

The Disappeared

I remember with bone-chilling clarity the night they dragged my father away from our home in Buenos Aires. I was nine years old. I woke to the sound of screaming. It was my mother howling hysterically and beating her fists against the wall near the shattered door of our apartment.

“*Mamá* what happened....Where’s *papá*?”

“The soldiers...they’ve taken him.”

It was May 1977 and the junta was waging its so-called Dirty War. By 1983 when the brutal military dictatorship relinquished power, an estimated 30,000 people had been “disappeared” by the state. These *desaparecidos* were never seen again. The junta dubbed left-wing activists “terrorists” and they and anyone else who spoke out against them were kidnapped and killed. The government made no effort to identify or document the *desaparecidos*. By disappearing them and disposing of their bodies, the junta could pretend they never existed. But their families knew they existed and my mother, Bernardina was active in one of the earliest protest groups of women who gathered every week in the Plaza de Mayo.

I recall my mother telling me years later, “You see Valentin, the government officials didn’t know how to deal with this increasingly large and strident group of fearless women. They tried to marginalise and trivialise us by labelling us *las locas*, the madwomen, but they didn’t suppress us for fear of a backlash from the general public. We kept going even when some of our leaders were murdered and on occasions the police opened fire on us with automatic weapons.”

I was thirteen when I joined my mother on the first “March of Resistance,” a 24-hour long protest that became an annual event. For decades we tried to find out what had happened to my father. He was a campaigning journalist, an outspoken critic of the regime and there was clearly a target on his back. All our considerable efforts to discover what had happened to him came to naught until.....

A friend of mine provided a vital link in the chain. He introduced me to former Argentinian Airforce pilot who had “found God” and was guilt-wracked about his role in the junta’s murderous campaign. I heard his confession.

“I flew several “death flights” several hundred kilometres out into the ocean. On board were dozens of the *desaparecidos*. I recognised your father as I’d often seen him on TV. On the first flight I didn’t know what was to happen to the passengers. I was told to lose altitude and then saw bodies being heaved out of the plane and plummeting into the sea.”

So here I am looking at the elegant brass plaque on the wall of our old apartment block. Its simple inscription,

Isandro Alvarez 1939-1977

Dormir Tranquilo

Wiping my wet cheeks, I instinctively turn towards my mother’s house. I want to tell her we can finally lay my father to rest. But of course I can’t as she passed away years ago worn down by grief and her fruitless struggle to find out the truth.

500 Words