

Mouths

It was raining when we arrived in Buenos Aires and I didn't have a jacket. It was cold too, and grey. I had had some illusion in my head, of a tropical paradise, sienna-soaked buildings, sunshine. I looked at Dom, who had come prepared with a windbreaker, sweater and scarf. He had called me up one day and said, "We're going to Argentina in June. Don't do that thing you usually do." "What thing?" I said. "You know, chicken out." This wasn't exactly a quick trip upstate in search of hash or a prank Dom was playing on a poetry professor. Still, I wouldn't chicken out. I drained my bank account. I took extra shifts at the bar. I begged my sister for help. Dom was still living off his inheritance money and seemed to have bought his ticket on a whim. The casual decision making that comes from never having to worry about money.

Although there were buses leaving from the airport regularly, Dom wanted to catch a taxi. Susana, the girl we were staying with, was waiting for us. Dom was determined to drive the price the driver quoted down. Using patchwork Spanish, he explained he had read in a tourist book the figure should be many pesos lower. The driver, visibly flustered, switching between Spanish and English, assured Dom he was mistaken. I saw what the driver saw, Dom's fat leather wallet, and felt my heart tighten. "Is this necessary?" I asked Dom quietly, "We don't need to be, you know, the two foreigners trying to score the best deal." Dome gave me a belittling smile,

“It’s all part of the game. He’s in on it too.” He said, “You have to learn to relax into Rome.” I wasn’t sure. After he got out of the cab, I pushed an extra couple of pesos into the pile he’d handed the driver.

Susana, with her mass of curly hair, waved from the doorway of her building in the last rays of sunlight. I could see what Dom meant when he described her as, “The kind of girl you want to see more than just one night.” She was different from Dom’s usual girlfriends though, stronger, less sad around the eyes. Dom had met her when he was at a summer writing program in Paris last year. She was on a scholarship. He was not. My own scholarship application had been rejected, and I had stayed at home. Dom pulled Susana into his arms, which was slightly clumsy as she was a little taller. She turned her head to place two kisses on his cheeks in greeting. He continued to hold her for longer than was necessary. She pulled away, though, and turned to me. I learnt I was a fraction taller than her as she delivered the same kisses to my cheeks. I imagined what it would feel like to have her kisses on my lips. She rubbed my arm and said, “You must be frozen. My brother left his jacket here, you may borrow.” With those sharp inhalations of breath before each word that accompany the Argentinian accent.

Susana’s apartment was small and modest, with pink and white surfaces that showed off her good taste. There was an array of green houseplants, pictures pulled from magazines and old textbooks stuffed into antique frames, 1960s record covers hung from the wall. Dom and I sat on a smooth gray couch we’d later learn was also

our fold out bed to share. Susana prepared us some tea that resembled sludge that came in a metal cup with a matching metal straw. Dom took his and sucked it up hard so I did the same. It smelled and tasted awful but Dom smacked his lips in pleasure so I did the same.

“So Connor, are you a writer also?” She asked me as she sat down with her tea. I looked at Dom before answering and hated myself immediately. “Yeah, we were in school together. Before he dropped out.” Dom spoke for me. I wanted to tell her some explanation for dropping out, something that concealed the truth partially but also didn’t make me sound like the loser Dom was making me out to be. But I missed the space between her question and Dom asking her about the economic situation in Argentina after the crisis. She chose to answer in Spanish and Dom was nodding away like he understood everything. I couldn’t understand anything but I liked listening to her, the way she sat forward in her chair, her hands clasped, her eyes glossy though her voice never shook. “People were carrying baskets of coins to the supermarket just to buy bread or a bottle of milk.” She said in English. She wanted the weight of the baskets to be truly understood.

The next morning I woke up to see Dom sprawled out next to me and I was glad. I went into the kitchen where Susana was preparing coffee. She smiled at me softly and I immediately felt self-conscious. “Did you sleep well?” she asked. “It was hard... with Dom kicking around next to me.” She laughed, then her face turned to concern. “I heard you this morning. Early, it was about, 3am.” I felt hot, like a rash was

forming on my chest. I knew what was going to follow. "You were crying." I wondered why I hadn't woken Dom up, I guessed he was snoring too loud to hear. No one else knew I had started sobbing in my sleep, I hadn't slept with a girl in over a year, and if Dom found out... I looked up at her, wanting to explain, not wanting her to think I was some emo loser, but there was a hand wrapped around my throat, holding it shut tight. She put her hand on my arm and it felt warm. We sat there for a few moments while the water started to rise over the edge of the little steel pan and the milk warmed in a pool of sunshine. "Someone making coffee?" Dom asked from the doorway and we both jumped, as though we'd been doing something to feel guilty about. Susana quickly let go of my arm and went to the stove. The handprint she left behind felt cold.

Susana had to go to work so Dom and I were on our own for the day. He was carrying around this guidebook he'd "borrowed" from the library, which had post-it notes stuck in between the pages, guiding us to all the places where we could go to find inspiration. Dom was like that, he carried his phone everywhere with this voice record app on it, talking into it, making little notes. "Never let a thought drift by, unrecorded," He said, "You never know where it might end up." I carried around a beat-up notebook and was always asking for a pen. I often let thoughts drift by because I was never sure how useful they'd be recorded. We teased each other about these methods of keeping track of our ideas. Dom led us all over the city, mostly by taxi, to the house where Borges spent his last days, the Basilico, The Museo Mitre and the casa where Esteban de Luca lived, which was now a restaurant.

We sat for a while afterwards in the Plaza Francia watching the girls walk past. We each made some comments we would never have said around Susana, for example. Dom went in search of cellphone reception to call her and find out the plan for the evening. I opened up my notebook and wrote her a letter I didn't think I'd send.

Dom told me Susana would meet us at La Boca, the mouth from which the Tango was supposedly born. We had a couple of hours before she finished work at a bank where she counted coins and distributed small stacks of cash. We decided to go early to take pictures of the brightly colored houses so as not to embarrass Susana with our foreign spectator behavior. I stood on the sidewalk picturing young Argentinians taking each other by the waist or shoulders, sliding their feet along the concrete, weaving in and out of traffic. There were no street performers today, so Dom proposed a walk. "Let's follow that road." He said, pointing after a murky looking canal flanked with grey crumbly walls that seemed to be heading towards boarded-up buildings and dead-end roads. I looked at him like *I don't know about this* for a moment, but I wondered how Susana would feel if I only gawked at the pre-approved parts of her country, so I turned and followed Dom down the canal.

We passed big old European-style houses overlooking the water. But they lacked the color of the other neighborhoods we'd visited. They looked washed out, like they'd been rained on a few too many times. The whole atmosphere was eerie, as though someone was following us, although I couldn't see anyone. The houses soon gave way to rows and rows of unstructured shelters, built with scraps of metal and wood,

tarpaulins, boxes and pieces of printed canvas. The lean-tos, shacks and shanties seemed to go on and on climbing upwards into the horizon. There were no roads at all, only narrow passageways accessible on foot. We realized we'd reached the *Villa Miseria*, the slum, with its growing population and ever-expanding collection of make shift lodgings.

Just below where we stood was a large open area where a group of adolescents were kicking around a brownish, mostly deflated soccer ball. They were shirtless and shoeless in the autumn chill. Dom was watching intently, the smug look gone from his eyes, as though an important idea was just now dawning on him. I scrambled down the steep path to where the kids were shouting, "Let's join them!" The kids looked at me, wondering what I might have to offer, wondering what I might do. I picked the ball up and kicked it over to them. They laughed then, and kicked it back. Dom had reached us, and I could see them eyeing him up too, surmising that he probably had more to offer than me. I wasn't sure how they intended to get it from him, all that he had to offer, perhaps they didn't know either. One of the kids kicked the ball towards him and the others stood back and watched, waiting to see what Dom would do.

"Come on," I said, "Pass it back." But Dom was frozen to the spot. He looked down at the ball then up at the kids then past them, eyes probing the rows and rows of shacks. In that moment I saw we were not so different, we were both spectators in a sport we would never be forced to play. I felt sick that I had so casually jumped into

the game. Then Dom started reaching into his pocket, about to pull out his wallet (whether he was planning to perform charity or pre-empt a shake-down, I couldn't tell). There was a loud shout behind us. I turned to see a policeman in the spot we had been standing with a furious look on his face. The kids ran, disappearing into the rubble. The policeman waved at us to come back up the hill. This was not a tourist destination.

We made our way back to La Boca to find Susana waiting to take us to a tango class. Dom had suggested it the night before and she had smiled, saying, "Tango is so old-fashioned. People think every Argentinian knows how to do it. The young people listen to other kinds of music now. Hip hop, reggaeton. Still, the image remains. People like to put others in boxes." On the way to the club, I told her about our encounter. Dom was very quiet. I didn't ask him what he was thinking when he reached for his wallet, I didn't want him to be embarrassed, I also didn't want to hear him make something up. Susana looked at him, "You asked about the economic crisis last night. There it is. That economic crisis is more ancient than I was speaking to you about." Dom nodded that he understood. I thought about my own perception of the economic gulf that divided us, and of how I had grabbed the ball Dom had not wanted to touch.

We reached the club at dusk, and Susana led us to a back room where lessons were given to tourists. I accepted now we were tourists, and that tonight we would play a prescribed role. "I also need a lesson." Susana told us, laughing. Most of the other

students were middle-aged women from France, Italy, and the U.K. They dragged their reluctant husbands along. Our teacher was a 55-year-old, sharply-dressed man named Carlos with a greying ponytail. He came up to my armpit. He paired me up with a purple-haired British woman, and Dom with a very large American. Susana he chose to demonstrate the steps with. She flushed deeply every time she stepped on his foot.

We spent the first half hour just walking around the room, which I didn't see the point in. My partner kept flattening her hand on my chest and laughing every time her foot grazed mine. She had not brought a husband. Carlos had opened up our little triangle, now Dom, Susana and I were satellites, orbiting the room. Susana caught my eye from across the room and winked at me. I started to relax. After some time, Carlos decided we'd mastered the walking and began teaching us the basic eight, which should be called anything but basic. I couldn't understand anything the instructor was telling us so I just copied.

Carlos let go of Susana's hand to demonstrate a more advanced move. He stepped to the side and pivoted on his toe and then did it on the other side. The move required massive concentration. After a while I started to feel I was getting it, the music started to complement my steps instead of distracting me from them. I had my eyes closed, I was no longer thinking of Dom, Dom's wallet, my partner. I was thinking about my father and the last time I'd seen him and how alive he'd seemed, singing along to a Howlin' Wolf record. I imagined he was in the room and we were learning

tango together. Somehow, I began to feel everyone watching me and giggling. “Es por las mujeres.” The instructor told me, pointing at the other men standing against the wall. I felt hot and I looked at Susana, but she was looking at me and smiling. I started smiling too, remembering my father telling me to always turn a joke on yourself. I looked at Susana and smiled. She looked at me and smiled. Then, I looked over at Dom, who was not smiling. I stopped smiling too, and wondered why for once, he didn’t feel like teasing me.