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The Day I Voted for General Peron

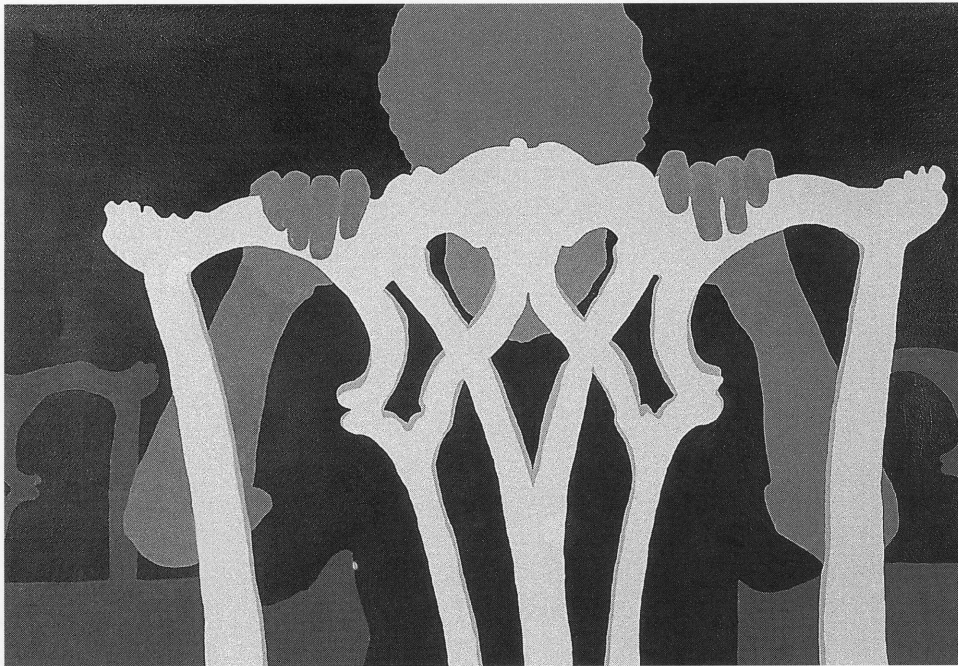
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2] perón was a dictator who ruled argentina from 1945 until 1955, when he was overthrown by the armed forces in a bloody coup. i will not elaborate on life in a dictatorship. i will say, however, that freedom of expression is one of the first things to disappear, and my parents constantly reminded us to use caution in our behavior. they were born in argentina, but their families had come from ireland, and we spoke english. this made us suspicious, as there was, in some sectors of the population, a strong and sickish nationalistic feeling. my mother's brothers worked for the argentine railroads, property of the british who had built them. in 1948 perón expropriated them as part of his national program.

during perón's dictatorship, my godfather, one of my mother's brothers, was imprisoned and held incommunicado for two weeks; his crime was never clearly stated. when we were authorized, we visited him. the jail house was in the oldest part of town. a gloomy gray stone building, it stood on one corner detached from its neighbors; a large crowd moved around it. and so there we stood, aliens in such a crowd. at the appointed time, the door opened, and we walked into dark hallways that oozed of smothered air and gray walls that collapsed into a world of silence and despair. and then we came to my godfather, wearing a coarse gray uniform, a black number stuck on his back. to this day i have a haunting memory of that visit.

at the time, we lived in the township of rodriguez, two hours away from the city of buenos aires where we commuted by train daily to our work places. we lived in rodriguez one year so that the transition period, from country life to life in the big city, would not be too drastic on my father, who had lived all his life on a farm. we then moved to the city of buenos aires, where most of my parents' family lived.

now, let me tell you what happened to me during this prohibition time. a national election was due at the time of our move. my mother and i had not made our address change on time, so we both had to travel to rodriguez on election day to fulfill this obligation that is law in argentina. elections are held on a sunday. all stores are closed, and entertainment is banned for the day. the voting procedure is also different from that observed in the united states. in argentina, at age 18, a citizen is issued a document similar to a small passport with pre-printed pages. on election day, the clerk in charge identifies the voter with a listing, then stamps and signs the document. this is an official document, not to be tampered with, and its presentation is required when renewing passports and other official transactions. it was to be the first time i'd vote, and i felt so important with my recently acquired adulthood that i showed my document to a group of friends.

the day i voted for general perón

however, when election day arrived, i wasn't thrilled with the trip to rodríguez. i was recuperating from surgery, and the thought of visiting a place where we had very few friends wasn't pleasant. the weather did not help; a fine drizzle clouded the day. my mother sensed my mood. "once we are done with the voting, we can go by the flannagans for tea." always ready to make the best of a bad situation, she quickly added, "her scones are the best i've tasted in some time."

and so we got off the train in the early afternoon of that election sunday into a sparsely populated railway station. the drizzle had turned into a fine rain that coated roads with a slippery layer, and the house stared in cold, foreboding silence. huddled under their umbrellas, elusive shadows, people hurried in the gray, gloomy silence. following the written instructions we had, we walked down unfamiliar streets. from time to time we stopped to check our instructions, until finally we arrived at an old school building where the voting was held. there were only three people in the room: two lady employees and a uniformed police officer. my mother handed in her document, and once her name was verified she was directed to the voting room.

next, i handed in my document. the employee checked my name, flipped through the pages, and opened it where she was supposed to stamp it. here she stopped, looked at it more attentively, and instantly looked up, straight into my face, askance, yet she did not utter a word. instead she showed my document to the other employee and then gestured to the police officer. i was growing apprehensive and couldn't understand what was happening. the police officer now held my document in his hand and slowly walked towards me.

"this is a serious misdemeanor, young lady." his hard look went right through me, though i was still innocent of my crime. my eyes followed the officer's pointing finger. no! i couldn't believe it. in big letters on the page where my first vote was to be recorded, one of my friends had written, "vote balbin frondizi." this was perón's opposing formula. i felt my body go into a state of total disarray. "i didn't do it, i didn't do it," i sobbed, and quickly added, "i will vote for general perón, i will vote for general perón." my whole body shook, my heart pounded, and a ticklish sensation ran down my legs.

what happened next comes back in snatches. i stood there, a leaf trapped in the wind. the police officer also stood there, a waiting expression on his face. we stood there for what seemed an incredible length of time, yet it could only have been minutes. and then, my mother burst onto the scene.

"what have you done to her?" she walked straight to where i stood by the police officer, the envelope with her vote still in her hand. the officer now turned his gaze in my mother's direction. "what have you done to my daughter?" she insisted in a louder tone this time. i now feared both of us would be thrown into some dark cell, incommunicado. with such fear, and the absurdity of our situation, i lost my voice. dumbfounded, i witnessed in awe how my mother tried to explain my misdemeanor. then, one of the lady employees ushered me into the voting room and closed the door behind me.

for a second i stood there. accusing eyes peered at me from all four walls while mine nervously searched for the ballot that had perón's name. my trembling fingers fumbled with it, folded it, and shuffled it into the envelope. dazed by the experience, and ready to rid myself of the envelope, i stepped out of the room, hesitant and eager to join my mother. at the door i found the same lady who had ushered me in. she retrieved the envelope with my vote before i reached the urn. i learned later that my vote would be annulled.

my mother forgot tea and scones at the flannagan's, and we went straight to the railway station. i had a hard time keeping up with my mother, who now walked with short, quick steps; her high heels echoed sharply in the empty streets. the rain had stopped, but water still fell. it slithered down walls in soft whispers. it rolled down gutters, plop...plop...plop...drops rippled as they hit puddles on the ground. i walked with caution; i was afraid to slip, and i had to watch each step not to get into one of the many puddles that had collected in the broken parts of the sidewalk, or to step on a loose tile and send water squirting up my legs. as it was, i was pretty wet already. i had sweated profusely. no, i had peed in my pants.