

## Silence

by Rosalyn Hurst

A man's silence is wonderful to listen to.

*(With grateful thanks to Mario Vargas Llosa - Who killed Sergeant Palomino?)*

It was the minutes since the last sound. The General turned his chair so he could see the early light of dawn shine through the mountain pass. He wearily stacked the pile of forms, retaining one.

A knock.

'Enter.'

A salute.

'And?'

Rigid the young guard lowered his hand, bloodstained, sweat on his brow, uniform badly buttoned.

'And?' Repeated the General.

Words swallowed in a nervous gulp.

'Most are still alive, two are unconscious.'

'And?'

'They were definitely in the village and it is the troop that attacked last week.'

'Well done, give them water and quarter rations, throw the bodies in the river, it will serve as a warning.'

The general looked at the young soldier with some compassion, he recalled his early days on the squad, how they had to torture each other, to learn how to extract information without killing their comrades, though, he recalled the mistakes, the near misses.

'Is the leader still silent? You haven't marked his face or hands.'

'No general all is as you ordered?'

He could not mask the question, but he was lucky the General was in a contemplative mood.

'Learn this Sergeant, if we do not mark his face or hands, if we give the leader just a little more rations, and extra bottle of clean water, he will always be viewed as a collaborator should he ever escape...or we let him escape. Send him in.'

Doors opened and slammed, moans echoed around the stone walls, course laughter from the guards, wafts of pungent cigarette smoke, the sun rose higher, but not yet reaching the mountain top.

A handcuffed man was thrown before the General.

'Sergeant, that is no way to treat an officer, we may not obey all the paragraphs in the Geneva Convention, but we are not savages. Take off the handcuffs, get that chair, sit down General, we shall talk leader to leader, yes?' The prisoner raises his head.

'Cigarette? No? I shouldn't but then...' The General lights a cigarette.

'Let's start with some questions, we are both officers, I will treat you with the courtesy and respect you have earned. Now I see, your father's name is Julio Mendes.'

The man stirs, the General is expectant, the first break through.

'No General that is not my father's name, you know, we have to protect our families, but I can see you are a man of honour, my father's name is Arancaya de Lima Mendes.'

A gasp, the General sits back, a common enough name, he thinks. He looks again at the papers.

'Tell me about your family, we all love our families do we not. Now what was your mother's name?

'Maria.'

'Don't fool with me, all women in this country are called Maria, so Maria what?'

'Maria Nina, but she died, you know.'

The General his head down, scribbling on the forms. His manner changes.

'You have a sister. What is her name?'

He moves the papers on his desk, he continues

'I myself have a sister I love her very much I would give my life to protect her.'

Silence.

'You would not like to see her harmed, would you, as an honourable man, you would not sacrifice the life of your sister to protect those illiterate peasants would you?'

'I would not, but she is well protected.'

'By whom?'

The General leans back, he can now feel the sun on his back, he watches the smoke rise to the ceiling, he laughs, he has found this man's vulnerability, the sister, of course the sister, how easy it will be. He looks at the scrawny man in torn clothes, who sits there unafraid, no challenge, no real threat.

'Are you thinking of your brother?' To protect her!'

He laughs, but there is no humour in that sound.

'Your soldiers tell us he died some years ago. Do not try to lie to me. We can get her location, she will be violated, she will be broken.'

The man looks, there is sadness in his face.

'I may tell you but not with the sergeant in the room ask him to leave.'

The sergeant who had been striving to keep as invisible as possible throughout this bizarre interrogation, for this prisoner is famous, the most valuable captive and still alive, stepped forward to give a blow to this impudent order to his General.

'Enough go!'

As the door closed the guard heard,

'General I can tell you my sister is close by.'

The General checks the door is closed.

'Close by, protected by her brother, I am assured.'

The General moves his chair the sun is burning his neck and the shaft of bright light falls on the prisoner. He hesitates, there is something familiar...

He tries again, 'Her name! Now!'

'My brother you know her name.'

And the prisoner considers that a man's silence is wonderful to listen to.