

Crooked Lines

by Sandro Piedrahita

“God writes straight
through crooked lines.”

Saint Teresa of Avila

The former Sister Dolores – soon to be Comrade Dolores – waited for Comrade Juana to bring her the pistol the former nun would use for her first assassination. Dolores was still a Catholic, still kept a vow of chastity, still lived a life of poverty, but she firmly believed the Christ would not have opposed the use of violence to achieve social justice if He had lived in contemporary Peru.

She knew that the Shining Path advocated revolutionary violence, but felt it was an ultimate resort which did not violate the doctrines of the Catholic Church, since the Church itself had long since recognized the principle of a “just war.” She believed that the decision of the poor to take up arms against the Peruvian state had not been made lightly. It had been a desperate response to structural violence and gross inequities which had lasted for centuries, a decision made only after all other avenues had been explored and failed. She recalled that the Brazilian sociologist Paulo Freire had once written, “Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed.”

The former Sister Dolores had slowly come to believe that popular violence was a necessary reaction to the institutionalized violence of the Peruvian State and of the social classes it supported. So she thought her decision to support the *quechua* peasantry in their armed struggle was perfectly in line with the most basic tenets of the Catholic faith. Indeed, she was certain that she had never followed the example of the Christ more closely in her whole life. Hadn’t Father Camilo Torres Restrepo, the revolutionary priest, once said that “if Jesus were alive today, he would be a *guerrillero*”? The former Sister Dolores felt that what she had been doing as a nun was not enough, though she had tried. Lord, how she had tried!

Her decision to become a religious in the first place had been a product of her heartfelt desire to help the poor and the oppressed. Even as a child, she had marveled at the conditions of the Indians who toiled in her father’s hacienda, breaking their backs from sunup to sundown for a few coins or none at all. And even if her father had not been a wealthy *gamonal*, she was guaranteed a life of ease and comfort in Peru merely by virtue of being white. By contrast, the Indians – no matter how hard they worked or how much they saved to put their children in school – were destined to a life of poverty from which their offspring would not be able to escape.

When she went to Lima to attend a Catholic school run by the Carmelites, she continued to be appalled at the inequalities of Peru. For one thing, all of the girls in the school were white – and this in a country where the vast majority of people were Amerindians. For another, the nuns often took her to the *barriadas* where the displaced Indians from the highlands lived – without electricity, without running water, without the most basic necessities of life. At least the nuns were doing something – distributing food and clothing to the impoverished masses – even if they weren’t doing anything on a larger scale. And so, by the age of thirteen she had decided to become a nun. The fact that from her earliest childhood she had been extremely devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus made her decision easier, though even if she had been an atheist, she would have joined the

Carmelites. They were the only ones in all Peru who seemed to care one whit about the poor – and yet even they wouldn't allow any Amerindian children in their school.

After she professed her vows, Sister Dolores asked to be sent as a missionary of sorts to the shantytowns of Lima. There she came to the conclusion that acts of charity, no matter how well-intentioned and necessary, were but mere palliatives given Peruvian society's structural inadequacies. More needed to be done than just dispense alms to the poor. She remembered once when she was attending to a woman during labor and the woman found it impossible to give birth. A Caesarean section was required for a safe delivery, but there was no doctor available, and so Sister Dolores witnessed how the woman died.

Another time she attended to an infant with an extremely high fever. Again, a physician was necessary to save him, and Sister Dolores tried to carry the child to the nearest bus station to take him to a public clinic. It took two hours to walk to the nearest bus station and so the child died on the way. And it would happen again and again. Epidemics ravaged the shantytown even when the sickness barely touched the white *limeños*. Others simply died of hunger and malnutrition. Sister Dolores daily saw six-year-olds scavenging in the trash to see if by chance there was some food to find. And Sister Dolores would say to herself: this is not the way Jesus planned it, this is not His plan of liberation. She became convinced that the Catholic Church had to go beyond mere acts of charity towards a radical demand for social justice. But she was still not at the point where she thought such social justice could only be achieved through violence. That would only come with time.

Dolores sat silently in a booth at the Casa Bolognesi restaurant where she waited for Comrade Juana to bring the gun. The former nun looked out a window from which she could see the doomed mayor's residence or, better said, the wall around it. Like the vast majority of the houses in the *zonas decentes* of Lima, the mayor's house was protected by a tall wall on top of which were encrusted pieces of glass, to prevent home invasions from members of Lima's multitudinous poor. Dolores had arrived early on a bus and as she waited thought about the long path which had brought her here. Everything she had learned as a Catholic from her earliest days studying with the Carmelites and then while working in the *pueblos jóvenes* paradoxically led Dolores to make the decision to kill and to do so without hesitation. So, she waited anxiously for Comrade Juana to arrive. In her heart of hearts, she was eager to murder the traitorous mayor, to stop thinking about it and get it done. She had decided to forego her scruples and engage in her first act of revolutionary violence.

At some point Sister Dolores found herself joining and establishing a number of *comunidad eseclesiales de base* in the shantytowns – grass-roots communities which explained the doctrine of the Catholic Church in terms of obtaining broad-based social justice through collective action. She saw such action as achieving not just a humanitarian purpose but ultimately a salvific one – that living in humane conditions would lead to the salvation of souls in Christ Jesus whereas extreme poverty would lead only to despair. The purpose of the *comunidad de base* was first and foremost religious – a small group where people could celebrate their faith and share in the construction of the coming kingdom – but it was also fundamentally political. Following the precepts of Pope Paul

VI, the *comunidades* were united in “a struggle for justice, fraternal aid to the poor and the promotion of human values.” Sister Dolores saw the *comunidades* as the Church at its most humble, accessible, and vital level. In other words, she thought the *comunidades* represented the Church of the poor as opposed to certain great churches which sometimes seemed to be at the service of the wealthy.

It was fitting that the meetings of the *comunidades* often began with a Mass celebrated by an American Jesuit, Father Steven Prettyman, who looked nothing like an ordinary priest. His hair was long, he had a thick blonde beard, and he often appeared in jeans and a t-shirt. When he wore a collar, it was often on an orange or purple shirt. He never ended a Mass without denouncing injustice, nor did he hesitate to criticize the Church at times, saying the small *comunidades* were a living protest against certain segments of the Church which were compromised – *comprometidos* – with a political, economic and social order which was basically unjust and inherently un-Christian. Father Steven saw the vast economic inequalities in Peru as the product of “social sin” – the sin of greed perpetrated on a massive scale. Wasn’t that inherently opposed to Christ’s Gospel of Love, indeed to everything that Jesus had preached throughout His time on earth?

Sister Dolores understood that Christ demanded justice in this world but didn’t specify how to achieve it. At first, she established *mesas populares*, where she distributed food and milk to the residents of the *pueblos jóvenes*, particularly the children. She tried to engage in discussions between the *comunidades* and the municipal government of Lima to seek redress for citizen grievances, all to no avail. She published a weekly newsletter, *Izquierda Católica* – The Catholic Left – distributed throughout the shantytowns, encouraging social activism and peaceful resistance while at the same time addressing pastoral concerns. Then she organized massive protests in the Plaza Mayor, where the masses demanded simple things such as potable water, access to health care, vaccinations, schools, more accessible transportation to the places where they worked.

She actively encouraged the creation of trade unions and wrote letters to the Church prelates seeking greater Church participation on behalf of the poor. But she felt she was achieving very little through such means, so she decided to do more. With the encouragement of Father Steven and the assistance of a dozen lay members of the *comunidades*, she organized traffic stoppages on a great scale, setting up human roadblocks to interrupt commerce in Lima until the needs of the *comuneros* could be fulfilled. She instructed all the inhabitants of the shantytowns who were employed to initiate strikes at the factories where they worked. Finally, when nothing seemed to result in any meaningful change, she directed some of those who lived in the shantytowns to engage in small acts of sabotage to wake up the government – the destruction of a statue of Francisco Pizarro, putting graffiti on a wall at the Palacio de Gobierno, burning a car on the public square as an act of protest. She was inching slowly toward armed insurrection, but she was not yet there. The Carmelite nuns at the convent where she lived were not aware of Sister Dolores’ extensive conduct on behalf of the poor, so there were no objections to her activities. Everything would change with the nun’s participation in the *asentamiento humano* at San Fermin.

Comrade Juana and Comrade Bárbara arrived at seven-thirty on the dot. Comrade Juana immediately took Dolores to the bathroom, where she handed the former nun a pistol.

“Make sure you get close to him and shoot him twice in the forehead,” Comrade Juana said. “Comrade Bárbara will be next to you, armed as well, just in case anything goes wrong. I’ll be waiting in the car so that we can all escape right after the killing.”

“Yes,” said the former nun, suddenly feeling somewhat dazed.

“Are you ready?” queried Comrade Juana.

“I have the weapon,” responded the former nun. And then she made a sign of the Cross. It was an instinctive reaction, the product of so many years as a religious.

As soon as Mayor Biondy Salazar walked through the large wooden door in the middle of the wall which surrounded his house, Comrade Bárbara ordered Dolores to follow her into the street. The mayor was a heavyset man in his mid-sixties, with ruddy cheeks and a patch of white hair over his head. The former nun approached him and, according to plan, shot him twice in the head without hesitation. He was Herod, after all, responsible for the killing of innocents. The man fell to the ground, his face covered with crimson blood, just as his chauffeur arrived.

“Shoot him!” commanded Comrade Bárbara. “We don’t want any witnesses. Shoot him now!”

The former nun looked at the seventeen-year-old Indigenous driver and didn’t know what to do. She felt the revolver in her hand and it suddenly felt very heavy. The mayor’s chauffeur, speaking with a *quechua* accent, pleaded with her not to kill him as he fell on his knees next to the cadaver of the murdered mayor. She asked herself: is this what the revolution requires? And then she dropped the gun.

The peasant invasion of the land at San Fermin, in the desert outskirts of Lima, did not happen overnight. First one family arrived from the Andean highlands, then a group of twenty, then a hundred, then five hundred until eight-hundred families were precariously living in that arid stretch of land. They were surviving as best they could in makeshift dwellings made of calamite, planks of wood, matted straw, sometimes even cardboard. The lucky ones had brought tents with them and were best protected from the elements. They clearly had no title to the occupied desert zone, so they were at the mercy of authorities who might decide to evict them at any moment. Sister Dolores heard about the new *asentamiento humano* – literally the “human settlement” – and decided they were in most need of her care. After all, what food did the *pobladores* have? What water could they drink? Who could tend to the usual maladies of childhood? The government wasn’t doing anything to help the newly arrived *campesinos*, even though they were clearly in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. A crisis, thought Sister Dolores, which was a direct product of the State’s unremitting failure to protect them in their ancestral lands. When she arrived at the *pueblo joven*, she was appalled at what she saw, for she thought that adequate housing for the needy was a basic human right as well as a fundamental directive of the Christ.

Sister Dolores had arrived at the new shantytown together with Father Steven, who had convinced the Loyola Institute of Lima to donate four hundred bottles of milk for distribution among the newly arrived *campesinos*. As usual, providing the milk was better than nothing, but it was clearly not enough.

Before they even started unloading the milk bottles from the truck, however, they witnessed something which shocked both the Carmelite nun and the long-haired priest: the arrival of more than a hundred police officers, as well as ten bulldozers meant to raze the newly established *pueblo joven* to the ground. Soon the newly minted mayor of Lima, Augusto Biondy Salazar of the Popular Christian Party, appeared out of the shadows and addressed the masses through a bullhorn. Apparently, the owner of the invaded lots, Oscar Valdez, had demanded their immediate eviction, as he had entered a contract with Mayor Biondy Salazar to provide the space as a *basural* where

trash could be disposed. Sister Dolores, after her initial surprise, reasoned that such a reaction was to be expected. The new mayor of Lima had run on a plank guaranteeing that *Lima la horrible* – Lima the horrible – would soon once again be *Lima la bella*– Lima the beautiful. The subtext of his message was that he would return Lima to its ancient splendor, when Lima was filled with the white descendants of Spaniards and wasn't surrounded by a circle of *pueblos jóvenes* inhabited by dirty, lice-ridden Indians who cared not a whit about hygiene or morality.

At the direction of the mayor, the bulldozers began to destroy all the peasant shacks as most of the Indians looked on agape, not even allowed to collect their few belongings.

Sister Dolores turned to Father Steven and asked him, "Is there nothing we can do?"

He raised both arms in the air and responded with five words: "The violence of the state..."

"Well, I won't let it happen," Sister Dolores said as she moved to stand in front of one of the bulldozers to stop it from continuing to demolish the peasant dwellings. Four policemen promptly arrested her and put her in handcuffs.

"Communist nun!" they laughed. "Do you think you can avoid the eradication of this settlement with your frail body? Who are you to resist the orders of Mayor Augusto Biondy Salazar?"

"State violence!" she cried out. "Violence against the people!"

But she hadn't yet seen state violence, not even close.

A bunch of adolescents started throwing rocks at the policemen and they responded with full force, encouraged by the mayor who approved everything from the sidelines. In the melee that ensued as the peasants ran for their lives, more than a hundred of them died, some shot by the policemen, others trampled by the stampeding crowd. Sister Dolores watched the scene with horror as she sat in the back of the policemen's SUV with her hands tied behind her back. The events of that afternoon would forever be remembered by the people of Lima as the San Fermin Stampede. What shocked the nun most of all were the faces of the desperate peasants searching for relatives among the pile of cadavers – men, women and children – after the stampede had ended and the bulldozers continued with their grim work.

The next day, after she was released from jail, Sister Dolores had a new resolve. She had to do more for the peasant classes – much, much more. When she returned to the convent, she wasn't sure if she would continue to live at the nunnery, but the Mother Superior made the decision easy for her.

"In light of what happened yesterday, particularly your arrest," said the Mother Superior, "we have decided that it's best for you not to continue working with the *comunidades de base* in the shantytowns. You have your heart in the right place, but you are forgetting the limited role you have as a religious. Your task as a Carmelite is not to fight for vast political change. You have no business getting involved in violent defiance against the mayor. So you will be re-assigned to teach at the Saint Rose of Lima school for girls."

"That school for *pitucas*!" Sister Dolores exclaimed with disgust. "Those snobbish girls who flaunt their daddies' wealth. I'd rather keep working with the poor."

"You've made a vow of obedience," responded the Mother Superior. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice in the matter. Some bishops have complained about all of the political work done by the *comunidades de base*."

"I do have a choice," retorted Sister Dolores. "I shall give up the habit. There are other ways to serve God. I see Christ's face in the *menesterosos*... There is only one error – dare I say a sin – which a Catholic can make: to do nothing in the face of such injustice. In the confrontations

between Christ's poor disciples and the wealthy Pharisees – representatives of the established church no less – Christ always sided with the poor.”

“Be wary of the subversives,” said the Mother Superior. “They are a fearsome temptation to those who thirst for justice. Listen to me: a temptation. Some of their ideas are incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice,” responded Sister Dolores, quoting the Christ, “for they shall be satisfied. Jesus Himself was a subversive. Whatever path I choose, I shall continue to defend the values of the Gospel, the poor, the Indian and the weak. I shall always stand in solidarity with the masses. It's not enough to help the poor. We must be the poor.”

“Pick up your pistol and shoot that *hijo de puta* now!” commanded Comrade Bárbara when she noticed the hesitation of the former nun. “If the driver lives, he'll report everything to the police!”

Dolores looked at the seventeen-year-old indigenous chauffeur and couldn't bring herself to do it.

“He's but a teenager,” she stammered. “And he's not the oppressor. There was a reason to kill the mayor but not this boy.”

Comrade Bárbara took the matter into her own hands and shot the teenage chauffeur in the abdomen, immediately killing him.

“Never, ever disobey an order,” Comrade Bárbara spat out at Sister Dolores once they were safely in the vehicle that would take them away from the scene.

“Give her a break,” laughed Comrade Juana. “She's a virgin in these matters. Although from now on she's a member of the Shining Path. The little nun has committed her first homicide! And killed a mayor no less! Welcome, Comrade Dolores! May you achieve great things during the course of the armed struggle.”

For about six months after leaving the convent Dolores continued to work with the *comunidades de base* in the various shantytowns, with Father Steven always at her side. He, too, announced he had decided to leave the Jesuits for he felt their rules were shackling him in his efforts to achieve social justice for the Indians of Peru. He continued to celebrate the Mass for the impoverished *jornaleros*, but Dolores noticed a radical change in his message. Now he was saying that the armed struggle was a necessity in Peru, that social justice could be achieved in no other way. Finally, one afternoon he told her that he had decided to join the Shining Path and that he wanted her to meet a friend known as Comrade Juana.

“Your work as a nun was just the first stage in what Paulo Freire described as the development of a critical consciousness for liberation. You took the first step, now you must take it one step further. Jesus demands radical change in connection with the current social structure. That can only be achieved through the taking up of arms. I am not a Marxist, either as a Christian or as a priest. But I'm not afraid of the Communist boogeyman. Father Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua once said, ‘I'm a Marxist who believes in God, follows Christ and is a revolutionary for His Kingdom.’ Daniel Ortega once commented that Christian arguments were the best arguments the Nicaraguan people had to take up the Marxist revolutionary struggle.”

“Who is this Comrade Juana that you want me to meet? Does she endorse violence in the struggle between the social classes of Peru?”

“She’s an American who once was a staunch Catholic and who has abandoned the faith in the service of the revolution. But you don’t have to give up Christianity to move into the great movement known as the Shining Path. The role of religion in Peru can be decided in a fraternal manner after the triumph of the revolution. We can be allies of *Sendero* without giving up on the Gospel. Many theologians have concluded that violence in the defense of the masses is in keeping with the Catholic faith. As the Nicaraguans say, ‘Between Christianity and revolution there is no contradiction.’”

“So you’ve decided to fight, to take up arms yourself?”

“I have,” responded Father Steven. “And I’m hoping you will do the same. In some way, I see it as the culmination of everything you’ve done so far. Jesus would demand no less. He always turned toward the poor. Christ requires an active faith, not a sleeping faith.”

“I see no problem with meeting her. Still, I’ve heard that excesses have been perpetrated by *Sendero*.”

“You have to understand we’re talking about nothing less than a war. There has never been a war in human history where some misguided soldiers didn’t commit atrocities. But the underlying purpose of the Shining Path is noble. They intend to achieve the liberation of the *quechua* masses.”

“I’ve heard they’re radical atheists. How can someone suffused with the Gospel of Love join them in their struggle?”

“Once the popular class assumes power, with the help of all revolutionaries, then our people will be ready to discuss the religious orientation they should give their lives. You have to do this, Dolores. Otherwise your life will be a truncated life.”

“All, right, I’ll meet with her, but I can offer no guarantees. I’ve given up on the Church hierarchy, but not on the Church itself. You’re basically asking me to take a radical line which is in some ways inimical to my nature.”

“It’s not, Dolores, it’s not. You are a *guerrillera* at heart. Wouldn’t you want the *cholos* of Peru to have some human dignity? Can’t you see the current status quo is a form of indentured servitude? And lastly, don’t you realize there is no other way? Don’t forget that priests killed and died in the French Resistance, that priests killed and died during the *Cristero* war in Mexico.”

The next time Comrade Dolores was asked to kill, it was Rodrigo Salaverry, a corrupt government official who had swindled thousands of senior citizens from their pensions. In her mind, there was a clear demarcation between killing the guilty and killing the innocent. Salaverry was clearly a vile man – he had used his position of power to take advantage of the most needy – and so she felt no compunction about participating in his murder. And Comrade Dolores kept praying – she had never ceased to pray – even though at times she wondered whether the Lord heard her any more. At any event, most of her work for the Shining Path did not require any acts of violence, so that allowed her to quell her conscience for a while. Her primary function was to fly to Europe with valises full of cash the Shining Path had received from the jungle *cocaleros* and deposit the money in Swiss bank accounts. The job was risky but thankfully nonviolent. If she was caught, she would certainly be sent to the women’s prison at Chorrillos for a period of at least ten

years for supporting a “terrorist organization” but Comrade Dolores did not care. It was all for the greater cause of liberating the Indians from centuries-old oppression.

On the day of Dolores’ first meeting with Comrade Juana, Father Steven was with the former nun as she entered Comrade Juana’s small apartment in the middle-class neighborhood of Chama. The revolutionary received them warmly, as if they were longtime friends, and greeted Father Steven with a hug. The fact they were both Americans fighting for social justice in Peru would have made them natural allies, but *Sendero* tended to distrust and even hate religious activists. So it took a while for Comrade Juana to develop a friendship with Father Steven, though at some point she grew to believe in his revolutionary bona fides.

“I brought a new recruit for you,” stated Father Stevens. “Her name is Dolores and ever since she was a child, she’s been appalled by the treatment of the *Quechua* masses.”

“The Shining Path is dedicated to their liberation,” Comrade Juana said. “Steven has told me about you, about all the work you’ve done in the shantytowns. We can certainly use you, although frankly I don’t see you as a cadre fighting with rifles and grenades in the southern sierra. You speak three languages, don’t you?”

“Yes, Spanish, English and French – and a little *Quechua*.”

“Well, we could use you as a liaison with Maoist organizations abroad who share our mission. And we can send you to deposit money for the Shining Path in Europe. You can continue dressing as a nun and nobody will suspect you are a member of *Sendero*. Would that suit you?”

“Yes, I think I can help in that way. I was a little afraid that you’d demand I get involved with acts of violence. In some way, I’m somewhat relieved.”

“I haven’t said you won’t be involved in acts of violence. Violence is the mother’s milk of the Shining Path. As a cadre, you’ll be called from time to time to perform some small duty for Presidente Gonzalo. I’m talking about assassinations.”

Father Steven sought to assuage Dolores’ trepidation.

“Targeted assassinations are a necessary form of liberation. Can you think of what would have happened if the dictators Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Somoza of Nicaragua had not been assassinated? There was simply no other way to shake off their oppression.”

“I see,” said Dolores in a calm voice. “Certainly, in extreme cases, such as those of Trujillo and Somoza, there was no alternative. I can see that... But in other cases, I’m not so sure. Are targeted assassinations consistent with the Gospel of Christ? I’m afraid I feel violence is inherently repugnant.”

“The assassinations of certain powerful men in Peru are no less necessary than those of Trujillo and Somoza,” answered Comrade Juana. “The Shining Path’s efforts to combat poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and lack of housing sometimes require that those who stand in the way should be eliminated. If you don’t see that, then maybe you should return to your nunnery.”

“Give her some time,” counseled Father Steven. “Allow her to process the decision she is about to make. She will come to realize that those who use arms to obtain just ends may be the objects of God’s sanctifying grace.”

“Fine,” said Comrade Juana. “We’ll give her some more time. But you should understand, Dolores, that to join the Shining Path, it is necessary that you commit some crime. By doing so, you can no longer betray the Shining Path for you have been complicit in its violence. We usually

require that the new recruits shoot a policeman and bring back his gun as evidence of the deed. Is that something you could do?"

"No, not a policeman," Dolores said in a whisper. "So many of them are just indigenous men who've found no other source of income."

"Well, then I'm afraid the Shining Path is not for you."

"Wait!" Dolores exclaimed. "I'm willing to commit one crime for the Shining Path. I could take the life of the mayor of Lima, Augusto Biondy Salazar. Wouldn't I have killed King Herod to prevent him from slaughtering the innocents? I see Biondy Salazar as no better. The way he persecutes those in the shantytowns. The killing of the peasants at San Fermin which happened at his orders. That was the day I learned the meaning of the word 'impunity.'"

"Yes, he's a monster," assented Father Steven. "What happened at San Fermin shouldn't be remembered as a stampede but as a massacre."

"The Doctors of the Church and the Magisterium have made it clear that self-defense is a God-given right," Dolores continued. "And killing to save others is also justified. In fact, defending the innocent is not only a right, but a sacred duty."

Father Steven intervened.

"In fact, the Catechism states that the defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm."

"So you are willing to do it?" asked Comrade Juana. "Killing Biondy Salazar would certainly suffice. The death of a policeman isn't necessary. You just have to participate in what the Peruvian state calls a crime."

Dolores looked at Father Steven, seeking reassurance. He smiled at her.

"Armed struggle means just that, doesn't it?" asked the former nun. "That you have to use arms in the struggle?"

"Indeed," responded Comrade Juana. "When there is no alternative to armed revolt, the oppressed must take up arms. Mao said it: politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed. The Peruvian oligarchy stands in the way of the people's progress and so we must engage in the politics of bloodshed."

"Do you think this is the right decision?" Dolores asked Father Steven.

"It is. When peaceful revolution is impossible, violent revolution is inevitable. And peaceful revolution is impossible in this time and place, Dolores, so don't hesitate. You have to go all in. This is not an age for half-measures."

"All right," replied Sister Dolores, with a pained look on her face, as if she had been forced to swallow a bitter *purgativo*. "I shall shoot Mayor Biondy Salazar. May the Master forgive me if I'm not acting at His direction."

"We'll meet outside the house of Biondy Salazar in Monterrico at eight in the morning next week," said Comrade Juana. "There is a restaurant across the street, named Casa Bolognesi, which serves breakfast. I will bring Comrade Bárbara with me. And I'll bring the pistol too."

After a period of about eighteen months in the Shining Path, Comrade Dolores was surprised to receive a visit from Father Steven, now known as Comrade Oscar. The former priest had taken on the name of the slain Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador – a victim not of leftist insurgents but of a right-wing death squad. Comrade Dolores thought he had aged quite a bit in such a short time and was shocked to see he had a black eyepatch where his left eye had once

been. Comrade Oscar explained that he had lost his eye during a skirmish with the *sinchis*, the name given to a specialized army battalion fighting the Shining Path in Apurimac, the Andean district where Comrade Oscar had been leading a squad in the “popular war.”

After some obligatory comments of introduction, Comrade Oscar cut to the chase.

“Listen,” he said. “I know we were never romantically involved, since we were both religious at the time, but over these past eighteen months I’ve been thinking a lot about you. All our conversations, all our shared dreams to somehow heal this martyred nation. I always – let me choose my words correctly – I always thought of you as a woman and not a nun. And tell me if I’m wrong, but I always thought my feelings were reciprocated. That if you hadn’t been a nun and I a priest we would have become lovers. Tell me, Dolores. Am I wrong?”

Comrade Dolores blushed and was briefly silent. She wasn’t expecting such a confession, not after so many months. At one time, while they were working together in the *comunidades de base*, she had expected it.

“Perhaps,” she stammered. “Perhaps in different circumstances we would have become something more than friends. I don’t know. I’m a woman and not immune to thoughts of concupiscence – ”

“Don’t use that word, Dolores,” said the former Jesuit. “It connotes something wrong and sinful. There is nothing immoral about my feelings for you. All I want is an opportunity to get to know you. I want our interaction to be that between a man and a woman. And then we’ll see where it takes us.”

“I can’t forget the vows I’ve taken,” responded Comrade Dolores.

“I thought that’s why you left the convent.”

“I broke my vow of obedience, that’s true, Steven, because I couldn’t contemplate the idea of spending my life teaching Latin and grammar to girls born into privilege while millions of destitute men and women suffered. But as to poverty and chastity, those are vows I made before God. I have no intention to break them even now.”

“Before God?” repeated Comrade Oscar incredulously. “Do you still believe in the Christian God after spending so many months with *Sendero*? Haven’t you figured out that faith in God is anathema to their project? Didn’t Leonardo Boff – a married priest, no less – write that the Catholic Church in Latin America has become the legitimating religious ideology for the social order of the elites?”

“I believe in a different God from the God of the Catholic hierarchy. A Christ who was an insurgent, who didn’t spend his time with rich men and Pharisees. A Christ who sought out the sinners, the prostitutes, the poor. A Christ who welcomed the ‘unclean,’ a Christ who washed the feet of His apostles, a Christ who exemplified the deepest humility. A Christ who would have willingly taken up arms in favor of the oppressed.”

“And you think such a God would bar us from love? All because you made a pledge when you were practically an adolescent?”

“I believe there is a purpose to chastity. I’m sorry, Steven. Chastity, like poverty, is in some way liberating. How can I dedicate my life to the poor and the revolution when I am busy tending to a man and his children?”

“We wouldn’t need to have children... We could just be companions.”

“I made a solemn oath, Steven. An oath before God. I mean to keep it, no matter what I may feel toward you. And I do have feelings for you. But as a Catholic and as a revolutionary I don’t see a sexual relationship as my vocation.”

“I hope you realize your life is a contradiction.”

“I do,” Comrade Dolores responded. “But I believe in a God of contradictions. And the Church of Latin America has always been a church of contradictions, ever since the Conquest. All you have to do is remember the war for independence in Mexico which pitted virgin against virgin. The Mexicans sought protection from the image of the olive-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe while the Spaniards fought under the banner of the white Virgin of Guadalupe. Or you can think of Monsignor Valencia Cano of Colombia, labeled as the “*obispo rojo*” – the red bishop – so many decades ago. In Latin America, theology has always been political and rife with – what is the word you used? – rife with ‘contradictions.’ The Hispanic continent has always been heretical in one way or another, even as most of the prelates in power were conservative. So if I contradict myself, very well, I contradict myself. I commit so-called ‘crimes’ for the Shining Path, but I also go to Mass on Sunday.”

As Comrade Oscar prepared to leave, Comrade Dolores told him to wait.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I just wanted to clear something up. I’ve heard that in the Andes, the Shining Path is actively fighting against the Indians themselves. Is that true? Can you support that?”

“Again, I’ll have to remind you we’re in a war. Some of the *quechua* peasants have allied themselves with the military. The military is arming them and some peasants are actively killing members of *Sendero*. It was to be expected. Some Amerindians always side with their oppressors. Didn’t Hernan Cortes take over Mexico due in large part to his alliance with Amerindians who helped him decimate the Aztecs? Didn’t the great eighteenth century revolutionary Tupac Amaru II lose his war against the Spaniards in large part because some Indians turned against him? It’s no different today. Some individual peasants have decided to assist the military and they must be quashed in order to liberate the Indian peasantry as a whole.”

Some two weeks after the appearance of Comrade Oscar, Comrade Dolores received a phone call from Comrade Juana, asking the former nun to visit Comrade Juana’s apartment that night to discuss “an important matter.” When Comrade Dolores arrived, Comrade Juana, Comrade Bárbara and Comrade Meche were already sitting at the table. Comrade Juana greeted the former nun in customary fashion: “In the name of Marx, Lenin and Chairman Mao, welcome to my home.”

“Why did you want me to come?” asked Comrade Dolores.

Comrade Juana smiled and told her to sit at the table. Comrade Dolores thought she detected some mischievous cruelty in the eyes of Comrade Juana.

“We want to discuss a mission in which you’ll have to participate.”

“What mission?” inquired Comrade Dolores.

“The assassination of Archbishop Leopoldo Flores Iparraguirre of the archbishopric of Lima.”

The former nun was startled by the words of Comrade Juana and was at a loss for words. She had attended Mass at the Cathedral where the archbishop celebrated the liturgy and could not understand why anyone would want to murder the gentle octogenarian bishop. Comrade Dolores asked a one-word question and Comrade Juana responded with a speech.

“Why?” asked Comrade Dolores.

“Because he’s poisoning the minds of all the *feligreses*, everyone who attends his Masses. It used to be that I thought religion was a harmless imagination, but now I detest religion. The Catholic faith is inherently antithetical to the revolutionary project. All the Catholic priests preach

peace when they should be preaching war. And Archbishop Flores Iparraguirre is the worst among them. He even speaks on a radio station once a week and never ceases to criticize the Shining Path. He blames us for all the violence when it is the Peruvian military that has instigated the violence. He denounces us as heretics and atheists. Like the military, the Church is an instrument of the dominating classes.”

“He criticizes the army too,” responded Comrade Dolores.

“Well, we’ve decided we have to take him out,” replied Comrade Juana.

“He’s a cancer growing on Peru,” added Comrade Bárbara. “All tumors have to be excised.”

“And you want me to participate in such a crime?”

“I thought about you for a reason,” answered Comrade Juana. “We want to test your revolutionary mettle. Are you devoted to Gonzalo Thought or to the rambling divagations of the Catholic religion?”

“I am a Catholic and a Marxist both,” responded Comrade Dolores. “I can understand assassinating men like the dictators Trujillo and Somoza, Rodrigo Salaverry and the mayor of Lima, but not this harmless prelate.”

“We plan to execute him this Sunday while he celebrates Mass at the Cathedral, preferably while he is raising the host during the Eucharist. It won’t be difficult to escape among the crowds, as his Masses are standing-room only. There are so many besotted people in this country. You, Comrade Bárbara and I shall shoot him while Comrade Meche waits for us outside in the escape car. That shall be a message to all the other priests who seek to tarnish the revolution.”

“Well, I won’t do it,” answered Comrade Dolores in a determined voice. “Archbishop Flores Iparraguirre is a saint. He’s always supported the *comunidades de base*, even while facing strong opposition from many others in the Church. He even favors a general amnesty for guerrillas who choose to give up their arms.”

“That’s exactly the problem. He wants the *senderistas* to give up their weapons. And many have heeded his advice. The archbishop must be killed.”

“Is this what you learned when you studied with the nuns in America? To kill old men while they preach the Mass? Isn’t there a bit of self-hatred in your rancor against religion? I tell you again I won’t take any part in such a crime.”

“You made a vow of obedience to the Catholic Church when you became a nun, didn’t you?”

“I breached that oath a long time ago. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, now you are sworn to obedience to the Shining Path. Traitors and deserters are hanged as you well know. So we expect you at Mass this Sunday. Don’t forget to bring your pistol with you. If you wish, put on your nun’s habit. That will make it easier for you to flee.”

Comrade Dolores exited the apartment and began to walk aimlessly along the streets. She had to think. How had she come to this point, when she had to seriously consider participating in such an outrage? She knew the Shining Path would be only too happy to punish her if she disobeyed. They would make of her an example. And yet how could she do it? To murder a bishop as he was celebrating the Eucharist was the worst possible sin. Then again, she was already steeped in sin. What would it matter if she engaged in another crime?

On Sunday, Comrade Dolores woke up early, with the instinct to pray, and yet she did not pray. She put on her habit and a veil upon her head and waited silently on a sofa in the living room until the clock struck eleven. She put a pistol in her purse and hailed a taxi to the Cathedral. She arrived when the services were just beginning, still considering what she would do. There she saw

all the devout – white men, mestizos and Indians too – all of them joyfully attending the Mass and preparing to hear the words of Archbishop Flores Iparraguirre. The bishop was already at the altar, an old bald man wearing green vestments with the depiction of a golden cross upon them. Comrade Dolores looked at a small Indian girl praying fervently in front of an image of the *mater dolorosa*, the Mother of Sorrows with her heart pierced by seven swords. Comrade Dolores well knew what those seven swords meant, the sorrows endured by the Virgin Mary during the Passion of her Son as well as the suffering she experienced as a result of the sins of men. Would she, Comrade Dolores, pierce another sword through Our Lady's heart? Would she add another sorrow to such a long list?

So she decided to act. She made her way among the crowds, screaming *peligro, peligro! there are terrorists in your midst!* until she reached the prelate at the altar. He seemed to be shocked at her presence, still more shocked when she put her arms around him and told him to escape.

"There is a plot to kill you!" she exclaimed. "The Shining Path has decided to assassinate you!"

Archbishop Flores Iparraguirre was completely befuddled by her words. There was a great commotion in the church as everyone sought to escape after hearing the shouts of the former nun. Then a group of priests surrounded the archbishop and ushered him into a room adjacent to the altar, followed by Comrade Dolores who was also desperate to preserve her own life. She had seen Comrade Juana and Comrade Bárbara among the throngs and knew they wouldn't hesitate to kill her if she was in their crosshairs. She had committed the unpardonable, had foiled one of *Sendero's* plots, and recognized her own life was in danger. When she confessed to the archbishop how she had come to know about the plot against him, he didn't seek to have her arrested. Instead, he blessed her and sent her to a Benedictine monastery where he knew she would be safe.

The man with the eye patch had arrived at the monastery at nine o'clock to see the abbess, but he hadn't realized the cloistered Benedictine nuns spent the whole morning in prayer so he would have to wait until lunchtime. The lobby where he waited was austere: only a small sofa and a small chair across from it, on the walls a single crucifix and an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Steven Prettyman – once Father Steven, once Comrade Oscar – was now simply Mister Prettyman. He had just been released from prison after a fifteen-year-sentence for aggravated terrorism and had decided he wanted to meet with the abbess, if only for a little while, before he was extradited back to the United States. He had spent several weeks trying to track down Dolores, until someone he knew from the *comunidades de base* told him she had become a cloistered nun and was living in the Monasterio de la Madre de Cristo, a solitary convent where the nuns strictly observed a vow of silence, spent their whole days in prayer and contemplation, and had little to no contact with the outside world.

When the abbess suddenly appeared, Prettyman was astonished by how little she had changed, even after fifteen years. She had the same figure which had once violently attracted him, even though she was now in a dark habit that hid her entire body and a veil which covered most of her head. Her deep hazel eyes were the same too, although now they denoted a tranquility he had never seen before. When she first approached him, she did not hug him, merely bowed her head in an expression of recognition. And yet he detected an unmistakable joy in her face, as if she were welcoming a long-lost friend. She sat on the single wooden chair across from him and addressed him as Steven.

“It’s been a long time, Steven,” she said with a broad smile on her face. “Now that the guerrilla war is over, what are you doing with your life?”

“I don’t know, Dolores. Can I still call you Dolores?”

“I now have the lofty title of Mother Superior Teresa of Jesus Crucified,” the abbess responded with a smile, “but I don’t mind if you call me by my baptized name. I have so many fond memories of you.”

“Well, in the short term, Dolores, I’ll be returning to Los Angeles hopefully to find a job with an organization known as Homeboy Industries. It’s run by an old Jesuit priest I used to know named Father Boyle. They help formerly incarcerated youth re-integrate with society. You see, I’m still a bleeding heart liberal, though I have learned much from all my years in prison.”

“I have also learned a lot in the last fifteen years,” responded the abbess. “I have learned that violence is never – mind you, never – an instrument to help the poor. So much more can be achieved through prayer.”

“I think we still differ there,” said the former priest. “As the martyred Father Camilo Torres Restrepo once said, ‘The revolution is not only permitted but obligatory for Christians...’”

“Well, Camilo never murdered priests nor massacred the peasants like the Shining Path. And I’m not quite sure what he meant by ‘revolution.’ He was the one who spoke about ‘*amor eficaz*.’ In any case, I’m glad now you will be doing something noble. There are so many ways to help the outcast.”

“I must confess that I never would have expected you to become a cloistered nun, Dolores, secluded in a monastery, so far away from those who need you most.”

“The years teach much which the days never know,” responded the abbess. “What is it that surprises you so much?”

“I had always suspected that at some point you might return to the life of a religious, but I thought you’d be an activist nun, an Ursuline or a Maryknoll. After all, the Ursulines run schools and hospitals, help the homeless and disenfranchised, reach out to women in jail and to children in the shantytowns. They actively work on behalf of those on society’s margins. And the Maryknolls are also active in the world, social workers of sorts who help the poor, the elderly and the marginalized. But you’re doing none of that, which surprises me beyond comprehension.”

“Why do you find that so difficult to believe? Don’t you realize I have a different mission?”

“You’ve decided to hole yourself up in a monastery where all you do is pray and ignore the desperate needs of the poor. Or am I wrong? Isn’t that the life of a Benedictine, to forget all the needy on earth and just seek heavenly recompense for oneself? I apologize for saying so, but it seems you’ve entirely forgotten the idealism of your youth, that you’re wasting your talents by living in isolation.”

“Let me tell you a little about how I live an ordinary day and perhaps you’ll comprehend.”

“All right,” said Steven.

“We spend our whole days in prayer, that’s true, but we don’t just pray for ourselves. Those poor you mention, those sick, those forgotten, we pray for them too, and we do so relentlessly. The celebration of Holy Mass and the seven hours of the Divine Office is fundamental, for our chief role in the Church is prayer – a sort of universal prayer, Steven, a prayer for all who need the light of God. Then we participate in what we call *Lectio Divina*, the peaceful, contemplative reading of Sacred Scripture. Our role is vastly different from that of activist nuns, but it is no less essential. We engage in continuous prayer for the world, for the ill, the downtrodden, the hardened sinners, and I can’t think of any mission which could be more noble – or more important and effective –

for we firmly and tenaciously believe that God does answer prayers. A million people praying the Rosary every night can change things more quickly in the world than all its mighty armies.”

“And why are you cursed with silence? Since when is it a sin to engage in conversation?”

“We lead a life of silence and reflection, but that is not a sacrifice but a blessing, since leading life in such a way brings us closer to Jesus Christ and allows us to seek God’s aid for the poor, the marginalized, the elderly. It helps us to *listen* to Him, do you understand, Steven? So in a way, my mission is no less idealistic than the mission of my earliest youth when I dreamed of helping the poor. In fact, my current mission is more profound, since I’m turning over my entire day, my entire life to help them.”

“I can’t believe, Dolores, that you’re the same person who once laundered money for the Shining Path, the same woman who once participated in assassinations in your quest to help the Indians...”

“God writes straight through crooked lines,” responded the abbess, quoting Saint Teresa of Avila. “He brought me to the here and now through a tortuous road, but what matters is that I am here at last. I have experienced the ongoing process known as *metanoia*. I have renounced the world and all its pleasures but also its traps. And that has filled me with a radical joy.”