants and skirts, I listened to

the pig speak to us as if we were the criminals and the murderers and not him and his troops. I can't remember exactly what he said — I was too busy feeling a kind of fury I had never felt before, but I did hear him say that we would not be released until our leaders signed a piece of paper agreeing to accept the government's orders.

There was one sentence that stuck with me: "We will not tire until every Bolshevik agitator in Chile is neutralized." I had never heard the term "neutralized" before, but I understood right away what it meant: "killed."

We were kept at the barracks for several more days — long enough for everybody to get sick and for a few more people to die. Fortunately, even though we were all burning with fever and coughing our lungs out, we didn't give the pig the satisfaction of being "neutralized" by the gripe.

When I asked my mama where we'd go when we got out, she didn't think twice about it: "Asunta's, of course! She'll know to come and get us."

Sure enough, the day we were released, there she was, all four-foot-eleven of her, a silver bun on top of her head, and her bright, blue eyes looking big and round behind a pair of glasses that could've been made with the bottoms of beer bottles.

She gave us all a hug and then examined us as if she were a doctor. She inspected our eyes, ears and mouths, even asked us to stick our tongues out, her glasses now balanced on the tip of her nose. Then she concluded that the repressive, capitalist state had not only treated us like shit, but also that we had high fevers and most likely, tonsillitis.

"Those bastards," she repeated in her weird way of speaking, as if her tongue kept getting caught in between her teeth. My mama had explained that Aunt Asunta had come to Chile from Barcelona and spoke like a Spaniard.

"No!" she replied, raising her hand when my mama suggested that we walk to her house. "You're all too ill. You can't walk."

Then she put her right thumb and index finger in her mouth and let out a whistle so loud that even the La Coruña foremen would've been impressed. In no time a horse-drawn cart was picking us up. A huge sense of relief washed over me. Aunt Asunta would take care of us.

Iquique looked like a metropolis compared to La Coruña: cobblestoned streets as opposed to dirt roads, street cars, a central square with palm trees and flowers, grandiose buildings all around it, all kinds of stores where Aunt Asunta said that you could buy whatever you wanted with *real* money instead of tokens (that is, if you *had* any money, which we didn't) and of course, my very favourite: the Pacific Ocean right around the corner from Aunt Asunta's place.

I don't think I had the concept of "ugly" and "pretty" until I got to Iquique. For me, La Coruña was the place where I had grown up and I had never stopped to think whether it was big, small, pretty or ugly. It was what it was. But now, after seeing the big city, I had no choice but to conclude that my hometown was ugly. Very, very ugly — a cluster of run-down shacks criss-crossed by narrow, dirt roads. I guess you could say that the bosses' part of town was pretty, but that was a different world, completely separate from ours. La Coruña was our camp and the mine.

As soon as we got to her house, Aunt Asunta ordered us to bathe. Moncho and I were already out the front door, looking for the public bathrooms at the end of the block when she ordered us to get back in the house and directed us to a tiny box of a building in the back yard: the bathroom. We had our own bathroom! Right in the middle, there was a cement tub with a brass gadget attached to the edge, which let water out of a spout when you turned the handle! And in the corner, a contraption in the form of a huge cup with a wooden lid where you went number one and number two! Not only that; right above it, there was a water tank connected to the cup by a pipe and when you pulled on a chain, all the water came rushing down and took the waste away! No wonder the bathroom smelled fresh

and clean! I had read about drinking water and sewage systems in my schoolbooks, but seeing them at work with my own two eyes was something else altogether. Moncho and I might have been feverish and achy, but still we managed to have fun opening and closing the tap and pulling on the chain over and over again until Aunt Asunta showed up and ordered us to stop.

The private bathroom was not the only luxury in the house. There were many others: instead of dirt floors, there were wooden ones, where you could skid and slide to your heart's content; a large room with a dining table, a kitchen cupboard, a sink and a kerosene stove, instead of a coal-burning one; uninterrupted electricity (in La Coruña the power was turned off between nine at night and five in the morning) and a bedroom separated from the main room by an actual door (not a curtain, like in our La Coruña house). Also, there were large windows with glass panes that let the light in.

Aunt Asunta gave her bed to my mom and Rufina, put down a mattress on the bedroom floor for herself and set one on the front room floor for Moncho and me. As soon as we were all clean and shiny, she fed us *cazuela* and then sent us to bed.

“Don’t worry about anything. Rest and get better,” she ordered. She also commanded us to drink a horrible concoction called Bulgarian herb tea, and sure enough, after a week or so we were all back to normal.

Then, she began to enforce the second phase of her campaign: fattening us up. Moncho, baby Rufina and I responded to the new game plan with enthusiasm; we became bottomless bags — we could keep on eating forever. My mama was a different story. She hardly touched her food, and slowly, her portly self was replaced by a thin, older woman with salt and pepper hair and narrow eyes. It was as if she was afraid of what she might see if she opened them wide. She moved slowly, spoke little and could sit for hours looking at the wall. Perhaps that’s where her past life resided now — La Coruña and everything that had happened there.

So, Aunt Asunta put phase three of her campaign in motion and focused on bringing my mama back to at least a semblance of her old, strong self. My aunt owned an ancient Underwood Number 5, on which she turned out the leaflets and newsletters she used in her political work. She started to leave my mama stacks of papers, which she *had* to finish typing by the end of the day. She also assigned her a few house chores, and when Aunt Asunta came home from work, made sure that they cooked together.

By then my mama's dream had come true: I had started attending high school, so I left the house early in the morning and didn't come back till early afternoon, when we ate our main meal together. Then, I left for the beach to forage for food, Aunt Asunta took Moncho along as she attended to her different projects, and my mama and Rufina stayed home with strict orders of taking a good, long nap.

Little by little my mama got her physical strength back, but not her combative spirit and hearty laugh. A few things put a smile on her face — helping me with my homework, teaching Moncho to read, listening to Rufina's nonsensical chatter. Most of the time though, she was quiet and withdrawn.

I liked my new life — how predictable it was and how safe it felt. At Aunt Asunta's house I seldom felt hungry, I was never too hot or too cold and I thoroughly enjoyed taking a daily bath in the privacy of our own bathroom. Mornings at school were full of surprises — like learning that turtles can live up to a hundred and fifty years or that in Egypt there are mummies just like the ones buried in the Atacama Desert.

But nothing topped my afternoons by the ocean. I could spend hours watching the waves come and go, the water rise and ebb, the foamy surf creep over and steal seashells from their sandy bed. It took me a while to learn how to read the ocean's hidden moods — coy, honest or deceitful, stingy or generous — all lying in wait under a sheet of glass suddenly shattered by a gust of wind, a gentle pulse turned thunderous without warning. I had to resist the temptation



of outsmarting the ocean and learn to wait and take what it offered me.

The beach was a busy place: fishermen worked on their nets, kids hopped and shrieked in the waves, grownups combed the beach for unexpected treasures, and bums slept their drunkenness away splayed on the sand. Also, there were plenty of boys my age foraging for food.

At first, I walked around and studied their ways out of the corner of my eye. They dug for clams, searched the rocks for mussels and sea urchins, set up fishing lines by sticking the poles in the sand and combed the surf for kelp and seaweed. Before coming to Iquique I had never eaten seafood, but Aunt Asunta's chowders and casseroles got me hooked. Besides, why pay for food when you can get it for free? As soon as possible then, I would join the other scavengers. But first, I would have to figure out how to win them over. They had come close a few times, stared at me shamelessly, and one of them, a blondish, ruddy-faced jackass twice my size had talked loudly to the other ones, making sure I heard him: "Have you ever come across such an ugly tadpole? If he thinks he can come to our beach and do whatever he wants, he'd better think twice. Well, I guess we'll just have to show him whose beach this is."

A couple of days later I decided to try my luck and started digging for clams. Next thing I knew, the tongue-lashing, brawny jackass had given me a mighty shove and I was in the water, battling the waves. Finally, I managed to get to my feet, gasping for air and coughing up the water I hadn't already swallowed. The bully and his buddies were laughing their heads off.

A few hours later I had a plan. Up in the *pampa*, I had enlisted the desert animals themselves to protect my territory. Whenever my enemies crossed the line, I shot a small rock at a flying buzzard, which reacted to the attack by regurgitating a thick shower of food. The stink was so revolting it sent the trespassers packing. There were no buzzards by the ocean, but I was sure another animal would help me stake out a place for myself as a forager on Bellavista Beach.

Earlier that day I had overheard a fisherman say that at night, the beach swarmed with crabs. “I got more than a dozen last night, enough for my mom to make a delicious *chupe!* But one of the damn beasts got hold of my toe and wouldn’t let go! Look! It even broke the skin and my toe still hurts from the bite!” he said, lifting his foot for his friends to see.

That afternoon, I came home early. A while back Aunt Asunta had shown me a gadget she was particularly taken by — a modern, battery-operated flashlight. I had never seen anything like it before and asked if I could take it apart to figure out how it worked.

“Over my dead body!” she’d said, snatching it from my hands, walking into her bedroom and putting it away in one of her dresser drawers. “That’s a valuable revolutionary tool, Manuel. It’s a life saver when I go to the shanty towns at night to do my political work. Don’t forget, those poor people don’t have electricity.”

That evening, I found the revolutionary tool, slipped it into my pocket and, after everyone had gone to bed, headed to the beach, a bucket in hand.

The tide was low and every receding wave revealed dozens of scampering crabs. I scooped water into my bucket, got on my knees, combed the wet sand with my hands and in no time at all I had three big crabs in the bucket. It could’ve been four, but the last one pinched my pinky and wouldn’t let go. I tried pulling it off, hitting it, turning it over, shaking my hand, but with every new attempt to get rid of it, the crab tightened its grip even more. The fisherman was right; the beasts stabbed you with their pincers as if they were knives and then latched on for dear life. I dipped my hand in the ocean looking for relief from the pain, and within a few moments, the crab let go of me.

The next day I got to the beach early. I sat up high on a rock with my bucket of crabs and watched the regulars trickle in. The bully was one of the last ones to come. As usual, he was loud and obnoxious, making sure everyone knew that the king of the foragers had arrived. While he was busy bossing his minions around, I made my way off

the rocks and onto the beach. Bucket in hand, I started digging for clams.

When he saw me, he marched in my direction. “Hey, tadpole! Do you want to drown for sure this time?” he yelled.

I ignored him.

He started running.

I got ready. I watched him with the corner of my eye, and when I figured he was a few seconds from me, I jumped to the side. He fell flat on his face, his arms and legs splayed out. I dropped a crab on each of his hands and one foot. For a moment I wished I’d had a fourth crab to make things symmetrical, but then decided it didn’t really matter. Three crabs were already doing the trick.

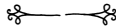
The bully was now lying face down on the beach, squirming and writhing like a worm, his muted shrieks accomplishing nothing other than filling his mouth with sand. His minions came to his rescue and pulled him up. His face and the front of his body were plastered with wet sand and his eyes looked like bloodshot platters. While he jumped around and shook his hands and foot, the three crabs fastened on tight, he tried to yell something, but what came out was gibberish.

I felt the urge to laugh. I had to laugh. I couldn’t help it. So, I laughed. I laughed loudly and I laughed with gusto. The scavengers, the fishermen, the little kids and whoever else was on the beach that day were all staring at the bully now, and when they heard me laugh, little by little they joined in until everybody was laughing.

I had expected his minions to help him, but they were too busy laughing. So, I decided to put the bully out of his misery. I grabbed him by the arms and pulled him into the ocean. He didn’t resist. A good-sized wave dragged us into deep water. While I had taught myself how to stay afloat, I hadn’t really learned how to swim yet and for a moment, I panicked. But soon enough another wave returned us to shore. The bully’s face and clothes were clean now and the crabs had let go of him. We stood side by side in the surf.

“My name is Manuel Garay,” I said. “I’m the only man in my family and I have to take food home. I won’t take more than I need.”

He looked at me sideways while he shuffled his feet. Then he turned to face me and extended his hand. “I’m El Rucio. Welcome to Bellavista Beach.”



AS I WENT THROUGH my days, memories of my former life would cross my mind — the immutable, ochre expanse of the *pampa*, so different from the capricious, blue ocean; the sight of a fat iguana caught in my trap; the howl of the wind rushing through the saltpe-tre fields; Eva skipping rope with her friends, the warmth of her hand in mine, her hair parted on one side and held down with a barrette; the light in my papa’s eyes, his calm demeanour, his speech at my first and only union meeting, his broken body when they took him out of the tripe room and the sound of the barrage of gunfire that killed him... Sometimes these memories cropped up as flashes or a series of pictures; at other times, they were a simple thought or a mumble-jumble of feelings. But no matter how they came to me, they always found their way into the hole in my chest. At night, in the amber light of a candle, I would turn them into words and spill them onto a blank page until the hole was empty and the page, full. By the time I blew the candle out, I was awash with a sense of serenity. Writing had become my new *tamarugo* tree.