

Mark Jacobs

HOW BIRDS COMMUNICATE

This has to be done from the outside. If I went inside, and you followed me, we'd both be lost, possibly forever. You'll trust me on this, but first I want to give you a few unassailable facts. When I say unassailable, I mean objective. Being objective is what a person does to stay on the outside. That's the theory. Anyway here are the facts:

1) My father, who was tortured and then disappeared by government goons during the Stroessner dictatorship in Paraguay, named me Lenin. He chose to do this at a time when literature and beards were both considered prima facie evidence of the worldwide communist conspiracy at work in our country.

2) At one point during one of the torture sessions, the goons placed a telephone call to my mother and allowed her to listen to my father's screams of pain. The experience of listening brought on a mental breakdown in my mother. She did not recover. She chose, rather, to go inside.

3) The arrest, torture, and disappearance of my father were ordered by a very fat man named Pastor Coronel, one of the dictator Stroessner's most faithful and efficient supporters. Government documents substantiate this. After Stroessner fell from power, Pastor Coronel was charged with many heinous crimes, including several related to my father. Because our legal system is dysfunctional, these charges have not been resolved by trial. Pastor Coronel remains in preventive detention.

4) Pastor Coronel's health is poor.

5) Pastor Coronel's name is a disturbing oxymoron.

Strictly speaking we should strike statement number four from my list of facts. (I say we because I want to get close to you. You are where I want to be, i.e. on the outside.) My information regarding Coronel's health was second hand. It came from newspaper accounts suggesting that he was ill in body and soul. It was evident, however, that although he had lost some weight his obesity was a tremendous drag on the man. It was a recent photograph and article in *Noticias*, actually, that broke a certain impasse for me. The photo, or more accurately my

reaction to it, led me to act. The reaction was sympathy. There ought to be a hell for persons who feel it.

I try not to read the papers. When I do, I focus on the economic news. I work for a small think tank that studies economic phenomena and applies the results to indices you might broadly label as quality-of-life issues. The Centro de Luz got its start with international funding back during the dictatorship, when it was impossible to conduct research in the universities. Luz survived because foreign embassies lobbied with the regime to keep it open, although we were continuously harassed by thugs in uniforms and lackeys armed with official paperwork.

Luz was the logical choice of employment for the son of a man murdered for his political convictions. My father's convictions were simple: He insisted on people's right to express an opinion. If enough people shared a particular opinion—for instance, that the distribution of land and wealth in a given subtropical country with a history of de facto government was inequitable—then serious consideration ought to be given to changing that distribution. When he was murdered I was twenty-three. I inherited his convictions, which naturally diluted over time into beliefs.

My father was a visionary. He dreamed and described a city of justice. My task was less grandiose. I was one of many architects in a firm whose prosaic contract was to build such a city, brick by humble brick.

I cut out the picture from *Noticias* and hung it in the rim of the bathroom mirror. I studied it as I shaved, after I showered, while I dressed. In the photo, Pastor Coronel sits on the edge of his bed in pajamas and slippers, one hand up to shield his face from the photographer's prying eye. The hospital bed is mussed, the striped sheets tangled. Even in the grainy picture his great bulk exudes discomfort; it leaks like sweat from the man's pores.

Across from the patient-prisoner sits an outlandish man in a tight white suit. He is as fat as Coronel himself. A garish tie rides becalmed on his vast belly. He has turned mid-gesture to look at the photographer, and his jowly face in square black glasses shows surprise, irritation, and that unmistakable lust for publicity one sees in so many faces these days. His outrage is phony. He loves being photographed ministering to the notorious anti-communist.

The accompanying article describes Coronel's interlocutor as a forensic psychiatrist. I knew from friends that as a young man he was a poet with exuberant socialist ideals, and that he failed at medical school. He was himself arrested and imprisoned. Behind bars he underwent an ideological conversion that straightened his twisted vision, returning to the streets a virulent supporter of President Alfredo Stroessner, who gave him work. The journalist quoted him as saying that if Pastor Coronel continued the way he was going, the former chief of the Department of Investigations of the Asunción Police would kill himself. He suffered from an overwhelming combination of physical and mental maladies, including bulimia, a reluctance to get out of bed, and a severe persecution complex.

I folded the photograph and tucked it into my wallet. Downstairs, my mother had the *maté* ready. I'm a compulsive early riser, subject to anxiety if I don't see the sun rise, as though I've missed something I need. For years Mother and I have enjoyed a little morning ritual. For forty minutes we sit in the back patio and she serves me hot *maté*, maintaining the water in the kettle just below the boiling point on a gas ring.

"Two woodpeckers," she said, handing me the gourd with the strong, bitter tea. "They said there was a terrible storm off the coast of Chile. A banana boat went down with all hands. An albatross saw it sink."

I sat next to her and sucked on the silver straw. The dark had not quite lifted. I couldn't make out the woodpeckers, but Mother's eyesight was always acute. Our house sits in the middle of a block-long street of irregular cobbles in Villa Laureles. The house is quite small but attractive to the eye. It once appeared on a post card. My father was the one who converted the back patio into a garden. It has been a pleasant oasis, with corn and tomato and pepper and bean plants, flowers and ornamental shrubs. Around the cultivated perimeter orange and grapefruit trees alternate in a protective row.

And birds. Since my father died, I should say. While he was alive we had birds, of course. What city garden doesn't draw them? But when my mother went into her decline, it was as though they smelled it, and we were inundated. Birds of every description, birds not normally found in the city, common birds and uncommon birds, brilliant and dull birds, long-tailed and short. We had to buy a book to identify them. They

didn't stay long, and sometimes it was one lone representative of a species that showed up for an hour and left again. But they came, they kept coming, they have never stopped coming.

My older brother Derlis believes that the birds began to come because the garden had reached a certain level of mature profusion, and they were attracted to the varied bounty it offered. According to Derlis, the birds have nothing to do with my father's being taken away and my mother's reaction to the loss. Derlis is a physician, a surgeon, with a comfortable private practice and a summer apartment on the beach in Punta del Este. He is highly skilled at his job. My complaint about him is the assumption he makes that since he can deal with the mysteries of the body, he somehow understands the other mysteries that people inhabit.

Apart from the pleasure intrinsic to observing such flitting variety, the birds were a godsend for Mother. She began gradually to communicate with them. Derlis and I have gone round and round on this. He considers I am being willful in my description of what happens out there in the garden. Anyone who would play with the idea of interspecies communication he views as tending toward instability, a condition my brother Derlis abhors. If you incline to his side, I'd only point out the curious (but unassailable) fact that while my father lived in the house we had an ordinary urban allotment of birds—a jay here, a sparrow there—while afterward they came in herds.

Over the years the birds have meant a great deal to Mother. I believe she could not live without them. A few years ago when my marriage was tottering, we sent her to live with each of my sisters and brothers in turn. The idea was to give my wife and me some privacy to work things out. My siblings were all willing to take her in, but the most Mother lasted was two weeks with my youngest sister. Although she claimed she was restless without me, I believe it was the birds she really missed. (After tottering, my marriage crashed, but for reasons that have nothing to do with Pastor Coronel. My wife took our children to Buenos Aires, where she married a plastic surgeon whose only defect, to my knowledge, was a disparaging way he had of raising his eyebrows when my name was mentioned in the presence of the kids. I never saw him do it, of course, but it has been described to me by people I trust.)

As the sun came up over Asunción and the traffic stirred, we drank our *maté* and watched a pair of woodpeckers investigate the trunk of a grapefruit tree. A yellow and black pitogüe foraged below them in the corn. And my mother narrated a story in several voices that I assumed she picked up from the birds. It was the animal equivalent of a soap opera, too theatrical for my taste. I distrust emotion when it's noisy. It took place on the Argentine pampa and included foxes and deer and cow ponies and red hawks, as far as I could make out. Mother never explained her stories. I was her only audience, and I was incidental.

As I listened passively and the *maté* woke me up and I felt the summer heat of February assert its prerogative on the humid air, an idea formed in me. It began as an idle fantasy, but in the course of the day at Luz it acquired a shape, a body, and finally a life of its own. I tacked the photo of Pastor Coronel and the forensic psychiatrist on the bulletin board on my office wall. It disappointed me that no one noticed or commented on it. Perhaps my colleagues assumed out of delicacy that reference to it would be painful. By mid-morning I shut the door, stopped working, and stared into the picture with my hands folded on the desktop.

The absurd photograph that captured a moment in the history of injustice in our country was not the first of its kind, just the most provoking. In their blunt, battering way trying to make democracy work, journalists periodically stole their way into wherever Coronel was being held, snapped him in his bed of pain, and appended to the picture an article describing the snail's pace at which the legal system was moving toward justice.

Each time I saw one of those articles, I was overcome with a strange sensation for which I have no more accurate word than sympathy. I imagined what it must be to move in one's life from a torturer with unlimited scope of action, reporting directly to the President, who trusted him for reasons no outsider would ever know, to a prisoner in a timeless limbo of pain and uncertainty. He knew he was reviled, and that the dictatorship was gone for good, and that the most he could look forward to was a jail sentence that would last longer than he did. Gone forever the pleasures of power and the unchecked ability to hurt people. Gone all the secret satisfactions: the terrified, pliant young girls whose mothers thrust them forward as payment in kind for consumer goods.

The camaraderie of men who ruled. The certainty, in which lurked a strangely sexual impulse, that when common citizens recognized one's official automobile on the street, they quailed, or prayed, and then hid their relief when it passed them by.

It was almost as if I were able to get inside the ugly, obese body of the torturer and experience what he felt, what he suffered. I could rub my palm across the textured surface of his nightmares. All this for the man who had my father killed. You can imagine how I felt. Whenever it happened, a tremendous self-loathing engulfed me, paralyzed me, blinded me. I could not look at myself in the mirror. It was all I could do to stay inside my body as it walked in the street, or drove my car, or sat in the morning to drink *maté* and listen to my mother's amazing stories. It was my own dirty secret, and there was no one in whom I could confide it for the simple relief of letting it out. I could say more but prefer not to, hoping you will respect the reticence.

The only way out, it occurred to me as I sat in my office listening to the computer's conspiratorial whisper, was to kill Pastor Coronel. Since his health had deteriorated he had been moved to the Adventist Hospital, where security was lax, as the photographer from *Noticias* had proven. I could use the same ploy: borrow a camera and sneak or bribe my way in. Or I could pretend to be a doctor. Paraguayans seldom challenged a person who appeared to know what he was about; that was one more residue of the authoritarian manner in which the place had been governed for so long. But I opted for neither of those. Instead I became a janitor, probably because the challenge of pulling off the character appealed to me. A dry run was advisable.

That same day I found myself pushing a broom down a hall in the Adventist Hospital dressed the way any other janitor dressed, aping the resignation of body with which I had observed them go about their duties, as if in their heart of hearts they suspected that if there were a Heaven, and they made it that far, they would wind up pushing a broom across the celestial floor because of an uncorrectable flaw in the nature of things. In my pocket I carried a hunk of smooth wood in place of the pistol I was going to need. There was only one tense moment, when a woman I knew from the Foreign Ministry happened down the hall. But I hung my head and kept sweeping, and she blew by me on a wind of purpose quite certain she had nothing to say to a custodian like me.

As much as practicing the janitor act itself I needed to locate Pastor Coronel's room without giving myself away, and as it turned out I stumbled across it quite by chance. I had acquired a little squeaky-wheeled cart piled high with the tools of my new trade and was roaming the halls randomly when a door opened, a nurse with a clipboard exited, and I saw the giant belly of the man who had killed my father rise and fall regularly as he lay sleeping on his back. For the moment, at least, there was no police guard. In a country in which the principal henchmen of the dictator still strolled the streets freely, living off the investments they made during the fat times, perhaps it was thought that the former head of investigations was safe as he was.

At any rate I had my first glimpse of Coronel in the flesh, albeit asleep. The sight of him that way—flat on his back in a bed too small to contain him, his asthmatic breathing like a kind of non-verbal stutter—brought on a flood of sympathy. I fingered the block of wood in my pocket for a moment, turned and rolled my cart away, and I was gone.

At home, Mother was elated by a visitation: Seventeen hummingbirds had descended on the garden in a cloud of nervous color. They spent the afternoon among the flowering shrubs like so many finicky epicures delighted to have stumbled across a five-star restaurant in a sleepy town in the south of France. I could scarcely pay attention to Mother, the self-loathing had risen to such a pitch inside me. I was sick to my stomach, and cold sweats broke out on my body, which felt weak and unnaturally sensitive.

"There are still wildcats in the jungle," my mother told me. She was making me a sandwich in the kitchen, and I felt pleased to see her so animated, so evidently satisfied with her life and circumstances and my only love. "But not so many as there used to be."

"People have no notion of what they do when they shoot one," I said.

She shook her head and grinned. Her delight in knowing something I didn't know hurt me. "That's not the problem, Lenín. They told me this afternoon what the real problem is. If anyone, bird or beast or human, dares to count them all and then say the number out loud, the cats will die. Every last one of them. Don't you think that would be a shame, *mi hijo?*"

I agreed it would be a shame. I took my cheese sandwich, along with some baked *chipitas* and a glass of cold water. I despised myself. When I had eaten and my mother left the room, I tore the photograph from *Noticias* into a dozen pieces. And I made up my mind.

The next morning I called in sick and went downtown, where it was only too easy to purchase a Remington pistol and some ammunition. The Korean merchant who sold me the gun did not ask to see any identification. He tried instead to interest me in a contraband stereo system, which he had in great quantity in stacks around the shop. I knew I should take the time to familiarize myself with the weapon before I used it to kill someone, but I was quite sure that not unless and until Pastor Coronel was dead by my hand would I be rid of the clammy feeling of self-disgust that hung on me like a skin. I was impatient not to do it but for it to be over. Plus it would be dangerous to climb down from the wave of momentum that was carrying me along.

So it all happened fast, just like the movies. There I was in the men's lavatory at the hospital dressing myself in the custodian's uniform, loading my new gun, retrieving what looked like the same squeaky-wheeled cart from a dark closet that smelled like mothballs and soap. To steady my nerves I wheeled the cart around the halls aimlessly for a while, happy that no one paid the least attention to me. I could have stayed inside that moment of sealed suspension forever.

But I didn't, of course. Here I was, or someone who resembled me except that he was more purposeful, opening the door to the sick man's room. Coronel was awake, as he should be. The persecution complex had caused the equivalent of super-sensitive miniature antennae to grow on his body like invisible fur. Those antennae told him instantly that I was not the normal custodian, and that I might hurt him. He heaved himself up into a sitting position, which effort caused him to lose the little breath he had, and he stared at me as though keen to know the particulars of the grudge I bore him.

I pulled the pistol from the pocket of my jacket. It had the heft of the hunk of wood I had used during the dry run. I released the safety, pointed the weapon at his guilty heart, and steadied my aim with my free hand. The torturer's mouth opened slowly in a round O of supplication and terror. He raised his arms slowly into the position of surrender. Urine leaked in a slow stream from his pajama pants, then onto

the floor. By the time I squeezed the trigger, unfortunately, there was someone behind me. A plainclothes policeman, I think, although my memory is patchy and inclined to play tricks when I reconstruct all this. I also remember an intern in a white smock and wire-rimmed glasses, and someone burly who smelled like tobacco and may have been a real janitor.

I'm not sure which one of the three got to me first. Whoever it was he spoiled my aim so that the bullet caught Coronel in the shoulder, quite high. Flesh and blood splatted in a satisfying way, and the torturer roared in pain that came out as outrage. Someone knocked me to the ground, and I lost the gun. But when I got to my feet there he was sitting on the bed, bleeding and laughing. He pointed his finger at me and shot.

"Gotcha," he said, and I understood perfectly that he had.

The cell they locked me inside was blessedly quiet. There were official things to be done, I gathered, before I was remanded to the common penitentiary known popularly as the Tacumbu Hilton. It was a perfect place not to think but to meditate in a way that called upon powers of imagination I hadn't known I possessed. With your forbearance, I prefer not to go into detail. I thought, as you might expect, about my father. I thought about Pastor Coronel, and President Alfredo Stroessner in exile in Brazil, and some of the other victims of the regime about whom I had read over the years. I thought about being on the inside, how different it was from being on the outside, as though there really were two distinct worlds, and the great cunning mystery to be understood was the way the intersection points were hidden, so that one never knew when he might step out of one into the other. I thought about Pastor Coronel pointing his finger at me and shooting. However ugly the knowledge, it pained me to learn something from him.

At one point a noisy swarm of newspaper people was allowed inside to take my picture. I had nothing to say in response to their questions, which were predictable and blind-eyed, just what one would expect from people on the outside without a clue about the inside. Happily for me, friends and lawyers arranged to have me released on their recognizance. There was a swelling up of popular sympathy for me, since my intended victim was a man who deserved whatever he ulti-

mately got. The media fanned the flame, printing stories about my father and his vision of the just city. People who had lost loved ones to the goons organized a vigil in front of the court building, and something quiet about their conviction threatened people in the government, who thought to defuse the tension and earn some easy credit at the same time by letting me out of prison. I was escorted home not like a hero who had achieved something, or tried to achieve something, but like a man who had suffered a recent bereavement and needed gentling.

My mother knew all about what had happened, she told me when they left us to ourselves. She hadn't worried when I failed to come home from work on time. A rare visitor had explained it all to her. It was her first sighting of a short-billed canastero. Proudly she showed me the picture in our well-thumbed bird book. She had printed a careful X next to the paragraph describing the bird. X meant she made the first sighting; my mark was a Z.

"What did it tell you, Mother?"

"Let's drink some *maté*," she suggested.

It was early. The day was going to be a scorcher. But *maté* sounded good. I felt more at peace than I had for a long time. The anxiety was gone. So was the self-loathing. They drained out of me while I sat in the cell waiting to be charged with attempted murder. In their place was nothing, which was extremely buoyant, like a raft or a cushion.

Mother waited until the water was hot on the gas ring and she had passed me the gourd full of tea before she answered my question.

"It had to do with your father, didn't it?" she said hesitantly.

I was amazed. Not twice in a year did she bring up his name. "It did."

"Your sister Julia tried to trick me with some cock-and-bull story about your running into a friend from school who invited you out to his ranch in the Chaco."

"Julia meant well, Mother."

"But I knew better."

"What did you know?"

"I knew . . ." She was crying. "I knew the number."

"What number?"

"How many wild cats are left in Paraguay."

That made sense. I nodded, and she excused herself. She wanted to do some tidying up around the house, after all the commotion of visitors. She may not have known what she was doing—I'm reasonably certain that she didn't—but I did. She was tempting me to go where she had gone. Inside. I won't go.

I sat by myself drinking *maté* until the strength of the *yerba* was spent. The serenity I felt was anything but lassitude. It was too clean for that, too round. I watched a white-tipped dove settle in an orange tree, the branch on which it lit swaying slightly with the bird's weight. The question in my mind was where a person wanted to live his life: outside or in. I made my choice years ago. I will stay outside. With you. I've been inside. It's more like a cell than a cage. Not that it's always easy to know what's best. But the serenity helped. When the dove opened its small bill to speak I stopped my ears.