

PINTURAS MONTANA

By Joseph Gueron

It's an old photograph, a faded B&W, 3 by 5, with a ridged edge. It shows four men standing in front of large industrial tanks, interconnected with pipes ending in mysterious places. I am on the right, my arms crossed, my shirt is not properly tucked in, and I have a slight petulant smile. I must be nineteen. I put on the turntable a Platters LP, and play the track "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." I am inspired, memories flow. I write.

When we arrived to Caracas in the summer of '58, I tried to open a small magazine and romance novels shop in my neighborhood full of recent Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian immigrants. Alas, my estimate of the number of bored housewives who would be customers was perhaps too optimistic. With a sense of failure I reluctantly accepted a job in a large paint factory my father had helped me find.

Pinturas Montana was the success story of two Slovakian brothers who, after escaping the communists, had started mixing pigments in discarded oil drums, and within few years had secured large contracts with the Venezuelan army. When I joined the paint factory, the Newman brothers drove Jaguars and owned Picassos. My new job was to be a kind of Boy Friday for the production manager, a Yugoslavian engineer, very bright, with an eternal sad smile, and much patience to forgive my many mistakes.

One of my duties was basically to cajole the young macho men responsible to clean harden remnants of chemical components in storage tanks to use their goggles and protective gloves. The spill of the acid they used for the work could blind them or produce severe burns. Often they ignored me; I was a "musiu," a gutless foreigner.

The main floor where the workers, all women, filled the cans of finished paint by hand could have been one of Dante's rooms. The mix of tropical heat, lack of proper ventilation, the sound of conveyor belts and hammered cans, the workers' voices and grunts echoing from the corrugated hot tin roof, the smell of solvents, resins, and sweat and that pungent feminine scent of dozens of women, mothers, wives, young girls, who lived in makeshift houses with no running water and commuted miles for pitiful salaries was overwhelming.

Still there were moments of ephemeral beauty, the voice of a woman singing a broken love bolero, or a lullaby from a pregnant young girl. A rivulet of sweat running from brow, to neck, to the deep cleavage of a tired woman, unaware of her own loveliness, hair all disheveled, the light reflecting on her glorious golden brown skin and me dying, full of dancing hormones, desire and shame, not knowing what to do but to run away.

After two years I came to realize I would need a college education if I wanted to escape that factory of frustrations, rage and hopelessness. Some months after that photo was taken, I applied for a small scholarship from a Masonic lodge, and soon started my studies in Physics and Math at the Universidad Central de Venezuela - even though my real love was literature, funds for bad poets and dreamers were non-existent.

Looking back, my experience at the paint factory layered my mind and heart with a variety of rich colors. It was the spring of my bleeding heart liberalism, my sexual awakening, and my neurotic inability to relate to blue-collar workers. Even now, as an old man with mild arthritis and low libido, that certain scent of a woman or the reflection of sunset light on her perfect caramel skin fills me with melancholy and longing.

The Platters' track playing now is "The Great Pretender". I weep.

