

Two Countries

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Five weeks after his father's death, Jack awoke from a deep sleep. He had been dreaming of a trip he had taken with his wife for their second anniversary, when they rented a secluded cabin on the shore of Lake Michigan. They swam in the lake day and night, cool water on their skin and freedom in their laughter. As Jack came to, he groped for Kate's soft body, but she was not there, for he had left home—left the country—a year ago, to come to Uruguay and aid his father and family in the hopeless battle against death. He groaned, and dug his hands under the mattress, squeezing the cheap, yellow foam between his fingers. He lifted himself out of bed, the winter light that slipped through the window piercing his eyes, the flat black stone of the floor cold on his feet. It was a quiet morning, as if the world had started that day.

As he heated some water for coffee, Jack rolled open the shutters and checked the mail. Two letters, both from his wife, her heavy cursive hand scrawled across the front. He leaned against the dining table, turning the envelopes in his hands and tracing their postmarks, a couple days apart, with his thumb. He did not open them, but placed them on the stack he had already started above the stove. He knew that if he read their tempting contents, he would long for home, but home was a place he was not ready to return to. At first he had rescheduled his flight to the next day, then the next week, the next month, but one day his calls to United Airlines stopped entirely. He e-mailed his wife from his cousin's place, the message brief and believable: "Legal issues arose with the inheritance. Will come home as soon as possible, once everything has been resolved." But the truth was that something within him had changed, and that he was not sure when he would be returning to Michigan. He had to know, before he went back, who he had become, and until then, he would stay here in the old summer

home his father had left him, leaving letters unopened and phone calls unreturned. Kate could manage without him, for she and the children were staying at her mother's in Ferndale, and she had a year of leave from teaching. Without such worries, it was easy for Jack to forget about her and his kids, to think only about himself.

After his coffee was ready, Jack sat on the sofa and watched the birds landing in the muddy puddles that had formed in the dirt road outside. No one ever walked by. Most of the country's population lived just fifteen miles away in the capital, working at offices and studying for exams, climbing aboard buses and tightening scarves around their necks. In three months they would return to summer homes like this one, and forget all about the bleak sadness that in winter enveloped the city like a haze. But for now, the streets and houses, even the nearby bakeries and pizza joints, were deserted. Jack was grateful that when he went for walks, there was no one to run into, and that when he lay in bed at night, the howling of strays was all he heard, his lullaby.

Bird-watching was a habit he had picked up here, in the de la Cruz summer home. Watching the tiny creatures, the swift movement of their wings as they bathed, the way they took a breath after each sip of water before bending down for more, reminded Jack of his childhood visits to Uruguay. His father had taken him here for Christmas and New Year's, when summer came in waves to South America—before Jack's mother died, before his father disappeared into his silence, before he became a stranger to his son, and his son to his father's country.

The house had been abandoned for forty years, but the birds were the same as they had been then, and their songs, too. Every day, Jack sat in front of the picture window to admire them. But today, Jack caught sight of a cat crawling toward the puddles in the street. It was all black, except for four white paws. He put down his cup of coffee, threw on his coat, and stepped outside into the dank air. "Shoo," he said, picking up a pebble and tossing it at the creature. "*Fuera de aquí.*"

The birds scattered, landing deep in the trees' leafless branches, but the cat did not move. It did not have the strength to. Fear, in the form of large eyes and an open mouth, spread across its face. From the window, Jack had thought it was a large feral cat, but now, closer, as it stood frozen in the middle of the road, he saw that it was merely a kitten. He walked down the driveway to the road and picked up the animal. It was the size of his hand.

"You need something to eat, little guy," he said, rubbing the small ribs that protruded from the kitten's dark belly.

Jack thought of the corner shops that were all closed for the winter, of his kitchen, which was almost empty, save for a carton of eggs and tins of coffee and powdered milk. He looked down at the cat, which shivered in his arms, and listened to its weak breathing, a soft, panting rhythm. He knew he would have to use the Volkswagen Beetle that sat in the driveway, the car his aunt had lent to him, her poor nephew, who had rarely talked to his father and now it was too late. Would his father have kept his silence, Jack often wondered, if he had known of the stroke that would run through his body, and the coma that would follow?

Jack had hoped that he could stay away from the real world after his father's passing, but now he fingered the car keys in his coat pocket, and he could already smell the worn leather, hear the rattling of the windows in the wind. He would speed along the highway toward Montevideo. Before he knew it, he thought, he would be standing in the airport, and then he'd be taking a flight back to Miami, then Chicago, then Detroit, coming closer to his old life with every leg of the journey, turning back into his old self, the spell unbroken.

The drive to the butcher's shop took only fifteen minutes, but felt as though it had lasted an hour. After shifting the car into neutral and pulling the worn parking brake, Jack sat in the car, staring at the traffic that drove east. He strained to see farther out, past the long stretch of pharmacies and gas stations, toward the edge of

the horizon, to the sky, where planes had cut lines into its blue. Jack closed his eyes, leaned back against the seat, and felt for the kitten sitting next to him. The small creature gnawed on his fingertips, then rubbed its cheek against his knuckles. Jack smiled, and opened his eyes.

“Well.” He picked the cat up from its nape. “Let’s get you something to eat, okay?”

As Jack walked into the store, a familiar scent wafted to him: old blood and moist, new meat. Skinned pigs hung from the ceiling, and, resting in crushed ice were steaks and sausages, the deli meats wrapped in kraft paper. Behind the glass, prepared sandwiches and *empanadas* decorated the interior of the display case. Local red wines were stacked in crates against the counter, and sets of steak knives, manufactured somewhere in Brazil, were marked down to half the usual price. It would have been like most butcher shops in Uruguay, with its noisy refrigerators and tiled floor, but there was something unusual, almost wrong, about the store.

The girl. Girls rarely worked in butcher shops, certainly not attractive ones. She must have been the butcher’s daughter. She had brown hair, which she had pulled back into a plait to keep it out of the way while she worked, but those hands, they were not the thick, ruddy hands of a butcher. Her fingers, which tapped on the counter in a fit of boredom, were thin and white, with no specks of blood freckling the skin. She was bent over a paperback—the same Isabel Allende novel Jack’s niece had been reading in the hospital waiting room—and she sang to herself. Jack recognized the melody: it was an old folk song he had heard his father sing when he was a boy, an Italian tune about a sailor who had lost his way at sea. The song was what troubled Jack the most, for it echoed against the stone walls of the store, its notes fine and its tone silver, transforming the shop into some other place.

When the girl finally noticed Jack, she slammed her book down on the counter. “*Ay*,” she said, a little too loudly. “*Señor, mil disculpas.*”

She wiped her hands on her apron, even though there was no blood on them, and smoothed down a few strands of hair that stuck out from her neat braid. When she smiled, Jack noticed, her teeth looked a little too big for her, as if they belonged to another person.

“*El carnicero no está hoy*,” she said, smiling again at Jack. “*Pero, creo que con la mayoría de la carne, puedo...*” She paused and looked at him, as if she was searching for something on his face. Light fell in through the window just then, and painted her brown eyes a shade of gold. “*Señor*,” she said. “*¿Habla Español?*”

“*Algo*,” said Jack. “But, English is easier.” He leaned against the counter. “Do you speak English?”

“Who does not speak English?” She craned her neck forward and whispered, “Uruguay is a small province of the United States. Did you not hear from your president the news?” She laughed, and bared her large teeth.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said. He partially unbuttoned his coat and showed her the cat he had hidden there. “This cat is hungry. He needs to eat something.”

“*Ay*,” said the girl, widening her eyes. She leaned against the counter to get a better look, and her small breasts pressed against the laminate. “*Que divino.*” She looked at Jack, and asked, “What is the name?”

“I don’t know. I just found him. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Poor cat,” she said.

She reached over the counter, extended her arm to the kitten’s face, and scratched behind its ears, slowly repeating, “*Ay, pobrecito.*” Jack could feel the gentle pressure of her knuckles against his chest, their motion gentle and disturbing, like a moth’s clumsy thumps against a window late at night.

“Well,” he said, and took a step back. “I’d like to get him something to eat. Have you got anything? Ground meat, or something like that?”

“No,” she shook her head. “The fish.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your cat is small,” said the girl. “He needs the fish. The meat is too strong, too much.”

She reached behind her back and untied her apron. After draping it across the counter, she unlocked a latch and opened the small door that separated her from customers.

“Let us get some fish, for the cat,” she said. “If you like, we can have the lunch. I know of a restaurant where they will give your cat a fish for eating.”

Jack looked at the girl, hearing the low hum of flies hovering around the lifeless swine that hung above them. There was something about her—the large teeth and eyes, the white of her skin and the red of her mouth, a dark mole right beneath her left earlobe—that gave her an exaggerated, strange beauty, as if she was not all human, but something else.

“I’m Jack,” he said and extended his hand.

“Estela.”

She shook his hand, and then she hung up a sign that said she would be out to lunch, returning in a few hours.

They went to a nicer part of Carrasco, to a residential neighborhood a few blocks from the beach. Across the street from where Jack parked the car, there was a gelato place, a bookstore that had closed for lunch, and a realtor’s office with pictures pasted in its window of summer homes that would be move-in ready by December. On the drive over, Jack had discovered some things about Estela—that her father owned several butcher shops and a national grocery chain, that she adored cats, and loved giving them strange names, like “Banana” and “Edgar Degas”—but he had not revealed anything about himself. When he turned off the motor, he looked at the girl in the seat next to him, with the kitten curled up on her thin legs, and wondered if he ought to tell her about his wife and children, if he ought to give the real reason for his visit.

“What?” she said, and cocked her head to the side, letting her braid sway from one side to the other.

Jack shook his head and smiled. “Nothing.”

The restaurant was a few streets inland, on a busy, palm-lined boulevard. It was warm inside, with maroon drapes, a lit fire, and a table of French flight attendants on a layover. Estela had told the *maitre d’* about the cat they had brought with them, and he had insisted that they sit outside.

“Is not so bad,” she said after they ordered a bottle of wine. She rubbed her hands together and blew onto them. “There are the heating lamps, above. And the seats, they are comfortable.”

“Yeah.” Jack buttoned his coat halfway. “It’s fine. It’s not Michigan, that’s for sure.”

“Michigan,” Estela said slowly. “Is the city of Detroit, in Michigan?”

“Yeah.” Jack nodded and had a sip of water. “It’s kind of run-down, but I guess you’ve still got to call it a city.”

“That is wonderful,” Estela said brightly. “I have been to Michigan! I studied for one year in the United States, in high school, in the city of Columbus, Ohio. We went on trip for school to Detroit, to see the city, all the international students.” She laughed with joy. “Now, you see, why my English is so excellent.”

Jack smiled. He imagined Estela in Detroit, a younger version of her still-young self, her eyes wide as she walked down Woodward Avenue, as she passed by the graffitied front of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

“It’s too bad I didn’t know you then,” he said. “We could’ve had a fun time together.”

Estela blushed as another smile formed on her face. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I play with my band most nights, at several bars and restaurants, mostly outside Detroit, one in Ann Arbor. I could get you a free seat and dinner, and you could hear us.”

“The instrument that is yours, what is it?”

Just then the waiter, a thin, young man, came out carrying a tray with the bottle of Tannat, two glasses, and a plate with slices of cheese and quince jelly. He carefully placed the plate and glasses on the table, opened the bottle, and poured just a bit of wine into

Jack's glass. "*Señor*," he said, and stood by the table until Jack had tried some.

"*Si*," Jack said, after taking a sip. "*Está bien*."

After the waiter left with their orders, Estela smiled and resumed the conversation. "So you are a musician from Detroit."

"Well, no, not exactly. I go there a lot." Jack had a slow sip of wine, and looked at the girl, at the stray hairs that fell onto her forehead and ears, at the teeth that peeked out from her open mouth. "Not just for concerts. My wife, she teaches English there. At Wayne State."

"Your wife." Estela picked up her napkin from the table, unfolded it, and placed it across her lap. "Your wife, why is she not here with you?" She looked again at Jack, her face drained of color. "Is it not hard to be alone, in a new country like this?"

Jack crossed his arms and let out a heavy sigh. He did not want to look at Estela now that he had told her, so he gazed down at the cat, which sat next to her feet. The kitten was happily digging its teeth into a dish of mackerel, his head bobbing back down with each bite.

"I had a lot to think about," Jack said finally. "I thought Kate might get in the way."

Estela took a breath. She did not say anything at first, but merely picked up her glass of wine and put it to her small set of lips. Then she looked away from Jack, across the street, at a couple of schoolboys playing hooky.

"What kind of things of which did you have to think?" she asked, still looking at the boys in their school uniforms, who were trying to bum cigarettes from passersby.

Jack knew that he could tell her about his father, that he had not wanted his wife to come along, that she couldn't have, that she was the only one who worked in the household, and that someone had to be there to take care of Russell and Annette. He could talk about his grief, explain that sorrow had not come to him like a storm, but as a fog that followed him wherever he went, and that it made him feel unlike himself, had changed him. He felt as if his

past had left him, as if he were stranded, and that if he returned, no one would remember his name or who he had been. All these thoughts came to Jack, but he did not want to put them into words. He wanted to think of what would make Estela happy, of what would bring him closer to her.

"Well," he said, and cleared his throat.

Estela looked back at him, a blank expression forced on her face, trying to hide her obvious disappointment. Jack smiled at her, and reached for the Tannat, brushing his arm against hers.

"I've got to name the cat," he said, "and then find him a home." He topped off Estela's barely-touched glass. "Do you know where this little kitten might feel healthy and happy?"

Estela smiled, and color slowly returned to her face.

"Of course," she said. "I know very well a place."

Estela's apartment was in downtown Montevideo, so they drove along the coast to reach her neighborhood. At first there was very little scenery, just woods and rocks and sand, but then they passed the old casino and the shorefront houses emerged, and then the bay with its boats, and then apartment buildings, rising up over the boulevard. They passed the old lighthouse, where couples had parked their cars to talk and kiss, and the port, where ships were docked with colorful stacks of shipping crates mounted on their backs. After driving over potholed roads and the cobblestone streets of the Ciudad Vieja, Jack finally parked the car in front of an old restaurant, a relic from the early 1900s with a domed jade awning and a matching florid exterior of tiles, all of them emerald, mint, or myrtle.

Estela held the kitten while they approached a side door of the building. "I live right above." With her free hand, she pointed at one of the windows above the restaurant. "Do you see?"

Jack followed her inside, up a stone staircase that echoed every step he took. It was dark, and as he climbed the stairs, he could hear the sound of the restaurant's kitchen: a cook yelling at the busboy, the dishwasher running, a couple of waitresses giggling

about the handsome customer who had flirted with the both of them.

“We are here,” Estela said when they reached the landing. She unlocked her door and it swung open. “Please, how do you say in your country?” She laughed. “Make yourself at home.”

Estela flicked on the light, and the place was like nothing Jack had ever seen before. The apartment itself was beautiful, with burnished wood floors and tall windows that looked out onto a plaza, but what surprised him was its numerous inhabitants. First, there were the cats: six of them slept on the windowsill, where they could soak in the warmth of sunlight, and another two crawled about the tiny kitchenette, searching for scraps of food. Then, pattering on the floor, were three German Shepherd puppies, which excitedly ran to their mistress, singing in happy barks. There were the parrots, too, one cage next to the upright piano and the other standing in front of the window. The birds were large and colorful, and as the cats and dogs congregated around Estela, the parrots clung to the rails of their cages, sending Spanish greetings to her in strained, female voices.

“Wow,” Jack said as he closed the door behind him. “You’ve got a lot of pets.”

“My creatures are dear to me,” Estela said. “They are all animals I have found in the street, *abandonados*, except for the birds, who were my mother’s. I love my animals very much.” She smiled and looked down at the kitten she held in her hands, the one Jack had found just that morning. “He will be happy here,” she said, and placed him carefully on the floor.

The cat instinctively joined in with the others who fawned over Estela and followed her to the kitchenette. As she turned on the tap, Jack took slow steps toward the center of the apartment. He sat down on the only real piece of furniture in the place, a chartreuse sofa that looked like it had been designed in the fifties.

“Would you like a drink?” asked Estela. “Perhaps the coffee, or the *mate*?”

Jack traced his fingers against the soft upholstery and looked up at her. She was leaning against the edge of the large, metal sink, and the animals were at her feet, docile as boys drugged on love.

“*Mate*, I guess,” he said. “I haven’t had it in a while.”

She turned back around, and Jack watched her as she leaned down to pick up the full kettle from the sink, her backside pressing against her jeans, her long legs stretched up like prairie grass. A small hand reached out to the hotplate, and she turned the dial to high heat. Then she placed the kettle on the plate, and turned back around. She smiled and walked over to Jack, and when she reached the sofa, she peeled off her sweater and dropped it on the floor.

“Jack,” she said, and traced a finger along the inside of his thigh.

Estela looked at him, her eyes narrowed, as if wind were blowing into her face, and Jack looked back at her, following the steep slope of her neck down to the small golden cross that hung, from its chain, above her breasts. He kissed her.

At first he started slowly, like a boy’s first steps into a great ocean, and then he went deeper, pressing his body against hers, kissing her neck and the tops of her breasts, that burning, pale skin. She was soft and welcoming to him, acquiescent as he unzipped her jeans and pulled at the edges of her tank top. Jack knew that she would lead him there, to the person he had once been, that she would be the gentle estuary that brought him back to sea. She would be the River Plate from his visits as a boy, the scent of pines and sand, the evening primrose that grew on rolling dunes, but then, somewhere in his mind, it returned to him, that dream he had woken from that morning, how his wife had been all these things for him, the cool water and the happy summers of their youth, and that now she was waiting, always waiting, for his return.

“I can’t,” he said, and pulled away from Estela.

“What is it?” Estela was sitting on the sofa in her bra and underwear, pressing her hands between her knees. Her face was pale and her mouth had dropped open.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said, picking up his shirt from the floor. “It’s just...”

“I know,” she said, smiling kindly. “You do not have to explain to me why.”

Estela got up from the sofa and Jack watched again as the animals followed her. She turned off the hotplate and then spoke to him, her voice controlled and quiet.

“I will be taking the shower, now,” she said. “I hope that when I return, you will have disappeared, that you will no longer be in my city or my country, that you will be returning to a place that is yours, where it is that you belong.” She poured the hot water into the sink, and the impact made a loud drumming noise. When the kettle was completely emptied, she said, “I hope that you will do what I say,” and went into the other room.

As Jack picked up his clothes from the floor, he thought of how wrong Estela had been. It was his country, too: all his family lived in Uruguay—his father had been born and died in Montevideo—and Jack himself owned property there, the summer home he had been living in and some farmland thirty miles from the capital. His birth certificate named him, in large print letters, “Joaquín Martín de la Cruz,” not, “Jack Wilson,” or “Miller,” or “Moore.”

Still, as Jack buttoned up his coat, he thought of his family, of Kate, and Annette, and Russell. He had never taken them to his father’s country, yet they were a part of him too. His family belonged to him in the way the United States did, the way Cleveland and Indianapolis and Chicago were his; Chicago, where he met the woman who would become his wife and discovered in her so many things that defined him. There must have been something foreign about him that had attracted Estela, and now he knew what it was. It was love, a love for a different self, in a different country, a far-off place, that somehow she had recognized again when they first spoke. For him, Estela had been lazy, South American waters, and for her, he had been the cold, hard land of the Midwest, its rust belt cities and small towns.

“Well,” he said to the animals that watched him as he wound his scarf around his neck. “I had better get going, wouldn’t you say?”

The birds replied in tinny voices, and it was hard to tell what they said, but that did not matter. Jack wanted to say goodbye to only one creature, the one who had brought him here, and when he found the kitten lounging on the floor in a patch of sunlight, he smiled.

“Hey, little guy,” he said, and picked up the small animal. “I’m going to miss you, but you’ll be really happy here. Don’t worry, okay?”

The cat yawned in response, and Jack carefully put him back where he had been lying. Then he walked to the door, turned the knob, and looked at the animal one last time, at its tiny face and white paws that looked just like mittens. Then he shut the door, ran down the dark stairwell, and went out to the bustling street, where artisans rushed by carrying their unsold merchandise, and where girls, wearing only short dresses and scarves, were passing out flyers advertising dance clubs and restaurants. It was evening now, and Jack knew it before his eyes did, from the scent of roasted meat and the drone of neon signs. He climbed into the Volkswagen and started the engine, and a new voyage began. Winter was almost over now, it would be in a few weeks, and as he slowly turned the car onto the coastal boulevard, Jack felt the new season all around him, slipping in through the open windows, and taking him, like winds on a sail, on to North America, to home. ☪