LYNN F. MONAHAN

PISTACO

A Tale of Love and Terror in the Andes

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Lynn F. Monahan

i.e.
in extenso

A note from the author about dialogue in Pistaco

The characters in a Peruvian story would normally speak Spanish, the country's principal language, or Quechua, the tongue of the Inca empire still spoken in places like the fictional village of Urpimarca, where *Pistaco's* main action takes place. Most of this book's dialogue, whether Spanish or Quechua, is rendered in English, though I have kept a few phrases of those languages to help retain a sense of the atmosphere of the Peruvian highlands.

A glossary of Spanish and Quechua words and phrases appearing in the book is appended after the last chapter for the reader's convenience.

Pistaco is a work of fiction. Aside from references to a few historic figures mentioned by name, any similarity to actual people, living or dead, is coincidental.

All sin is rooted in the failure of love.

Thomas Merton

1

A hushed voice from the street blurted out its message in a tone of urgency.

"Dile al padrecito que ya vienen los terrucos. Que no salga!" Tell Father the terrorists are coming. Don't come out!

The priest recognized the voice of Don Javier, the mayor of Urpimarca. One of the few men in the village respectfully addressed as "Don," he was a man deferred to even in unofficial matters by most people in the community.

Don Javier stayed outside. Father Steven McMahon had been called to anoint Magdalena Quispe, who could no longer lift her frail frame from the earthen platform covered with blankets of llama wool that served as her bed. The priest prayed with Señora Quispe's daughter and eight-year-old grandson. Her son-in-law, Angel, waiting outside, had received the warning. The one-room house of unstuccoed adobe with its packed dirt floor and walls blackened by years of wood and kerosene smoke barely accommodated those already inside.

Angel and a neighbor entered and stood silently. The priest didn't turn to acknowledge them, tending to the old woman, who, though awake, seemed unaware of what was going on around her.

"Recemos," the priest said. He prayed the Our Father in Spanish and the daughter and son-in-law repeated it in a dissonant murmur, reciting the prayer in Quechua, the only language the

old woman knew. The neighbor tried to keep up with the priest's Spanish, mumbling the last words of each line a fraction behind the priest, producing an echo in a language he spoke rarely, and only when outside the village.

Father Steven knelt by the grandmother and held her hand. He made the sign of the cross while her other hand followed in midair. He asked God to give her comfort and rest.

"Senora, tengo que irme," he told her. The daughter translated that the priest had to leave. The grandmother nodded her head and blessed the priest with the sign of the cross, as he had her. She said something in Quechua that he recognized as a blessing that mingled two universes, two visions of the divine, one Christian and the other handed down the millennia from her Andean ancestors.

As Steven turned from the woman, Angel said in Spanish, "Padre, the terrucos are in the square looking for you. They have three prisoners. They plan to make an example of them."

"What do they want with me? Do they want a priest for the prisoners?" The question seemed ridiculous to him even as he asked it.

"They aren't looking for your blessing, Padre. They are looking for your hide."

Angel handed him a poncho and a chullo to pull down over his light brown hair.

"You won't be noticed in these. Come on. Let's get you up to the cemetery."

The colorful wool cap with its pointed peak, tassel, and earflaps gave him the look of a campesino. The poncho was black with fine blue lines, the color villagers used for funerals. Outside the house in the bright sunshine, they hefted a large canvas bag filled with sticks and straw onto Steven's back. It was almost as tall as the priest and twice as wide. He had often seen farmers and poor laborers doubled over at the waist, balanc-

ing such loads on the flat of their backs like burros tottering beneath their packs.

"Why would I carry such a thing to the cemetery?" the priest asked.

"Don't worry. Outsiders pay no attention to such people. They are invisible to them," Angel said.

True, no one would expect a gringo priest to behave like a burro or a llama.

They headed up a dusty path to the road that led to the cemetery on the hill opposite the village. The men apologized as they walked, uncomfortable at subjecting the priest to such indignity. Shining Path guerrillas had for a while been railing against the church and making threats against anyone who accepted material aid from nuns or priests. They had warned religious workers not to fund or supply soup kitchens, health clinics or agricultural projects. You could pray with the people, but in the convoluted logic of the Maoists anything that alleviated temporal suffering was a salve, an attempt to pacify the poor while doing nothing to change a system that left them in misery. The church in Lima continued to send medicine, enough to provoke the guerrillas' rage, but not enough to meet the need.

Steven had another, more important, mark against him. He was an American.

He shifted the load on his back to keep it from slipping. It wasn't heavy so much as it was incredibly bulky, and his breath was labored as he waddled in this unnatural position. He stopped every few minutes and knelt in the dirt to avoid standing conspicuously. The bottom of the bag rested on the ground as he stretched his back and adjusted the load. The track was hardly wide enough for a small vehicle, if one had come along, an unlikely event. After years of government neglect, the dirt road into the village was largely impassable. No one who lived here owned even a truck, and only an occasional vehicle

belonging to a government agency or to mining engineers came anywhere near the pueblo. Steven had left his 1965 Beetle an hour's hike from the hamlet, as far as he could safely drive along the crumbling road.

Angel and the neighbor walked ahead of him, pretending they didn't know him. They pressed on. The chullo and poncho were stifling in the late morning sun. The wool made his head itch. Sweat ran down his cheeks. His clothing stuck to his back. He stopped to wipe his dripping forehead. A bit of red caught his eye in a bush just off the trail. He rested and watched a vermillion flycatcher, its head and belly brilliant red and its back and wings dull black. The little bird made him think of Lima, though he saw the flycatcher frequently in the campo. Just this morning one had been singing on the school patio. In Lima the bird did a strange thing. It camouflaged itself. At first Steven assumed the chocolate-colored flycatcher he had seen in the city's wide parks was a different bird, until a Peruvian ornithologist told him it was just the vermillion flycatcher engaged in a form of natural selection. The brown bird was a dark morph, a rare variation that occurred naturally in the species. But in Lima, where red birds made such inviting targets for children, who frequently killed them, the darker, less conspicuous form prevailed. On the other side of the bush, a dark gray thrush with a bright yellow beak and yellow legs landed and in a swoop of crimson the smaller bird disappeared into the brush farther back from the road. Steven resumed his slow trek.

After about half an hour he could see the cemetery ahead, looking from this distance like a city itself. Many of the tombs were topped with concrete rectangles, the headstones shaped like little houses with crosses on the roofs. On one side of the cemetery stood a large square structure, looking like an apartment building, with niches where the dead were laid in rows,

four graves high and ten graves long, their entries sealed over and the names of their occupants and dates of their deaths etched into concrete.

When they reached the graveyard, Steven loosened the bag ends tied around his chest and rested in the shade beneath the wall of niches. He pulled off the cap, his hair soaked and darkened with sweat. The other two men dropped to their haunches. They peered around the corner.

"Padre, I don't like this," Angel said. "We're too exposed here. Farther up on the hill is a hut for animals. It's nothing but a lean-to and isn't easily seen. They won't know it's there. We can go up through the trees."

"Let's go," the priest huffed. He quickly retied the bundle and the men helped him position it as he rose. They walked with him now, watchful as they moved, helping prop up the bag as the priest grappled up the slope into the trees above the graveyard. The ground in the stand of eucalyptus trees was deep with the decayed remains of long narrow leaves, the air rich with their scent. They hiked deep into the grove. The ground here was open and free of other plants, naturally inhibited by the oily detritus of green and silver fronds. While the lack of undergrowth offered little cover, Steven found the fragrance of eucalyptus oddly comforting. Everything in the Andes smelled of it. Eucalyptus trunks timbered the country's many mines. The rafters of houses were fashioned from it and most meals were cooked over its red embers. The highland people boiled its leaves for medicinal vapor and even the local honey tasted of its flowers. An introduced species native to Australia, the immigrant tree thrived in the semi-arid mountains. Successive governments heavily promoted reforestation with eucalyptus, planting saplings so abundantly that it had become indispensable to the common people.

"It's safe to get rid of that thing," Angel said, slapping the pack on the priest's back. "We need to move more quickly."

They dropped the bag behind a clump of trees and headed through the grove. Beyond the trees the open hillside was furred with tufts of coarse grass that made for uneven walking, though the priest, freed now from his burden, felt as if he were running. They crossed a couple of small ridges, the tops of gullies and defoliated washes that fanned downhill, crouching at the top of each rise to check their trail for signs of pursuit. After about forty minutes they came upon the lean-to of eucalyptus poles, still covered with papery bark peeling in fine strands. The hut, covered with thickly leafed branches, sat in a fold in the hill and was scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding terrain. The three men crouched to enter and huddled together once inside. Steven stripped off the chullo and poncho.

"Padre, I will go now and come back for you when the terrucos are gone," Angel said after a brief rest, using the pejorative for terrorist. "Cesar will stay." He slipped out.

The two men settled into the leaves and dry grass on the shelter floor. Above the earthen bank that half blocked the front of the hut they could see a glimmer of hillside.

Cesar said little. Steven was familiar with the sometimes discomfiting silence of Quechua men. Already taciturn by nature, they could be virtually mute around strangers. Cesar was probably embarrassed by his poor Spanish and kept what he had to say in that alien tongue to a minimum. Steven knew only enough Quechua to mumble a few prayers, a smattering of the liturgy. He remembered visiting a family that wanted him to attend a sick elder. "She is ignorant, Padre," they apologized. They meant no disrespect. It was just that the old woman couldn't speak Spanish, so must be, to their thinking, ignorant. Steven chastised them lightly, protesting that it was he who was ignorant for not knowing their tongue. Her son smiled and told him, "That's fine, Padre. That's fine. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried," the priest replied. "I'm frustrated."

They stood in two different worlds, he and the Quechua, separate islands, and the wide stream between them was Spanish, a language that was neither his nor their native tongue. He managed Spanish pretty well, thanks to his Latin studies in seminary and some intensive Spanish tutoring before he left the States. Quechua, on the other hand, was a mountain more formidable for Steven than the Andes themselves. He could ask them their stories in Spanish, persuade the families he visited most often to talk of the rhythms of their lives and their venerated customs, like paying the earth, their annual blessing of the fields, when they would burn an offering of food to the mother of the world, Pachamama, and spill a drink of corn brew, chicha de jora, in fervent hope of a good crop. But he was never really taken into their deepest confidence. Something was always held back, something they declined to share with him. He was never sure whether they did not think it worthy of him, a priest, a fair-skinned and educated foreigner, a Yankee, or whether it was he they found unworthy. The mother and father of their own mythic truths, their Adam and Eve, their Moses, were children of the bottomless Lake Titicaca. They wandered the fragile crust of this earth with a golden rod the creator had given them to plunge into the ground and where it sank founded a civilization, without edicts of forbidden fruit or tablets replete with commands. Steven wanted to know what life—past, present, future, morality, love, hate, everything—looked like, felt like from here, from their side, their view from the great depths of shadowy antiquity, echoed through a timeless tongue, now obscured beneath a superficial veneer of Spanish language and modern culture.

A gunshot brought him back from his reverie with a sensory rush—the odor of eucalyptus, llama hair, sweat, a brilliant wash of sunlight, all sharper in the sudden silence behind the reverberating crack of gunfire. Another shot rang out.

Cesar shifted onto his haunches. "From the village," he said. Steven nodded. They exchanged a glance, and the priest assumed his own eyes reflected the same apprehension he saw in Cesar's expression.

Three more shots echoed across the hillside, spaced a few seconds apart.

The priest pushed his forehead to his entwined fingers and prayed.

"Don't worry, Padre, they won't come here," Cesar said, his voice tight, his breath short. "I'll go to where I can see down the hill. I'll be right back."

Cesar brushed by him and squeezed out. Steven felt fear well up in his chest, in the tautness of his arms and legs, in the burning in his stomach, fear for himself and for what might be happening in the village.

A few minutes later, Cesar returned and spoke into the lean-to from outside.

"Nothing. I think we should wait for Angel. I'm going off just a little way. I will warn you if anyone comes."

After a moment's hesitation, Steven pulled the poncho and chullo back on and went out to join Cesar. The hut now seemed vulnerable. He found Cesar lying on the ground atop an arroyo that sloped to the land below. He was looking across the open hillside in the direction they had come, toward the eucalyptus stand now out of sight behind the undulating ground. He nodded at the priest, who crouched beside him. Neither spoke. Nothing stirred.

For the next few hours the two men kept watch from this vantage, too nervous to return to the cover of their refuge. They spoke only once, agreeing that if Angel didn't come by nightfall the priest would stay in the lean-to and Cesar would go down to find out what had happened. They waited. As the high

sun passed through late afternoon, shadows defined the choppy terrain, accenting the texture of the surrounding hills and the terraces where potatoes and quinoa grew across the valley.

Steven stared in the direction of the village, straining not to linger on what the shots might mean, pushing away the worst possibilities. The shooting could have been nothing more than boyish impulsiveness, the targeting of flycatchers. Or hungry rebels slaughtering a lamb, a pig, or an alpaca, collecting their war tax on a village where cash was an uncommon currency. What he couldn't stop thinking about were the people in the village. He focused on Don Javier, the perennial mayor, chosen time and again by the village. Usually such an honor rotated among the men of a hamlet. Here it inevitably rested on Don Javier, occasionally lighting upon the shoulders of another who showed signs of responsibility and sagacity, only to return like a falcon to the falconer the following term. Against his will, Steven pictured the teacher. He didn't want to think of her, not now, not while he was in hiding and she was still in the village. He hadn't asked Angel about her and now he realized why. How could he run if she was in danger? Perhaps there was no reason she should be. He was the foreigner, and they were singling him out. Panic coiled inside him. The rebels' behavior had been vicious and erratic before, so it well could be now. Wait. Pray. But his prayers felt haunted, his petitions seemed mocked by some obscure peripheral presence, something beastly and demonic that sought to thwart him now when he most needed grace. What stymied his prayers? Was it the logical fear and anxiety of hiding from men who wanted to kill him, or the prosaic—and chronic—doubts that had nagged and unsteadied him for so long? Shamefully long.

What he found emerging from darkness was neither of these, nothing so logical or immanent or tangible. It was folklore, a legend of horror. It was a beast that lurked in the deepest

recesses of the Andean highlands. That his subconscious should invoke this monster just now both frightened and annoyed him. The Andeans believed in it without doubt and feared even to mention it. The Quechua word, so rarely spoken aloud, at first escaped him: pistaco. Yet Steven imagined the shadowy fiend in human form thirsting to suck fat from people who knew its ravaging only by the wasting away that followed its secret assaults. He recalled his own irrational terror when he had feared it was stalking him, alone at night in the mountains not far from here. He had embraced the local culture's apotheosis of evil. He continued praying.

The chill of mountain air began to settle in as sunlight retreated higher up the peaks, leaving the men in shadow. From a swath of sun across the top of the hill on their side, a condor lifted off, descending straight across their field of vision. Its great black back and wings glided down slope, parallel with the ground until the earth dropped off into a ravine and the bird soared over open land, the telltale, downy white collar around its neck fluttering ever so faintly ragged in the wind. It disappeared quickly into the gloom of the darkening valley.

Angel returned soon after sunset, still crouching as he climbed in the waning light. Steven could no longer see detail in the murky valley below the backlit peaks rising against the sky, still lit by a sun fallen below the massive ridge of igneous crust in which this valley was but a wrinkle. Angel emerged from the twilight and dropped quickly to their level, showing more caution than appeared necessary.

"The terrucos have left," he said in an expulsion of air as he squatted. His breathing, heavy and slow, marked the seconds as the other two sat waiting for him to continue.

"The guerrillas were furious," he said. "They demanded to know where we were hiding you. They gathered everyone into the plaza."

They told the people they were going to witness a trial, he said. Three beaten captives were forced to sit in the dirt, hands tied behind their backs. All of them kept their bloody faces turned to the ground. The rebels, about a dozen of them, were dressed like villagers. Three were women, two of whom wore wide campesina skirts and long dark braids. The man leading them had railed against the priest, against American imperialism and foreign interference. This, he said, was why the three bound men had been brought to this place.

"They were technicians working on a power project or something," Angel said. "They were foreigners, Padre. The terrucos said those men had no right to be here."

The priest waited.

"We have dead to bury, Padre."

Discovering the meaning, and the price, of love

A gunshot echoed across the hillside. Steven startled in the darkness where he crouched, his nose filled with the odor of eucalyptus, damp llama wool, and sweat. Another shot rang out. The priest squinted out of the shady lean-to into bleaching sunshine that radiated off the sandy path.

"From the village," Cesar, the campesino beside him, said. Three more shots spaced a few seconds apart reverberated through the otherwise still mountain air.

Steven dropped his forehead to his folded hands. No doubt the terrorists had killed their prisoners. He asked God's mercy on their souls, whoever they were, and for whatever they had done or failed to do in this life. Then he prayed for the safety of the rest of the villagers and for a softening of the hearts of the killers.

"Don't worry, Padre, they won't come here," Cesar said. The strain in his voice contradicted the comfort he tried to offer. "I'll go to where I can see down the hill. I'll be right back."

Steven pondered the sequence of shots. One per person, he thought, and prayed he was wrong. Who else? Maybe the first shots were only warnings, a call to attention. Speculating was futile. He would know soon enough—if he wasn't found and killed himself....

"*Pistaco* is a compelling story of love, war, faith, and superstition in the remote Peruvian highlands during the rise of a Maoist guerrilla movement in the 1980s. Father Steven McMahon, an American priest recently arrived in Peru, meets Cori, a young woman who has come from Lima to teach in an indigenous village. Repeated encounters with violence and threats from both government troops and rebel forces throw the unlikely couple together, and their passionate story unfolds with all the intrigue, suspense, and moral complexity of a Graham Greene novel. *Pistaco* is a riveting masterpiece by a first-time novelist."

—Michael Leach, former publisher of Orbis Books and the Crossroad Publishing Company, a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter,* and author of many award-winning books on Catholicism

"Reminiscent of the finest Graham Greene novels, this beautifully written and compelling story thrusts us into an indigenous Andes culture and ultimately into the heart of faith, which is to find God in our human imperfections and the mysteries of daily life."

—Judith Valente, author of *Atchison Blue: A Search for Silence, a Spiritual Home and a Living Faith* and *The Art of Pausing: Meditations for the Overworked and Overwhelmed*

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