

ACTS OF GOD

PROLOGUE

She is always his first wife, the shadowy one, the one people can scarcely remember from the good old days (for she died so young!), the symbol of all their lost hopes, his sainted wife. They remember vaguely that she was small and blond, with blue eyes, although they can't recall her voice; they are reminded of her by cheap postcards, sold by the millions in the souvenir shops. They can look at her on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, beautifully dressed, or deliciously off-guard (it seems to them almost illicit), laughing and playing with the dogs on the palace grounds, in shorts, God help us, in a bathing suit! Making faces and laughing, willfully careless (or recklessly so) of how she would be remembered by the iconographers; elusive, suddenly disappearing from parties, or from the world, always lovely, always young. A myth, or a fairy tale. But they do not remember her clearly.

They remember him more clearly, of course: halted by blood in midsentence, pitching forward, his brains splattered out like black oatmeal on the marble steps of Constitucion Hall. There were those who cheered. The obscenity of his death was perfect, for the disturbing beauty

of a leader who tried to pull them along too quickly; who didn't care what they thought of him, who sometimes seemed oblivious of the whole world, as long as she was there. El Lorca--who had been handsome even then, slender as a dancer with his jet-black hair, and his lovely hands...a little parvenu, perhaps? A little bit of a dago? Although he was then fifty-six. Well, anyway, he was dead. He had tried to substitute his second wife in her place, but he himself had scarcely seemed to believe in it; perhaps it was one of his subtle jokes, the distillate of his bitterness and disillusionment. He had seemed to want his death. She had died too, the woman who had been a pop star; who had seemed like an appropriate replacement, but about whom little was known; had he loved her, had he ever slept with her? Nobody seemed to know, or care; she was a part of his death, like the statues of him they pulled down, the monuments they defaced with spray-painted slogans, the general chaos that followed his assassination. They rampaged through the Presidential Palace, ripping down the flags and tearing down the stiff oil paintings and pulling the sheets off the beds, children gone wild in an orgy of destruction, killing their parents over and over again in an hysteria of relief and guilt. And there had been those who mourned him, although they had been few, and far between: the man who had almost prevented it, and who had hated him as much as anybody; and a priest in the Vatican who had fallen onto his knees and wept.

Father Battiste Tommassi had been self-conscious, even then, of the gesture; but it had welled up within him, and he assumed his ridiculous theatrics were in one way or another the will of God, for publicity for his beloved country. He had mourned *her* more secretly, and remembered her better than most. He had known her longer, longer even than El Lorca, and had loved her more devoutly, and more passionately, although he had never allowed his white fingers

to caress her, or his body to know her, his salvation, his sin, his saint. It was he who had started the movement to canonize her--or had it been he? Hadn't it sprung up in a dozen places throughout the country, once El Lorca was dead, the love now simplified because their madonna was again a Virgin, no longer married to a dictator for life, no longer human; a plaster statue, adorned with flowers; and there *were* statues of her, put up around the country; and people claimed to have achieved miraculous cures from them. Touch me, and I will make you whole. I will take away your pain and sin; I will make you devout, beautiful, rich; I will be your film star and your child-madonna; I will be your lover, and I will never grow old--and there were offerings, and sometimes scrawled notes left under the feet of the statues like pen-pal letters; and the plaster became gray with the fingerprints of a million touching hands. She hadn't minded, then; her beautiful face had remained calm and serene despite all their tears and pleading, remote from either sorrow or ecstasy; and they had preferred her like that, and they had loved her. And so her cult had grown, bigger than the Virgin of Guadalupe; and today she was being beatified, the first step towards canonization.

The rumors were rife. That the President of the United States was going to fly to the Vatican and kneel in front of his Holiness to beg forgiveness (for having caused her death, some said, by denying her last request: that she could come to New York, to Sloan-Kettering, for one last, hopeless operation). That the Lorcanistas were planning a coup, to put that old relic, Quintero de Buiztas, back into power; him who had been ousted by El Lorca himself back in the old days, and who was now nearly eighty, a ghost without even a memory of the past. That the assassins of Ferdinando Lorca were finally going to be brought to justice; or else that they would spontaneously confess their sins, at the moment of the beatification of his wife. And above all,

the worst rumor continued to persist: that she was still alive, that her disappearance into the jungle had been merely a temporary retreat, and that she would return to them, their Camila, their *palomita*, their little dove.

Father Battiste Tommassi crumpled the cheap postcard picture of her he had been looking at and threw it into the fireplace. He needed no photograph to remember what she looked like: the color of her hair, unbelievably bright, and the exquisite line of her cheek which had remained with him for twenty years, burning him like a torturer's brand every waking and sleeping hour of his unhappy life. He walked to the window, and stared down with sightless eyes at the crowds jamming Vatican City, as far as the Via della Conciliazione. They were tourists, some; and thrill-seekers and the curious; and hundreds of television cameramen and newspaper reporters, a select few of whom would be allowed into the Basilica to witness the actual ceremony. And there were the thousands of the faithful, for whom merely being here was enough; her lovers too, all of them, he reminded himself with a wry smile. If she could have been there, how she would have laughed. She would have behaved perfectly, of course, convent-bred and always exquisitely polite on the outside; but she would have made some slyly ribald comment behind her hand, and they would have laughed together, waiting backstage, inside this mausoleum: she, and he, and Ferdinando. They had been friends, and how not? Hadn't Battiste Tommassi even officiated at their wedding ceremony, that hurried affair before their flight to the Isla del Viento to escape the police? Whether he liked it or not, he was a part of her myth too, and he put his face into his hands and whispered, "Camila, Camila, I miss you so," just as El Lorca had done in the instant before they blew his brains out.