Interview in America, July 13, 1944

EVA DUARTE

The way a person takes a look at a posada collection.
I want to take a look at the world.

„Lady Lazarus“, October 23–29, 1962

SYLVIA PLATH

I do it exceptionally well.
Is an art like evmething else.

Dying
On coming out of a faint that lasted for more than three days, Evita was certain at last that she was going to die. The terrible pains in her abdomen had gone away, and her body was clean again, alone with itself, in a bliss without time or place. Only the idea of death still hurt her. The worst part about death was not that it occurred. The worst part about death was the whiteness, the emptiness, the loneliness of the other side: one’s body racing off like a galloping steed.

Although the doctors kept telling her that her anemia was in remission and that in a month or less she would regain her health, she barely had the strength left to open her eyes. She was unable to get out of bed no matter how intently she focused her energies on her elbows and heels, and even the slight effort of turning over on one side or the other to relieve the pain left her breathless.

She did not seem to be the same person who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1935 without a penny to her name, and who acted in hopeless theaters where her pay was a cup of coffee with milk. She was nothing or less than nothing then: a sparrow at an outdoor laundry sink, a caramel bitten into, so skinny it was pitiful. She began to make herself look pretty with passion, memory, and death.
She wove herself a chrysalis of beauty, little by little hatching a queen; who would ever have thought it?

"She had black hair when I knew her," one of the actresses who took her in said. "Her sad eyes looked as though they were saying goodbye; you couldn’t see the color of them. Her nose was rather coarse, a bit on the heavy side, and she was more or less buck-toothed. Though she was flat-chested, she had quite a good figure. She wasn’t one of those women men turn around in the street to look at: she was likable enough, but nobody lost sleep over her. Today, when I realize how high she flew, I say to myself: Where did that frail little thing learn to handle power, how did she manage to come by such self-assurance and such a way with words, where did she get the force to touch people’s hearts in the place where it hurt? What lamb’s bleating can have so stirred her blood as to turn her overnight into what she was: a queen?"

"Maybe it was the effect of her illness," the makeup man on her last two films said. "Before, no matter how much foundation cream and rouge we put on her, you could tell from a mile away that she was common, there was no way you could teach her how to sit down gracefully or use a knife and fork properly or chew with her mouth closed. It couldn’t have been more than four years later that I saw her again, and what can I say? A goddess. She had such beautiful features by then that they gave her an aristocratic aura, an air of refinement straight out of a fairy tale. I took a good hard look at her to see what miraculous war paint she was wearing. But it was nothing you could see: she still had the same rabbit teeth that kept her from closing her lips, eyes that were sort of round and not at all provocative, and to top it all off her nose looked bigger to me. Her hair, I grant you, was different: dyed blond, drawn back tight into a simple bun at the nape of her neck. Her beauty grew inside her without a by-your-leave."

Nobody realized that her illness not only made her thinner but also made her all hunched up. Since they let her wear her husband’s pajamas till the end, Evita drifted about more and more aimlessly inside that vast expanse of cloth. "Don’t you think I look like a Jibaro, a pygmy?" she said to the ministers standing around her bed. They answered her with adulation: "Don’t say that, señora. If you’re a pygmy, what can we be: lice, microbes?" And they changed the subject. The nurses, however, turned her reality upside down: "See how well you’ve eaten today?" they kept saying as they took away the dishes she hadn’t touched. "You look a little plumper, señora." They fooled her like a child, and the rage burning inside her, with no way out, was what made her gasp for breath: more than her illness, than her decline, than the senseless terror of waking up dead and not knowing what to do.

A week before—a week already?—she had stopped breathing for an instant (as happened to everybody who suffered from anemia, or at least that was what they told her). When she came to, she found herself inside a liquid, transparent cave, with pads over her eyes and wads of cotton in her ears. After one or two tries, she managed to pull out the tubes and catheters. To her astonishment, she noticed that in that room where things seldom changed place there was a cortege of nuns on their knees in front of the dressing table and dim lamps on top of the wardrobes. Two huge oxygen tanks loomed menacingly alongside the bed. Her jars of cream and bottles of perfume had disappeared from the shelves. Prayers could be heard on the stairs, beating their wings like bats.

"What’s the meaning of all this ruckus?" she said, sitting up in bed.

They all stood there paralyzed with surprise. A bald-headed doctor she barely remembered came over and said in her ear:

"We’ve just performed a little operation on you, señora. We’ve removed the nerve that was causing you such pain in your head. You won’t suffer anymore from now on."

"If you knew that that was what it was, I don’t understand why you waited so long." And she raised her voice, in the imperious tone she thought she’d lost. "Come, give me a hand. I have to go to the bathroom."

She got out of the bed barefooted and, leaning on a nurse, walked over and sat down on the toilet seat. From there, she heard her
brother, Juan, running up and down the corridors, excitedly shouting over and over again: "They've saved Evita! Praise be to God, they've saved Evita!" At that very moment she fell asleep again. She was so exhausted she woke up only now and again to drink sips of tea. She lost all track of time, of the hours of the day and even of the members of the family who took turns keeping watch over her. Once she asked: "What day is it today?" and they told her, "Tuesday, the twenty-second," but after a while, when she repeated the question, they answered, "Saturday, the nineteenth," so she chose to forget something of so little importance to everyone.

During one of her waking periods she had them summon her husband and asked him to stay with her for a while. She saw that he was fatter and had big fleshy pouches under his eyes. He looked disconcerted and seemed to be eager to leave. It was only natural: they hadn't been alone together for almost a year. Evita took his hands in hers and felt him shudder.

"Aren't they taking good care of you, Juan?" she said to him. 
"You've put on weight from worrying. Stop working so hard and come visit me in the afternoons."

"How can I, Chinita?" her husband said apologetically. "I spend all day answering the letters addressed to you. There are more than three thousand of them, and in every one of them they ask you for something: a scholarship for their children, trousseaus, bedroom suites, jobs as a night watchman, I don't know what all. You have to get back on your feet soon, before I come down sick too."

"Don't try to be funny. You know that tomorrow or the day after I'm going to die. If I ask you to come it's because I need to ask you to do certain things for me."

"Ask me whatever you like."

"Don't abandon the poor, my little greasers. All the people around here who keep licking your boots are going to turn away from you someday. But not the poor, Juan. They're the only ones who know how to be faithful." Her husband stroked her hair. She moved his hands away. "There's just one thing I won't forgive you for."

"Getting married again," he said, trying to make a joke.

"My Life Belongs to You"

"Get married as often as you like. All the better for me. That way you'll realize what you've lost. What I don't want is for people to forget me, Juan. Don't let them forget me."

"Don't worry. It's all taken care of. They won't forget you."

"Of course. It's all taken care of," Evita repeated.

The next morning she woke up feeling so energetic, so feather-light, that she was reconciled with her body. After everything they'd put her through, she didn't even feel it now. She didn't have a body, only breaths, desires, innocent pleasures, images of places to go to. There were still some pools of weakness in her chest and hands, nothing special, nothing to keep her from getting out of bed. She had to do it as quickly as she could, so as to take all of them by surprise. If the doctors tried to stop her, she would already be dressed to leave, and with a couple of screams she'd put them in their place. Come on, she said to herself, let's go now. But the minute she tried to take off, one of the terrible drills that bored holes in the nape of her neck made her acutely aware of her illness once again. It was a very brief torture, but intense enough to warn her that her body hadn't changed. So what? she said to herself. I'm going to die, right? Since I'm going to die, everything is permitted. Another bath of relief immediately washed over her. Up until then she hadn't realized that the best remedy for getting rid of something bothersome was to accept that it existed. That sudden revelation filled her with joy. She would never object to anything again: neither catheters nor intravenous feedings nor radiation treatments that burned her back to a crisp nor pain nor the sadness of dying.

They had told her once upon a time that it wasn't one's body that fell ill but one's entire being. If that being managed to recover (and nothing was as hard, because to cure it, it was necessary to see it), the rest was a question of time and willpower. But her being was healthy. It had never, perhaps, been better. It hurt her to move from one side of the bed to the other, but once she pushed the sheets aside, getting out was easy. She gave it a try and was on her feet immediately. The nurses, her mother, and one of the doctors were asleep in the armchairs around the room. How she would have liked
him to see her! But she didn't wake them, for fear that among all of them they would force her to get back in bed. She tiptoed over to the windows facing the garden that she had never had the chance to look through. She saw the molten ivy on the wall, the tops of the jacarandas and the magnolias on the garden slope, the vast empty balcony, the ashes of the lawn; she saw the sidewalk, the gentle curve of the avenue that was now called the avenida del Libertador, the strands of dampness in the semidarkness, as though they had just come out of a movie theater. And all of a sudden a boiling of voices reached her ears. Or weren't they voices? There was something in the air that rose and fell as though the light were skirting obstacles or the darkness were an endless fold, a toboggan run to nowhere. There was a moment when she seemed to hear the syllables of her name, but separated from each other by furtive silences: Eee vii taa.

The light of day was rising in the east, from the depths of the river, as the rain stripped itself of its gray mists and came to life again with a diamond light. The sidewalk was strewn with umbrellas, mantillas, ponchos, glimmers of candles, processional crucifixes, and Argentine flags. What day is today? she said to herself, or may have said to herself. Why the flags? Today is Saturday, she saw by the calendar on the wall. A Saturday nowhere. It's the twenty-sixth, Saturday, July 1952. It's not National Anthem Day or Manuel Belgrano Day or the festival of the Virgin of Luján or any sacrosanct Peronist holiday. But there the little greasers are, pacing back and forth like souls in purgatory. The one on her knees praying is doña Elisa Tejedor, with the same mourning kerchief she was wearing when she asked me for the milk cart on Christmas morning: the one who's walking toward the police barricades, with his hat tilted to one side, is Vicente Tagliatti, for whom I got a job as an apprentice painter; the ones lighting candles are the sons of doña Dionisia Rebilloni, who asked me for a house in Lugano and died before I could hand it over to her in Mataderos. Why is don Luis Leija weeping? Why is everybody embracing, why are their arms raised heavenward, why are they cursing the rain, why are they grief-stricken? Are they saying what I'm hearing: Eee vii taa, don't go away? I'm not thinking of going away, my

dear descamisados, my little greasers, go get some rest, be patient. If you could see me you wouldn't worry. But I can't let you see me like this, looking this thin. You've gotten used to seeing me look more imposing when I appear before you, dressed to the nines, and how disillusioned you're going to be, now that I'm nothing but skin and bones, my happiness so wasted away, my spirits so low.

She could record a radio broadcast to them and tell them good-bye in her own way, entrusting them to her husband's care as she always did, but she still had all morning to set her voice to rights, to order the microphones set up and have a handkerchief within reach in case she was carried away by emotion the way she'd been the last time. All morning, all but afternoon as well, and the next day, and the horizon of all the days it would take her to die. Another gust of weakness sent her back to bed, her body turned out the light, and the bliss of her weightlessness made her very sleepy; she went from one sleep to another and yet another; she slept as though she had never slept before.

Could it have been 9:00 that night perhaps, 9:15? Colonel Carlos Eugenio de Moori Koenig was delivering his second lecture at the Army Intelligence School on the nature of secrecy and the use of rumor. "Rumor," he was saying, "is the precaution that facts take before becoming truth." He had cited William Stans’s studies on the structure of Chinese tongs and the teachings of the Bohemian philosopher Fritz Mauthner on the inadequacy of language for dealing with the complexity of the real world. But his attention was focused on rumor now. "Every rumor is innocent in principle, just as every truth is guilty, because the truth does not allow itself to be contaminated, it cannot be passed from mouth to mouth."

He looked through his notes in search of a quotation from Edmund Burke, but at that moment one of the duty officers interrupted him to inform him that the wife of the president of the Republic had just died. The Colonel picked up his folders, and as he was leaving the classroom, said in German: "Thank God it's all over."
In the last two years, the Colonel had spied on Evita by order of a general of the Intelligence Service who cited, in turn, orders from Perón. His outlandish duty consisted of submitting daily reports on the vaginal hemorrhages that were tormenting the first lady, concerning which the president was to be kept better informed than anyone else. But that was how it was in those days: everybody mistrusted everybody else. A frequent nightmare of the middle classes involved the horde of barbarians that would come down from the darkness to take their houses, jobs, and savings away from them, just as Julio Cortázar had imagined in his story "House Taken Over." Evita, however, saw reality upside down: she was distressed by the oligarchs and traitors who were out to crush the shirtless people beneath their boots (that was the way she talked: in her speeches she sounded all the high notes of emphasis) and asked the masses' help in "flushing traitors from their foul lairs." As an exorcism to ward off the stampedes of the poor, in the living rooms of the upper class the civilized maxims of Lin Yutang’s *A Leaf in the Storm*, George Santayana’s lectures on pleasure and morality, and the epigrams of Aldous Huxley’s characters were read. Evita was no reader, of course. When she needed to get out of a tight spot, she cited Plutarch or Carlyle, on the advice of her husband. She preferred to trust in God-given wisdom. She was very busy. She received between fifteen and twenty labor union delegations in the morning; she visited a couple of hospitals and a factory or two in the afternoon; she inaugurated stretches of highway, bridges, and day-care centers; she toured the provinces two or three times a month; she delivered from five to six speeches a day, brief harangues, pet battle cries: she proclaimed her love for Perón up to six times in the same sentence, taking the themes farther and farther and then bringing them back to their point of departure as in a Bach fugue: "My only thoughts are for Perón and my people"); "I hoist my banner for the cause of Perón"); "I can never thank Perón enough for what I am and what I have"; "My life does not belong to me but to Perón and to my people, who are my fixed ideals." It was overwhelming and exhausting.}

No spy job was beneath the Colonel, and to keep Evita under sur-

“*My Life Belongs to You*”

veillance he served for a time in the court of her aides-de-camp. Power is nothing but a tissue of facts, he kept telling himself, and heaven only knows which of all the ones I gather will be of use to me for loftier ends. He wrote reports as minutely detailed as they were inappropriate for his rank: "The Señora is losing a great deal of blood but she refuses to allow the doctors to be called in... She locks herself in the bathroom of her office and discreetly changes her sanitary napkins... Blood keeps pouring out of her. Impossible to tell when it is from her illness and when it is her menstrual flow. She moans but never in public. Her female assistants hear her moaning in the bathroom and offer to help her, but she doesn’t want them to... Calculation of the blood she lost today, 19 August 1951: 5.75 cc... Calculation of the blood she lost today, 23 September 1951: 9.70 cc." Such precise figures gave away the fact that the Colonel questioned the nurses, snooped about in the trash cans, wrung out her used pads. As he himself used to say, he was doing honor to his original name, which was Moor Koenig: King of the Moor.

The longest of his reports dates from September 22. That afternoon, an official from the American Embassy passed confidential medical information on to him after having been given a complete list of the hemorrhages, thereby allowing the Colonel to draw up a document couched in more rigorous language. He wrote: "When an ulcerated lesion was discovered in the cervix of señora Perón, a biopsy was made and the cause diagnosed as an endophilic carcinoma; as a first step, therefore, the affected area will be destroyed through the use of intracavitary radium and shortly thereafter a surgical intervention will be performed. In other words, in lay terms, she obviously has cancer of the womb. Because of the extent of the damage it is assumed that when she is operated on her entire uterus must be removed. The specialists who are treating her give her six months to live, seven at most. They have called in one of the heads of the Memorial Cancer Hospital in New York for an emergency consultation to confirm what there is no longer any need to confirm."

Once Evita was placed in the care of the doctors, the Colonel was
left with very little to do. He asked to be relieved of his assignment to the corps of aides-de-camp and be allowed to pass on to an elite of young officers his vast store of knowledge in the fields of counterespionage, infiltration, cryptography, and rumor theory. He led the life of a contented scholar while honorary titles and decorations were heaped upon Evita as she lay dying: Standard Bearer of the Humble, Lady of Hope, Chain of the Order of the Liberator General San Martin, Spiritual Head and Honorary Vice-President of the Nation, Martyr of Labor, Patroness of the province of La Pampa, of the city of La Plata, and of the towns of Quilmes, San Rafael, and Madre de Dios.

In the three years that followed, everything imaginable happened in the history of Argentina, but the Colonel kept his distance, absorbed in his teaching and his research. Evita died, and her body lay in state for twelve days beneath the towering giraffe dome of the Secretariat of Labor, where she had been drained of her life's blood answering the pleas of the multitude. Half a million people kissed the coffin. A number of the mourners had to be dragged away bodily because they attempted to commit suicide at the feet of the corpse by slitting their throats or swallowing capsules of poison. Eighteen thousand wreaths of flowers were placed around the bier: as many more were hung in the funeral chapels erected in provincial capitals and district towns, where the deceased was represented by photographs ten feet tall. The Colonel attended the wake with the twenty-two aides-de-camp who had served her, wearing the conventional black armband. He stood there for ten minutes, said a prayer, and withdrew with bowed head. The morning of the funeral he stayed in bed and followed the movements of the funeral procession as described over the radio. The coffin was placed on a gun carriage drawn by an escort of thirty-five labor union representatives in shirtsleeves. Seventeen thousand soldiers were posted in the streets to render her military honors. A million and a half yellow roses, stocks from the Andes, white carnations, orchids from the Amazon, sweet peas from Lake Nahuel Huapi, and chrysanthemums sent by the emperor of Japan in warplanes were thrown from balconies.

― My Life Belongs to You ―

"Numbers," the Colonel said. "That woman's only anchor to reality now is numbers."

Months went by, and reality nonetheless continued to take care of her. In answer to her plea not to be forgotten, Perón ordered the body embalmed. The work was entrusted to Pedro Ara, a Spanish anatomist famous for having preserved the hands of Manuel de Falla, as though they were still playing "El amor brujo." On the second floor of the General Labor Confederation, an isolation laboratory was set up, kept off bounds to the public by the most rigorous safety precautions.

Although no one could see the corpse, people imagined it lying there, in a private chapel, and came on Sundays to recite the rosary and offer flowers. Little by little Evita began to turn into a story that, before it ended, kindled another. She ceased to be what she said and what she did to become what people say she said and what people say she did.

As her memory became incarnate and people unfolded within that body the folds of their own memories, that of Perón—fatter and fatter, more and more disconcerted—was emptied of its history. Among the rumors that the Colonel compiled for the enlightenment of his disciples, one about a military coup that was supposed to take place between June and September 1955 began to make the rounds. There was no coup in June; in September, Perón fell on his own.

A fugitive, hiding out in a Paraguayan gunboat that was being repaired in the Buenos Aires shipyards, Perón, going without sleep for four nights in a row as he waited for his murderers to find him, spent those nights writing the story of his romance with Eva Duarte. It is the only text of his life that construes the past as a tissue of feelings and not as a political tool, although its effect (no doubt deliberate) is to wield Evita's martyrdom, like a mace, to club his adversaries in the face.

What is most striking about these pages is the fact that, even though they are a declaration of love, the word love never appears in them. Perón writes: "We thought as one, with the same brain, we felt as one and the same soul. It therefore was natural that such a com-
munion of ideas and of feelings should give rise to that affection that led us to marriage.” “That affection?” That is not the sort of expression that one imagines coming from Evita’s lips. At the very least what she used to tell her *descamisados* was: “I love General Perón with all my soul and would go through fire for him a thousand and one times.” If feelings had a unit of measurement and if that unit could be applied to the two statements, it would be easy to determine the precise emotional distance separating Evita from her husband.

In those days of the coup against Perón, the Colonel’s interests lay in other breaths taken by reality. The most trivial of them was a semantic respiration: nobody now called the ex-president by his name or by his military rank, from which he was soon to be demoted. The phrases used to refer to him in official documents were “the runaway tyrant” and “the deposed dictator.” Evita was called “that woman,” but in private they reserved crueler epithets for her. She was the Mare or the Filly, which in the Buenos Aires slang of the time meant “hooker,” “B-girl,” “nut case.” The *descamisados* did not give up using these names for her altogether, but they turned their meaning around so that they were no longer taken as insults. To them, Evita was the lead mare, the one that guided the herd.

After Perón’s fall, the higher-ranking army officers were decimated by pitiless purges. The Colonel feared that his retirement, forced on him because he had served as aide-de-camp to the Señora, would be announced any day, but his friendship with several of the revolutionary ringleaders—whose instructor and confidant he had been in the Intelligence School—and his acknowledged expertise in bringing conspiracies to light kept him afloat for several weeks in the liaison offices of the Ministry of the Army. There he drew up a complicated plan to assassinate the “runaway dictator” and another, even more involved, aimed at surprising him in bed and cutting his tongue out. But Perón no longer worried the triumphant generals. The headache that kept them awake nights was the remains of “that woman.”

The Colonel was in his office writing a memorandum on the use of spies according to Sun Tzu and listening to Bach’s “Magnificat” at full volume when the provisional president of the Republic sent for him. It was eleven at night, and it had been raining for a solid week. The air was saturated with mosquitoes, caterwauling, and the smell of rot. The Colonel had no idea why they could possibly need him and wrote down a few notes about the two or three delicate missions that he was perhaps about to be assigned. Perhaps tailing the nationalist agitators who had been driven out of the government that very week? Finding out who was going to be entrusted by the military with the job of governing Brazil after the hasty resignation of President Café Filho? Or something more secret, more clandestine still, such as discovering the dens where the wolf packs on the run were licking their wounds? He washed his face, shaved his day-and-a-half beard, and entered the labyrinths of Government House. The meeting was in a large room with mirrored walls and allegorical busts of Justice, Reason, and Providence. The desktops were littered with dried-out sandwiches and cigarette ashes. The provisional president of the Republic seemed tense, about to lose his self-control. He was a pale man, with a round face, who punctuated his sentences with asthmatic silences. He had thin, almost white lips, darkened by a large nose. The vice-president’s round shoulders and the contractions of his jaws put one in mind of ants. He also wore big sunglasses, which he did not take off even in the darkness of the room. In a hoarse voice, he ordered the Colonel to remain standing. Their meeting, he informed him, would be a short one.

“It’s about that woman,” he said. “We want to know if it’s her.”

It took the Colonel a moment to understand.

“A number of persons have seen the body at the CGT,” a navy captain reported. “They say it’s impressive. It’s been three years now, and it appears to be still intact. We’ve had X rays of it taken. Here they are, have a look at them. It has all its vital organs. Maybe the body’s a hoax, or some other woman’s. There’s still an Italian sculptor around who was asked to submit plans for a monument to her, with a sarcophagus and the whole bit. The Italian made a wax copy of the corpse. They say that it’s a perfect copy, and that nobody can tell for sure which is which.”
pass by way of heaven only knew how many other destinations in order to reach it.

He went over and over the reports on the work of preservation, which had been going on since the night of the death. The embalmer’s account was glowing. He maintained that after the injections and the fixatives, Evita’s skin had turned taut and young, like that of a twenty-year-old. Through her arteries there flowed a current of formaldehyde, paraffin, and zinc chloride. The whole body gave off a delicate aroma of almonds and lavender. The Colonel could not keep his eyes off the photographs that showed an ethereal, ivory-colored creature, possessed of a beauty that made a person forget all the other felicities of the universe. Her own mother, doña Juana Ibarguren, thinking that she heard her breathing, had fainted during one of her visits. The widower had kissed her on the lips twice to break a spell that was perhaps the same as Sleeping Beauty’s. The transparencies of the body gave off a liquid light, immune to changes of humidity, storms, and the devastations of ice and heat. It was so well preserved that even the tracery of the blood vessels beneath the porcelain skin and an indelible pink tinged the aureole of the nipples were visible.

As he went on reading, the Colonel’s throat grew dry. It would be better to burn her, he thought. With her tissues that saturated with chemicals, she’ll blow up the minute I touch a match to her. She’ll blaze like a sunset. But the president had given orders prohibiting her body from being burned. Every Christian body must be buried in Christian ground, he had said to him. Though that woman lived an impure life, she made a last confession and died in God’s grace. The best thing, then, would be to encase her in fresh cement and throw her into the river in a secret place, as the vice-president wished. Who knows, the Colonel reflected. It’s anybody’s guess what occult powers those chemicals have. Maybe they’d effervesce on contact with water, and the woman would float to the surface, more vigorous than ever.

He was consumed with impatience. Before dawn he called the embalmer and asked to meet with him. “In a café or at my house?”
the slightest change in the cadaver from day to day. In one of his lab notes is the entry: “August 15, 1954. I lost all sense of time. I spent the afternoon watching over the Señora and speaking to her. It was like taking a look at a balcony that is now empty. And yet that cannot be. There’s something there, something. I must discover the way to see it.”

Is there perhaps someone who presumes that Dr. Ara was trying to see the suns of the absolute, the language of earthly paradise, the milky galactic orgasm of the immaculate conception? Nonsense. All the references to him confirm his good sense, his lack of imagination, his piety. It was impossible to suspect him of occultist and parapsychological inclinations. Certain of the Colonel’s notes—of which I have a copy—may hit the nail on the head: what interested the embalmer was finding out whether the cancer was still spreading through the body even after it had been purified. The boundaries of his curiosity were limited yet scientific. He studied the subtle movements of the joints, the changes in color of the cartilage and glands, the network of the nerves and the muscles in search of a stigma. There was not a trace of one left. What was withered had been erased. Only death breathed in the tissues.

Anyone who reads Dr. Pedro Ara’s posthumous memoirs (El caso Eva Perón, CVS Ediciones, Madrid, 1974) will readily note that he had had a look at Evita long before she died. Time and again he complains of those who think that. But only a conventional historian takes his sources literally. See for example the first chapter. It is entitled “The Force of Destiny?” and its tone, as can be sensed from that rhetorical question, is one of humility and doubt. The idea of embalming Evita would never have entered his head, he writes; more than once he drove from his door those who came to ask him to do so, but in the face of Destiny, of God, what can a poor anatomist do? It is true, he hints, that perhaps there was no one as well prepared as he for such an undertaking. He was an academician of the first rank and a distinguished professor. His masterpiece—a nineteen-year-old girl from Córdoba who lay immobilized in a dance step—left the experts openmouthed. But embalming Evita

the doctor asked, still entangled in the fogs of sleep, “I need to examine the body,” the Colonel told him. “I’m going to where you’re keeping her.” “Impossible, sir. It’s dangerous to see her. The substances in her body haven’t settled yet. They’re toxic, unbreathable.” The Colonel cut him short: “I’m heading there this minute.”

The fear that some fanatic would take possession of Evita had always existed. The triumph of the military coup also emboldened those who wished to see her cremated or profaned. At the CGT nobody slept in peace. Two sergeants who had survived the Peronist uprisings in the army took turns standing guard on the second floor.

On occasion, the embalmer allowed civil servants from the foreign diplomatic missions to enter the laboratory, hoping they would cry out to high heaven if the military destroyed the corpse. But what he got out of them was not promises of solidarity but incredulous stammers. The visitors, who arrived prepared to witness a scientific miracle, left convinced that what had really been shown them was a magic act. Evita was in the middle of a vast room draped in black. She lay on a glass slab, suspended from the ceiling by transparent cords, so as to give the impression that she was levitating in a state of perpetual ecstasy. Hanging on either side of the door were the purple ribbons of the funerary wreaths, with their inscriptions still intact: COME BACK, EVITA MY LOVE. YOUR BROTHER JUAN; EVITA ETERNAL IN THE HEART OF THE PEOPLE. YOUR INCANSALE MOTHER. The visitors fell to their knees before the marvel of the body floating in the pure air, and rose to their feet with their minds reeling.

The image was so overwhelming, so unforgettable, that people’s common sense ended up somehow else. No one knows what happened. The shape of their world changed. The embalmer, for example, now lived only for her. He turned up at the CGT laboratory every morning at eight on the dot, dressed in one of his blue cashmere suits and wearing a stiff-brimmed hat edged with a wide black band. On stepping out on the second floor, he removed his hat, baring a shiny bald pate and a few strands of gray hair plastered down with pomade. He then put on his apron, and for ten to fifteen minutes he would examine the photographs and X rays that recorded
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wife's life," he said to him. "The legislature wants to build a monument to her one hundred fifty feet tall in the Plaza de Mayo, but such grandiose displays don't interest me. I would rather have the people continue to see her looking as alive as she is now. I have been told that you are the best taxidermist there is. If that is so, it is not going to be difficult for you to prove it with someone just a little over thirty-three years old."

"I am not a taxidermist," Ara corrected him. "I am a preserver of bodies. All the arts aspire to eternity, but mine is the only one that turns eternity into something visible. The eternal as a branch of the tree of the true."

The uncouthness of Ara's language disconcerted Perón and plunged him into an instantaneous mistrust.

"Tell me once and for all what you need and I will place it at your disposal. My wife's illness scarcely leaves me time to do everything I have to do."

"I need to see the body," the doctor answered. "I fear that all of you have called upon my services too late."

"Go in whenever you like," the president said, "but it's better if she knows nothing of your visit. I will give orders this minute for them to put her to sleep with sedatives."

Ten minutes later, he showed the embalmer into the bedroom of the dying woman. She was thin, angular, her back and her abdomen badly burned by the bungled radiation therapy. Her translucent skin was beginning to turn scaly all over. Indignant at the carelessness with which a woman who was so venerated in public was treated in private, Ara demanded that the torture of the radiation therapy be suspended and gave them a blend of aromatic oils with which her body was to be anointed three times a day. No one took his advice seriously.

On July 26, 1952, as darkness was falling, an emissary from the presidential palace came to get him in an official car. Nothing more could be done for Evita; she was now in mortal agony and was expected to die at any moment. In the grounds outside the palace, long lines of women were moving forward on their knees, begging

was like blowing up the firmament. Have I been chosen? Because of what merits? he asks himself in the memoirs. He had already said no when they pleaded with him to examine Lenin's corpse in Moscow. Why would he say yes this time? Because of Destiny, with a capital D. "Who is so fatuous and so vain as to believe that he could be chosen?" he sighs in the first chapter. "Why, after so many centuries of decline, does the idea of Destiny continue to prosper?"

Ara met Evita in October of 1949, "not socially," as he puts his reader on notice, but in the shadow of her husband, at one of the rallies of the populace that thrilled her so. He had come to Government House as the emissary of the ambassador of Spain and was waiting in an anteroom for the end of the speeches and the ritual of greeting the people. A tide of admirers bore him to the balcony where Evita and Perón, with their arms upraised, were being swept to and fro by the wind of ecstasy that arose from the multitude. He stood at the Señora's back for a moment, so close that he was able to observe the dance of the blood vessels in her neck: the agitation and suffocation brought on by anemia.

In his memoirs he maintains that that was Evita's last day without worries about her health. A blood test showed that she had only three million red cells per milliliter. Her fatal illness had not yet taken its mortal swipe at her, but it was already there, Ara wrote. "If I had seen her for a little longer than that brief second that afternoon, I would have captured the dense fragrance of flowers of her breath, the fire of her cornea, the indomitable energy of her thirty years. And I would have been able to copy those details in their entirety in the dead body that was so badly deteriorated when it reached my hands. Given the circumstances, I was obliged to make use of nothing but photographs and presentiments. Even so, I turned her into a statue of supreme beauty, like the Pietà or the Victory of Samothrace. But I deserved better, is that not true? I deserved better."

In June of 1952, seven weeks before Evita died, Perón summoned him to the presidential palace.

"You may have already learned that there is no way of saving my
heaven to postpone that death. When the embalmer stepped out of the car, one of the devout women clutched him by the arm and asked him, weeping: "Is it true, señor, that misfortune has befallen us?" To which Ará replied, in all seriousness: "God knows what He is doing, and I am here to save what can be saved. I swear to you that I shall do so."

He had no idea of the arduous work that lay ahead of him. They delivered the body to him at 9:00 that night, after a hasty prayer for the dead. Evita had died at 8:25. The corpse was still warm and pliant, but its feet were turning blue and its nose was drooping like an exhausted animal. Ará noted that if he did not act immediately death would get the better of him. It was advancing, dancing on eggs, and wherever it set its foot down it seeded a nest. Ará removed death from here, and it glinted there, moving so swiftly that his fingers were unable to contain it. The embalmer opened the femoral artery in the groin, underneath the Fallopian arch, and at the same time entered the navel in search of the volcanic slimes that were endangering the stomach. Without waiting for the blood to drain away completely, he injected a torrent of formaldehyde, as the scalpel made its way through the interstices between the muscles, heading for the viscera; when he reached them, he trickled paraffin over them and plugged the incisions with plaster tampons. His attention flew from the eyes that were gradually sinking in and the jaws that were coming out of joint to the lips that were taking on an ashen tinge. Dawn surprised him in the midst of the stifling battle. In the notebook in which he kept a record of the chemical solutions and the peregrinations of the scalpel he wrote: "Finis coronat opus. Eva Perón's body is now absolutely and definitively incorruptible."

He took it as an affront to be asked, three years after such a feat, to account for what he had done. Account for what? For a masterpiece that preserved all the viscera? What stupidity, dear God, what a misprision of fate. He would hear what they had to say to him, and then he would catch the first boat to Spain, taking with him what belonged to him. ∼ Colonel Koenig's good manners nonetheless took Ará by surprise.

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He ordered a cup of coffee, nonchalantly tossed off a few verses of Góngora's on dawn, and when he finally spoke of the corpse, the embalmer's scruples had long since vanished. In his memoirs he describes the Colonel in glowing terms: "After searching for a twin soul for so many months, I have just found it in the man I believed to be my enemy."

"Absurd rumors about the corpse have reached the government," the Colonel said. He had brought a pipe after drinking his coffee, but the doctor begged him not to smoke it. A slip of the flame, an absentminded spark, and Evita could turn to ashes. "Nobody believes that the corpse is still intact after three years. One of the ministers surmises that you hid it in a niche in the cemetery and put a wax statue in its place."

The doctor shook his head in dismay. "What would I gain by doing that?"

"Fame. You yourself explained at the Academy of Medicine that giving a dead corpse the sensation of life was like discovering the philosophers' stone. Exactitude is the quintessence of science, you said. And the rest, rubble, a mule without a face. I didn't understand that metaphor. An occultist allusion, I presume."

"I have been renowned for some time, Colonel. I have all the fame I need. On the list of embalmers there is no name other than mine. Perón called me in for that reason: he had no alternative."

The sun appeared amid the curvets of the river. A spot of light chanced to fall on the doctor's bald pate.

"No one is unaware of your merits, Doctor. What is odd is that an expert like yourself took three years to do a job that ought to have been finished in six months."

"Those are the risks of exactitude. Weren't you just speaking of that?"

"The president is being told other things. Forgive me for mentioning them, but the franker we are with each other the better we'll understand each other." He took two or three sealed documents out of his briefcase. He sighed as he leaped through them, as a sign of displeasure. "I would like to think that you would not take these ac-
cusations to be more important than they really are, Doctor. They are merely that: accusations, not proofs. It states here that you kept the Señora’s corpse because you were not paid the hundred thousand dollars that had been agreed on.”

“That is despicable. A day before Perón fled the country I was paid everything I was owed. I am a believer, a militant Catholic. I am not about to lose my soul by using a dead woman as a hostage.”

“I concur. But it is the nature of the state to be mistrustful.” The Colonel began toying with the pipe and tapping his teeth with the stem. “Listen to this report. It’s shameful. ‘The Galician is in love with the corpse,’ it says. The Galician is no doubt yourself. ‘He paws it, he fondles its titts. A soldier has caught him putting his hands up between its legs.’ I imagine that isn’t true.” The embalmer closed his eyes. “Or is it? Tell me. What you say is strictly between us.”

“I have no reason to deny it. For two years and a half, the body that I left fresh at night was faded on awakening in the morning. I noted that in order to restore its beauty its vital organs would have to be put to rights.” He averted his eyes, tucked the waistband of his trousers beneath his ribs. “There’s no need to go on manipulating it. I’ve discovered a fixative that keeps it nailed to its being, once and for all.”

The Colonel sat up straight in his chair. “The most difficult problem to resolve,” he said, putting the pipe away, “is what the president calls ‘possession.’ He believes that the corpse cannot remain in your hands, Doctor. You haven’t the means to protect it.”

“And they’ve asked you to take it away from me, Colonel?”

“That is correct. The president has ordered me to do so. He has just appointed me head of the Intelligence Service to that end. The appointment was announced in the papers this morning.”

A disdainful smile appeared on the embalmer’s lips. “It isn’t time yet, Colonel. She’s not ready. If you take her away now, you’re not going to find her tomorrow. She will be lost in the air; she will turn to vapor, mercury, alcoholic spirits.”

“I don’t believe you understand me, Doctor. I’m an army officer. I don’t listen to reason. I carry out orders.”

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“I am going to give you only a few arguments. After that, do as you please. The body still needs a bath of balm. It has a cannula that’s draining. I must remove it. But above all I need time. What are two or three days for a journey that is going to last for all eternity? In the depths of the body are faucets to close, quarrels that are not settled. And what is more, Colonel, the mother doesn’t want anyone to take it away from me. She has granted me legal custody. If they take it away there’ll be a scandal. She will appeal to the Holy Father. As you see, Colonel, there are certain reasons that must be listened to before obeying.”

He began to rock back and forth on his heels. He tucked his thumbs underneath the suspenders that he was doubtless wearing under his lab smock. He recovered his aloofness, his air of superiority, his slyness: everything that the Colonel’s entrance onstage had, for a moment, caused to disappear.

“You know very well what’s at stake,” the Colonel said as he too rose to his feet. “It’s not the corpse of that woman but the destiny of Argentina. Or both things, which to so many people seem to be one. Heaven only knows how the useless dead body of Eva Duarte came to be confused with the country. Not for people like you or me. To the poverty-stricken, to the ignorant, to those who are outside of history. They would let themselves be killed for the corpse. If it had rotted away, that would have been the end of that. But by embalming it, you made history change place. You left history inside. Whoever has the woman has the country in the palm of their hand, do you realize? The government cannot allow a corpse like that to drift about. Tell me your conditions.”

“I’m not the one to dictate conditions,” the doctor answered. “My sole responsibility is to fulfill the wishes of Evita’s mother and sisters.” He read a few notes he had on the desk. “They wish, they tell me, to have her buried in sacred ground and have people told where it is, so that they can visit her.”

“Don’t worry about the sacred ground part. But the other proviso is unacceptable. The president has given me orders to have everything done in the greatest secrecy.”
"The mother is going to insist."

"I don't know what to tell you. If anyone were to find out where the body is, there would be no human force able to protect it. There are fanatics searching all over for it. They would steal it, Doctor. They would make it disappear from under our very noses."

"Then watch your step," the doctor said sarcastically. "Because when I lose sight of it, nobody will have any way of knowing if she's her. Didn't you tell me about a wax statue? It exists. Evita wanted a tomb like Napoleon Bonaparte's. When the mock-ups were being made, the sculptor was here, reproducing the body. I saw the copy he made. It was identical. Do you know what happened? He went back to the studio one night, and the copy was gone. They took it away from him. He thinks it was the army. But it wasn't the army, isn't that so?"

"No, it wasn't," the Colonel admitted.

"Well then, watch your step. I'm washing my hands of the whole thing."

"Don't wash them too fast, Doctor. Where's the body? I want to see for myself if it's that marvel your notes speak of. Let me see what they say." He took an index card out of his pocket and read: "It is a liquid sun. Doesn't that seem like an exaggeration to you? Imagine, a liquid sun."

2

"I Will Be Millions"

When Evita went outdoors for the last time she weighed eighty-two pounds. Searing pains flared up every two or three minutes, making her pant for breath. She could not, however, offer herself the luxury of suffering. At three in the afternoon that day her husband was going to take the oath of office as president of the Republic for his second consecutive term, and the descamisador had flocked to Buenos Aires to see her, not him. She was the big show. The rumor that she was dying had spread all over. In the huts of Santiago del Estero and Santiago del Chabut the grief-stricken people interrupted their daily tasks to beseech God to keep her alive. Every humble home had an altar where photographs of Evita, torn out of magazines, were alight with candles and decorated with wildflowers. At night, the photos were carried in a procession from place to place so as to give them a moon bath. No recourse was neglected if it promised to restore her health. The sick woman knew these things and did not want to let people down after they had spent the night in the inclement weather to see the presidential motorcade and greet her from afar.

She tried twice to get up out of bed, and the doctors would not allow her to. The third time, blinded by a pain that drilled into the nape of her neck, she collapsed on the bed. She then decided to go