

VIVID

by

Peter Magellan

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities

and Social Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Vivid

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Peter Magellan
Bachelor of Fine Arts
University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2007

Director: Courtney Brkic, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



This work is licensed under a [creative commons attribution-noncommercial 3.0 unported license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	iv
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two.....	30
Chapter Three.....	63
Chapter Four	85

ABSTRACT

VIVID

Peter Magellan, MFA

George Mason University, 2016

Thesis Director: Courtney Brkic

This thesis is the first part of a novel in progress. The novel, entitled, *Vivid*, tells the story of Henry, a quiet, introspective young man who, after the tragic death of his childhood friend, decides to leave the country. He spends the next five years in Buenos Aires, Argentina and during his time abroad, he struggles to process his friend's death, while also redefining his own ideas about love, family, and purpose. The novel explores themes of loss, identity, otherness, and the way we – as individuals – carve meaning into the chaos of the world around us.

CHAPTER ONE

On a grey afternoon in late November, I sat in a red plastic chair with my feet in the cold Uruguayan sand. An offshore wind pushed against the faces of the waves, slowing their break as a half a dozen surfers floated atop their boards, rising and falling in the dark water. Though the austral summer was just around the corner, the day reminded me of fall back home, quiet and wistful. I watched the gulls flap their wings, fighting hard to come in from over the ocean.

Behind me stood Oscar's restaurant – a shack of weathered boards, windswept into a permanent slant, with a blue-framed swinging door and a rusty metal roof that dipped in the center. Through the upper screen on the door I watched as Oscar stirred paella in a giant steel pan, overflowing with saffron-tinged rice, yellow onion, sea scallops, mussels, and prawns. I sat at a table out front, just a few feet away from the door. Next to me, a narrow road cut through the small, colorful village of Punta del Diablo. Peak season was still a few weeks off and in that moment, all I heard was the white noise of foam scratching at wet sand.

“A comer,” he said emerging with a liter of Pilsen and two glasses. “You want?” he asked holding up the beer.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” he smiled. His face was cracked and leathery, with lines splintering away from the corners of his eyes. “Very difficult today, fishing.”

Despite my speaking Spanish, he often preferred stumbling through ideas and questions in broken English. His voice had the quality of dry gravel and the skin of his cheeks hung in jowls like a bullmastiff.

I imagined him to be in his late fifties but I couldn't tell. He'd spent most of his life on the water and years passed differently here. Every morning he got up at four and went out on his boat. What he caught, he threw into that day's paella, which he advertised on a small chalkboard in front of the shack, “Menú del Día = Paella Marinera.” He never had to change the faint letters.

After pouring our beer, he went back inside. “Como se dice en ingles, yo nací en una familia de pescadores?” I heard his voice as he scooped paella into two ceramic bowls. He always asked me how to say this or that in English and I happily translated.

“I was born into a family of fishermen,” I said when he came back out.

“Mi abuelo,” he stuck out the thumb on his right hand.

“My grandfather.”

“Mi padre. My, my fah-father?” Index finger.

“Si.”

“Mis tíos.” Middle finger.

“My uncles.”

“Todos pescadores.”

“All fisherman.”

“You,” he said. “You can learn me English. I learn you cooking paella de mariscos,” and he burst out laughing. Then almost immediately, the laughter turned into a wild fit of deep rasping coughs, the result of decades of unfiltered cigarettes.

“I must stop smoking,” he said after a few minutes, smiling again. “Pero no puedo. Bueno. Comamos.”

This was my third consecutive afternoon eating paella outside Oscar’s place. Listening to the ocean and the birds, I felt a peace that had avoided me for some time.

I’d been living on and off for nearly three years in Buenos Aires, supporting myself by doing freelance work as a teacher and translator. As summer approached, I was again growing tired of the city and its chaos; this happened periodically all throughout my time there. I took a boat across the Rio de la Plata to the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo. As soon as I arrived, I received a translation assignment from one of my linguist friends in Buenos Aires. She was presenting research at a conference in Brussels the next month and needed her paper translated into English, stat.

So instead of heading for the coast, I posted up in Montevideo at a hostel and worked. The paper ended up taking me about a week to finish and I sent it back, got paid, and went to the bus station, Tres Cruces. From there I got the first bus to Punta del Diablo.

Part of what I liked about Oscar was that most of the time we sat in silence. I got the sense that he just enjoyed the company and felt no urge to sustain forced conversation.

Sometimes after several minutes of eating and staring out at the water he would say something like, “El mundo esta cada día mas loco, eh.” I agreed with him. The world did seem to be getting crazier every day.

He would then relay some anecdote about life in big cities. Perhaps he collected stories from people who vacationed in Punta del Diablo from Buenos Aires or Montevideo.

Oscar had chosen a different life from those people. And over the past three afternoons, he’d told me bits and pieces. He had been born and raised in a nearby coastal town in Rocha. When Oscar turned eighteen he moved to Montevideo and got various jobs working at restaurants and bars. One summer he met a Spanish girl, who was passing through the city. They spent a week together and he fell in love with her. She stayed with him in the Uruguayan capital for two years and then one day, he woke up and she was gone.

“Todo me hacia acordar a ella. Como se dice en ingles?”

“Everything reminded me of her.”

“In Montevideo, everything reminded me of her,” he said. “Me tuve que ir. Como es?”

“I had to leave.”

“And I come here. Sometimes, when fishing in the morning, I think of her.”

He stopped and looked out at the surf.

“You never met anyone else?” I asked.

“I knew other girls, but never loved them,” he said. “I had two years with her. Two perfect years. No es tan mal. And now, I fish all the days. The sea is my home. It is a simple life. You think about going home?”

“All the time.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Es complicado, Oscar,” I smiled and lit a cigarette. Again we drifted into silence.

“I imagine that it is difficult for you,” he said after a few minutes. “Especially on days like today, no?”

“What do you mean, especially days like today?”

“Hoy no es el Día de Acción de Gracias?”

His words caught me off guard. He was right. I’d totally lost track of time. It was Thanksgiving.

I left Oscar’s a few minutes later and walked out to the water. Over the past several years, I’d begun to hate Thanksgiving, much the way that people begin to hate birthdays later in life. Because they remind us that time is passing. Because we are one year further into our lives. Because the gap between our reality and our expectations continues to widen. Birthdays remind us of our lack of progress.

Thanksgiving reminded me of something else.

I was alone. Three years ago, to this day was the last time I’d heard my brother’s voice. We got into a fight in his DC apartment and I stormed off and hopped on a plane to Buenos Aires.

I walked back out to the road, passing the colorful painted houses along the way to the campsite on the edge of town. On my left I saw the large red hostel, El Diablo Tranquilo. Out front, they had a sign that said, ‘Thanksgiving Cocktail Party Tonight at 8pm.’ I knew I wouldn’t attend.

Back at the campsite, I packed my stuff.

* * *

But I did not go home.

The next day, I left Punta del Diablo and set off for Cabo Polonio, a strange place, totally cut off from the outside world. The town – if you could call it that – was suspended in a state of timelessness, with no electricity, no running water, no Internet, nothing but sand and stars. To get there, I took a bus from Punta del Diablo that dropped me off on the side of a highway in the middle of the province of Rocha. I questioned the bus driver, not seeing anything other than the flat, single-lane road stretching off toward the horizon. He smiled warmly and said, “Si. Ahí esta,” and pointed across the highway. Confused, I got off the bus.

I crossed the road. A few hundred yards away, people were climbing onto a large yellow double-decker truck. I ran over and bought a ticket before throwing my backpack on the roof and pulling myself up. I held on to a white metal pole as the driver put the vehicle into gear and began barreling through the grassy dunes. After about ten minutes, we emerged from the ridges and sandbanks and drove out onto the flat, compacted wet

sand along the shore. Off in the distance I could see dozens of tiny white houses with colored roofs scattered and spotting the grass and sand along the curved edge of the cape.

The truck stopped in the middle of the curious village, and hummed and sputtered as everyone got off. Small wooden shacks and cabins were strewn around as far as I could see, all painted in bold colors – oranges and blues and greens and purples. Two wind cracked, red-hulled fishing boats sat together in the soft white sand, a good five hundred yards from the edge of the water. From all I could tell, they were nothing more than forgotten beach decorations – giant wooden ornaments, idle for decades.

I hadn't had anything to eat all day and it was getting late in the afternoon. I took off my flip-flops and walked through the warm sand away from the stranded boats. There were a handful of artisans lining the path displaying their jewelry and hats and wind chimes made of shells. On the corner of the footpath, two old televisions were stacked one on top of the other. There were messages painted across the screens in white letters. The one on the top said "APAGA LA TELE!" The bottom one said "ENCENDE TU MENTE!"

And then I saw her.

She was sitting under a yellow umbrella in front of a small wooden cottage. She had a liter of beer on the table in front of her and her backpack leaned against one of the table's legs. She wore a plain white, backless shirt and aviator sunglasses. Her pants were loose and had a faded turquoise kaleidoscope print that blew freely in the quiet afternoon breeze. She was alone, reading.

I walked up to the window of the little shack and tried to be nonchalant but felt giddy and stupid. A tanned, bearded man came to the window and said, “Hola amigo. Como te va?” “Bien, vos?” “Requeté bien, che. Todo excelente. Un día hermoso, no?” Immediately, I liked him. From inside, I heard someone lightly strumming a guitar, in reggae-style bar chorded upstrokes. I asked for a beer and a quesadilla to which he replied, “Dale. Bueno. Ya te lo traigo.” He motioned his head over in her direction and whispered, “Anda!”

I sat at the table next to her and saw that she was reading *Rayuela* or *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar.

When she looked up from her book, she did something most girls would never think of. Something they’ve been conditioned to avoid at all costs, a gesture that only causes problems. Something small. And she did it so naturally and with such grace that I was put immediately at ease. Disarmed.

She looked me in the eye and smiled.

“Hola. Que tal?” She said in a soft, raspy voice, textured like crinkly tissue paper.

I replied with the first thing that came to my mind, which was to comment on her book. She asked me if I’d read it and I said no but that I’d read many of Cortázar’s short stories. She wanted to know which was my favorite and I told her the one with the ant-killing machine and the peacock feather, you know? It is the one where the young boy and girl speak every day through the wooden fence that divides their houses. No me acuerdo como se llama. For a moment, she just looked at me. Then she furrowed her brow and said, “Los venenos.”

“Mira.” Look, she told me as she rotated her left arm so her palm faced up and on the inside of her forearm I saw a delicately inked peacock feather. She picked up her beer and came to sit across from me. “Soy Lola,” she said, leaning over to greet me with a kiss on the cheek.

After a couple of minutes of conversation, something I said made her stop. She took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were light hazel, soft and empty, spread just a bit too far apart from each other to seem perfectly placed. I knew exactly what she was about to ask. I was used to it. She squinted a little and said, “De donde sos vos?” She couldn’t place where I was from. She was surprised at my being American and told me about a trip she’d taken the year before to San Francisco, speaking in beautiful, fluent English. The man brought out my quesadilla and beer.

When we left that little restaurant, we set off with our backpacks to find a place to sleep. I asked her if she knew where to go and she said she’d heard about two small hostels on the beach just beyond the old fishing boats. We walked through the sand together, past the televisions and artists and hippies and their jewelry and arrived back to where I’d gotten off the truck. Off to the right, I saw the red boats and past them, the waves breaking on shore. We stopped for just a second, as Lola needed to grab something from her pack.

As we were standing in the center of the village with our backpacks, a dreadlocked kid – probably eighteen years old – approached us and asked where we were going.

“The hostel,” Lola replied.

“Oh, you don’t want to stay there. It’s horrible and expensive and dirty. I have a house I’ll rent you. It’s the same price as the hostel, four hundred pesos uruguayos each. Do you want to see it?”

Lola looked at me and I froze, waiting for her to make a move. She gave me a coy, dubious smirk and finally said. “Okay. Vamos a verla.”

We walked through the sand in and out of wooden shacks, many of which reminded me of Oscar’s restaurant, looking like they may give way at any moment. But Lola seemed unconcerned and had grabbed a hold of my arm and made amiable conversation with our dreadlocked guide. We walked past the hostels, which were side by side, set back from the shoreline, both appearing as if they’d been built out of random pieces of driftwood. The roofs were made of wavy slabs of corrugated iron and one of them had brightly colored Paraguayan hammocks hanging from the corners of the ceiling support beams.

We passed a leafless tree that had been painted so that the bottom half was bright orange and the top, royal blue and then saw a wooden cabin with a sign out front that read, “What a Shitty Life!”

The boy told us that the last time the Uruguayan government took a census, Cabo Polonio had ninety-five year round residents. Of course, he said, over the summer there are thousands of people coming and going all the time.

“Y acá estamos,” he stopped in front of a brown oblong structure. From the outside, it could not have been less inviting. It looked like a misshapen gingerbread house

or perhaps, an attempt by Gaudi's younger, less gifted brother to design a miniature version one of the eccentric buildings in Parc Güell.

The boy took out a set of keys and opened the only door. When we walked in, Lola squeezed my arm. Dispersed throughout the cement façade were shards of stained glass, and once inside, we saw that the sunlight – shining through the western facing wall – cast watery splashes of color along the floor and interior. Downstairs was a tiny kitchen with a gas camping stove and a circular table and two chairs. A narrow staircase spiraled up to a small loft, just large enough to fit a queen-sized mattress on the floor. On the walls, hanging in between the soft, glowing orbs of pink and lavender and green, were assorted paintings and black and white photographs.

“Y chicos? Les parece bien?” the boy asked.

“Es hermosa,” Lola answered and we gave the boy the money and he left.

We decided to walk to the general store and buy some things for the night – a couple bottles of cheap Malbec and a jug of water to heat for maté.

Lola got everything ready and we walked out to the beach. We sat down in the sand and I watched her take the maté gourd out of her bag and fill it with loose greenish-brown leaves and stems. Then, she put the palm of her hand over the gourd, turned it to the side, and shook. Carefully, she set it back up right, with the yerba leaned up against one side. She filled it slowly with hot water from the thermos, before finally sticking in the bombilla and taking the first sip. We spent the next hour watching the colors change until the sun slid out of view.

We went back to the house and grabbed sweatshirts and then walked into the center of the village. The only lights came from the stars and the moon, except for the lighthouse at the outermost point of the cape, the only thing powered by electricity from the Uruguayan grid. When we passed the hostels we saw that they had built a large bonfire and dozens of silhouettes sat in the sand around the flames singing to the strummed chords of weather-beaten, nylon stringed guitars.

“De aquel amor, de música ligeraaaaa

Nada nos libra, nada más quedaaaaa”

We walked past the two abandoned fishing boats and Lola took my hand as we approached the sandy road and the restaurant where we’d met only a few hours before. We decided to sit at a different table in front of a different wooden shack, this one advertising calamari and empanadas.

A breeze moved through the darkness as a beam of light from the lighthouse orbited on its cyclical path. I’d just finished reading Virginia Woolf and was telling Lola about Mrs. Ramsay and the candle’s flame against the window and yellows and purples on dishes of fruit and time passing, when suddenly I looked up and saw a man with straight silver hair hovering by our table, listening to our conversation. I had been speaking in Spanish and he interjected meekly and asked if we were talking about Al Faro. His inflection told me that he wasn’t Uruguayan or Argentine or Latin American for that matter.

He said he was from Toronto and that he was a poet “in his own right” and that he would love the opportunity to write us a poem. “Of course,” he said. “No poet past, present, or future can sustain his craft without support from his public.”

“And what does a poet from this day and age, wandering the beaches of Uruguay charge for his spontaneous words?” I asked.

“One hundred pesos,” he answered.

“Five bucks!” I said. “How can I be sure that this is a worthy investment?”

“Well,” he thought. “It is but a small sum to pay for a memory. A few choice words from a lonely artist under the summer stars?”

I looked at Lola and nodded. “Bueno,” she replied and he sat on the bench next to me and took out a small notepad and pen.

An hour later we were in a bar, of sorts. Our poet friend had given us directions and told us that we must go there, *si o si*. We had some trouble finding it, as we didn’t fully understand what we were looking for. We also hadn’t considered the intense difficulty posed by a pitch-black night. Neither of us had ever seen such profound darkness in our life. Lola and I stumbled over the unpredictable mounds and divots, straining our eyes for this bar ‘that looked like a little jungle on the beach.’

When we found it, we stopped.

There were two makeshift lanterns – large candles set inside plastic jugs filled with sand – marking the entrance of the bar, which was a narrow path between dense fences of vegetation. On the right side, a wall of amber sea grass, tall as cornstalks,

glowed behind the flickering torches. And framing the left side of the passageway, a whitewashed slab of driftwood leaned against a curious knotted tree with deep green leaves like those from a magnolia.

Once inside, we couldn't help but look around in disbelief. In certain places the plants from the perimeter hung over, supported by haphazardly built trellises. But in the middle, where Lola and I sat on a simple wooden bench, there was no ceiling, just the night sky. Under our feet, hundreds if not thousands of beer and wine bottles had been flipped upside-down and twisted into the sand, speckling the ground in a rainbow of glass polka dots.

Behind the modest bar stood a middle-aged man with a checkered scarf tied around his head.

"That must be Joselo," Lola whispered, pointing at him. She didn't have to worry about pointing, because as the poet had told us, Joselo – the owner of this strange establishment – was blind.

"What are you going to have?" I asked.

"Fernet and coke," she said. I walked up to the bar and looked directly into Joselo's eyes. They were like two clouded glass marbles, grey and distant. He must have sensed my presence.

"Buenas noches. Que tomas, vos?" he asked.

"Dos Fernet con coca," I said. He reached down and pulled out a silver pair of tongs and dropped two ice cubes into each glass. I leaned over the bar to try and see

where he'd acquired the ice when suddenly, from the out of the darkness, waddled a tiny penguin.

“Ah, there he is,” Joselo said. The penguin must have brushed against his leg. “Allow me to introduce, El Pinguino.” As Joselo mixed the drinks he explained that the little penguin had washed ashore a couple summers ago and now lived with him at the bar. “Just wait until the band shows up,” he said. “He will be in the middle of the dance floor.”

I took the drinks back to our table and Lola and I sat and watched as the place began to fill up. The dreadlocked boy who gave us the keys to the house arrived with an acoustic guitar, alongside a friend with a charango – a ten-stringed Andean instrument. They tuned up and began quietly playing in the corner of the bar. Within a half hour, there were twenty or thirty people drinking and listening to the music from the worn wooden instruments. El Pinguino hopped and scuttled in and out of the benches and tables, as if following an incomprehensible sequence of dance steps, prompted by the melodies ricocheting from the bottles in the sand off into the starry ceiling of the night sky.

It was late, or rather early, by the time that we left Joselo's. The darkness had begun to fade into a slowly expanding grey over the ocean. The pale glint of the morning sun was already starting to warm the salty air as we strolled along the waters' edge. When we got to the house, we opened a bottle of Malbec and walked up the escalera caracol to the mattress on the floor upstairs.

I remember Lola lying on her side next to me, her head propped in her hand. As the sun rose higher in the sky, its rays passed through the colored glass embedded in the wall and patches of light danced along the tan skin that stretched over her ribs. I ran my hand along the ridges through the translucent spots of pink and blue. Goosebumps trailed my fingers.

“This place is perfect,” I said. “I wish we could stay in Cabo Polonio, don’t you? Here in our casita de la playa.”

She looked at me curiously. In her eyes, she smiled, but there was a hint of reproach in her gaze. She leaned in toward me, tucking her head under my chin, her body pressed against mine. Then after a minute she inched away.

“No,” she said. “I could never live here.”

“What?”

She reached over and took a cigarette from the pocket of her discarded pants.

“This isn’t real life,” she said exhaling the smoke of the first drag. From the cherry of the cigarette, white ribbons spiraled in and out of colored beams of light. “This is a place that people run away to.”

Something inside me tensed up.

“I don’t want to escape real life.” She looked into my eyes and handed me the cigarette. “It’s what inspires me. It makes me think. It makes me cry. It turns me on. It’s happening back in Buenos Aires, in San Francisco, in New York, London, Paris, not here.” She kissed me again. “Henry,” she whispered into my ear. “Don’t run away from what scares you.”

* * *

Three days later, I was back in Buenos Aires and things felt changed somehow. Lola had awoken something in me. She'd shaken me from my trance. Over the past couple years I'd grown comfortable in the capital. I went about my weeks in autopilot, taking various colored buses from place to place, across the city to classes and meetings and appointments. I had one steady job, a teaching gig at an American tech company. But other than that, nothing about my life was constant or stable. When students canceled classes at the last minute, I didn't get paid. When I woke up on a random Monday or Tuesday and learned that the subway was on strike, again, I had to find an alternative way to get downtown or to wherever I needed to be. The unpredictability and hectic nature of it all was undyingly exciting to me at first, but after a while it felt like a series of fragments and pieces that didn't add up to anything of value. It was all just a chaotic puzzle with crucial pieces missing.

But after crossing the river, things were new again. I got off the subway at Bulnes and walked along the tree-lined avenue of Colonel Diaz and the street was alive, buzzing. The same old men walked their same bull terriers and the bakeries had the usual pastries in the same glass display cases. The sounds of taxi cab horns and the whistle of the local knife sharpener circling the blocks, mixed together with passing conversations and it made a dissonant, yet alluring song. Summer was on its way.

That morning on the beach, Lola got up from the bed and walked out into the sand. I followed her and we ran into the cold waves and she wrapped her arms and legs around me and we shivered and clung together as the sun started to warm the air. Later, we finished our last bottle of wine and I tried to convince her to stay one more night with me.

“I have to get back,” she said.

“Will I see you again?”

“That is entirely up to you,” she smiled.

She packed her backpack and I walked her to the center of the village where she got on the yellow truck and left.

When I got to my small apartment, I put down my backpack. Even the white-walled box, which so often felt claustrophobic and imprisoning, welcomed me as I opened the shutter curtain and sunlight danced in golden slits along the hardwood floor.

I didn't have anything to do that day and decided I'd spend the afternoon reading on the balcony.

Several days passed before I mustered the courage to call Lola. Part of me thought that Cabo Polonio had all been a strange, vivid dream. I only remembered it in bits and pieces, her smell, the colors, a collage of moments, the feeling of her skin touching mine, her warmth next to me.

I called her late one afternoon and asked if she wanted to grab a coffee. It was the first Saturday in December. She said she'd meet me at the park where I spent most of my free time, just a few blocks from my apartment at the corner of Colonel Diaz and Las

Heras. While I waited nervously, I sat in the grass reading Cat's Cradle. The sun was warm that day but a cool breeze swept through the trees. Around me, groups of people sat on blankets drinking maté and children ran through the open spaces, chasing each other and kicking soccer balls. Busy, busy, busy, I thought to myself. In a nearby tree, two girls were practicing tela, suspended in the air, wrapping their bodies in long pieces of fabric tied to a tall, sturdy branch. I watched as they climbed twenty feet up and then spun and fell gracefully down, catching themselves in the thick ribbon before they reached the ground below. My phone buzzed.

Nuevo mensaje

FROM: Lola

Che, estoy aca en el parque. I don't see you. Donde estas?

I replied: By the crazy acrobat girls in the trees.

I watched them for a few more minutes, absorbed in their display of elegance and strength. Then, I felt a tap on the shoulder.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey." I stood up.

For a moment, I just looked at her.

"Venis siempre por aca?" Do you come here a lot? I asked her in a playful tone.

She laughed, as that was the typical line that guys used to start conversations with girls at bars.

"Que chamuyero, eh," she replied. What a smooth talker. "Como te va?"

"Good," I heard myself say, and for the first time in years, I meant it.

A gust of wind blew through the park. The sun was going down. We sat for a few minutes talking before she said, “Che, tengo frio. Let’s go grab a drink. There’s a cool place nearby I want to show you.”

We got up and walked away from the grassy field, crossed Avenida Santa Fe and turned on Guemes. A couple blocks up, we arrived at a wooden door, set within the faded red façade of a large building. We went inside and took a table by the window.

A young bearded waiter approached and we ordered a jarra of the house wine. It came in a clay pitcher, shaped like a penguin.

“El penguinino,” he said as he placed it on the rough wooden table. “Bueno chicos. Cualquier cosa que necesiten, avisenme.” Let me know if you need anything, he said. I looked around the bar. It was L-shaped. The walls were deep red in the front wing by the window and changed to a golden bronze as you made your way back toward the stage. The stained oak bar had hundreds of wine bottles on shelves that extended to the ceiling and several guitars hung mounted on the perpendicular walls above softly glowing sconces.

“Salud,” Lola said after she poured the wine. “So, how’s it being back in the big, crazy city?”

“In real life, you mean?” I joked.

“Yes,” she smiled, lighting a cigarette.

“It feels different,” I said. “But in a good way.”

“Oh,” she said. “Before I forget. I was at work the other day and I thought of you.”

I sipped my wine.

“My boss is looking for an English teacher. She wants someone to come to the office and give us classes. You interested?”

“Definitely.”

“Great. I think she wants to start in January. I’ll put you guys in touch.”

I looked at her across the table. Her grey eyes glowed in the dim light. “Thank you, Lola,” I said. In that moment, all I wanted was to lean over and kiss her but thought better of it.

“You can, if you want,” she said, as if reading my mind.

“What?”

“Here, I mean. Not at the office. At the office, if you get the job, we’re just friends. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. Her lips were even softer than I remembered. I felt my face flush as my heart drummed in my chest. “Ugh.”

“What?” she smiled.

“Nothing.”

“So,” she said after a moment. “If you’re going to be my English teacher, let’s see what you got.”

“You speak perfect English.”

“Not perfect,” she said. “Teach me something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Phrasal verbs. Why are they so confusing?”

“Give me an example of one you don’t understand.”

“That night, at the beach, before the poet approached us, you remember?”

I nodded.

“You were telling me about that book. And you said, ‘I didn’t get into Virginia Woolf until after college.’ Why can’t you say, ‘I didn’t read her until after college?’”

“I could have. There are lots of ways to say the same thing. That’s what gives language, you know, flair. Pizzazz. Style.”

“Pizzazz?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It means energy. Personality. With phrasal verbs, there isn’t any logic really. You get into a writer or a band or a hobby. But at the same time, you get into a taxi. You get on a plane or a train. You get out of relationship. You only get out of something what you put in.” I laughed. “It’s a mess.”

“You get around a city. Or get over a cold.”

“Yes and yes,” I said. “You try to make enough money to get by. You get through a difficult time and you get around to finally doing something. But to be fair, Spanish has its confusion as well.”

“No it doesn’t,” she joked.

“Sure it does. You guys use the same verb to mean a hundred totally different things. Like subir, for example. Climb a mountain. Go up the stairs. Take the elevator. Turn up the volume. Get on a train. Board a plane. Upload a photo. Raise the blinds. Zip a zipper. It’s maddening.”

“Yeah,” she said. “But that makes it easy.”

“In a way, I guess.”

“What’s this?” she asked picking up the book that lay on the table between us.

I told her about Vonnegut’s made up religion and I watched her eyes in the dim light as she read the first couple pages.

“If you find your life tangled up with somebody else’s life for no very logical reasons, that person may be a member of your karass,” she read aloud.

“It’s an interesting idea,” I said.

“I think we are in the same karass,” she said.

“I hope so.”

“Can I borrow this?” she asked.

“You can have it,” I said.

There was something very comfortable about Lola. I liked the musical quality of her voice, its rhythm and timbre, as she tried to express an idea that forced her to choose her words with care. I liked how she kept her eyes on me, not looking away even when she said something that made herself appear vulnerable or flawed. On more than one occasion, sitting there, I noticed something. A spark, a connection – that feeling when someone says something that unlocks an idea in your head that you didn’t know existed. Or releases an emotion you’ve always known to be true but never been able to put into words.

We stayed drinking wine out of clay penguin pitchers for several hours, talking and looking out into the streets as the light faded.

Around ten o’ clock, we had a lull in our conversation. The first in some time.

“So, what do you want to do now?” she asked with a coy smile.

Perhaps, it was the wine. Or the look in her eye. Or something far more abstract, yet all too real, that driving force - loneliness.

“We could get some empanadas from the place on the corner and go back to my apartment.”

“Bueno,” she said. We paid the bill and left.

As we walked the streets, she clung to my arm. We passed my apartment door and on the way to the takeout empanada spot on the corner, Lola’s phone rang.

“It’s my aunt. I need to take this,” she said. “You go ahead up. I’ll get the empanadas and be there in a few minutes. What number is it?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I need to talk to her. Family stuff.”

“Okay. 3A.”

“Dale,” she said and answered the phone. “Tia, como andas?”

I opened the front door of the building and got in the elevator, my mind reeling. My wine stained thoughts bled together in whirl of excitement. I pushed three and tried to look at myself in the distorted stainless steel mirror as I lurched upward. The artificial light was pallid and anemic.

When I slid open the door into the dark hallway, I couldn’t see a thing. I stepped toward my apartment door blindly and was suddenly shoved into the wall. I felt the butt of a pistol come down on the back of my head and my vision in the darkness got splotchy from the blow.

“Abri, pelotudo,” a voice whispered from behind me. Open, stupid fuck.

As I fumbled with my keys, another hand slammed my face into the wooden door. There were two of them. I felt one of them breathing on the back of my neck in the silent hallway.

When I finally got the door open, they pushed me in and I fell into the futon against the wall that divided the kitchen and main room. They wore blue and yellow Boca jerseys and had bandanas tied around their faces.

They tied me to my desk chair. The one with the gun pointed it at me as the other closed the door and began rifling through the dresser. He threw my t-shirts and boxers and socks over his head and when he finished each drawer, he slammed it shut with a violent crack. The gun toter stared at me in between glances over his shoulder at his partner.

After a few minutes, he said, “Donde esta la plata, boludo?” Where do you keep your money?

I barely heard him. There was only one thing on my mind. Lola. How much time had passed? What would they do to her if she walked in? Don't think about that. I'd heard stories. Terrible stories. I needed to distract them.

“Y? Hijo de puta? Sos boludo? Yo te mato, sin problema,” the one waving the gun in my face said. Well? Are you fucking stupid? I have no problem killing you. He tilted the pistol to the side, swung his arm and hit me across the face with the slide of the gun. I tongued the blood as it passed the corner of my mouth. If I can get to my phone, I thought. My last message was from her.

The thieves were getting frantic. I barely had anything to give them. I had five hundred pesos stashed in a book on the bookshelf, the remnants of last month's money. That was it.

I tried to free my hands. The knots were carelessly tied and as the kid wiped the blood off the top of his gun and looked back at his partner, I reached into my pocket and pulled the phone behind my back, out of sight.

I unlocked the screen instinctively. It was a simple phone, one of those basic, rectangular Nokias. I tried to imagine which letters corresponded with which numbers on the keypad. 1 was blank. 2 had ABC. 3 had DEF, etc. I needed a minute to concentrate. Without a pistol pointed at my face.

I told him to go into the bathroom and look through the medicine cabinet.

He did.

At that point the second kid was in the kitchen.

I tried again to imagine the keypad. 6 pause, 66. Space. 7777 pause. 88 pause. 22...

The kid with the gun came back, furious. "Este pelotudo, quiere morir." He smacked me once more with top of the gun. This time the blow fractured my cheekbone. I heard it. The sound of a dead twig snapped in half before being thrown in an autumn bonfire. Superimposed on the back of my eyelids I saw a giant buck, his golden antlers splintering like a pulse of electricity in the blackness, a metallic shock of pain.

"Perdon," I yelled. "No estoy pensando bien. Ahi, en mi cuarto, busca dentro de los libros en la biblioteca." I told him to look through the books on the bookshelf.

He glared at me and pressed the end of the pistol into my forehead. He told me that if he didn't find money this time, I was dead. Again, he left. I heard him throwing my books, flipping through pages, tearing paper. Desecrating the space I held sacred, that which kept me sane for three years in a place where I had nothing, no one. But none of that mattered. Now, the only thing that mattered was her. His dirty, drug shaky hands could tear out every page of every novel I'd ever read and loved, destroy every sentence that ever filled me with hope, like air, so long as neither of them laid a finger on her.

2 pause. 7777.

At that moment, the second kid, who I'd temporarily forgotten was in the kitchen, came back and stood in front of me, breathing hard. Furious. Irrational. In his eyes I saw something that I'd never witnessed. Not in person at least. His gaze was one of pure madness. The kind of eyes you only see in a nightmare. The eyes of someone whose desperation overrides that thing inside us that keeps us human. He'd seen the phone behind my back and screamed to the one in the room.

I hit send.

TO: Lola

NO SUBAS

He took out his knife and held it to my throat. And yet, in that moment, with the blade digging against my trachea, I felt a strange calm.

The second one returned from the bedroom and he told him that he'd seen the phone behind my back. He took it from me and looked at the message.

“Quien es?” he yelled at me. Who is this? “Llamaste a la policia?”

“No,” I said, confused. The message was sent to only her. How could he think that ‘Lola’ meant ‘police?’ And then suddenly it dawned on me. Neither of them could read.

“Es un amigo mio,” I said. “Te juro. Le dije, ‘no subas.’” I told them that I'd sent a message to a friend saying not to come up, making sure to use the masculine noun ending, amigo not amiga. “Por favor, les pido, dejame. Lleva la plata. Son quinientos pesos.”

The one, who had found the five hundred pesos in the book, consulted the other. They didn't believe that a person could live in Palermo, one of the city's nicer neighborhoods, and only have five hundred pesos.

“Que quieres que te diga?” I said. What do you want me to tell you? I offered them the hundred some pesos in my wallet and tried to convince them to leave my phone, reminding them that it wasn't worth anything, which was true.

There was another moment of indecision. They both eyed me, tied to my chair. Their madness had settled and in that confused moment, they seemed different. They glanced around the apartment, observing the mess, the chaos, everything I owned, torn from its place. The one with the gun looked at me once more. And suddenly, to me, his eyes didn't appear the eyes of a murderer at all. They were the eyes of a kid who'd seen too many ugly things, spent too many hungry nights under highway overpasses, trying to

fall asleep, cold, imagining a life that resembled something else, anything other of the hand he'd been personally dealt.

Then, they left. Just like that. Without saying another word, they went to the door, flung it open and disappeared into the dark hallway.

I sat in silence. I'd done it. I'd kept her safe. The rest of this could be fixed, tidied, cleaned, made right again. I felt the skin around my left eye swelling and imagined the colors, red turning to a bluish purple, which would eventually fade into a yellow-green, like dusk to midnight to dawn. This was real life.

My phone rang and I inched my chair forward to where it sat on the floor. I still hadn't freed my hands completely and failed at picking it up between my feet. It rang again and again.

After several minutes, I heard the ding of the elevator open outside. The thieves hadn't shut my door. I looked out into the dark hallway and saw her tentatively poke her head in, as if she materialized there out of the darkness, in my doorway.

"I told you not to come up," I said, trying to sound calm.

"Henry, ay dios." Judging by the expression on her face, I must have looked worse than I thought. The horror and pain in her eyes was familiar. I'd seen it before, once.

After Lola untied me, she laid her head in my lap and cried.

I smiled because she was there with me. She was safe. Other than that, I felt nothing.

CHAPTER TWO

One of Henry's first memories was from kindergarten. In the mornings, he had free time to go to different workstations scattered throughout the classroom. He spent this time in the writing station with pencils and pads of wide-ruled paper that had dashed lines dividing the top and bottom. Despite the constant scolding from his teacher, Miss Darla, Henry did not write at the writing station. He drew. Henry never liked drawing at the drawing station because there were always too many other kids there making noise and he found it hard to concentrate. What he missed out on in color with 64-pack boxes of crayons, he made up for in peace and quiet. To him, the trade off was worth it and Henry could imagine the colors in his mind anyway.

At the writing station, Henry drew scenes from Mario and pictures of birds and bugs and dinosaurs. From time to time, Miss Darla would come stand over his shoulder and watch and in her best teacher voice, she'd say, "Is someone making bad choices?"

"No, Miss Darla," he'd reply.

"What station is this?"

"The writing station, Miss Darla."

"And are you writing?"

"No."

"Why don't you go to the drawing station with the other boys and girls?"

“It’s too noisy over there, Miss Darla.” He’d look up and see her try to conceal a smile. “Can I please stay here for today?”

“Okay, just for today.”

This exchange took place more times than either of them could have counted.

Henry couldn’t remember why exactly, but at some point he gave up on video game levels and prehistoric reptiles and became obsessed with circles. He sat and drew circle after circle, trying – with increasing desperation – to draw one just perfect. His young mind wouldn’t admit that such a simple shape could be so difficult to get right.

He tried and tried and got more and more frustrated as the days went by.

One morning after several pages of failed attempts, Henry slammed his forehead down against the pad of paper. Miss Darla ran over and asked him what was wrong. He told her that he was mad at himself because he couldn’t draw a circle.

“Honey, those are all circles,” she said placing her hand on his head.

“No, no they’re not. They’re not good.”

“You mean they aren’t perfect.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want to draw a perfect circle?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Just because.” Hot tears streamed down his face and he choked over his words as he tried to explain to her. “I just want to. But I can’t.”

She went over to the cabinet and grabbed a can of Play Do and sat down next to him and showed him how to trace along the outside of the cylindrical base.

“Look,” she said. “A circle. How’s that?”

Henry told her that that didn’t count. He needed to do it with his own hand. Her way was cheating. At that point, Henry had worked himself into such a frenzy that he was wheezing and blowing snot bubbles from his nose, gasping for air.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” she said.

“No.” He screamed. “No, it’s not okay.”

At the dinner table later that night, Henry told his family what had happened. His father, a math teacher at the local high school, listened to him explain his frustration occasionally nodding as he chewed a forkful of grilled pork chop or green beans.

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me,” his father said.

“What?”

“You can’t draw one because there is no such thing. Perfect circles do not exist.”

Henry twisted his face into a confused knot but his father didn’t continue. The four of them just sat quietly around the table.

“Would anyone like some more of anything?” his mother said. Henry didn’t answer. He was thinking.

“What do you mean, dad? I’ve seen them before. How can you say they don’t exist?”

“Where have you seen them?”

“We saw some the other day,” Henry’s brother, Cameron, who was eleven months his senior, chimed in. “We were looking for crickets and frogs at the pond behind the O’ Brien’s and it started to rain. When the raindrops hitted the water, they made perfect little circles, one inside another, inside another.”

“When the raindrops hit the water, sweetheart,” his mother, a librarian, corrected him.

“Those are called concentric circles,” his father said. “They appear to be perfect, you’re right. But they aren’t. Not quite. Well, that is my opinion. There is no way to prove that they are perfect.”

“Why?”

“Well, it is complicated,” he said. “I’m not sure I can explain it in terms you’d understand.”

Henry’s father saw by the look that his son’s face that his answer wasn’t sufficient.

“Whether or not perfect circles exist in reality is more of a philosophical question,” he said. “Since physics cannot answer whether or not things in the universe appear in that type of order, down to infinitesimal precision. My guess is that they don’t. You see the physical world is in chaos. Therefore, unlike in the theoretical Euclidean, the geometric constructions will be distorted immediately toward infinite complexity, never reaching a perfect symmetry.”

Henry’s mother let out a weary sigh.

Despite not understanding a word of what he said, Henry was trying to come up with other examples. “What about my eyes?” He asked.

“The most precious eyes in the whole wide world,” his mother said.

“Hey,” Cameron quipped. “What about mine?”

“You two are tied for first. I’m allowed to have two favorites, aren’t I?”

“I guess.”

“But no, son,” his father said. “Your eyes are not perfect either, I’m afraid.”

“But they look perfect.”

“I know they do. We’ll come back to this question in ten years. For now, you’ll have to trust me on this one.”

“No,” Henry said.

“No what?”

“I don’t want to. I want to know now.”

“Fine,” he smiled. “You see Henry, in math, there is a number called pi.”

“Pie,” Cameron said, throwing his arms in the air. “Apple pie, punkin pie, cherry pie...”

“Yes, well, pi in mathematics is a special number. Since the digits of pi go onto infinity, we cannot make perfect circles because we cannot subdivide the world an infinite amount of times. Therefore, a perfect circle is purely a mental construct like the tooth fairy or Santa Clause.”

“David,” Henry’s mother shot him a look.

Henry stopped to consider what his father had said. “It’s okay mom. I know.”

“What do you know, sweetie?” she asked with a look of disappointment on her face.

“Santa Clause isn’t perfect.”

“Yeah,” Cameron said. “Last Christmas he brought us the wrong Lego ship.”

“And my shoes didn’t fit.”

“See Helen,” Henry’s father chuckled. “They understand. Millions of children with millions of requests. Santa has a lot on his mind. And just like our circles, he isn’t quite perfect. Try as he might.”

She reached across the table and touched his hand. “Boys, finish your green beans. I want to see those plates clean before anyone leaves this table.”

The next day at school, Henry went back to drawing pterodactyls and sharks and scenes from Koopa’s castles.

A year after that conversation about circles at the dinner table, Henry was in first grade and Cameron, second. It was early spring, the end of March, and the two of them were outside one day after school digging through the garden for bugs. They’d found several roly-polys and were in the process of putting them into plastic bug boxes and giving them names when Joseph approached.

Joseph Cardanzo was their next-door neighbor. He was nine and though neither of the brothers knew it at the time, there were several colorful words people later in life used to describe people like Joseph. At the time, their only descriptor was ‘mean bully.’

It was because of him that Henry learned which way to turn the water spigot on and off. Their spigot was on the front of the house and when Henry stood facing it, Joseph's house was to his right. In Henry's seven-year old mind, he associated water with good. To turn the water on, turn left. Not having water was bad; to turn the water off, turn right, toward Joseph Cardanzo's house.

Joseph's father was on a temporary government assignment in the area and since the previous August, Joseph had taken it upon himself to terrorize Henry and Cameron at every opportunity he got. He was an only child, freckly-nosed, with an evil jack-o-lantern grin. He ate uncooked hotdogs for breakfast.

At that time, Henry and Cameron were really into G.I. Joes and between the two of them they had a couple dozen of the small, military action figures. For Henry's most recent birthday, his parents had given him a G.I. Joe vehicle, the HAVOC Mk-II tank, which – at the time – was his absolute prized possession. It was army green and featured an opening canopy, free-rolling wheels, a moveable windshield wiper and hi-velocity X-1 torpedoes. On that afternoon, in between insect discoveries, the two of them pretended that the vegetable garden was a far off land and their tank was on a mission to rescue captured G.I. Joe allies behind enemy lines.

Joseph came up silently. If they had heard him, Henry and Cameron certainly would have abandoned their rescue mission and bug digging venture and gone inside. But it was too late. He reached down and picked up Henry's HAVOC Mk-II and looked it over.

“This is cool,” Joseph said. “I want it.”

“Well, you can’t have it,” Cameron said. “It’s not yours. It was my brother’s birthday present.”

“Yeah,” Henry said. “It’s mine.”

Joseph looked down at Henry kneeling in the topsoil.

“You got this for your birthday?”

“Yeah.”

He tilted his head slightly to the right as if considering what he’d just been told. Then, without saying anything, Joseph put the tank on the ground and jumped on it, slamming his two feet down on top of it with the force of his entire body, smashing it to pieces.

Henry burst into tears as Joseph turned and walked back across the side yard to his house.

Henry’s father went next door when he got home that night and had a conversation with the Cardanzo’s. As a result, Joseph was grounded for two weeks and had to buy Henry a new tank with money taken from his weekly allowance.

The next day, he came over with an unopened HAVOC Mk-II and an insincere apology. Henry was thrilled. More importantly than his new tank, the brothers had been given the ultimate gift, time. They had fourteen days of freedom without the ever-present threat of Joseph’s unwanted company and they were determined to make the most of every minute.

Over the next week, the neighborhood transformed with color. The azalea bushes out front exploded in bursts of magenta and fuchsia and red. The dogwoods and cherry

trees opened their flowers and the streets were lined with plumes of pink and white. Around the vibrant flowers, bumble bees and tiger swallowtail butterflies buzzed and landed and flew off again. In the grass, robin redbreasts and black iridescent-feathered grackles hopped about scouring the lawn for worms and the sun got warmer with each passing day.

Henry and Cameron got home from school and had a quick snack before venturing out for Joseph-free afternoons of adventure.

They rode their bikes and threw the football and went back into the woods behind their house to play in the creek and turn over rocks to hunt for tiny crayfish camouflaged in the cold water.

On the second Friday after the tank incident, Henry was sitting in the driveway with a bucket of sidewalk chalk drawing a blue brontosaurus when out of the corner of my eye he saw something move in the crab apple tree above him.

He put down the piece of chalk and stood up to get a better look. It was a giant praying mantis standing perfectly still on one of the flower tipped branches. Its front legs were bent inward and Henry gazed curiously at his triangular head and shiny green eyes set against the reddish blooms. Cameron had gone inside for some reason or another and Henry stood by himself admiring the strange insect.

“What are you looking at?” he heard the dreaded voice behind him.

Henry turned around.

“You’re supposed to be inside,” he said. “You’re grounded.”

“My mom had to go to the store,” Joseph said as he stepped toward him. “What’s in that tree?”

“Nothing,” Henry said. Henry knew that if Joseph saw the mantis he’d do something awful. He’d seen him stomp caterpillars and katydids and there was no way he was going to let him touch that mantis.

“Get out of the way,” Joseph said pushing Henry to the grass. He walked over to the tree and saw it. Then he reached up and took the insect in his hands.

“Don’t hurt it, Joseph,” Henry screamed at him as he put the mantis down on the driveway.

“What if I do?” he taunted. “What if I crush it just like that stupid tank?”

“Don’t,” Henry pleaded. Just then Henry saw Cameron approaching from behind with their yellow Nerf baseball bat. Henry held his breath.

“Leave it alone, you jerk,” Cameron said and as Joseph turned toward him, Cameron swung the bat with all his might, making direct contact with Joseph’s nose. Drops of blood fell, sprinkling the concrete in tiny red dots on blue chalk, in and around the motionless mantis. Joseph covered his face and ran home crying. Henry sat in the grass under the tree looking up at his brother holding the bat, the sun shining behind his head in a static shaft of golden light.

Henry then watched as Cameron picked up the mantis and put it back in the tree above him.

The heat and humidity of the DC summer came early and by mid-June the days were sticky and wet. Henry and Cam spent most of their afternoons at the neighborhood pool, jumping off diving boards and running barefoot through the grass playing pickle ball during the fifteen minute breaks every hour. Their mother dropped them off in the morning before her shift at the library. She gave them five dollars and told them to buy grilled cheeses or hotdogs from the snack bar for lunch but usually they spent the money at the ice cream truck that came by each day, on frozen snickers bars and red white and blue firecracker popsicles instead. While gluttonously licking and chomping their treats, they made sure to keep their eyes peeled for yellow jackets that swarmed around the melting sugary mess dripping from their lips to the black pavement.

When she came back to get the boys later in the afternoon, they always asked for five more minutes, one more dive, just a little longer. She'd sigh and usually concede. Then after a bit, they all got into her blue Buick, first spreading out our towels so as not to drench the fabric seats, always careful not to let the metal seatbelt buckles accidentally sting the skin above their hips. Behind the backseat of the car was a rear deck, that small shelf that extended to where the back window met the trunk. Henry looked and saw it always littered with bee carcasses and glittery shells of dead Japanese beetles.

At night, Henry and Cam got together with the other neighborhood kids and played capture the flag or kick the can, running in and out of trees and bushes, hiding from opponents, in the firefly spotted summer sky.

A new family moved in to the Cardanzo's house at the end of July. The brothers crossed their fingers, praying not to get another Joseph. They loved not living in fear and Cameron hung on to some guilt from breaking Joseph's nose.

The Reilly's moved in on a Thursday. Henry's mom didn't have to work that day and the brothers played in the front yard running in the sprinkler when a wood paneled minivan pulled into the driveway next door. They stopped and watched as Mr. and Mrs. Reilly got out of the front seat. They walked around and slid open the door and out came Molly, in a white summer dress and strawberry blonde hair. She was eight, just a couple months older than Henry at the time.

The boys went over and introduced themselves and Molly smiled at them and said, "Nice to meet you."

"How long you boys lived there?" Mr. Reilly asked in a kind, booming voice. He was tall and had a thick brown mustache.

"All our lives, sir," Henry said.

"Well, we're coming in from Philadelphia."

"Oh no," Cameron said. "Are you Eagles fans?"

"That's right," he said. "You have Eagles fans moving in next door. I hope you won't hold it against us."

"It's okay, Mr. Reilly," he said. "We'll try not to."

Molly asked if she could come play in the sprinkler.

"Let's get your stuff in the house first," her mother said. "Then you can go over. You boys going to be outside for a little while longer?"

“Yes, ma’am,” Henry said. “We can help you with your bags, if you’d like.”

“That’s very nice of you, dear,” Mrs. Reilly said. “But we got it under control. Molly will be out in a few minutes.”

Henry and Cam ran back over to their yard, all giddy and wound up. For a few minutes neither of them said anything. Henry noticed his brother looking at him strangely.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Cam smiled, “I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I’m not.” He picked up a squirt gun, shot it at Henry, and then ran off toward the sprinkler.

A few minutes later, Molly came over and sat down next to them in the grass.

“You don’t like to kill bugs, do you?” Cam asked.

“No,” she said. “Why would you ask me that?”

Henry told her about Joseph and how much they hated him and how he liked to break their toys and step on poor little insects and laugh about it afterward.

“I don’t do any of that,” she said. “I promise.”

“Good,” Cameron said. “Then we can be friends. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

The rest of the summer passed quickly and Molly came over almost every day to play in the creek and go to the pool. At night, the Reilly’s sometimes sat with Henry’s

parents in plastic chairs in the front yard. The moms drank white wine and the dads Coronas. They talked and watched as the three kids ran around chasing fireflies and inventing games that only made sense to them.

Mrs. Reilly was an artist. She painted and worked with ceramics and one morning she walked back to the creek with Henry, Cam, and Molly to have a look. She stopped at the big honeysuckle bush and plucked a flower from it, gently pinching the end and pulling it until a small drop of nectar came out.

“I used to love doing this when I was a kid,” she said. They all picked a few and then continued on down to the creek. Once they got there, Mrs. Reilly took off her shoes and waded into the water and began digging at the bank, into the mud. She took some of the reddish clay in her hands and put it into a bucket. They brought it back home and she showed the children how they could form it into different shapes and figures. Molly made a giraffe. Henry made a turtle and Cameron a bird.

“Nice pigeon,” Henry said.

“It’s a turkey,” Cam answered.

“Looks like a pigeon to me,” Molly said.

“I don’t care what you guys say. It’s a turkey.”

After they finished, they put their animals into her kiln to fire and harden and Mrs. Reilly said that the boys could come back the next day when they were ready.

As August marched on, the air got heavier and the summer storms rolled in. Henry was too young to know it then, but something was happening next door. He’d

noticed that he hadn't seen Mr. Reilly in a few days. Molly came over every afternoon like always and once Henry asked her about her father and she replied, "Sometimes, when mom gets sad, dad goes away for a little while." Henry had no idea what she was talking about. It sounded like she was just repeating the words she had heard her parents say, time and time again.

Then one morning, Henry was having a bowl of cereal in the kitchen and he heard a knock on the door. He went down to open it and it was Mrs. Reilly. She looked strange. She had dark circles under her eyes and her voice was thin and tired.

"Is your mother here?" she asked. Henry went upstairs and got her. She told him to go to the basement after she invited Mrs. Reilly up to the kitchen.

Henry stood at the foot of the steps and tried to listen to what was going on but couldn't make out any of their words. He thought at one point he heard Mrs. Reilly crying. He went downstairs and found his brother playing with Lincoln logs. He joined him and forgot about what was going on above them.

About an hour later, his mom came down and sat with them on the floor.

"Boys," she said. "Mrs. Reilly has to go out of town for a few days and Molly is going to stay with us."

Henry's heart leapt out of his chest for a second thought he tried not to show it. "Is everything okay, mom?"

"Yes honey," she said. "Everything is fine. Mrs. Reilly will bring Molly over in a little while. I want you boys to be extra nice to Molly while she's here, okay?"

That night after dinner, the three kids sat around a small fire in the clay chiminea on the back patio. They each had a stick and toasted marshmallows, trying to achieve that perfect golden brown. Molly sat closer to the flame and kept letting hers catch fire. Then she'd blow it out and start over.

"You can't hold it in the flame," Cameron told her. "You have to move it back a little."

"I don't mind," Molly said. "I like the way it looks when it's on fire."

"But it doesn't taste as good," he said.

"You don't have to eat it," she said. "I like the way it tastes when it's burned on the outside."

When it was time to go to bed, Henry's parents told Molly that she could sleep in the guest room. She had made up the bed and found an extra night-light to plug in to one of the corner outlets. Henry watched Molly's chin begin to tremble.

"What's the matter, honey?" she asked.

"Nothing." Molly started crying, silently.

Henry had a feeling that Molly was afraid and he asked if they could all sleep in sleeping bags downstairs together.

"Would you like that, Molly?"

"Yes please," she said.

In the basement, they took out the couch cushions and made a fort and hung a blanket over the top and the three of them sat inside with a camping lantern in between them.

“Let’s tell stories,” Cam said.

“Okay,” Molly said. “Not ghost stories.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t like ghost stories.”

“What kind of stories then?”

“We can make them up,” she said. “I’ll start and then you guys can add your part.”

“Fine,” he said with a dramatic sigh.

“Once upon a time, there was a princess.”

“No,” Cameron blurted out. “No princess stories. Princess stories are for girls. If you say we can’t tell ghost stories, I say we can’t tell princess stories.”

“Okay, that’s fair. Once upon a time a boy made a pigeon out of clay,” she said giggling.

“It was a turkey!”

“This is my part,” she said. “You can get your turn in a minute.”

“This story stinks already,” he whined.

“How do you know? You haven’t even heard it yet.”

“Keep going, Molly,” Henry said.

She started her story about a boy who made a pigeon out of clay and the pigeon came to life and when he realized he was a pigeon, he got sad because he wanted to be a turkey. Cameron laughed and decided to go along with it. He added that the pigeon,

named Piggy, thought that if he ate enough pigeon food he could grow so big that he'd turn into a turkey, and he did.

“So,” Henry said. “Piggy ate all the pigeon food he could find and woke up one morning and looked into the mirror and he was a turkey. He was the happiest turkey in the world and went into the forest to make friends with other turkeys.”

“But he didn't find any,” Molly said.

“Why not?” Cam asked.

“Because they were all hiding,” she said. “You see it was November and all the turkeys were in their best hiding places because Thanksgiving was almost here and the hunters were out in the forest looking for turkeys to shoot for dinner.”

They all laughed.

“Then Piggy was mad at himself for eating so much and turning into a turkey because now he was in big trouble,” Cam said. “He looked for a good hiding place in the forest.”

“But it was too late,” Henry said. “All the best hiding places were already taken by the other turkeys.”

“He didn't know what to do,” Molly said.

“And suddenly, he saw the boy the who made him out of clay.”

“That's me,” Cam said. “And the boy said, Piggy what happened to you? You're supposed to be a pigeon.”

“And Piggy told him what he had done.”

“And the hunters appeared with their guns and Piggy was afraid and the boy told him to run as fast as his turkey legs would carry him.”

“And Piggy ran and ran and he got really tired but kept going because he knew if he stopped, he’d get shot and eaten.”

“He ran for seven days and nights,” Molly said. “And as he ran, he looked back over his shoulder and saw the hunters chasing him with their guns.”

“And then something strange happened,” Henry said. “Piggy realized that as he ran he got smaller and smaller and just as the hunters were about to catch him, they stopped and looked confused.”

“‘We’ve been chasing a pigeon this whole time!’ They shouted in anger.”

“And Piggy saw that they were right. He was a pigeon again and just like that he flew off.”

“And lived happily ever after.”

“See,” Molly said. “That story didn’t stink.” Reluctantly, Cam agreed and three of them fell asleep, huddled together with the camping lantern shining its warm light on the walls of their pillow fortress.

Molly stayed with them for two more days. On the second night, they pitched the tent in the backyard and made up new stories and fell asleep to the sound of the crickets and cicadas in the nearby fields and trees.

On the third day, Cameron had a doctor's appointment and Molly and Henry were alone for the first time lying in the grass on the hill looking up at the clouds and telling each other what shapes and animals they saw.

"That one is a squirrel," she said.

"A squirrel? That's boring. Squirrels are everywhere. It looks like a cheetah to me."

"Cheetahs don't have bushy tails like that."

"That tail isn't bushy."

"Yes it is. It's fluffy and bushy and looks just like a squirrel."

As they stared up at the sky, they ate peaches and after each bite Henry had to wipe the juice from his chin with his shirtsleeve. When Molly finished her peach she sat up and looked at him.

"Have you ever opened up the pit of a peach?" she asked.

"No."

"Inside it there's a seed, look," she tore open the pit and inside was a small seed that looked just like an almond.

"If we plant it, will a peach tree grow?"

"I don't know," she said. "I heard that this seed is poison."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"I can't remember. Open yours," she said. Henry did. "Two poison seeds. One for each of us."

"What do you mean?"

“Let’s eat them,” she said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t want to eat it if it’s poison.”

“Fine, then give me yours.”

“No,” I said. “Molly. Why?”

“Either you give me yours and I eat them both or we each eat one together.”

“Or we don’t eat them at all.”

“Nope. Let’s eat them now. It will be our secret.”

“What if we die?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think we will.”

“What if we do?”

“My mom told me that when she was little, her and her best friends would cut their thumbs and put them together and become blood sisters. And then, it’s like they were family forever and no matter what happened they promised that they would always love each other. This is like that, for us.”

Henry listened to the sound of his heart pounding in his throat. “I’m scared.”

“It will be okay,” she said. “Ready?”

“Okay,” and he put the seed into his mouth and bit down. “It doesn’t taste like poison.”

“Nope,” she said. “I like it.”

They lay back down and put their heads in the grass, next to each other, and watched as new clouds drifted across the quiet sky.

Later that night, Mrs. Reilly came home and picked Molly up and took her back to their house. When Henry got in bed, he tossed and turned and wondered if the poisonous seed would kill him in his sleep. Around midnight, he got up and went into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk, thinking that maybe it would neutralize the poison in his stomach but just as he was about to take a sip, he stopped. He thought, I can't drink this. I made a promise. He poured the milk down the sink and went back to his room and said a prayer for Molly and closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The next day when Molly came over, she smiled at him. They were both okay. The seeds didn't kill them. They now had a secret, a pact. A promise.

The school year started and with it came the changing leaves and best of all, football season. Henry and Cameron looked forward to the fall all year.

Even though neither of their parents had a strong religious upbringing, they insisted on going to church every Sunday. Henry didn't mind too much because in the back of my head, he knew that as soon as Sunday school was over, it was game time. The family would all gather in the TV room downstairs and they'd watch the Redskins together. Those were some of Henry's favorite memories.

After a touchdown, they'd sing the fight song and Henry and Cam would run around the coffee table as their dad threw the Nerf football so that they had to make a diving catch into the couch on the other side of the room.

The team was good that year and they got off to an unprecedented start. Going into the bye week, we were 7-0, undefeated.

On week eight, when the Redskins weren't playing, after church Henry's father and the two boys went outside and raked. The two large maple trees in the yard were just starting to shed their leaves and the day was unseasonably cold. Henry could see his breath in the air for the first time that fall and a thin layer of frost covered the pumpkins that sat by the front door. It was one of those strange beautiful afternoons when you are reminded of the days getting shorter, when the rays of the sun seem to mean more.

Henry hated raking and he didn't understand why they needed to do it that afternoon considering the majority of the leaves still hadn't fallen.

"You don't wait until all the leaves fall," his father told him. "You do it little by little."

The three of them raked for a while and soon had a sizeable pile, a mountain of purples and yellows and reds. Before they bagged the leaves, Cameron asked if they could play in them first.

"Of course," his father said. "You guys want to run a few pass routes?"

"Yeah!" they shouted and he went inside to get the football. "Alright, boys. It's the fourth quarter, two minutes left and the Skins are down four. Who are we playing?"

"The Cowboys!" Henry and Cam both said in unison.

"Alright, I'm Rypien," their father said. "Who are you?"

"I want to be Art Monk," Cam said.

“I want to be Art Monk. He’s my favorite,” Henry said. “Rock, paper, scissors for who gets to be Art Monk?”

“No,” Cam answered. “It’s okay. You can be Monk. I’ll be Gary Clark.”

“Alright,” their father said. “The Cowboys just scored and we got the ball on our own twenty. Monk, you run a fade; Clark, you do a buttonhook and go. Okay? Break.”

The boys lined up and waited for the signal. “Blue 42, set, hike.”

He threw the first pass to Cam on the buttonhook and go and he made a diving catch into the pile of leaves.

“First down, Redskins,” their father’s voice boomed. “Alright hurry up offense, boys. The clock is ticking. That was a fifteen-yard completion. Monk, slant to the left. Clark, quick out to the right.”

On the next pass, he threw to Henry and he caught it and tripped over his own feet but came down with ball in his hands.

“Spike it, dad. Spike it,” Cam said jumping up and down. “We’re out of timeouts. His father took the ball and threw it quickly into the grass.

“Alright,” he said. “The clock is stopped. A minute thirty left and we’re almost to midfield. What’s the play?”

“We’ll both line up on the same side,” Cam said. He drew a play on the palm of his hand. He had Henry running a post route over the middle and he was going long. Incomplete. Henry caught the next pass and fell into the pile of leaves, unnecessarily, adding a bit of drama to a simple catch. Cameron caught the next one and ran to the sidewalk, out of bounds.

“How much time is left?” Henry asked.

“Forty-five seconds,” his father said.

“Where are we on the field?”

“Cowboys thirty five yard line.”

Two incomplete passes followed, one to each of them.

“Alright guys,” their father said as they huddled. “It’s third and ten. Thirty seconds left on the clock. This is huge. We need a first down.” He threw one to Cam. It was low but he caught it on his knees in the middle of the yard. His father spiked it again to stop the clock. They only had time to run a few more plays. Two more incomplete passes and they were down to the final play of the game.

“This is it, boys,” their father said.

“Throw it to Gary Clark,” Henry said knowing his brother was the more skilled receiver of the two.

“We’ll see who gets open.”

They lined up and when their father snapped the ball, Henry ran up the left side of the yard and bent his route toward the pile of leaves. His father pump faked to Cam and threw the ball in Henry’s direction. It soared in the air just over the fiery pile. Time froze as Henry dove, his body in full extension. He watched the ball, spiraling through the cold breeze, and made a diamond with his hands, gripping it tight as soon as it hit his palms.

He brought it in cleanly and tumbled into the pile and just as he did, he felt a shooting pain pierce the skin of his cheek. It was like a flaming spear shot into his face and he stood up, stunned. His father and brother ran towards him, their arms in the air.

“Touchdown, Rypien to Monk,” Cam yelled. “Redskins win! Redskins win! Unbelievable!”

When they got up next to Henry, they both stopped cheering and went silent. Henry reached up and touched his face and when he pulled his hand away, it was covered in blood. A stick in the pile had gouged him, just an inch below his right eye. He looked at his brother and watched his expression turn from joy to horror in a split second. Cam burst into tears and threw his arms around him.

“Are you okay?” he cried.

Henry just stood there with the ball in his arms, completely lost. He didn’t feel anything.

“Stay right there,” his father said. He ran inside and came back with a first aid kit. He pressed some cotton against Henry’s cheek and he felt the flap of skin that had come loose. The alcohol stung. That was what shook Henry from his daze, the burn of the alcohol against his torn flesh. His parents decided to take him to urgent care in town and the doctor put a few stitches in his cheek to close the wound.

They stopped for ice cream on the way home and Henry ordered a three-scoop sundae with almonds and hot fudge. Henry imagined each almond was a poison seed from the pit of a peach and he smiled to himself as he chewed, savoring them one by one.

Christmas and New Years came and went and the morning the Reilly’s got back from visiting family in Philadelphia, Molly sat with Henry in the driveway with a bucket of chalk. The day was cold and the wind bit at their cheeks and noses. Molly was

uncharacteristically quiet and for a long while they drew in silence, listening to the sound of chalk sticks scraping against the concrete.

“Is everything okay?” Henry asked finally.

“I’m gonna be a big sister,” she said.

“What? That’s great,” Henry said, looking up at her. But instead of seeing her smiling, she had buried her face in her mittens. “What’s the matter?”

“I thought it was the best Christmas present ever.” As she spoke, muted sobs divided her sentences, finding the spaces and cracks between the syllables of her words. “But ever since they told me, all they do is fight. My mom spends all day in her room and my dad is sad all the time.”

She leaned over and put her head on Henry’s shoulder and cried and when he looked up a few minutes later, he saw thick, fluffy snowflakes falling all around them.

That night, Henry lay in bed thinking about Molly and couldn’t fall asleep. He went into the kitchen to get a glass of water and looked out the bay window at the naked branches of the maple trees, dusted in white, against the purplish black sky. Then, suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, in the street, he saw someone, a shadow, pacing.

He walked over to get a closer look. It was Mrs. Reilly. She walked up and down the street in violent loops and zigzags, every couple seconds running her fingers through her long, blonde hair.

Henry tiptoed back to his bedroom, put on his sneakers, walked downstairs, and carefully unlocked the deadbolt on the front door. It was perfectly quiet as he walked

outside into the cold, moonlit night. He hid behind the trunk of the maple nearest the house and watched. She was in red flannel pajamas and as Henry looked closer, he saw that she was barefoot. When he held his breath he could hear the soft crunch of each footstep in the newly fallen snow. Despite the violence in her movements, she didn't make a sound. Henry watched for a few minutes, mesmerized. Then he heard the Reilly's front door open and he shifted around the tree, keeping himself out of sight.

Mr. Reilly didn't say anything. He just walked out into the street and put his arm around her and led her back in the direction of the house. Halfway across their front yard, she tried to push him away but he held her, and Henry heard her voice but couldn't make out the words. It sounded drained and hollow. Then she stopped struggling and put her arms around him and they stood, pressed together for some time before finally going inside. Henry kept still until he heard the door close and saw the lights go out upstairs.

He walked out into the street and began retracing Mrs. Reilly's steps, following the spiraling path of their madness through the snow, watching as the pattern from the soles of his shoes gently replaced each of her tortured footprints, one by one. As he walked, he thought about that afternoon in August by the creek when she took honeysuckles from the bush and taught them to fire their clay animals in the kiln and then suddenly, he stopped in her tracks. Their tracks. He was crying.

He looked up. There was a halo around the moon. Millions of tiny ice crystals floated in the atmosphere, suspended in that moment, refracting the light of the moon and casting a silvery ring around its incandescent face. He sat on the curb and watched the

fragile halo dilate across the sky, glowing against the darkness, and he tried desperately to find even the slightest hint of imperfection.

A couple weeks later, on Super Bowl Sunday, the Reilly's came over for the game. The Redskins were playing the Buffalo Bills. Mrs. Reilly smiled and bent down to give Henry a hug me when he greeted them at the door. She had never done that before.

Henry was convinced she knew. She'd seen him out there. Her hug seemed to say, we're not so different, you know? And Henry thought that she was right.

That night Mrs. Reilly laughed and ate and talked about the baby on the way as if it were the greatest surprise in the entire world. She told everyone how her and Mr. Reilly had tried so hard to have a second child after Molly was born but never could and, "isn't it strange, sometimes, the way things work out?"

She spoke with such warmth in her voice. It was unlike anything Henry had ever heard. He listened to her tell stories and watched the way she used her hands to make funny gestures and her words and movements took him on journeys to places he'd never even heard of. She talked about the years that her and Mr. Reilly traveled before they had Molly and how they rode camels across Mongolia and saw bullfights in Madrid.

And when the game started, she sat back in the couch and watched. She didn't care about football but was more than happy just to be there with people who did. From time to time, she reached for a tortilla chip and shoveled it into the seven-layer dip or got up to bring Mr. Reilly a beer from the fridge. And the three kids sat in beanbag chairs on

the floor, just a few feet from the TV, craning their necks toward the screen with a giant bowl of popcorn in between them.

At halftime, they all ate bowls of chili, and with the Redskins up 17-0, the basement atmosphere was easy and comfortable, full of laughs and toasts and stories and joy. The adults, apart from Mrs. Reilly, were starting to get a little buzzed and Henry's mom asked if they could mute the television and put on music.

"What do you say boys?" his father asked.

"Only until the game starts back up," Cam answered.

So, they listened to Side One of Abbey Road on the turntable. During Octopus's Garden, Molly took Henry's hand and they danced around the coffee table.

The Redskins won the game 37-24 and afterward, the three kids began a game of Monopoly as the parents had coffee. They were still playing when Mr. and Mrs. Reilly got up to leave and they pleaded their case for a little longer.

"Can Molly just sleep over?" Cam asked. The four parents exchanged looks and decided it was okay.

Once they left and it was only the three of them in the basement, they made up a game called caterpillar where one of them got zipped into a sleeping bag and stood up, encased in complete darkness. The other two spun the caterpillar in circles over and over and danced around the swaying sack as it stumbled and bumped into the walls, shouting and smacking it with pillows until it fell to the ground. They all took a few turns and each time the caterpillar collapsed onto the carpet, the others dropped next to it laughing and trying to catch their breath.

During Molly's third turn, she plowed into the back of the couch and crashed down on the floor, hitting with a dramatic thud. Henry and Cam flopped down next to her sweaty and winded, smiling; but after a minute when she didn't unzip herself, they stopped and looked at each other.

"Molly?" Henry said.

She didn't answer. Under the sleeping bag, they saw the outline of her body and it was still.

"You okay?"

Henry started to panic. He shook the bag and tried to find the zipper.

"Molly, what's wrong?"

Nothing.

"Molly," Cam said as Henry tugged at the zipper. He pulled too hard and the zipper caught in the green nylon.

"Do not unzip me in my slumber, little insects," came her voice, muffled under the thick green bag.

"What are you doing?" Henry asked. "That wasn't funny. You scared us."

"I'm in my cocoon, hibernating," she said. "Let me be."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just hibernating," she said.

"Caterpillars don't hibernate," Cam said.

"Well, whatever they do when they are in their cocoon, that is what I'm doing."

"I don't know what that's called."

“Me neither.”

“When I come out,” she said. “I will be a new creature.”

“No, you wont,” Cam said.

“Yes, I will,” she called, her voice theatrical and shrill. “You won’t even recognize me, little bugs.”

“When are you coming out?”

“When I’m ready. I’ll emerge in all my glory!”

“As what?” Cam said. “No butterflies allowed. House rules.”

She was quiet for another minute.

“That’s okay,” she said freeing herself and jumping out of the cocoon in a burst of noisy energy. She grabbed the green blanket that was draped over the back of the couch and began flapping it like wings behind her, skipping around the room.

“I’m not a butterfly. I’m a moth. The royal, magnificent Luna moth.”

The boys ran after her.

“I’m the queen of the night. Bow down, my little caterpillars and behold, your queen,” she cackled in delight.

She stopped behind the coffee table, and so did they. She took a couple steps left, then right. Henry ran at her from one direction and Cam flanked her from the other and she flapped her wings once, twice, and hopped up on the table and darted across the room to the other couch and hurdled over the back, tumbling again to the ground. But she sprung up this time and kept flapping her moth wings.

“You’ll never catch me, little caterpillars. I’m the queen of the night.”

The boys chased her.

“I’m the queen of the moon and the queen of the stars. The queen of the fireflies and the crickets and the bats,” she stretched her arms behind her. “And the possums and foxes and raccoons and mice. I’m the queen of the shadows and the spiders spinning their webs in the trees. I’m the queen of the wolves in the hills and the owls in the forest with bright yellow eyes...”

As she continued naming things she was queen of, Henry and Cam – instead of pursuing and trying to capture her – trailed behind her just a few paces following her maniacal dance around the room, step by hypnotic step, knowing that she was right in her claim. In that moment, and from then on, she was the queen of all of those things, including them.

CHAPTER THREE

I got a late start the night I left for home. I'd had a spell of anxiety about the trip and paced in circles for a couple hours around my friend's apartment. Finally, with some encouragement, I got in the car and put the key in the ignition. It was a cold night in late November and the heat in my 1991 sea green Taurus didn't work. I remember the smoky plumes of my breath pushing against the inside of the windshield.

I drove in silence along that desolate stretch of I-40 West, through eastern North Carolina and after about an hour, my thoughts began to drift. I'd just returned home after six months of being away, my first of several attempts to circumvent the reality of adulthood. I left after graduation and backpacked through Europe for a few weeks before arriving in Barcelona. The city cast its spell on me. I looked for a reason to stay and found a job at a hostel in the Gothic quarter, working nights. I enjoyed the nocturnal routine and as I cruised in the left lane, I thought back to those solitary months, recollecting them with a sad fondness.

I remembered, in particular, a day in early June. I'd spent the afternoon on my favorite bench in the park across from Sagrada Familia reading. In between chapters, I looked up at the huge cathedral through the trees on the edge of the greenish pond, their flower-tipped branches like dark veins splintering across the Catalan sky. All around me

sea gulls and pigeons battled for crusty sandwich ends on the ground and behind my bench old men played bocce and smoked cigarettes on the flat, packed dirt.

That was the afternoon I met Vale and Javi, my only two friends in the city. Sure, I'd known people at the hostel and from gigs and parties and cafes, but those characters were all peripheral. They added pleasant details to scattered, solitary nights and we shared a few smiles, and drinks, and dance floors. But they were all fleeting moments, superficial reprieves from my persistent loneliness. None of them truly got to know me or cared about me, except for Javi and Vale.

Javi and Vale were from Buenos Aires. They'd left home ten years prior and backpacked through Europe, finally settling in Barcelona. They'd worked for a while and saved up some money and Javi opened his bar, Que Fiaca, on a quiet corner in the neighborhood, L'Eixample, just four blocks from Sagrada Familia.

At some point, on that June afternoon, sitting on the bench, I imagined Antoni Gaudi in his childhood, at the beach. Perhaps, he sat cross-legged one afternoon watching his mother make drip castles with the wet Mediterranean sand. And perhaps, it was that image that stuck with him, crystallized in the stream of his young consciousness. Perhaps, Sagrada Familia was Gaudi's drip castle to God.

The thought made me smile and when I came to the last sentence of the book, I got up and left the park, happy. I went down the steps, turned left, and began walking along Carrer de Mallorca. After a couple of blocks I saw a curious sign above a corner bar that read, Que Fiaca.

When I walked in, a short guy, a few years older than me, with an unshaven, pleasant face greeted me from behind the bar.

“Che, como te va?” He smiled. “Que vas a tomar?”

I ordered a glass of Malbec and a couple empanadas based on his recommendation.

“Bueno. Soy Javi. Un gusto.” I’m Javi, he said. A pleasure to meet you. I looked around the bar. The walls were sky blue and painted with comic strips of a little girl with a pear-shaped face and dark bushy hair. I didn’t recognize the figure at the time but Javi later told me that she was Mafalda, a character created by Quino, a beloved cartoonist from Buenos Aires. Black and white portraits of famous Argentines hung in gold frames above the bar. I only recognized a few: Cortazar, Borges, and Che Guevara.

Javi brought out my empanadas on a wooden plate and refilled my wine without asking. When I finished eating, he looked over at me and asked, “Y? Te gusto?”

I told him they were the best empanadas I’d ever had, which was true because they were my first empanadas. I didn’t tell him that part.

“No me chamuyes, eh!” he said. I’d never heard that expression before but I liked the way it sounded, so I asked him what it meant.

“Ah, si es muy Argentino. It means, don’t bullshit me,” he said with a strong, but charming accent.

A few minutes later, a girl walked in the bar. Javi and I were drinking coffee at the table. His back was to the door. Even in her loose-fitting hospital scrubs I couldn’t

help but notice her thin, beautiful figure and soft skin. She smiled and I watched her bend over and kiss Javi on the side of his face, at the corner of his left eye.

“Hola amor,” he said. “Como andas?”

“Bien, bien amore mio,” she answered.

I saw the way she looked at him. It must be nice, I thought.

“Che, Vale, te presento mi nuevo amigo yanqui” This is my new Yankee friend.

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Nice to meet you,” she said. “I’m Vale.”

“Hi. I’m Henry. Nice to meet you too,” I answered. I couldn’t look away.

“Ojo, eh,” Javi said smiling, using his index finger to gently tug on the skin beneath his eye, a gesture I would later learn meant, careful. “That’s my girlfriend.”

“Ay, Javi, no seas boludo,” Vale said hitting him playfully. She turned to me. “Don’t mind him. He’s just messing with you.”

Instantly, I liked her. I liked them.

Javi nodded, acknowledging her comment smiling. “What can I bring you, my love? A coffee?”

“No,” she said. “Long day at the hospital. I’ll have a Fernet.”

“Bueno,” Javi said. He looked at me. “Did you try Fernet?”

“No Javi,” Vale interrupted. “Not ‘did you try?’ You should say, ‘have you ever tried Fernet?’”

“Her English is better than mine,” he said.

I told them that I hadn't and Javi brought out three glasses with ice, a couple cans of Coca Cola and a green bottle filled with black liquid, labeled Fernet Branca.

I watched them pour their glasses about a third full of Fernet and then top the rest off with Coke. I did the same.

"Salud," Vale said raising her glass. That was my first of many Fernet's with them. The sun was setting outside in L'Eixample and the surrounding buildings were backlit in pink and orange.

As night fell on the city, the small bar filled with people and the sounds of Argentine folklore music filled the smoky air. Javi lit the candles on the tables that sat wedged inside empty wine bottles, their wax dripping down in translucent canopies of yellow and red. He bounced back and forth between our table and his duties behind the bar.

That was the first of many nights I spent at Que Fiaca, on that comfortable corner of L'Eixample.

I stared out the windshield, through the visible particles of my breath, at the two-lane highway. A green sign read 10 miles to the 95 North exit.

I checked the clock. 11:11. Make a wish, I thought to myself. Alone on that dark road, heading west, going home. Nothing in front of me except blackness and lines, and a distance, less and less with each passing second, between me and DC, driving 80 mph in the left lane. And then suddenly, as if in a stop frame animation film, without transition, in the empty road directly in front of my car, a massive stag appeared. His golden brown

fur and fully hardened crest of antlers were the last things I remember. I lost consciousness on impact.

I came to with my car parked in the right shoulder. Somehow, I'd drifted from the left side of the highway across both lanes and come to a stop in the only place where I was out of harm's way, completely safe and whole. The airbag had deployed and I was covered in white powder; an acrid smell, almost like burning fumes in a chemistry lab filled the empty car. The green hood had crashed back into the windshield and splintered it into a glass spider web in front of my eyes. I touched my face. It felt like a violent rug burn.

For a moment, I thought I was trapped in the driver's seat, as the buck must have hit the car just left of center, crushing in the front, giving the Taurus sedan the appearance of a giant green accordion. I crawled over the center console and gently opened the passenger side door, tumbling out onto the cold pavement.

About an hour later, I was in the passenger seat of Tyler's tow truck. He was young, probably twenty-five, wore a thick flannel shirt, and chain-smoked Marlboro Reds.

"Where were ya heading?"

"Up to DC."

"For Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah." I didn't much feel like talking.

“What’s up there?”

“My brother.”

“Just the two of ya?”

“No. Mom and Dad too. But I’m heading to my brother’s first.”

“Y’all get along?” He glanced over at me. I didn’t respond.

“I only ask ‘cuz me and my brother, Justin, man, I love him to death, don’t get me wrong, but shit, he’s a loose cannon. This one time...” I tuned him out for a while, stared out the window at the blurry tree line enmeshed in darkness. Something about a family gathering, an oyster roast, too much Jim Beam, a comment made about his brother’s ex-girlfriend, his great grandfather’s shotgun from 1885. “We ended up calming that son’ bitch down after an hour or so. But man, what a scene.”

I realized it was my turn to say something. “Sounds like a character.”

“So what about it? You two get along?”

“Oh,” I paused. “Yeah. But I haven’t seen him in a while. About a year.”

“A year?” His voice shot up an octave. “Why the hell not?”

“The semester and then I was out of the country.”

“Where?”

“Europe. Spain mostly.”

“Europe?” He twisted his face into knot. “What for?”

“I don’t know.” We sat in silence for a couple minutes.

“That must have been a sizeable buck you hit,” he said. “You know you’re fortunate, right? From the looks of that car, you lucky as hell.”

“Yeah.” Silence.

“People are reporting accidents on this stretch of highway every night this week it seems. Them bucks all running around like crazy this time of year. We’re ‘bout in the peak of breeding season. They trying to get their dick wet. Women’ll do that to us, huh, make us run around like idiots, jump in front of moving traffic, act all irrational in the head?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Man, I know you just wrecked your whip and all. But I’m trying to have a conversation with you, human to human, and you’re giving me one word answers.”

“I know, Tyler,” I said. “I apologize. It’s just a lot. All of this.”

“What, the car?”

“No, man. I don’t give a shit about the car.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know. Just seems like a bad omen or something. I’ve only been back in the country for three days, and I should be dead.”

“What the hell you sayin’?”

“You just said it yourself, ‘I’m lucky to be alive.’”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. You’re fortunate, but you should be alive. And you are. And because of that fact, you should be thankful.”

“You believe in fate, Tyler?”

“Whatcha mean, fate?”

“Like, do you think things happen for a reason? Everything according to some plan?”

“Well,” he paused, shook his soft pack of Marlboros and offered me one. “I’m not sure. I used to. What ‘bout you?”

“The same.” I lit mine and cranked the window open a hair. The night air was cold.

“But you know what,” he said. “That reminds me of something my granddaddy used to say. He said, ‘people get too caught up on dumb ass questions. Like whether the glass is half full or half empty. Don’t matter. The point is, the glass got something in it. And you should be grateful for that. And furthermore, it’s a sturdy, good looking glass to begin with. So quit you’re nitpicking, and get back to work.”

I laughed. When he heard me, he looked over.

“There it is,” he said. “I knew I’d get it out of ya sooner or later.”

“Yeah.”

“You gonna be alright,” he said. “Whether God’s trying to give you a shake or not, who knows? I think your car just ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. That whitetail buck trying to get him some white tail, if you know what I mean. Wouldn’t be the first time chasing tail ever killed a guy, I reckon.”

He tossed his cigarette out the window and didn’t say anything else until we made it to a Motel 6 and I got out. I thanked him and wished him well.

I spent the night in that motel, just a quarter of a mile off some random exit of 95. My car was totaled. I knew that. I was stuck, so I went to the gas station next door and bought a six-pack, deciding I'd sort it out in the morning.

At breakfast, I met a young couple on their way to Raleigh who told me I could get a ride. They dropped me at the bus terminal and later that night I arrived at Union Station in DC. It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. I strolled aimlessly around the mall and after an hour or so of admiring the monuments all lit up in against the night sky, I walked to the red line and took it to Dupont Circle.

It was just after eleven o' clock when I rang my brother's doorbell.

He met me at the door with a huge smile. His embrace felt the same as I remembered. He hugged with gusto, brought me in so that my head pressed against the top of his muscular shoulder. He smelled like faded aftershave and bourbon.

"Brother's home just in time for Thanksgiving," he said running his hands through his brown hair. "Goddamn. Well, let's not stand out here in the cold. Come on in."

As I followed him up the stairs to his third floor walk up, his voice ricocheted around the eggshell painted hallway. "Man, you just missed everyone. Tim and Jess, Kyle, Greg, Em, Case and Devin. They left less than ten minutes ago. Too bad. They'd have all loved to see you."

We walked in the front door of his apartment. It looked the same as I remembered. He'd moved in around this time last year. The old recliner he'd taken from

our childhood home, along with the beige wrap around couch from the den. The kitchen table. The liquor cabinet, hand made by our grandfather. The apartment felt warm and familiar.

“Just throw your backpack wherever,” he said. “Time for a new one, I’d say. Look’s like that thing’s been through a war. Can’t believe that’s all you’ve been living off for six months. You look good, dude.”

“Yeah, you too,” I said and I meant it.

“Make yourself a drink. I’m gonna hit the head real quick. You know where everything is.”

I set my stuff down and went to the liquor cabinet. It still had that distinct mahogany smell when I swung open the door. Basil Hayden, Knob Creek, Chivas Regal, Hendrick’s, Tito’s.

“Not a bad little selection you got here, man,” I said.

“Yeah, you know. I try to keep a little bit of everything. Except tequila. Devil tequila,” he said flicking the last drops of water from his hands, walking down the hallway. “I’m retired from that stuff. What are you having?”

“Just a gin, I think.”

“No tonic unfortunately. Casey polished it off.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’m good with a splash of water.”

“Okay, well I’m gonna stick with Knob. Don’t want to mix poisons.”

We sat down in the living room and he told me about work and what everyone in the crew was up to. Tim and Jess got engaged. Devin and Cody moved to New York. Greg had gotten his girl pregnant and had taken it as a sign to change his ways.

“He’s done drinking. Can you believe it?” Cam said. “He’s really into yoga all of the sudden. Apparently this girl’s one of those new age, kale and kombucha, let’s all be mindful and look within types. He says she’s a firecracker in the sack though.”

I sat and listened happily. I was glad to hear his voice and to learn about the happenings in his life and the people closest to him, many of which I’d known now for more than ten years. They were like family to me.

I didn’t have to say much. I just sipped my drink and smiled and asked follow up questions at appropriate times. I decided that I wasn’t going to mention the car accident. It was a fluke thing. I was fine. The minor abrasion on my face from the airbag, I said, was a football injury from our last day out at the beach.

“Another one of those famous diving catches, huh?” He laughed and swirled the bourbon around his glass.

“I can’t help myself,” I said. “Sometimes you gotta lay out for one.”

“Did you get it?”

“Of course I got it. What the hell kind of a question is that? Game winning touchdown right here,” I said pointing at my scabbed skin.

“That’s what I like to hear,” the volume knob controlling his voice went up a couple decibels as he stood to throw me a high five over the coffee table.

We refilled our drinks.

“But enough about me,” Cam said. “Tell me about Europe, man. How does a guy turn a six-week backpacking trip into six-months? You didn’t sell your body, did you? I hear that’s big over there.”

“Very funny,” I said. “Nope. No prostitution necessary.”

“So you just found a job?”

“Yep. Good thing about working at a hostel, free room and board. The money was shit, but it didn’t matter. Made friends with this Argentine guy who owned a bar, so I drank for free most nights. You know me. I don’t need much.”

“Sounds nice, if you ask me,” he said, a faint longing in his words.

“It was. Traveling’s lonely though,” I said. “Nature of the beast.”

We stayed up another hour before turning in.

“I’m so glad you’re home, bud,” Cam’s voice quivered ever so slightly as we stood in the hallway.

“Yep. Me too,” I said as I grabbed my ragged backpack and tossed it down in the corner of his guest room.

But that night, I couldn’t sleep. I stared at the ceiling, listening to the pipes creak behind the wall and the refrigerator hum in the kitchen. I tossed and turned for hours. At dawn, I heard the birds outside my window - pigeons and sparrows, cooing and singing and fluttering about. And finally, around seven, I dozed off into a restless half-sleep.

I was up earlier than Cam. I went into the kitchen and fumbled with his Keurig, confused. I’d never seen one before. After a minute or two, I rummaged through some

cabinets and found a French press. I put the kettle on to boil and grabbed the half-and-half from the refrigerator.

On the fridge, magneted to door, was an array of photos and notes, wedding announcements and contact information for plumbers and electricians. He'd taken some of the old pictures from our parents' house: the two of us in our Mario and Luigi Halloween costumes; at the duck pond tossing Cheerios at green-headed Mallards, their feathers iridescent in the afternoon sun; Super Bowl night 1991 in our Redskins sweatshirts and helmets, with Molly. I winced.

He'd also taken several of the magnets from picture days of his childhood sports teams. In each one, he held a soccer ball or a basketball under his arm and smiled at the camera in a different colored t-shirt. I remembered all his team's names. The Red Cardinals, The Grey Ghosts, The Royal Blue Kings, The Purple Pulverisers.

"How about brunch?" he said suddenly behind me, yawning theatrically. "You can't say no. I'm buying. How's that sound?"

"Sure," I said. Something about his energy, his goodness, felt like it was smoothing out the madness in my brain. I'd almost forgotten how nice he was to be around.

"Cool. I'm gonna jump in the shower," he said. "Be ready in fifteen. Let's head to Montrose afterwards and toss the pigskin. You down?"

Later that night, we were sitting again in his living room. A half dozen Chinese food takeout boxes littered the coffee table. He lay reclined in his chair and I sat on the couch, squinting at the TV.

“So, you didn’t tell mom and dad you were coming, right?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said. “I haven’t talked to them in a couple months. You know how I can be with communication.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “I think heard from you, what? Twice in six months.”

“More than that.” I paused, not so sure about my claim. “So anyway, I figured it’d be funny to see their reaction tomorrow when both of us knock on the door.”

“As long as mom doesn’t have a heart attack,” he said.

“How are they doing?”

“She’s drinking a little too much,” he said. “Dad can be a bear, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll see tomorrow. They’re fine, I suppose.”

“How about our Skins? How they looking?” I asked, changing the subject to something more innocuous.

“Another disappointing season, I’m afraid,” he said. “Shocker. The Redskins go seven and nine for the fifth year in a row,” he cracked open a beer. “It all starts with the offensive line. I mean, they’re bad. Wide receivers can’t get open. When they do, quarterback isn’t seeing them because he’s all flustered. Can’t blame him. I’d be tap dancing around the pocket like a ballerina too if I was getting sacked six times a game.” He looked over at me. “Why are you making that face, dude? You constipated?”

“That TV is intense, man. It’s hurting my eyes.” We were watching Jeopardy and the blue of the board seemed abnormally bright. “You been fiddling with the settings or something?”

“I don’t think so. Great picture, huh?”

“I guess.” I got up and went into the bathroom. In the mirror I saw faint purplish grey splotches. I splashed some water on my face.

“I just got an idea,” I said as I walked back out. “For a novel. It’s going to be kind of dystopian, but only set like ten years in the future.”

“What happens in it?”

“Everyone goes blind and at first no one knows why. Then, they realize it’s from staring too long at screens. The technology’s become too advanced. It sings people’s corneas.”

“I mean I’d read it,” he said. “But it sounds preachy, you hippie.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I sat back down on the couch.

“How about this?” he said, suddenly excited. “The screens don’t singe the cornea and cause blindness. Instead, they damage the photoreceptors and people start seeing everything in black and white. No more colors at all. It’s like we go back in time. Citizen Kane, man. The world becomes an Ansel Adams gallery.”

“That’s way better,” I said. “See, I need you, man. We make a good team.”

“Damn straight. And then, instead of Soma in Brave New World, you got drug dealers selling pills that temporarily repair the photoreceptors and people can see color again for like six hours.”

“And the pills are called eye dye tablets. Like eye,” I said pointing to my right eye. “And dye as in tie-dye.”

“People are like, ‘yo man, eye dyed today. It was crazy.’”

We both laughed and then fell silent for a moment.

“But seriously, you need to have that thing adjusted or something,” I said looking back at the TV. “That’s not normal.”

“Brother been gone long time. Leave home. Come back. Home different. Things new. Confusing to brother,” he said in a caveman voice.

“Maybe so,” I imitated him. “One thing stay same. Other brother still idiot.”

He laughed and that deep barreling sound filled the room.

Then from the TV, I heard: After Jeopardy, Channel Seven News Exclusive Report. While most of you are at home making final preparations for a day of family, food, and football, chaos ensues at local shopping malls. That’s right, Black Wednesday, Friday’s mutant offshoot, rolls out to another dicey start this year. Already, there are reports of violence at retail establishments all over the beltway. Stay tuned to WJLA for all the details on this increasingly treacherous evening of sales and savagery.

“Wow,” I said.

“World is getting crazier and crazier, brother,” Cam replied.

Alright, contestants, here is your clue for Final Jeopardy in the category Twentieth Century American Literature.

“How appropriate. You better get this, hotshot,” he said.

Published in 1925, it still sells 500,000 copies a year & was on the bestseller lists in 2013.

“Piece of cake,” I said. “Fire the writers.”

“I don’t know it.”

“Dude, think about it. What book does every high school student in the country have to read every year?”

“Gatsby?”

“Ding, ding, ding.”

The music stopped and the contestants revealed their answers.

What is *The Old Man and the Sea*? No, I’m sorry. That was published much later. And what did you wager? That’s going to cost you all but a dollar.

We come to our second place contestant, what is *The Sound and the Fury*? That is also incorrect, I’m afraid...

“No one reads any more,” I said. “Not even contestants on Jeopardy.”

“Bozos,” he said, half mocking me, as he turned off the TV.

“What should we do now?” I asked.

“Want to play chess? Got dad’s old board all polished up.”

“Let’s do it,” I answered. He went into the dining room and brought back the marble board, with its hand made pieces. “Damn isn’t that beautiful?”

“Probably my favorite thing of dad’s. This and the liquor cabinet,” he said.

We set up the board and each made our first moves in silence. He brought out his knights, as usual. I began attacking with my bishops. We both played defensively at first.

“You know what I was think of around Thanksgiving time?” he asked after a few minutes.

“What?”

“You remember that night that three of us built that fort in the basement and we made up that story about the pigeon who turned into the turkey?”

He laughed for a few seconds and then looked up from the board and saw my expression unchanged.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Now don’t get all glum on me. Fuck. We didn’t even make it twenty-four hours before brother starts singing the blues.”

“I’m not,” I said quickly but I was lying. I felt the clouds rolling in and the darkness settling underneath. “Can we just not talk about her? Please. Is that so much to ask?”

“Woah, easy,” he said. “You realize that mom and dad still live next door to the Reilly’s. You’re going to see them tomorrow.”

“Yeah, got it. Thanks for the reminder. I don’t understand how you can bring her up so casually. Are trying to piss me off?”

“It’s been five years, man.”

“What fucking difference does that make? She was our best friend.”

“She was your best friend,” he said.

“Hey,” I snapped. “Show some respect.”

“Come on. I’m tired of walking on eggshells with you. Molly died. It happened. It sucks.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Look man,” his voice was softer. “I’m not trying to hurt you. But at some point, we should be able to talk about her without this happening.”

“Without what happening, Cam?”

“Without this. You screaming at me.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I looked down at the board and tried to concentrate but none of it made sense. It was if I were reading a book in a language I didn’t understand. I got up and made myself a drink.

“So, what’s your plan?” he asked.

“Huh?” I was trying desperately to shake my mood, but I couldn’t. His words were just noise.

“What are you thinking about doing now that you’re home again? You want me to put out some feelers for a job for you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I felt it rumbling inside me, in my gut.

“Well, think about it. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to...”

“I don’t know if I’m going to stick around.” I don’t know why I said it. The voice I heard wasn’t my own.

He got up and walked over to the window.

“Oh yeah?” He said. “You just gonna fuck off again to Timbuktu?”

“I might,” I’d passed the point of no return. I couldn’t control my thoughts or my words anymore.

“Where to next, gumshoe?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“You’re just popping back in for a little Thanksgiving visit. That’s all, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Super. Thanks for the consideration. I’m glad we’re on your radar.”

“Look man, all of this,” I said pointing around the room. “This is great. I’m happy for you. Keep on doing it. But it’s not for me.”

“Of course, not,” he said. “My brother couldn’t be happy here. Nothing here for him. He’s gotta be off chasing fucking rainbows.”

“You know what your problem is, man?”

“No,” he said. “Please enlighten me.”

“You’re stuck. In this fancy city, fancy job, fancy apartment. This little bubble. Do you even like it here? You ever ask yourself that?”

I didn’t even know what I was saying at that point. My words hissed out with venom, misdirected. I took no issue with the way my brother lived, his decisions. I admired him. In fact, a large part of me was envious of his happiness, his stability.

“Alright,” he said calmly. “This game is over. You need to get your head straight and we can talk in the morning. I’m not going down this road with you tonight. Not on the night before Thanksgiving.”

“I won’t be here in the morning.”

As soon as I heard those words back in my own ear, I regretted them. I hated them, and in that moment, most of all, I hated myself.

“I sincerely hope that you don’t mean that,” he said. Tears welled up in his eyes. He got up and walked toward his room, paused and looked back at me. “You need to stop fucking running away from shit.”

He turned and slammed the door.

I sat there and felt the electricity in the air, vibrations pulsing through every cell in my body. I wanted to go knock on his door. I wanted to tell him I didn’t mean any of what I said. Tell him that I had no intention of leaving again. That I don’t know what came over me. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry.

I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend. That I loved him more than anyone or anything in the world.

I didn’t. Instead, I booked a flight to Buenos Aires, threw my stuff back into my tattered pack, and took a taxi to the airport.

CHAPTER FOUR

Henry flew into Buenos Aires on November 28th, the beginning of the Argentine summer. He supposed Buenos Aires would be like Barcelona, a big city with strange buildings and energy, but without the loneliness, because it would be filled with people like Javi and Vale.

Unfortunately, it wasn't so simple. He hopped around between a few hostels in his first weeks as the days grew long and heat asphyxiated the city blocks.

Henry woke up one morning in mid December in a small studio apartment in Las Cañitas, an upscale neighborhood of the city, he'd found on Craigslist. He lifted his head from the pillow, wet with sweat and stared at the quiet white room around him. The air was heavy and thick. He made coffee and tried to shake the sinking feeling, but the caffeine only intensified his anxiety. He'd been in the city three weeks and had no idea what he was doing. Panic set in.

He took a cold shower. When he got out, he paced in circles around the apartment. He took out his computer and checked his bank account. He still had some money but it was running out fast. In his lack of planning, Henry hadn't realized that the academic year in Argentina finished up before Christmas. His plans of getting work teaching English were hopeless for now. He'd contacted dozens of language institutes and English companies, sent them resumes and asked about jobs. The few that got back

to him all said the same thing. He'd have to wait until late February/early March, as that is the time they will be hiring teachers for the upcoming year.

He did some math. At this rate, if he stayed in Las Canitas, in this white-walled cell of an apartment, he would run out of money in three months. He needed a cheaper option. He opened a bottle of wine and went out to the balcony. His apartment overlooked Avenida Luis Maria Campos, a long, narrow tree-lined street that connected the neighborhoods of Palermo and Belgrano. From his seventh floor vantage point, he watched the people below going about their days, seeming to be in perfect harmony, totally unaffected by his suffering.

In that moment, he decided to write to his brother. He sat at his computer and stared in desperation at the blank screen. He finished the bottle of wine before he typed a single word. Then in a flood, without thinking he wrote:

I would give anything right now to go back in time and be in your apartment playing chess. I never meant to leave and I didn't mean any of the things I said. Now, I'm stuck in this city, alone and tired. There are so many things that I wish I could change. You are so much better than me in so many ways. I've always wanted to tell you that. I'll be home soon.

He looked at what he wrote and as he was about to push send, he paused. He lit a cigarette and then, just as quickly as he'd typed those sentences, he erased them.

Henry left that apartment on Christmas Eve and moved into a student residence in Recoleta. The house was full except for a single top bunk in one bedroom with three

other guys: Mike from New Jersey, Jeremy from London, and Victor from Gothenburg, Sweden.

When Henry arrived, he checked in downstairs and got his room key. He walked up the old wooden staircase and found the door to his room. The only person in there was Mike. He was lying in bed in his boxer briefs spread eagle.

“Hey,” he said. “You the new guy?” He had his hand in his pants as Henry opened the door. The room had one swivel fan, which Mike had locked in place blowing directly on him.

“Yeah,” Henry said. Mike sat up and reached out his hand, thought twice, and instead made a fist. Henry met Mike’s fist with his own.

“I was just, uh,” he stopped. “You know? Scratching my balls. It’s swampy down there. Fucking hot in December, apparently.”

They both laughed. Mike had curly blond hair and a pug face. He got out of bed and put on a pair of basketball shorts.

“Bienvenido, as they say. My name is Mike. Glad to have you. The last guy who was in your bed was a total douche; drank like a fish, perved on all the girls in the house, and snored like a chainsaw. So, I assume you’re an upgrade.”

“I hope so,” Henry said.

“You hungry?” Mike asked. “When Jeremy and Victor get back from the store, we’re going to grab some pizza.”

“Sounds good.”

Later that night, all the housemates, about twenty-five people in total, gathered on the terrace upstairs to drink and barbecue. Mike, unsurprisingly, took charge of the grill as well as the music. They got started a little after nine o' clock, just as the sun was going down, and the humidity doused the night air like a hot spritzer bottle. Henry stood off to the side of the party, drinking a Fernet and coke and smoking cigarettes.

After a little while, a short mousey looking girl approached him and asked for a smoke. She introduced herself as Kat. She was from New Zealand, and despite her small stature and boyish figure, she had a pretty smile and pleasant way about her. Her hair was cut short, kind of pixie-ish and she had a full sleeve of tattoos on her left arm, and piercing blue eyes.

“You just get here today, did ya?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Henry said.

“Yeah, that’s good,” she said looking up directly into his eyes, waiting for him to attach some additional comment to the one word answer. “So, welcome. Plan to stay long?”

“I think so. You?”

She told Henry that this was her last week at the house, that for most of the year, she had lived in a flat with ‘two lovely Argentine sisters.’

“They rented me the third bedroom, the one that their brother usually stays in. He was in London studying. He just got back last week, so now I’m here. Again. As much as I love this city, I don’t think I want to dick around for two months before work picks up again. So, I think I’m going to head south and check out a bit of Patagonia.”

They moseyed over to see Mike tending the meat. It was an Argentine-style parilla, with a crank lever to adjust the height of the grill in relation to the heat of the flame. Mike was a self-proclaimed expert.

“Hey,” Mike said as they approached. “Well Kat, you’re looking fine tonight. That’s one sexy Kiwi, if you ask me. Am I right?”

“Fuck off, Mike,” she punched him in the arm.

“What do we have here?” Henry asked him pointing at the vast array of meat sizzling over the orange embers.

“Well, up top we got our chorizo and morcilla, that’s blood sausage, by the way,” he said. “Those are about done. Kat, can you bring out that plate with the bread? Thanks love.

“Then here, we have my favorite. This is tira de asado, short ribs. Super fatty. Ton of flavor. Over here, this is a flank steak they call vacio. Very good as well. And last but not least, a bit of skirt steak back there, entraña.”

The meat came off the grill, little by little, and got cut and piled up in giant heaps on wooden plates, for people to help themselves. There was plenty of French bread and someone had made chimichurri, along with a simple salad of arugula and tomato.

Later on, after the food was gone, they sat around with a couple acoustic guitars, passing them around between those who could play, and everyone sang. Dozens of empty bottles of wine and Fernet littered the terrace.

It wasn’t until around dawn that the singing stopped and people began descending the stairs to their respective rooms.

Henry found himself in a dark hallway behind the kitchen upstairs. Kat stood on her tiptoes pressing her body up tight against his. She kissed hard, coiled her hand around the back of his head and pulled him in toward her, her fingernails scratching through his hair, and along the skin of his neck. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He listened to the soft moans of her breathing. They had nowhere to go, no privacy anywhere. In his room, as well as hers, there were three people sleeping in bunk beds.

Suddenly, the lights flipped on. Kat and Henry both froze.

They looked up and saw a short, roundish figure, giggling to herself.

“Ah, bueno, Kat. Estas festejando, eh?” she said. It was Blanca, the Paraguayan woman, who cleaned the residence. She was already beginning her day. It was seven in the morning.

“Ay, Blanca,” Kat laughed, turning red. “Que verguena. Fuckin hell!”

“Es lindo, este pibe. Quien es? Donde lo encontraste?” Blanca asked, clearly reveling in the awkward moment.

“Es el chico nuevo. Esta en el dormitorio con Mike y los otros,” Kat said.

Henry introduced himself.

“Ok, bueno. Alguien en este equipo tiene que trabajar,” Blanca said. Someone on this team has to work.

“Good night, Blanca,” Kat said. “Nos vemos en unas horas.”

Kat and Henry walked down the stairs together laughing quietly. When they arrived at the door of her room, she craned her neck to kiss him and whispered, “Feliz navidad, chico.”

Henry was sad to see her go a few days later. The night before she left, they went out with several of the housemates to a few bars and then ended up downtown at a club, where a dj from Berlin was playing techno. Kat found some pills and they danced until the lights came on. They were the only ones left from the original group, everyone else dropping at various points in the night. On the way home, they stopped and had pizza. They sat at a sidewalk table on the corner of Avenida Santa Fe, one of the main arteries of the city that went from the northwestern outskirts directly downtown. Dozens of buses and taxis sped along, honking and screeching in the early morning rush.

“Hard to believe,” Kat said sipping her beer and lighting a cigarette. “I can’t have been here for a year already. Time is a bastard, you know that?”

Henry smiled at her.

“I mean a night like tonight, poof, gone in a flash. Felt like ten minutes. A year of my life, vanished in this,” she pointed out at the bustling avenue. Four different buses flew by, all different colors. “This weird, chaotic mess of a city.”

“How long’s the bus ride tomorrow?” Henry asked.

“God,” she said. “Don’t remind me. Like twenty some odd hours.”

Henry looked at her in the morning light and without thinking said, “I’m going to miss you, Kat.” It just came out. He felt his face flush red and looked at the sidewalk.

“You could come with me, you know?” she answered.

“No, I can’t,” he said. “I need to figure shit out here.”

“It’s summer. You’re not going to be doing fuck-all here, except sweat.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course I’m right. Well, if you decide to come, write me. I reckon we could pool our pesos and get a private room, finally.”

On the walk home, Kat said she was tired, so Henry piggybacked her the last several blocks back to their place. He took off in a full sprint at one point, receiving strange looks from passersby as Kat shrieked and laughed behind him. At the corner, he stopped running and she kissed his neck as he panted and caught his breath.

Six hours later, with her backpack on, she came into his room and said goodbye.

The week after Kat left was brutally hot. At night, they had no air conditioning and only the one swivel fan to move the air through the stagnant room. If they left the window open, they had to deal with the mosquitos. If they didn’t, they practically suffocated. On more than one occasion, they awoke in the middle of the night and found that the fan had mysteriously stopped its 180-degree rotation and was fixed on Mike.

“Look mate,” Jeremy said one morning, after this had happened three or four times. “If you do that again, I’ll murder you in your sleep.”

“Dude, I swear to God,” Mike pled. “I don’t remember doing that.”

“Who do you think did it then, Mike? The fucking tooth fairy?” Jeremy replied.

Each morning, Henry got up and jumped in a semi-cold shower. It was one of three that he took over the course of the day. It was the only reprieve from the heat. But when he got out, the drops of water immediately turned back into sweat, his pores open and his skin constantly losing water.

Time passed slowly during those first two weeks in January. The majority of the middle and upper class city residents, porteños, had hightailed it to coastal towns like Mar del Plata and Villa Gesell. During that period, the half abandoned concrete sprawl was eerie, and at times unnervingly still. Henry felt like he was treading water. He missed Kat. He spent some of his nights with the housemates on the terrace drinking and eating, but he was getting stir crazy. No one in the house was there to make a life in the city. Most of them were just passing through, taking a six-week Spanish class, or settling in to their semester abroad. They took taxis around the city, traveling in packs between the bars and restaurants listed in Lonely Planet. Henry knew he had to get out of there.

He wrote to Kat on a Tuesday to see where she was. He didn't hear back from her until late Wednesday night. She said she'd been on a two-day hike up to a refugio in the mountains and that she planned to keep heading south. They could meet on Friday in the town of El Bolson. That night Henry packed a backpack, headed downtown to Retiro, and took a bus to Patagonia.

He went straight to the hostel that they had decided on, excited and surprisingly nervous about seeing her. The hostel had a large main living room with high ceilings and

rustic, wooden lamps and couch frames. The smell of grilled lamb wafted from the back yard in through the open window. He swung open the door, walked outside, and saw an entire Patagonian lamb splayed on a cross, leaning at a forty-five degree angle a few feet away from an open flame. Two guys sat on stumps nearby sipping Fernet. Behind them was a separate building where the hostel owners set up a small scale brewing operation and bar.

“Dinner in two hours,” one of them said.

“Perfect.” Henry went inside and decided to take a nap, exhausted from the bus ride. He fell asleep to the sweet smell of mountain air and roasting lamb.

“Well, well, well,” he awoke to Kat standing over him. “Someone got himself all tuckered out, did he?”

“Just resting up a bit before my company arrives,” he said turning over.

“You’re expecting someone, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s got blue eyes, tattoos, and talks kinda funny. You seen her?”

“Nope. Can’t say that I have,” she said as she climbed into bed next to him.

That night everyone from the hostel, eighteen people in total, sat around a long wooden table in the common area and ate. First, they had sausages, chorizo and morcilla, served with sliced French bread. They drank Fernet with Coke. There was one couple from Paris. The others were from Buenos Aires, taking their yearly summer vacations from the busy city.

After that came the lamb, charred on the outside, seasoned with rock salt and rosemary, and on the inside pink and tender. The hostel owners opened several bottles of wine, local Malbecs and Cabs, and passed them around the table and conversations got louder and more enthusiastic.

“This lamb. Fucking hell,” Kat said. “Un aplauso, no? Para los asadores!” And they all broke into a thunderous applause as the two grill masters stood and took bows.

After dinner, they went to the bar out back and continued drinking until the sun started to peak over the mountains.

The next day Henry and Kat took a bus south to Lago Puelo, a mountain lake on the border of Argentina and Chile. The French couple and three of their Argentine hostel mates accompanied them. When they arrived they all sat in a circle on the pebbly shore of the lake and passed around maté and buttery bizcochitos. The water was clear in the shallower parts, gradually fading to a deep royal blue out in the center. The mountains surrounding the lake were green with summer leaves and far off in the distance, across the lake on the Chilean side, the highest peaks were still topped with caps of snow.

It was a hot midsummer afternoon and after a couple rounds of maté Henry decided to go for a swim. With some prodding, Kat agreed to join him. She began to shiver as soon as her foot touched the water. About twenty yards from the shore a fallen tree stuck out over the lake, its thickest branch hung parallel to the surface like a hovering bench.

“Let’s go,” Henry said.

“All the way out there? I’ll freeze.”

He dragged her out and she shrieked as her shoulders submerged but after a minute they had pulled themselves up onto the branch and sat, feet dangling. Henry tried to warm her, rubbing the skin of her arms and back. The sun came out from behind a cloud and the lake sparkled in tiny ripples away from their perch in every direction.

“Not bad,” she said leaning back against him, her head resting on his collarbone.

They sat in silence for some time. Back on shore a young girl in a pink bathing suit splashed in the shallows next to her golden retriever and across the lake several neon orange kayaks cut gently across the water.

“Wanna know something weird?”

“Sure,” Henry said.

“Whenever I find myself in a place like this,” she paused. “I mean, in a quiet moment, I stop and think to myself, I couldn’t have fucked up that bad because I made it here. You know?”

He nodded and smiled.

“These moments don’t come as often as I’d like. But when they do, two things cross my mind. First, I ask myself, how many other people have experienced what I am experiencing right now? And was it the exact same? The emotions, I mean. Like yesterday, was someone in Cambodia doing what we’re doing now? Feeling what I’m feeling?”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” he said.

“Because if you think about it, all the things we do and say and feel, all the questions we ask ourselves,” she looked at him. “They’ve all been asked a thousand times already. There’s nothing that unique or interesting about any of it.”

“Yeah.”

“For example, the other day at the hostel in Bariloche I picked up a copy of *The Sun Also Rises*. Hemingway, you read it?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course you have. Anyway, there’s this bit at the beginning when Cohn wants to go to South America. He’s having this crisis, right? You know, the one we’re all having right now. The one where you think that life is passing too fast and you aren’t really living it. He thinks that going to South America will somehow solve that, or shine some light on something. And as I’m reading it, I’m thinking, ‘Cohn, you’re a bloody fool.’ The thing you are looking for isn’t in South America. But then I stopped and I realized, fuck. I’m Cohn. I did that, the exact same thing. I wasn’t happy in New Zealand so I moved to London. Then after a couple years of not being happy in London, what do I do? I move to Buenos Aires.”

They both started laughing. “I did it too,” Henry said. “I mean, in a way it isn’t funny, I suppose.”

“Of course its funny. You have to laugh at these things or you’re fucked,” she said. “In fact, it gives me a strange comfort. It makes me feel like I’m not the only who’s mad.”

“What was the second thing?” Henry asked.

“What?”

“You said that in moments like this two things tend to happen.”

“Oh right. Second thing,” her smile faded. “It’s a bit of a bummer but well, I think about death. A silence that lasts forever. I remind myself that it’ll be here someday, perhaps, sooner than I realize, but not today. And it might sound strange, but it makes me happy. Maybe happy isn’t the right word. It fills me with that thing, you know? Makes me feel like I’m taking part in a piece of the universe, something much bigger than me. Reminds me that I’m not alone. ”

Her voice shook on the last three words. They hung in the sunlight, adding an invisible weight to the mountain air, and suddenly Henry found it difficult to bring into his lungs. She saw his eyes darken before he looked away. The water beneath them turned grey, as a patch of clouds, drifted through the Patagonian sky, covering the sun. Suddenly, Henry felt the effects of exhaustion and alcohol wash over him.

“Hey,” she said – after a few minutes of silence – nudging him playfully. “Look at me. What is it?”

Her voice was warm and soft.

“Nothing.”

“I didn’t mean to gloomy the moment. I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve even made the sun go away. What a cunt I am.”

Henry couldn’t help but smile back at her, in spite of the void swelling beneath in his chest.

“You’re not,” he said. “I was just thinking of someone I used to know. You remind of her a little.”

“Oh. She was a friend of yours?”

“Yeah. My best friend. I was in love with her too, I think,” Henry paused. “Wow, I’ve never admitted that to anyone.”

“What happened?”

“She was in an accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

Kat put her arm around his lower back.

He looked out at the mountains on the other side of the lake.

“It’s funny,” he said, trying to shake his darkness. “I was kind of neurotic as a kid, you know?”

“Me too, completely.”

“When I was in kindergarten, I had this obsession with circles. I drew them over and over, one after another, and couldn’t ever get one right.”

“That is weird.”

“Yeah. It was. So one night at dinner I told my dad about it. He’s a math teacher. He tells me that perfect circles don’t actually exist. I demanded an explanation. Why not? And he’s explaining that the digits of pi go on to infinity and all this stuff that a kindergartener has no way of understanding and then he said, and I’ll never forget his words, ‘the world is in chaos.’”

“Pretty heavy stuff for a six year old,” she said.

“Yeah. Those words stuck with me. Even before that, I always had trouble sleeping. I used to lie in bed at night and try to keep track of my thoughts as they passed through my head. And for each one, I’d click my tongue against the roof of my mouth and pretty soon I was clicking so fast, it sounded like the squirrels in the trees outside my house.

“I used to watch them run around the yard, chasing each other and jumping from branch to branch. It was complete nonsense. A dance with no steps, no choreography, no meaning. And the worst part was, they were so locked into it, so caught up in their little world, that they didn’t even realize when the imaginary music led them into the street, under the tire of a passing car. And to me, that sound, was the sound of chaos.”

“That’s a whole new level of neurotic, man,” she winked at him. “I just used to worry there were monsters in the attic.”

“Oh, I did that too,” he said. “Trust me. But I guess that’s the thing I still can’t really come to terms with. I could be dead right now. Two months ago, I was in terrible accident, going eighty miles an hour, on my way home for Thanksgiving.”

“Need a conversion. We don’t do miles.”

“Oh, um... like a hundred thirty.”

“Pretty fast, got it.”

“It’s nighttime. No one’s on the road. Then bam. A deer just appears out of nowhere. I hit it head on. Crumples the front end of my car like a tin can. The hood crashes back into my windshield, airbag deploys, the whole nine.”

“And you were fine?”

“Yep. Had a scrape on my face from the airbag, that’s it.”

“Fuck, man.”

“But someone’s going to tell me that if I’d forgotten to put on my seatbelt that night and flown through the windshield, it happened for a reason? Part of some master plan? Please. What plan? It’s just shit luck. Chaos. Nothing more.”

“Well, that may be true. But you’ve chosen to frame it that way. You’ve attached that word, chaos, to it and given it that meaning in your head,” she paused. “You call the world chaos; I call it... complex. Even if it is chaos, doesn’t make it any less beautiful, does it?”

He shrugged.

“That brings us back to where we started anyway. You’ve made it this far, to this branch above this lake sitting with this girl. That is the order you’ve carved into the chaos, for now at least. Could be worse, if you ask me.”

And with that, Kat pushed Henry off the branch and he splashed into the lake below. He pulled her in after him and they swam back to shore to join the others. The next day, Kat left again, continuing south.

Henry walked her to the bus station and watched as the bus took off down the road, getting smaller and smaller, until she was gone.

Henry spent the first two weeks of February working at a rural school in the hills outside of Junin de los Andes. He spent his days tutoring the students in English and

working alongside a local gaucho named Don Segundo. Together, they built a recycling shed next to the cafeteria.

On his afternoons off, Henry sat by the river behind the school and watched the rainbow trout jump out of the clear, shallow water. A group of three girls from Buenos Aires were there at the time and the four of them lived together in the school's volunteer cabin. They had maté and croissants for breakfast and cooked dinner in their small kitchen at night. On a couple of the sunnier days, the girls put on their bathing suits and came to sit by the river with Henry. They didn't have much in common but Henry enjoyed their company. His favorite of the three was named Luz.

One night at dinner, she suggested that the following Saturday they get up early and hike up Lanin, a local volcano outside of town.

They got to bed early on Friday and woke up with it still dark out. Luz put on water for maté and the rest of them started making sandwiches and packing backpacks. She turned on some cumbia and began dancing around the cabin, twirling each of her friends around her. She was skinny and a bit awkward but had a nice complexion and pretty smile.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door and in came the head of the school. He pulled Luz outside for a minute and when she came back in she was hysterically crying. She went into the back of the cabin to the girls' bedroom and fell face down on the bed. The other two girls approached the man and they too burst into tears and ran back to her. All three of them packed their bags and left in a hurry. Henry found out later that Luz's father had committed suicide.

Henry arrived back in Buenos Aires in mid-February to find that the city had awoken from its summer nap. The streets teemed with people all tan and beautiful from weeks at the coast. An energy pulsed through the main avenues of Santa Fe, Cordoba, and Corrientes that hadn't existed when he left.

He moved back into the residence and started sending out resumes and inquiry letters to schools and companies throughout the city. He gave himself two weeks. By March 1st, Henry hoped to have a job lined up and a place to live. He stopped drinking and spent his nights reading or sitting at cafes in the leafy plazas of Palermo and Barrio Norte.

One night the sky turned purple as a late summer storm rolled through the capital. Kat had put Henry in touch with one of her friends, a British guy named Sam. Sam had lived in the city for three years and strung together an impressive portfolio of ways to make money. He bartended three nights a week at an expat bar in Recoleta. He gave private English lessons. He worked as a freelance translator. He sold his photography at the Sunday market in San Telmo. He wrote for Time Out, a travel magazine about cultural events and nightlife in the city. On top of all that, he got in with a local study abroad company and led tours.

“What don't you do?” Henry asked him as they smoked a cigarette on the balcony of Sam's twentieth floor Palermo apartment, heat lightning cutting across the sky.

“I don’t walk dogs,” he said. “Though I don’t knock it. Those guys, you seen them? The ones who walk like twelve fucking dogs at once, taking up the entire bloody sidewalk?”

“Yeah,” Henry laughed.

“They do alright,” he said stubbing out his cigarette. “But the point is, you can make it in this city, mate. Trust me. You just gotta hustle.”

Those were the words Henry needed to hear. The two of them became friends and over the coming months, Sam introduced Henry to quite a few people.

Henry rented a room in Barrio Norte, on one of the perpendicular streets that intersected Santa Fe, just a few blocks from Alto Palermo. He landed a job teaching English at an American tech company that had several sites throughout Greater Buenos Aires. First, they sent him to their Olivos location, just north of the city proper, along the Panamericana Highway every Monday and Wednesday. Then, after Henry proved reliable and got good feedback from the client, they had him go downtown to their Puerto Madero building on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The money wasn’t great but it was enough to make rent and occasionally meet Sam and his friends for a few happy hour beers or a very infrequent night out on the town. The next few months flew by as Henry settled in to his new life in the city.

One Sunday in late May, after the sun’s heat had softened to a warm glow, Henry decided to head down to the old part of the city, to the feria in San Telmo. It was a perfect

fall day and he figured he might run into Sam down there selling his photos and maybe they'd grab a drink.

He got on the D Line Subway at Bulnes and took it to Catedral. He crossed Plaza de Mayo and walked down Defensa toward Plaza Dorrego, through the masses, sidestepping distracted tourists. Lining the street on both sides were rickety stands with eager salesmen lurking behind them. Others just laid out their merchandise on the cracked stone sidewalk. They sold maté gourds and antique silverware, old Mafalda books, leather goods, and Ray Ban knock offs.

The autumn sun draped the bustling corner of Buenos Aires in a festive tapestry of gold and shadows and the air buzzed, smelling like incense and cheap marijuana. Somewhere in the distance Henry heard the sound of drums.

He found Sam a few minutes later standing behind his makeshift photography display. Sam told him he'd be closing up in a bit and he'd meet him in Plaza de Mayo.

Henry kept on down the cobblestone street and did a loop around Plaza Dorrego, admiring one of the tango dancers performing in the middle of the touristy outdoor cafés. She wore red lipstick and a black dress with a slit that came all the way up her hip. Her movements were delicate and precise, but had a certain violence to them. She pressed her body against her partner, following his lead, spinning and kicking her legs in an and out of his, their synchronized dance taking them from one corner of the plaza to the other. As the intensity of the music heightened she wrapped her leg around his lower back and they spun in rhythmic circles.

He bought an empanada on the way back out to Plaza de Mayo and took a seat at one of the benches to wait for Sam, looking around the famous square.

Pigeons hobbled to and fro, chasing each other, with occasional spastic movements fluttering to escape encroaching footsteps, their neck feathers shining iridescent like oil spills on pavement. A wrinkled man stood in the back of the plaza selling corn kernels to feed the mangy birds. Off to his right, the chalky pink presidential palace, la Casa Rosada, loomed against the backdrop of the fall sky. All around the plaza canopies and protest signs of the forgotten war veterans flapped in the breeze, dyed the colors of the Argentine flag saying things like, “Inclusion y Justicia, Tambien para Nosotros,” and encircling the Pirámide de Mayo were white hoods painted on the ground.

“What do you say, mate?” Sam’s voice took him out of his momentary reverie. “You want to grab one down here or head back up to our neck of the woods?”

They decided to leave downtown and got the train. As they descended the steps of the subway, a boy with a discolored face, wearing a soiled sweater asked them for some change, “una monedaaaa?”

They got on and sat down across from two teenaged girls who stared at their phones, engrossed in a world of photographs, comments, hash tags, and likes.

At the first stop, a mother got on with her young daughter. They were both well dressed. The girl had a balloon tied to her wrist and swung her dangling legs back and forth alternating her glances between her mother and her pink balloon. The mother was young and pretty. She wore her jeans tucked into brown leather boots, and a white coat with buttons down the front. She fixed her daughter’s skirt and hair when they sat down.

A few minutes later another girl, about the same age as the one with the balloon, walked down the subway car. She was alone. Her face was caked with dirt and she had large brown eyes that scanned the floor. She wore a faded pink shirt that said ‘princess’ in sparkly letters.

She first approached the mother and her daughter holding out her small hand. The mother looked at the girl and shook her head. Then the girl drifted over to Sam and Henry and did the same. Henry put his hand out and their palms grazed past each other. Then she formed a fist and their two fists touched and she looked up at him with burdened eyes. He reached into his pocket and fished out a peso and gave it to her. Her eyes returned to the floor and she quietly said, “gracias.”

Then she walked over to the two teenage girls but they didn’t acknowledge her and she continued on to the next car.

The girl with the balloon tugged innocently at her mother’s shirtsleeve and asked, “Mami, por qué esa nena le da la mano a todos?”

“Ay, mi amor,” she said. “No todos los chicos van al teatro el domingo.” She touched her daughter’s face.

Sam and Henry got off at Bulnes and walked to a corner bar on Avenida Colonel Diaz and sat at a table on the sidewalk.

“What are you having, mate?” Sam asked.

“Should we get beer? I think I’d prefer a gin.”

“Gin sounds good,” he replied. Just then a waitress approached the table with a small basket of peanuts.

“Y chicos, que van a tomar?” she asked.

“Dos gin y tonic,” Sam answered.

“Bueno,” she replied smiling.

“So, how are things? I haven’t seen you in a couple weeks?” Sam lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair.

“Yeah, good,” Henry said. He looked down the shady, tree-lined avenue. There were pasta shops and bakeries and vegetable stands. It was beautiful, almost peaceful here, a different world from the commotion of downtown. He watched an old man amble along, having a quiet conversation with his terrier.

The waitress set their drinks on the table.

“You alright, mate? You seem distracted.”

“That girl, the one in the pink shirt that was begging for money on the train, how old do you think she was?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Four or five, I reckon.”

“And the girl with her mom, the one with the balloon?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you hear the question she asked once the other girl left?”

“She said, ‘Mom, why does that girl give her hand to everyone?’”

“What’d she say, the mom?”

“Sweetheart, not all children go to the theater on Sunday.”

“Fuck, man. I’m still not quite used to seeing that stuff.”

“Yeah, well, you will. For better or worse. Pretty soon you won’t even notice. Then, you’ll get a reminder when you’re least expecting it. A buddy of mine just got his flat broken into last night.”

“Really? What happened?”

“He got home and found his door torn off the hinges.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. They’d already been in and left. They took his laptop and camera and I guess he had some money hidden somewhere. Twelve hundred pesos or something like that.”

“What’s he gonna do?”

“Nothing. He reported it to the police, but they aren’t going to do anything. That’s life here in the big city. Can’t let it get to you.”

“I guess. Has that ever happened to you?”

“No, fortunately not,” he said. “A couple random incidents in the street. Nothing major. Just have to keep your eyes open. We aren’t in Kansas, Toto.”

“You’re telling me. Should we have another gin?”

“Yeah, I’ll grab her next time she comes back out.”

They ordered another drink and as soon as the waitress brought them Henry heard a clanging sound coming from above them. In the air. It was sharp and metallic. Then he heard other hits, dull and hollow, like the Go-go drummers in the streets of DC, but without the syncopated rhythms. It happened again. Over and over. More than one.

People were hitting things, beating. It grew louder. He turned around and tried to find the source of the racket. He didn't see anything.

"It's up there, mate," Sam said and then he saw it. Clack, tock, bang, crack, clang, bam. It started coming from all around. The noise seemed to ricochet off the buildings and trees through the evening air.

All of the neighbors were out on their balconies above the avenue with wooden spoons hitting pot and pans. As Henry's eyes focused, he saw them, people on at least a dozen different balconies all doing the same thing. Then he heard the sound from off in the distance and it grew in waves, fuller and more dramatic; the clangs came from 360 degrees around the bar.

It didn't stop. Before long, he couldn't hear himself think.

"What the hell are they doing?" he asked Sam.

"Cacerolazo, mate," he said.

"What?"

"It's a form of protest. I forgot that this was happening tonight."

"You knew about it?"

"Yeah, it's all organized on the internet and social media nowadays. People are out on their balconies and in the streets banging pots and pans in every neighborhood of the city at this very moment."

"What are they protesting?"

"Well, part of it is what we were just talking about. How unsafe the city is becoming. The government refuses to acknowledge the severity of the problem. Also,

they've just instituted a series of controls on foreign currency exchange. People can't buy dollars. Then there's inflation, the devalued peso, corruption. Basically, just everyone is pissed off and this is one of the ways they voice it."

"Woah," Henry said. "So they just go out and hit stuff? That's kind of awesome."

"I agree," Sam said. "There's a lot that's awesome about this city, mate.

Especially the people. Don't let the horror stories spook you. You're gonna like it here."

Autumn came and went and soon after that day of the cacerolazo, the cold, damp set in. It was as if someone hit the dimmer on the sun or covered the sky above Buenos Aires with a sheet of grey gauze.

It rained a lot, but the rain – especially in the mornings – felt more like a taunt than punishment. Slowly and quietly it fell from the dreary sky, forming puddles on the roads. Some mornings, when walking to the bus stop on Scalabrini Ortiz, Henry would step on a loose sidewalk tile and water would fly up and drench his shoe and pant leg. On those days he sat in the conference room on the fourth floor where he taught classes for eight hours with wet socks. When he got home in the evening, his feet were pruned and shriveled and he'd make maté and run hot water in the tub to get warm. His apartment didn't have central heating so he bought a small space heater that he kept near him at all times. At night, with the lights out in his bedroom, its hot, snake-like coils painted the walls in a menacing, orange light.

He kept to himself during those first weeks of the cold and spent his nights reading and playing a cheap, nylon string guitar he'd purchased downtown on Calle Talcahuano.

It had been six and a half months since he'd spoken to his brother and he wondered how long the stand off would last. On half a dozen lonely nights he drafted letters to him. Some were somber and apologetic. Others were filled with stories of his time in Patagonia and life in the city. He saved them in a folder but never clicked send.

Once a month, Henry had to go downtown to get paid. On those days, he was always nervous. He'd leave the company's office and make a left on Avenida Corrientes. From there he had to walk along a pedestrian street for three or four blocks and then take a right on Saenz Peña, which cut diagonally back toward 9 de Julio where he could catch the subway to Palermo.

Other than Sam's words of warning, he had no real reason for anxiety considering he'd never had any problems in the city and he was beginning to feel comfortable moving from place to place. However, walking through downtown and getting on the train with fifteen or eighteen hundred pesos cash tucked in his pants always made for a stressful journey. His head was on a constant swivel and he walked with purpose, only stopping at corners for traffic when absolutely necessary. While he still had some money left for emergencies in his bank account, it wasn't much. He knew that on any given payday, if anything went wrong, he'd be in trouble. So, on those trips back home, Henry kept his eyes open and his senses sharp.

As he turned onto his street he always looked around to make sure no one was following him. Once he assessed the situation, he took out his keys and quickly opened the front door and got in the elevator. Inside the apartment he breathed a sigh of relief and poured a celebratory whiskey to calm his nerves as he stashed his month's earnings in one of the books on the shelf. He figured the last place a thief would look for money was a worn out paperback. He alternated the books each month for his own amusement. April was *My Antonia*, May *Cat's Cradle*, and now June *East of Eden*.

In the excitement of settling in to his new apartment and work schedule, Henry had overlooked an important detail. His 90-day tourist visa had expired. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be working on a tourist visa but everyone did it. The Argentine border patrol wasn't particularly concerned with Europeans and Americans living and working in the country. Their efforts to control foreigners mainly targeted immigrants from the surrounding South American states. So the loophole expats found was obvious. They came in to the country on a ninety-day tourist visa and found a job. Then on day eighty-nine, they hopped on a boat, crossed the river to Uruguay, spent the afternoon in Colonia or one of the other small towns adjacent to Buenos Aires, and came back with a new stamp in the passport and ninety additional days of legal residence.

The fact that he'd overstayed his ninety days worried him a little so he began to ask around. The general consensus was that it wasn't a big deal. He would get a slap on the wrist and have to pay a fine of three hundred pesos whenever he left the country, so Henry put the thought out of his head and decided he'd deal with the whole thing later.

As June drew to a close, Henry's spirits fell lower with each passing day. The drizzly mornings and quiet lonely nights were starting to get to him. As time passed, he found himself after work – instead of reading and strumming his guitar – spending the evening hours scrolling through his newsfeed, staring longingly at pictures of people back home.

Time began to crawl. Days blurred together, waiting for buses, explaining verb conjugations, drinking by himself in his apartment, clicking on pictures of beach trips and summer music festivals.

He was in a rut. He'd made good progress for a few months, taken care of laying the foundation for a life in the city, but now he felt like the rain and fog had brought construction to a halt and he was stuck trudging through the cold mud.

One night Henry went down to his local kiosk to get a liter of beer. The attendant that evening was a different guy than usual. He was about Henry's age, with greasy hair, a soul patch, and a stoned look on his face. Henry went back to the refrigerator, grabbed a liter of Quilmes, and when he got out his wallet to pay, he said to him, "Hola. Que tal? Como estas?"

The guy gave Henry a strange look and paused for a minute before he responded, "Diez pesos." Ten pesos, at that time, was double the price of a liter of beer.

Henry glared back at him and repeated, "Diez pesos? Un litro de Quilmes?"

"Si," his expression didn't change.

"Bueno," Henry said. "Quedatela." Fine. Keep it. He walked out of the kiosk and never went back.

It was in moments like this that Henry got a quiet, sad reminder. Buenos Aires was not his home. From that night on, little things hurt more than they should have. A strange look from someone when he asked for directions or an awkward interaction with a cashier at the supermarket was enough to ruin his day.

On the first Friday in July, Henry was sitting in his apartment staring at the orange light, when his doorbell rang. He didn't get up, figuring someone must have accidentally hit the wrong button downstairs. Thirty seconds passed and it rang again. Then once more. Fuck, he thought to himself.

He looked around at the clothes scattered all over the floor and a sink full of dirty dishes. Whoever it is will go away eventually. It was quiet for a few minutes and Henry returned to staring at the wall.

Knock, knock, knock. Someone was at the door. Henry froze.

"I know you're in there, mate. Open up." It was Sam.

Reluctantly, he got up.

"How did you get in the building?" Henry asked.

"Hey, nice to see you too," Sam said. "A fine young lady let me in. Gimena, her name was. Fucking gorgeous, that one. And friendly as well. You should go knock on her door someday. Which apartment is she in? Let's go down to the supermarket and buy her a bottle of wine and I'll introduce you."

"Sam, what do you want?"

"Well, someone's a bundle of sunshine this fine Friday afternoon, innit?"

Henry couldn't help but laugh as Sam pushed his way past him into the apartment. Immediately, Sam started picking up the clothes on the floor and putting them in the hamper.

"The place looks like hell, mate," he said. "You running a fucking opium den in here. Open that curtain. Put on some water. I want maté. Or better yet, let's go to Antares for a pint. You in?"

"Sam, I really don't feel like it."

"No, no, no," Sam said. "This is what I was afraid of. Haven't seen you in a month. You're not answering your phone. I show up unannounced and find you living like a mushroom in a dark shoebox. This won't fly, my friend."

"I hate you sometimes."

"Yeah, yeah. Get dressed. It's cold out."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh yes you are. Guess what the seasonal beer is this month?"

"The IPA?"

"Ding, ding, ding. When was the last time you had a proper India Pale Ale? I know how much you Americans love your hoppy beers. I'll buy the first round. Chop, chop. Wash you face. You're forehead is greasy."

"Goddammit, fine."

They left the apartment and took Soler to Scalabrini Ortiz and continued into Palermo Soho. The day was cold but clear and it felt good to be out in the streets. As they walked Sam chattered on about his latest project. He and a German girl Henry had met a

couple times were trying to organize a street art festival. They'd been in contact with one of the city's most prominent patrons of the arts, a hotel mogul and real estate developer, and they were trying to get a permit to paint a massive wall in Puerto Madero.

They walked past Plaza Armenia. The trees that lined the corner – filled with purple blossoms in warm weather – had bare branches. Children ran in every direction as the red carousel in the plaza played circus music and the air smelled like caramelized peanuts.

The bar was just opening its doors as they arrived and they took a table toward the back. It was fashioned after a German beer hall, with high ceilings and simple decorations. The waiter greeted them with a smile.

“Chicos, que tal? Que tomamos? Dos IPA, no?”

“Bien. Nos conoces, eh!” Sam joked.

“Si, obvio,” he replied. He returned a minute later with two beers.

“Cheers, mate,” Sam said. “Alright, so what's going on with you? You hibernating?”

“Something like that.”

“Is it a damp drizzly November in your soul?”

“Ha. Winter doldrums. No big deal.”

“You think this is bad. Try a winter in London. Dark by four in the afternoon. Miserable place to be.”

“I bet,” Henry said sipping my beer. “This is good. Almost tastes like home.”

“You hungry? Should we get a picada or something?”

Henry looked at the menu. “Shit’s expensive.”

“Oh don’t worry about that, mate. I’m doing well for myself this month. I’ll buy.

Smoked meats and cheeses, okay?”

“No no,” Henry said. “You’re not buying, Sam.”

“Te invite, che. No seas boludo,” Sam said in an exaggerated porteño accent. The waiter walked by and smiled when he heard him.

“Ya sos argentino, eh!” he said. “Te traigo algo mas? Una picada?”

“Si, por favor. Quesos y fiambres.”

“Bueno.”

“Anyway,” Sam said. “Where were we? The doldrums.”

“Right. I don’t know. Everything’s good. I shouldn’t complain. Job’s fine.

Apartment’s fine. Small and cold, but it’s okay,” Henry said. “Just too much thinking.”

“The mind can be a scary place.”

“And it kind of sucks looking at everyone’s pictures from back home. Friends are at Bonnaroo and the beach and I’m here stepping over puddles and dog shit.”

“Oh fucking hell,” Sam said.

“What?”

“Think about it. All you’re doing, looking at everyone’s bloody pictures is filling your head with nonsense. You’re asking yourself pointless questions. Was it the right decision to come here? Should I have stayed home? And it’s all bollocks. No one’s life is the way it looks on Facebook. All those smiling, sun-tanned faces, holding beers under beach umbrellas – it isn’t real.”

“What do you mean it isn’t real? Of course it’s real.”

“Come on. Those photos, they are isolated moments, plucked deliberately from the monotonous drone of daily life to give off a perception of wholeness. Look how wonderful my life is. I bet you wish you were me,” he was getting fired up. “I mean why did you leave DC in the first place?”

“Nothing there excited me. I was bored. Well... that’s the simple answer.”

“Exactly. You left because you were bored. So then why second-guess it? Sure, once in a blue moon something cool happens and you miss it. Five or six days of the year your friends do something you wish you could be there for. What about the other three hundred sixty? What pictures are they posting those days?”

“Grilled cheese sandwiches and pictures of cats.”

“Exactly. Hash tag, whycantIsleepallday.”

“You’re right.”

“Of course I’m fucking right. I’m always right. Remember that. And one more thing before I hop down from my soapbox,” he smiled at Henry and signaled the waiter for two more pints. “Did you take any photos of Patagonia and post them?”

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care enough, I guess.”

“That’s right. But if you had, than you could have stolen fifteen seconds from hundreds of other people’s lives. You would have had all of your friends saying to

themselves, 'Damn. Look how much cooler his life is than mine.' Blown opportunity, mate."

The waiter came by with the beers.

"Gracias, che," Sam said before turning back to Henry. "For the record, I talked to Kat. You know what she told me?"

"What?"

"She told me about the dinner at the hostel and the day at the lake and whatever else you two perverts did in that room you booked. And you're going to sit here and argue that that doesn't stack up against some lousy beach trip? Fuck off."

"When you put it like that," Henry said. He picked a peanut out of the basket and cracked the shell between his thumb and index finger.

"How many friends do you think I have?" Sam asked him.

"On Facebook?"

"No, idiot. Real friends in real life."

"I don't know, a lot I assume."

"Three."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have three friends," he said. "There are three people in the world that really know me. That got my back. That have been given full access passes into my fucked up little world. Three people that if I were in trouble, they'd be on a plane tonight." He paused to sip his beer. "How many real friends do you have? Don't answer. It's a

rhetorical question. But think about it. Take care of those people. Keep them close. Fuck everyone else.”

Henry thought about his brother, Cameron. And while the thought of him gave Henry a pinch of sadness, like a needle poking him just below the sternum, he knew he still had him. He was his best friend. They’d mend things. They’d be okay.

Two days later, Sam invited Henry to a 4th of July party at a friend’s house in San Telmo. Henry got down there in the late afternoon, just as the sun began to set. Julia, one of the flat mates, greeted him at the door. She wore an American flag bandana and had black paint under her eyes like a football player. She welcomed him inside and they walked past the courtyard up the stairs. The house was full of people speaking a medley of languages. Henry heard Germans speaking Spanish, Australians speaking French, and Colombians speaking English. Everyone was in a festive, boisterous mood and it took Henry a minute to acclimate to the commotion. In the living room, some Americans were teaching Argentines how to play beer pong. In the kitchen, people stood in a circle passing around a box of aguardiente. Henry tried to walk through and was stopped by a guy wearing a Hawaiian shirt who said, “Che, have some firewater, my friend.”

Up on the terrace, people stood in groups smoking cigarettes and on the grill, several cuts of meat and sausage sizzled over the glowing coals.

“Hey, man. Glad you made it. Let me take you around,” Sam put his arm around Henry’s shoulder.

They spent the night eating and drinking and around midnight everyone gathered on the roof and lit sparklers and shot bottle rockets into the night. Around three in the morning, Sam and Henry caught the 29 bus back to Palermo and Henry woke up the next day with a raging headache, but he didn't mind.

The rest of winter flew by and before Henry knew it spring arrived and the grey gauze was torn out of the sky. The parks were green and the trees that lined the plazas were in full bloom, coloring the city in shades of lavender and pink.

In October, Henry finally went to Uruguay. Sam was due to go and Henry tagged along with him and his friend, Imogen, who was visiting from London. The man at customs gave Henry more flak than he was expecting. He threatened to report Henry to someone, somewhere. Henry wasn't exactly sure to whom. He barked at him with a stern voice and furrowed brow.

“Y que haces aca en Argentina?” What are you doing here in Argentina?

Henry wasn't sure what he should say. He hadn't prepared an answer for that simple question, which in retrospect was very stupid. He looked at Sam and Imogen, who had already passed through and waited on the other side. Sam mouthed the words, don't tell him that you are working.

Henry froze.

“Estas con problemas,” he told Henry he was in trouble. “Casi un año sin salir.” Almost a year without leaving. Had it been that long? Kat was right; time is a bastard. He

left the window and came back with another man who asked Henry if he was working. Henry could tell he had a 'deer in the headlights' look on his face.

"No," he said. At that point, one of the other customs officials, a middle-aged woman had turned around and was also watching him. Then Henry got an idea. "Disculpame," he said. "Vine a Buenos Aires de vacaciones el año pasado y conocí a una chica argentina y me enamore. Y no sé qué hacer. No quiero romper la ley pero no puedo irme."

As soon as Henry said this, the second man and the woman at the next window smiled at each other.

"Jose," she said. "Dejate de joder. Esta enamorado. No pasa nada."

Reluctantly, he stamped Henry's passport and let him through.

"That was more intense than I thought it was going to be," Henry said joining Sam and Imogen on the other side.

"They were grilling you, mate," Sam said. "What did you tell them? It was like all the sudden you said the magic word."

"I told them that I was sorry and I didn't want to break the law but that I'd met a girl and fallen in love and I couldn't leave."

"That is brilliant," Imogen said. "Well done, man."

That was Henry's first of over a dozen trips to Uruguay. He never let his ninety days expire again. After a few years however, he started getting questioned on each trip due to the sheer amount of stamps in and out of the country over such a long period of

time. Whenever an official started to read him the riot act, Henry always gave the same story. I'm in love. I don't know what to do. It never failed. Not once.

Henry didn't like lying, even in that situation when it was out of necessity. In his mind though, he wasn't really lying. Over those years, he had fallen in love. Not with a girl, but with the city as a whole. With the people, the language, the literature, the little things. He fell in love with the sense of humor, the cynicism and self-deprecation. The way people gestured with their hands when they spoke. The customs. Getting together for asados. Maté in the park. Fugazetta, pizza with so much cheese and onion that after two pieces you didn't want to eat for days.

At the end of his third year, Henry quit his teaching job with the tech company. He was tired of following the booklets and playing the absurd audio clips. He knew there had to be a better way to teach the language, a better option than worksheets with fill in the blank verb conjugations. He told his boss at the beginning of November that he'd finish out the year but he would not be returning to the company the following March. He was ready for something different. To him, Buenos Aires was changing, expanding, pulsing with new, untapped energy. She was trying to teach him to find what he was looking for. Asking him to look past the cracked sidewalks and dingy street corners. Beyond the noise and crime and dirt there was something vibrant, something beautiful and he was determined to unearth it.

At the end of November, with Henry's visa about to expire again, he decided that he'd take a vacation, go explore the beaches of Uruguay, the desolate towns he'd heard

so much about and never seen with his own eyes. He took a boat across the Rio de la Plata to Montevideo and from there, a bus to Punta del Diablo.

BIOGRAPHY

Peter Magellan graduated from James Madison High School, Vienna, Virginia, in 2003. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from The University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2007. After completing his undergraduate degree, he lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina for four years where he taught English. He received his Master of Fine Arts from George Mason University in 2016.