

INFINITE



A NOVEL

COUNTRY



PATRICIA

“A book that speaks into the present moment with an oracle’s devastating coolness and clarity.”
—LAUREN GROFF



ENGEL

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INFINITE COUNTRY

A NOVEL

PATRICIA ENGEL

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For my parents and my brother

Mi patria es la tierra.

—Arturo Salcedo Martínez, *Sentido de Patria*

Diasporism is my mode.

—R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto*

ONE

It was her idea to tie up the nun.

The dormitory lights were cut every night at ten. Locked into their rooms, girls commanded to a cemetery silence before sleep, waking at dawn for morning prayers. The nuns believed silence a weapon, teaching the girls that only with it could they discover the depths of their interior without being servants to the temptations of this world.

To be fair, the nuns were not all terrible. Some, Talia liked very much. She even admired how they managed to turn the condemned penitentiary population into mostly orderly damitas. It was a state facility. A prison school for youth offenders. Not a convent and no longer a parochial school. The lay staff reminded the sisters to aim for secularity, but on those missioned mountains, the nuns ran things as they pleased.

During the day, under the nuns' watch, the girls practiced their downcast gazes. They attended classes, therapy sessions, meditation groups, completed chores uniformed in gray sweats, hair pulled back. Forbidden from gossip and touching, but they did both when out of sight.

At night, in the blackness of their dormitory, they gathered to whisper in shards of windowpane moonlight. When the nuns patrolled the hall outside their room, they became masterful mutes, reading lips, inventing their own sign language, moving quiet as cats, creeping like thieves. They listened for the nuns' footsteps on the level below, sensing vibrations on the wooden floor planks; the search for rule breakers, disruptors their guardians would schedule for punishment at daybreak.

The night of the escape, the girls made purposeful noise so the nun on duty would come tell them to be quiet. Sister Susana was on the nightshift. There

were many latecomer nuns at the facility leftover from some other failed life. The rumor was Sister Susana was married until her husband divorced her because she couldn't have children.

The plan originated with Talia. Or maybe her father deserved the credit. That afternoon she was given rare permission to phone him from the administrative office. Family contact was restricted, since the staff believed they could be a girl's worst influence. Talia hoped to hear Mauro say he found a way to free her, have her sentence lifted. Paid a fine or convinced one of the rich residents of the apartment building where he worked as a janitor to call in a favor on her behalf.

One never knows who might be listening, especially in a quasi jail for minors, some of whom were murderers on the verge. Talia and Mauro were careful with their words. He'd tried everything, he said. There was nothing more he could do. She understood. Liberating herself from the prison, and the country, would be up to her.

With the help of another girl, she spent an hour ripping bedsheets, twisting them tight as wire, thin as rope. She counted to one thousand in the darkness, then gave the signal for the other girls to start shouting, "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Sister Susana appeared in the doorway. Talia waited to catch her from behind with a pillowcase over the head. They'd cut breathing holes because they weren't trying to kill anyone, only to paralyze with fright. Talia held the nun while the others tied her to a chair with the shredded sheets, her breath hot on Talia's hands as another girl shoved a sock between her teeth to gag screams.

When Talia arrived to the prison school a month earlier, Sister Susana had called her into her office and told the fifteen-year-old she'd studied her life, as if that file of police jottings and psychological assessments on her desk could reveal anything that mattered.

"You're not like other girls here," she began.

Yes, I am, Talia wanted to say. She didn't want to be singled out, treated as an exception if it meant putting the other girls down.

"I believe it was your desire for justice that led you to do an awful thing. But you badly injured a man. You could have blinded him."

A pause. The rattle of voices in the cafeteria down the hall. She knew Sister Susana was waiting for a response. A denial perhaps. More likely an admission of

guilt. The nuns were always scavenging for remorse.

“Do you want to change? With faith and discipline anything is possible.”

Talia was not stupid, so she said yes.

• • •

The girls locked Sister Susana in their room with the same key she used against them each night. Nobody would look for her or for the girls until morning. The sisters and lay staff were in charge of their correction and safety. There were security guards on the property, but they were all men, so the nuns made them stay by the front gates to prevent the girls from developing crushes and the guys from trying to seduce them, as if that were a greater menace than an uprising, the girls taking the building under siege as happened all the time in men’s prisons; the illusion that women are safer among women.

The girls returned to their silence. Twelve to a room, the building held four dormitories in different corners of the building, each under the patrol of rotating nuns and staff. They knew the other girls. They had classes and meals with them every day. That night they wouldn’t worry about them, though, and Talia no longer worried about the girls with whom she planned her escape. The careless or slow would jeopardize her freedom. They would flee to boyfriends, friends, or relatives willing to hide them. But she had less than one week to get back to Bogotá, to the airport and out of Colombia.

When they hurried down the service stairs, out through the back garden to run across the sports field and over the concrete wall spiked with broken glass to the road as plotted, she broke away from the cluster, hustling east past the courtyard, through the gate into the forested hills spiraling down toward the valley.

Halting in a shadow before her final bolt, she saw the guards in the watchhouse by the prison driveway, hypnotized by the glare of a small TV. She’d assumed them to be some kind of police. They carried guns, and the girls believed they could chase and shoot them in the legs if they were caught trying to escape.

She ran alone in the fog, through dirt and thicket. It hadn't rained in a few days, so there was little mud. She heard night creatures. Frogs. Owls. Hissing insects. Through the tree canopy, the rustle of rodents or bats. An hour passed. Maybe two. Lights congealed. An illuminated road laced the forest curtain. She followed until she heard barking dogs warn she'd come too close to the fences of a finca, so she moved down the hill to the street.

If you'd passed her in a car as she walked, small in her baggy captivity uniform, an expression more lost than determined, you might not have thought her a fugitive from the school for bad girls up the mountain, the place said to reform criminals in the making.

She came to a gas station far from any route the other girls would have taken, approached a grandfatherly man in worn jeans filling up his truck tank, and asked for a ride.

"Where are you headed?"

"Anywhere but here." She only knew the facility was somewhere in Santander and the nearest town was San Vicente de Chucurí.

The man scratched his beard. "A word of advice. Don't ever tell a stranger you'll go *anywhere*."

"I need to head south. I hope to make it all the way to Tunja, but I'll take any route to get there." She didn't want the man to know she was headed to the capital in case police asked him questions later. At least from Tunja she knew she could find her way home.

The man said he was going to Aratoca but would drop her off in Barichara. Lots of tourists and buses passed through, so she could likely find a way south from there. He wasn't leaving until sunrise though. He needed to sleep a few hours before getting back on the road.

She didn't want to return to the woods. Before long, the police would have turned over every vine on the mountain searching for girls. She told the man she'd wait with him if that was okay. When he finished fueling, he pulled the truck into an unpaved lot behind the station and invited her to follow. She waited as he reached to open the passenger door, then dropped his own seat back, leaning into sleep.

“You can do the same,” he said, eyes closed. “I won’t touch you. I give you my word. I have two daughters. Not as young as you, but they’re still my babies.”

Her hesitation was mostly for show. Even if he hadn’t made such a pledge she would have done the same, climbing into the truck, nudging her seat as flat as she could so her head fell below the window line. Disappeared.

• • •

It happened behind a cafetería near the El Campín fútbol stadium. Talia went to meet her friend Claudia at the end of her shift so they could see a movie together. She waited in the alley beside the restaurant, smoking a cigarette with a waiter she thought was kind of cute though he sometimes spit when he spoke and used slang she didn’t understand. Two of the kitchen guys were also on break, talking in a corner of the alley near the dumpster.

Talia was bragging that she’d soon be leaving Bogotá for good. Her mother had finally paid for her plane ticket north. She’d meet the other half of her family. See New York and all that cool gringo shit from movies and music videos. How lucky she was, the waiter said, and asked her to write him all about it. She agreed, knowing she never would.

The kitchen guys were crouched on the ground looking at something by the garbage cans. The pavement was covered in disgusting muck and roach cadavers. One of the guys stepped away to go back into the kitchen. Talia saw a small cat where he’d been standing, orange and matted. She and the waiter walked over to get a better look. She was inclined to take it home, convince her father it would make good company for him after she left the country.

It happened in seconds. The kitchen guy who went inside returned with a bowl, walking quickly, and before anyone could ask what the hell, he poured a smoky liquid over the cat. It convulsed under the steam. Flesh cooked. Fur shriveling. Dead without a sound.

“What did you do?” Talia yelled, but the man only laughed, kicking the dead animal like a crumpled can toward the trash bins.

She can only describe what came over her as a subterranean reflex. A pressure to act that coursed through her as if from the earth. She took off through the kitchen door. The waiter and the kitchen guys must have thought she went to complain to Claudia. Instead, she went to the stoves, found a pot of hot cooking oil, took a large bowl off the counter just as the man had done, dipped it into the pot, and felt the steam graze her wrist. She walked out to the alley, and when she was close enough, turned the bowl, aiming the splash at the cat killer, oil dripping from scalp to shoulders, arms to hands. He dropped to the ground howling, blistering, palms and fingers soon swollen as yams.

They didn't have to restrain her because she didn't try to run. She knew he wouldn't die. If she'd meant to kill him she would have heaved the whole pot off the stove or reached for a knife and not just a bowl. The kitchen workers crowded around him and started praying while Talia leaned against the building and waited for whatever would come next.

The ambulance arrived quickly. The police took longer, which was normal. Paramedics wrapped the man—by this time she'd learned his name was Horacio—in a shroud while he fell into shocked delirium. The police handcuffed her and took statements from witnesses. Claudia came out and begged to know what happened while other employees, customers, and street people also tried to get a look.

They held Talia in police custody over the day and night that her crime made the city news. Just a quick mention on the evening TV reports and a few paragraphs in the local section of the print editions. They held her in a dim room with four other girls who said they were arrested on drug charges, though who knew for sure. The girls kept asking what Talia had done to be arrested, and she replied that she didn't know, until one of the girls pushed Talia's head into the toilet in the corner, so she told them the truth.

By morning she was released to her father's supervision, an advantage of being a first-time offender. The press had already moved from the story of the teenage girl burning a man onto actual murders and the political corruption scandal of the week. But she saw the newspaper clippings her father had saved at home, including color photos of charred Horacio, his face fried to a pink, satiny crepe peeking from beneath the bandages. Without revealing her name,

journalists wrote about the girl who attacked him in a baseless rage, adding that she would be tried and sentenced as a minor even if her crime demonstrated adult malice. There was no mention of the cat.

Talia considered how people who do horrible things can be victims, and how victims can be people who do horrible things. The witnesses who spoke to reporters said it was as if a lever had been turned in the girl they'd seen around the restaurant many times before waiting for her friend. Even Claudia was quoted saying she couldn't believe her dear friend was capable of such cruelty. Talia wondered if she meant it. Claudia's mother was also in the United States, and, like Talia, she was left in Colombia to be raised by her grandmother. They were good students. Their only crimes were occasionally taunting weaker girls in school, that time they shoplifted sunglasses from El Centro Andino, or lying to boys they met from other barrios, making up names and accents that didn't belong to them.

She'd gone through a series of evaluations when admitted to the facility on the mountain. She was never given any medications. Not even when a doctor asked if she'd ever pondered suicide and she answered, "Who hasn't?" The therapists and caseworkers were perplexed. How could a girl with no history of delinquency or aggression commit such a violent act? Most of the girls in the prison school had pages of predictive conduct behind them, from drug use, robbery, setting fires, to running with gangs or abusing their siblings or parents. The impulse to hurt Horacio must have come from somewhere, they agreed, but Talia was exemplary at home and school. Her record undeniably clean. They ran down a list of traumas. Rape. Abuse. Neglect. Displacement from the armed conflict. Orphaning. None applied to Talia. She told them her mother was abroad and sent her back to Colombia when she was a baby. But this particular family condition was so common it couldn't possibly be considered trauma.

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Talia rolled the passenger window down to release the dank truck air, then rolled it back up to keep out the bugs. Every hour through the bleed of green

hills, the old man pulled over to rag-wipe grime from the windshield. They spoke for stretches, then fell quiet. In the talking part, he told her he used to drive cargo for a yanqui fruit company till accused of skimming shipments. He swore to her he never pocketed a single banana.

“We’re all innocent,” she said. Sometimes she believed this.

After some time, without lifting his eyes from the road, he told her, “Whatever you’re running from must be serious. You’ve got no money and no phone and haven’t asked to borrow mine to let anyone know you’re okay.” When this failed to prompt a confession, he tried again. “You can trust me. I’m a wonder at keeping secrets.”

“My grandmother who raised me is dying of a disease that stole her memory, so now she’s lost in time and everyone is a stranger.” All of this was fact except that her grandmother was already dead and Talia would have given her lungs for Perla to take another breath in this world. “My parents won’t let me visit her out of revenge because she never approved of their marriage. They took my phone and my money. I had to run away just to see her before she leaves this life. She may not recognize me when I arrive, but she will know in some part of her that someone who loves her is with her.”

He brushed a tear from an eye, admitting his greatest regret was having left his wife, the mother of his daughters, for another woman. When he realized his error it was too late. She wouldn’t take him back. He was on his way to Aratoca to see her, still hoping for forgiveness.

“What does your other woman have to say about that?”

“Nothing. She died.”

They drove past signs for towns she’d only ever seen on maps and knew she would never see again. The truck came to a checkpoint, slowing to a stop.

“Military now,” the old man remarked, “but not so long ago it was guerrilla, like there’s a difference. The worst part is these kids have no manners.”

A young camouflaged soldier approached his window. “Where are you headed?”

“Aratoca. We live there.”

He tipped his machine gun toward Talia. “Who’s the girl?”

“My niece.”