

AN AMERICAN HEARINGS

Patricia Seaman

The place was covered with cactus. My first impression was that I was an imbecile. I had expected palms. And that somehow poverty would be less ugly, which it isn't. We stood right up close to one another, our dry eyes blinking, darting, in a country where we were foreign. Small green lizards with fluorescent, glimmering tails ran in front of us and under the vegetation. They left us uneasy, looking over our shoulders.

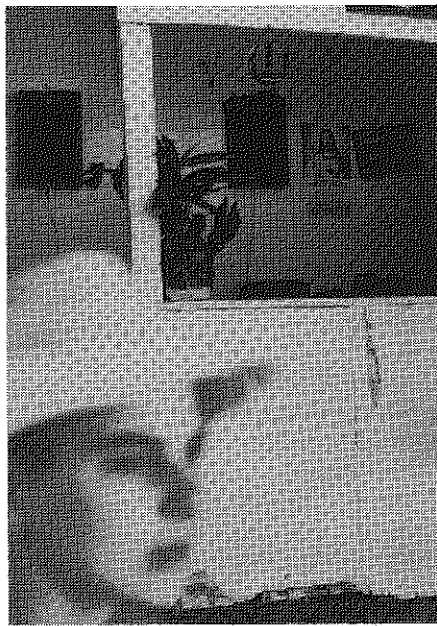
She stands still, hesitates, this is almost imperceptible. She looks through the window at the early winter dusk. She moves on, the moment is finished with, she is finished with looking out at the distance. She fills the kettle with water for tea. She takes bowls from the cupboard, she takes vegetables out of the refrigerator. She's noisy. She sings about the seraphim. She sings about God's love.

I am in the hall. She can't hear me. I am breathless and I can hear my own heart beating. I open the door to her room. The first place I look is the dresser, in the first drawer and on the right. There is an ornamental box, it holds a silver dollar, and a pair of cream coloured gloves as soft as silk. Christening candles lie in their original boxes. I put things back precisely. She will ask, Who has been in my things. I will deny it but she will know. When I look again something else will be missing.

For one thing, all I wanted was to go to the beach. To get away from the dismal winter. Two weeks away from the city. A warm climate, where the blue incisions would separate the unnameable disquiet into compartments, equatorial. And I wanted to be with Annie to see what she would do, if anything. To see what she remembered about me, if anything. Mostly, to get away from the grit.

The tourist restaurants and the expensive shops were on the main boulevard. We were ready for our cocktail after a long day in the sun. We walked the labyrinthine streets to the restaurant we both preferred. A group of men sat in front of a small shop, they were playing a game of backgammon. A little girl stood beside them. She played with her little sisters. The night I went out to take their photograph the shop was closed. The street was empty. I set the flash. I took a photograph of the metal grates in front of the door, and one of the soda bottles propped against the wall beside the trash. It was Sunday.

In a plain leather case I find a war medal in the shape of a cross, it commemorates an act of bravery. It commemorates the injury suffered. It has never been mentioned and I don't mention it. As if it does not exist.



Photographs by Patricia Seaman

straw hat. She wears sunglasses and imagines she's a spy. I undressed in the shade of the umbrella. My rib cage was showing through, and my breastbone. Annie wasn't getting a tan. We were slathering creams over ourselves and each other. We wanted to be in the sun but we knew it would kill us.

It is her rings that interest me. There is the long, black diamond that she must have worn to the nightclub that time. It is the most beautiful and elegant ring I have ever seen and I swear to own one exactly like it one day. The only other rings she owns are her wedding bands.

In the photograph taken at the nightclub, the women are wearing shiny, tight-waisted dresses. And perfume. They are very young. She is wearing a low-cut dress. She looks impossibly thin. There had been the Depression and then, rationing. You don't know how lucky you are, she said. I take the black diamond off my finger and put it back in the jewellery box and leave the room as quietly as possible.

Annie and I blamed the humidity for the way we fell asleep, instantly and deeply before we noticed what was happening, before we could say good night. One night, very late, there was a sound. It was the sound women have been warned about. I have planned my reaction under every circumstance and in every room. I identify weapons in common objects before I fall asleep. I know that I am ready for it. God help him. I am so ready for him I'm almost waiting for it. But then, it was such a small sound. When I heard that sound in the night, of all things, I ignored it. I am sleeping. I am comfortable. I am not afraid. Don't bother me now. At least Annie didn't ignore it. She jumped out of bed, she started yelling, screaming her head off and banging on the walls. She was furious. She shouted at him, Who are you. She pounded the door and he pounded back. She held it. We forced it closed, bolted it, put the chain on. We looked at one another and said nothing.

The desk clerk and the security guard chased him. We didn't hear his footsteps but we heard the closing of a door. We felt like we were in a movie. A gun went off outside the window. This is the kind of movie I never watch. There was nothing more for us to do, we went back to bed. I became anxious even though there wasn't another sound. Annie fell asleep right away. I wanted to take her photograph while she was sleeping, she's so pretty. I was afraid to get out of bed to look for the camera. I tried talking myself into it. I couldn't close my eyes. My breathing was

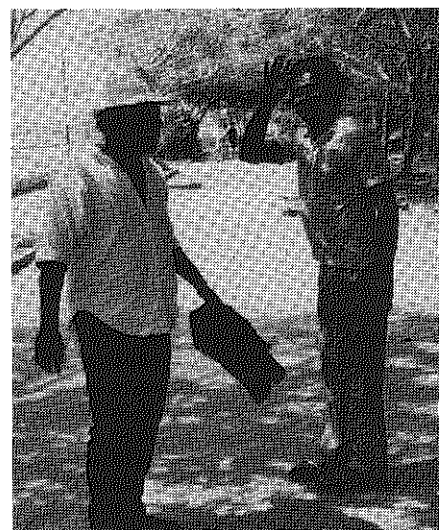
Or, words fail it. As if words, like money, could be lost and never retrieved.

I can hear her coming. I close the drawer and step into the middle of the room. My breath is coming faster. She stops singing, then she goes back into the kitchen. I can hear her. She makes the sounds of making a pot of tea, of choosing a cup.

To begin with, there's a photograph taken at night of a house. The yard is full of cactus. There is one palm tree and strange flowers. There's no one in the picture. When it was taken, when the flash went off, a woman shouted. She had been sitting at the window looking out at the night. She hadn't seen me coming. I gave her a bad scare.

In the top drawer of the vanity is a letter. I unfold it and it makes the sound of old paper. However, the handwriting, the signature, are illegible. Beside it are vials containing Valium and little yellow pills. On the vanity are two small jewellery cases. A decorative silver one with red velveteen lining contains her rings. She has a signet ring with her father's initials on it. It reminds me of a story she often repeats. How she had pleaded with him to let her use his pen-knife to make a little carving in a bit of wood. He had said, Don't come to me when you cut yourself. And she didn't. It was the housekeeper, finally, who found her like that.

We were afraid of getting sunstroke. In every photograph I take Annie wears her



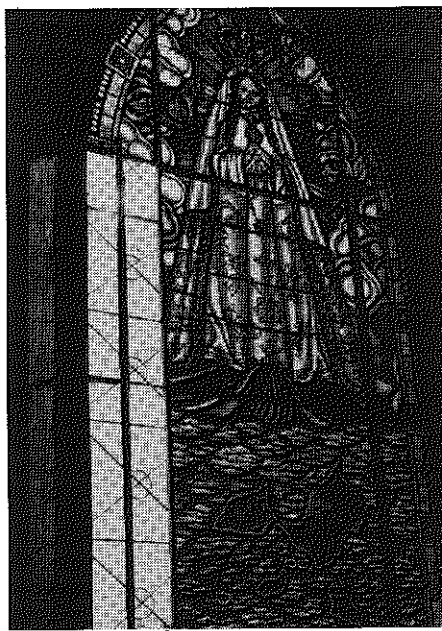
out of control. Annie didn't wake up from the sound of my heart. I could still smell the acrid smell of gunfire. I don't want anyone to be shot because I'm a tourist, because I will lie in a deck chair by the pool taking my leisure.

She sits at the table. She's very tired, she's drinking a cup of tea. She can't see me or she looks past me, or rather she looks through me. She's exhausted. She's picking her teeth with the cover of a matchbook. I walk behind her and go into the basement. The steamer trunk is kept in the far corner. I pull the latch and it opens easily. In it there is a cream coloured, satin wedding dress with a hundred buttons, a tulle veil is pinned to it. There are several framed photographs, some of her husband in uniform. Also, one with her family where she is sitting beside her father. At the bottom of the trunk is a box of more old photographs.

Behind me on the table is a vase of tulips, or there are tulips appliquéd on my dress and behind me is a vase of daffodils. As in all of the photographs I am unsmiling. I'm holding my little brother by the hand. Or else, he is not in this picture. Of course, he is not in this picture because it is my birthday portrait. I stand alone with my hands behind my back. There is a vase of daffodils. A painting of a rainy, Parisian street scene hangs on the wall. There are tulips appliquéd on my dress. It would be spring and I would be coming out of my long winter torpor. I have not smiled for the photograph and probably no one has asked me to.

It was surprising how cool it was in the shade of the trees in the square. How the police stood in the sun in their black uniforms all day without resting. How people looked at us. How I tried to look at myself and Annie the way I thought they looked at us. How women weren't permitted to walk past the statue in the square if they were wearing shorts. A policeman was watching. He was directing women in shorts to go around. What business was it of mine to be sitting in the shade waiting for the bus to the beach. *¡Perdón, dónde está porpuesto por playa la Agua, por favor?* They laughed.

There is a photo of her. I try to show her. In it she is wearing a suit that is fashionable for the time. She doesn't want to look at the picture. I'm waiting. She straightens and wipes her hands on a cloth and looks at the photograph which she immediately tears into small pieces. I shout for her not to tear it but it's too late. The photograph is then thrown away. She doesn't want to remember anything. She objects to her



appearance in that cut of suit and says something disparaging about the styles of that year.

Not giving it to her, I show her a photograph of a baby. His hand is bandaged, his feet are not in the photograph but they are also bandaged. I recall being the first to find him, after he began to scream. She says I was too young, that I don't remember. She would take one or the other of her children to the emergency ward, in the car, as a sort of respite. She never panicked. She was never afraid, or cried. She never talks about it. I leave the room. While she is setting the table she hums.

A bus of American students arrived from the airport in the afternoon. They were on spring vacation. Annie tells me they are all wearing Vuarnets. I have to ask her what Vuarnets are. She says they're very expensive, which doesn't explain anything to me. The students began their party right away. Three girls were thrown into the pool. A lot of screaming went on. The bar had to be restocked. Some of the guests gave each other meaningful looks before going to their rooms to dress for dinner.

The following day Annie and I wanted to get as far away from the hotel as we could. We hired a taxi. We took a tour of the lagoon. The boatman shouted, *romántico, mucho romántico*, as we glided through the narrow waterways under the overhanging trees. Annie laughed, she put her arm around me. We were late getting back to the taxi and the driver was angry. He drove like a maniac all the way back to the hotel.



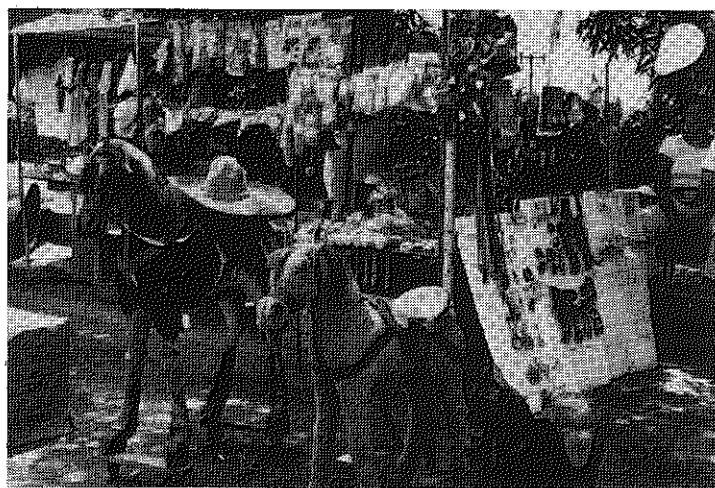
Something strange was going on. We were prevented from leaving the hotel again. The staff patiently explained it to the guests. They said that we would be picked up by soldiers if we were caught on the street. No one could give us more information. No one could explain this curfew. Annie and I were alarmed by the suddenness of it. An American girl objected. She said, I'm not involved, it has nothing to do with me, I'm an American citizen. There was a T.V. on in the lobby airing a newscast, there was gunfire, flaming vehicles, there was death. The girl didn't draw any connection between herself and the newscast. Later that night she won the beer drinking contest, to the mortification of the boys.

Already, a large metal bar had been drawn through the handles of the lobby door. The security guard stood inside with his thumb hooked on his gun belt. He came to be known as Clint. I recalled the advice given to me by a friend who had said simply, intently, Watch your back. From the window at night the town appeared completely deserted.

The table is scattered with dirty plates. Someone has spilled tea on the cloth and it will stain if it isn't washed immediately, however, she does not clear the plates. A bare tree can be seen through the window behind her. She is drinking her tea and smoking a cigarette. She puts down the cup. She picks up the cigarette from the ashtray and takes a long drag. She exhales. She picks up the matchbook. She and I are again alone in the room.

Nothing like her knees, her arms, spreading her towel on the sand. Are you hungry, she asked me. I said I was. I said I was famished, starving. I could eat anything, in fact, I had to eat right away, I felt faint. I was that hungry. She couldn't believe it while she watched me eat. Later, she was dozing in a chair. Her hand had slipped over the side and was resting in the sand. I woke her. I'm just going for a salad, I said. And get out of the sun. It's the middle of the day, you'll suffer. She sat under the umbrella and read her book. I couldn't stand to read anything myself. I was constantly distracted by her, and by the waves. I wanted to lie in the sun and daydream. There was the necessity of applying lotion. And of gauging the time by looking at the sky. Rather than read, I preferred to drink rum. It seemed that no amount of it could make me drunk.

She sits outside on a lawn chair. One of the babies is on her knee, she holds a bottle of beer in her free hand. She is smiling,



probably over something one of the children is doing to amuse her. The smoke from the barbecue is blown in her direction. She shakes her head and coughs. She is wearing a sleeveless, blue shirt and the baby is in diapers. I tell her about this scene, she doubts it. At least, not the bottle of beer. I tell her about a photograph in which she is very young. She is standing with a young man beside a boat at the edge of a lake. She's wearing jeans. They are each holding a bottle of beer, and smiling. She believes me this time, except about the beer. She insists there was never any. She might have married him if it hadn't been for the war. I tell her that I'm glad she didn't marry him.

No one was able to give us information. They couldn't tell us anything. We don't know what will happen, this has never happened here before. We believe the curfew will last ten days, they told us. What we are sure about is, if you are on the street after six the military will pick you up and we will not be able to get you out.

The metal bar is across the glass doors at the entrance. Every five minutes I see shock troops smash down the doors. The glass shatters across the lobby. Everyone screams, they yell, It's not my fault, I'm just a tourist. It is the first time they think circumstance is unfair. Every five minutes I imagine shattering glass.

Someone told us that the curfew would not last more than four days. From someone else we heard, By tomorrow everything will be back to normal. During the day men stood in a row against the wall of the *panadería*, drinking espresso and reading the paper. There wasn't much conversation about it. The only thing I recognised were the photographs which didn't make sense at all, they were of tanks and soldiers and corpses.



She doesn't say anything about it. She says she doesn't remember. I ask her if I was there and she says she doesn't remember. I can't get any information about her from the home movies, she's hardly in them, or she's standing over the barbecue. Her back, bent over the barbecue, is in the movies.

Annie liked to go snorkeling. I didn't, it made me seasick. We liked to walk to the deserted end of the beach. We put our towels in the sand and sat on them quickly, before they blew away. She made plans for a picnic. I agreed to the idea of a picnic. No, I say, I won't go in the water, there are jellyfish in there. She persuades me to go in finally. We were hardly swimming for more than five minutes when a giant jellyfish floated close to us. We screamed and laughed and tried to run out of the water. In a few minutes she went back in but I would not go in again. I was lying on the beach. There were hundreds of people lying in the morgue, and I felt somehow implicated.

I wanted to visit the churches when they were empty or almost empty. I took photographs of the stained glass and of the altars. And one of Annie smiling seductively, leaning her elbows on a holy water font. I bought a souvenir of the Virgin. Later, I gave it to my friend, who appears everywhere to me, like a visitation, a miracle. When I went back to take a photograph of the old woman who sold me the icon she was gone.

Annie and I liked the same things. Our eyes went wild in the occult shop. The clerk thought we were crazy. We bought up cigars and religious medals and *Secret of Venus*, and *Chango Perfumado*, and *Cleopatra Soap*. Someone bought us a beer. After smelling the *Jon Conquistador Strong Magic Perfume*, I refused to wear it. Dogs will follow us, I said. Don't be ridiculous, said Annie, as she doused me with it. But dogs did follow us, a whole pack of them, with their scruffy beachcombing fur and their starvation ribs, waiting, and not barking.

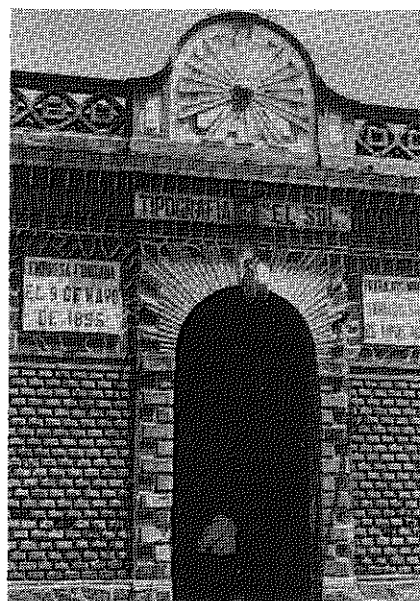
She puts the matchbook down again. She alternates between sipping the tea and inhaling the cigarette. There was a time when she used to roll her own cigarettes with the help of a little machine. She drums the fingers of her left hand on the table. The drumming of her fingers is the sound of resignation. It is without blame or contradiction. To no one in particular she says, Take Jesus into your heart.

We sat at a sort of café where we bought lunch from a woman who was cooking on a barbecue. I stood in front of the woman to take her photo with Annie in the background. The smoke from the barbecue partially obscured her. Then I took a photo of the religious calendar and other things on the wall. Someone said there was a café up the street that had a juke box, it was the place to go to dance.

To pass the time I painted Annie's toenails bright red and told her a story about a film I was once in. A general was speaking on T.V. He gave a speech, not explaining, or so we thought. We didn't under-

stand what he was saying, he seemed to be making election promises. He kept repeating something about the U.S. and the foreign debt. Annie and I tried to decipher the situation, we wanted to find one piece of information that would clarify everything. We didn't know what was happening, if it was a catastrophe, if we should be afraid. Annie flipped the channel, we watched an advertisement for sleeping pills.

The Americans were still at the pool so we sat at the inside bar, which was empty. There was one waiter to serve us. We ordered whiskey sodas like the Americans. Gradually, one at a time, other waiters came into the bar quietly, and sat down. Before we finished our drinks there were nine men sitting silently behind us, looking at our backs. One of them asked me, finally, what I did for my work. I said, I do what you do, I'm a waiter. He looked at me oddly. I mean, I explained, I'm a waitress. He looked at me again in that odd way but said nothing. We went back to our room.



We flipped to the Discovery channel. The next morning at breakfast, many of the guests were discussing the living habits of cheetahs.

There is a photo of her at a party. She is sitting on the edge of a chair. She has her arm over her husband's shoulder. He is smiling, and so is she but with her mouth closed, as always self-conscious about her uneven teeth. She is wearing some Godawful thing, some sort of hostess dress with a print, or something. She won't look at me anymore. She changes the subject, she asks me how my trip was. She only wants me to talk about something else, to leave her alone. I tell her, I wouldn't go there if I were you.

The curfew was partially lifted and we took the bus to the airport. Most of the tourists had managed to get on earlier flights. We were on the last flight out and it was half empty.

Patricia Seaman is a Toronto writer. Her first novel, *Hotel Destiné*, was recently published by gynergy press, an imprint of Ragweed Press.