

prices for the paltry cuisine he sold in his place. We didn't pay a cent the whole time we were there and he lavished hospitality on us. "Today it's your turn, tomorrow it'll be mine" was his favorite saying; not very original but very effective.

We tried to contact the doctors from Petrohué, but being back at work with no time to spare, they never agreed to meet us formally. At least we knew more or less where they were. In the afternoon we went our separate ways: while Alberto followed up the doctors, I went to see an old woman with asthma, a customer at La Gioconda. The poor thing was in a pitiful state, breathing the acrid smell of concentrated sweat and dirty feet that filled her room, mixed with the dust from a couple of armchairs, the only luxury items in her house. On top of her asthma, she had a heart condition. It is at times like this, when a doctor is conscious of his complete powerlessness, that he longs for change: a change to prevent the injustice of a system in which only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity. In circumstances like this, individuals in poor families who can't pay their way become surrounded by an atmosphere of barely disguised acrimony; they stop being father, mother, sister or brother and become a purely negative factor in the struggle for life and, consequently, a source of bitterness for the healthy members of the community who resent their illness as if it were a personal insult to those who have to support them. It is there, in the final moments, for people whose farthest horizon has always been tomorrow, that one comprehends the profound tragedy circumscribing the life of the proletariat the world over. In those dying eyes there is a submissive appeal for forgiveness and also, often, a desperate plea for consolation which is lost to the void, just as their body will soon be lost in the magnitude of the mystery surrounding us. How long this present order, based on an absurd idea of caste, will last is not within my means to answer, but it's time that those who govern spent less time publicizing their own virtues and more money, much

more money, funding socially useful works.

There isn't much I can do for the sick woman. I simply advise her to improve her diet and prescribe a diuretic and some asthma pills. I have a few Dramamine tablets left and I give them to her. When I leave, I am followed by the fawning words of the old woman and the family's indifferent gaze.

Alberto had tracked down the doctors. At nine the following morning we had to be at the hospital. Meanwhile, in La Gioconda's filthy room which serves as kitchen, restaurant, laundry, dining room and piss-house for cats and dogs, a miscellaneous collection of people were meeting: the owner, with his basic life philosophy; Doña Carolina, a deaf and helpful old dear who left our *mate* kettle as good as new; a drunk, feeble-minded Mapuche\* man who looked like a criminal; two more or less normal customers; and the queen of the gathering Doña Rosita, who was quite crazy. The conversation focused on a macabre event Rosita had witnessed; it appeared she alone had seen a man with a large knife stabbing her poor neighbor.

"Was your neighbor screaming, Doña Rosita?"

"Of course she was screaming, who wouldn't! He was skinning her alive! That's not all. Afterwards, he took her down to the sea and dragged her to the water's edge so the sea would take her away. Oh, to hear that woman scream, señor, scared the living daylight out of me, you should have seen it!"

"Why didn't you tell the police, Rosita?"

"Oh, what for? Don't you remember when your cousin was beat up? Well, I went to report it and they told me I was crazy, that if I didn't stop inventing things they'd lock me up, imagine that. No, I wouldn't tell that lot anything!"

The conversation turned to the "messenger from God," a local man who uses the powers God has given him to cure deafness, dumbness, paralysis, etc., passing the collection plate around after-

\*Mapuches are an indigenous people of Chile.