

MISS CHILE

THE WALLS OF THE SECURITY OFFICE

are bare except for two pictures. One, a faded photograph of General Augusto Pinochet—or “Pinocchio” as Chileans have begun calling him in these the last years of his dictatorship.

The other, a large photograph of Miss Chile—Cecilia Bolocco—who only weeks ago was named Miss Universe. In the photograph, torn from a newspaper, she is on stage moments after being crowned, wearing the glittering Miss Universe tiara, and a silver and royal-blue sequined gown.

Her complexion and colour are like that of all the Chileans I have met and seen—warm, lustrous, brown, desert. She towers over the other contestants and cradles a large bouquet of flowers against the dark skin of her arms.

She is beautiful.

Chileans are very proud of their Miss Universe. Her picture is everywhere. Even the curators of an archaeological museum in San Pedro de Atacama celebrate her crowning. A display case in the museum contains a mummified female body, excavated from a dig in the Atacama Desert. It is over a thousand years old and has been well preserved by the arid environment. A small sign in the case identifies the desiccated figure as “The Original Miss Chile”.

She is not alone in the museum. The Atacama Desert is an archeologically rich area and the museum is home to a large collection of human remains and artifacts from the Inca and the Arawacan. A past buried by the Spanish is on display for visitors, or is studied by archeologists and students.

The museum’s collection is housed in storage rooms crowded with grey, metal shelving units set in rows. Each unit is made up of a half dozen shelves, spaced from floor to ceiling. Each shelf holds twenty or so skulls, or the skeletal remnants of two bodies. Many more bones than this still lie beneath the desert.

The police—the Caribineros—leave their bare security office and approach my car. They leave the office door open and a slight breeze rocks the picture of Miss Chile like a pendulum. I’ve pulled off the highway to ask for directions, but now regret it. These brown shirted police make me nervous.

A week ago, in Santiago, the Caribineros pulled my companion off the street and

interrogated him in the police station. During their questioning, they opened the back of his camera and pulled the exposed film from its canister because he had been photographing the bus station.

The opposition to Pinochet’s dictatorship has been growing steadily and it has only been a year since the assassination attempt on his life. It will be another year before a referendum clears the way for democratic elections. Anti-government demonstrations are becoming more frequent and the bus station was the site of an incident the day before. The resistance is armed and an officer had been shot. The police are anxious and think he might be a journalist. “No photograph, no news story”, they reasoned and sent my friend on his way.

Three nights later, the bus carrying me north from Las Serena to Antofagasta had been stopped at another highway checkpoint. A single officer climbed on board, gathered up our passports, and instructed everyone to get out and bring their luggage into the office.

Inside, we placed our bags and suitcases on a long table, illuminated by an equally long bank of fluorescent lights, and opened them. The Caribineros sleepily fingered nothing but the top layer of the contents of the bags. Everyone—driver, passengers, police—resented the intrusion in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

Now, hundreds of miles north of the capitol, the Caribineros and I stand beside my car at the side of the TransAmerican highway. They look at my passport and ask me where I am coming from—Santiago, La Serena, Antofagasta. And where I’m going—San Pedro de Atacama. They ask how many hours I’ve been driving and I begin to wonder if they’re testing the veracity of my story. Do they think I’m lying and will reveal my deception by answering inaccurately?

Then they ask whether I am married. With my poor Spanish made worse by anxiety, I mistake their inquiry as a question about my hair. They laugh. I laugh and relax, and realize they were probably asking about the journey from Santiago because they’ve never been and were just wondering.

But, they’re still reluctant to give back my passport. They ask more questions, curious about this third-generation Japanese-Canadian driving into the desert alone. Curious and glad for the company.

We end up talking about Miss Chile. My Spanish is good enough to make a joke, comparing her legs to the country itself—long and beautiful.

We laugh about how warm and wet it is if you travel far enough north.

Then, we stand around in the silence that always follows a joke. They lean casually on my car, transferring dust from the fender to their pants. After a minute of quiet, I show them the route I plan to take to San Pedro. They nod to tell me I'm going the right way, then reluctantly return my passport, and wave and smile as I pull away.

THE TRANSAMERICA HIGHWAY IS DESOLATE, yet carries enough traffic that I never feel alone. Twenty-four wheel transport trucks slowly roll north and south along this meridian of asphalt. A team of cyclists in brightly coloured outfits appears from ahead and vanishes like a mirage in my rear view mirror. A shack sits precariously at the side of a dry river bed. I stop to take a snapshot of a road sign that reads "Linea del Tropic de Capricornio".

Gently sculpted hills remind me of photographs taken by astronauts on the moon. These hills turn out to be man-made: giant heaps of tailings from a nearby copper mine. But the price of copper has plunged in recent years and the mine sits quiet. The hills of slag, like so much of Chile, shock your sense of scale.

The highway is lined with *animas*, small shrines marking the "lost souls" left at the side of the road by car accidents. They are hung with crucifixes and decorated with license plates. A lone *anima* in the Valley of the Moon bears a small sign asking travelers for an offering of a drink of water. Many others, no matter how far from the nearest town or village, are graced with fresh flowers. And while most are no bigger than a kneeling person, one or two are like mausoleums, large rock and plaster structures peaked with crosses and surrounded by iron fences.

Many souls have been lost at blind corners or along stretches of road that wind through hills. But some *animas*, inexplicably, huddle together on stretches of straight, flat highway.

In San Pedro, there are no vacancies at the *hosteria*. That night, I pay two dollars elsewhere for a room with a dirt floor, a bed, and a bare light bulb that goes out at 9pm when the electricity is turned off.

In the yard outside my room, the darkness reveals a sky I have never seen before, brighter and deeper than the northern sky. Four brilliant stars mark the Southern Cross, while Alpha and Beta Centauri shine nearby. Alpha Centauri is the star closest to us and looks it tonight.

The Milky Way—the Camino de Santiago—stretches across the sky as Chile stretches along the western edge of the continent. The glowing band of starlight divides the eastern and western halves of the sky as the country separates Argentina and the ocean. The bright bulge of stars that is the center of our galaxy sits midway along the arc of starlight like the central valley of the country. The star Antares is Santiago projected into the sky.

Two pieces have fallen from the Camino de Santiago and drift near the horizon like distant puffs of smoke. These are the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds, two small galaxies in orbit around ours, their names reflecting the Old World in the New. They double the number of galaxies I have seen without the help of a telescope.

I am in Chile because of the sky, to visit and photograph the astronomers who also come to Chile for the sky. The northern region of the country is one of the driest places on Earth where, in some locations, no rain has ever fallen. The dry air is easy to see through, providing clear passage to the light of stars, nebula and galaxies.

Astronomers build large observatories on the peaks of the Andean foothills, thousands of meters above sea level—white, dome-shaped structures that from a distance look like they could be the eggs of giant condors. By placing their telescopes on peaks like Cerro Tololo, La Silla, and Las Campanas, high above most of the atmosphere, astronomers are able to view the Universe with incredible lucidity.

Earlier in the year, the light of a dying star in the Large Magellanic Cloud reached Earth after a journey of one hundred and sixty thousand years. It is the alchemy of these supernova that creates the heavy elements—the copper, silver and iron—that lie mixed with the bones under the desert. The supernova's light burned through the clear Atacama air and was observed by a Canadian astronomer working at Las Campanas. His were the first human eyes in nearly four centuries to see the death of a star.

As I stand outside my room in San Pedro looking up at this neighbouring galaxy, the supernova has already dimmed and is invisible to me.

THE NEXT DAY, I CHECK IN TO THE *hosteria*. It is run by an Australian woman named Bobbie who feeds me, introduces me to other guests, and shows me to my room. I thank her and ask for an early wake up call the next morning so I can head into the desert with my cameras.

But the next morning, my wake up call is an earthquake. My first thought is: It's an earthquake. My second thought is: How did I know that? I've never experienced an earthquake before.

I hear noises from the courtyard as objects fall and tumble. The window on the door of my room cracks. There is absolutely nothing to do except wait for the tremors to die or grow stronger. I feel the enormity of the earth beneath me.

The shockwaves seem to be rocking me from side to side as I lie in bed. I make a mental note. By comparing the direction of the waves at one location with the direction of the waves from another distant location, you can pinpoint the quake's epicentre on a map.

But at breakfast, I find that my seismic directions are wrong. I'd thought the epicentre was either east or west of San Pedro; in fact, the radio reports that it is far to the north. Miss Chile has had an orgasm.

The quake was relatively mild. Still, it is strong enough to divert the military from policing Chileans to helping them. Back in my room, Miss Chile appears to me again, this time in a newscast on television. She and Pinocchio have flown from the capitol by helicopter and are visiting the towns and cities hardest hit. She has discarded her gown and tiara for khakis and boots.

As the pair move through town, inspecting the damage, Miss Chile's long strides carry her ahead of the General. He follows slowly behind, stepping over debris, his eyes on the ground. She comforts those who swarm to her, their shyness and worry disappearing with her arrival. Amid the damage, children run beside her, reaching for her hand. Miss Chile's frown of concern cannot sustain itself in the warmth of their smiles and she smiles back.

She is beautiful.