

*Maria*

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3370 words

It was still winter in Boston and there were fine lace fingers of frost like suspended snowflakes crawling up the outside of the windows as Maria landed, though to notice this she had to move forward to look across the the row of seats opposite her. She was in the middle row of a large plane, one with 3-seat benches on either side and a four-seat row in the middle, and she sat on the right aisle-side and could look across to the small oval windows that were just behind the wing. The fat man in the seat to her left turned and grinned lopsidedly, his face at once crinkling and bulging.

“Good job we made it, mmm.”

This seemed to be both a statement and a question so she nodded politely before turning back to the dark sky and rolling tarmac and the air outside the plane that seemed itself to be grey. The window across her row was mostly obscured by the occupant of the seat directly next to it, a young man with hair too long to be handsome, whose conversation with the elderly woman next to him she had listened to throughout the flight with a kind of envious fervor. At times he had glanced at her absently, as if he had sensed her attention, but his face had remained blank and she had turned quickly, ashamed and confused.

“Headed home today ya?”

The fat man was still trying to strike up a conversation, as he had done all flight despite her clear, though not impolite rebuttals. She only now noticed his accent: a deep, rumbling throaty sound, exotic and distinct, probably African but with other notes to it; she couldn't place it.

“Yeah,” she said, turning back.

“Mmm.” he murmured, again a statement and a question both, or perhaps just an acknowledgement. She wasn't sure, and she didn't feel like elaborating.

“Me, I'm coming for a big meeting of my firm, in the city. I work in Nigeria, you know, but I work for this American company.”

“Oh.”

“It is pleasant work, you know, not too hard because I am in offices all day but sometimes I

grow tired from that. And Nigeria, it is a beautiful country but sometimes a hard place to be living. You know it is the African country that has the biggest population. Many, many people.”

He paused, Maria nodded mildly, and he continued, encouraged.

“This is my first time in Boston but once I came to California, Los Angeles because of my sister who was married. She's living there with her husband who is a doctor, but it was a very large city and I did not find it pleasant. But this South America I do love, it is a place so full of life. I am lucky to travel everywhere for this business.” He stopped again and looked at her, inadvertently letting out the kind of sigh that only the overweight and undervalued seem to.

She glanced away, toward the window, and was startled to meet the eyes of the young man again. He had small wire glasses and sandy hair swept back, and the corner of his mouth twitched. Twitched, she thought, into a cynical half-smile, his eyes remaining clear and cold behind their crystal lenses. He was the same age as Maria; she had gathered this during his conversation with the woman next to him, a short and energetic Argentinian who looked to be in her sixties or seventies, her head now drooped awkwardly toward the middle aisle, at so severe an angle her neck might have been broken.

They rolled into the gate with the boiling grey sky above and on all sides and the people sitting next to the aisles began to stand stiffly. The fat man, in one final attempt, or perhaps simply in an effusive friendliness, the kind that had long ago abandoned Maria if she had ever possessed it to begin with (and that she now preferred to call guilelessness- even naïveté), cleared his throat, nodded to her and smiled again.

“Well, welcome home I'm sure, I wish you pleasant journeys and a good winter season now. I hope you will enjoy your time here in this wonderful city.”

She took the green line back to her sublet on the outside of campus, sitting across from a drunk old man in a ratty tracksuit, clutching her suitcase awkwardly in front of her. She watched as the city grew as dark as the metro tunnels, punctuated only by the blurred lights rushing by. She had brushed past embracing couples, families and friends in the airport terminal, past waiting cars and busses, finally submerging herself in the familiarity of the throng winding its way up and down the dirty stairs of the entrance to the T, weaving her way

delicately into the roaring belly of the city.

Maria was as a girl, and well into her young adulthood, well-acquainted with the steady, almost unashamed gazes of strangers, with being watched, anywhere, everywhere, being followed by curious or lustful or envious or admiring eyes. A girl to whom rejection was alien but rejecting all too necessary. Heartbreaker, her mother's friends used to call her, and it was at once admiring in the nostalgic way that middle-aged women are to pretty girls, and an accusation, as if she, Maria, was the one who made herself into one.

Once, when she was fifteen and still suspended impossibly between girlhood and whatever it was that came after, Maria's mother had taken her to a popular cafe/bar near where she worked. Much later, looking back on this experience in its place among so many others like it, Maria would reflect that it was her mother's intent to in effect parade her daughter, show her off; this was something that her own parents had never done, a source of pride. "Oh, but how she's grown!" said one of Maria's mother's friends, in the awkward, exclamatory way in which adults often talk of teens, speaking not to the subject of the exclamation but to her beaming chaperone.

Maria's least favorite was 'wow- you look so much like your mother;' the more she thought about this, the more vaguely insulting it seemed towards both parties.

Maria's mother was Chilean, but had never left the United States, a fact she held close to her at all times and with equal parts indignation and pride. Her parents had a fascinating and desperately long immigration story, one which she had ensured that Maria never heard, perhaps out of some proprietary sense of false American attachment.

Around the time of her grandmother's death, Maria began to dream about Chile. These dreams were not entirely fantasy, nor were they really coincidence; her grandparents had left the country in 1973, immediately following Pinochet's rise to power, because although

they weren't politically active themselves they had had enough friends who were supportive of Salvador Allende to know that, especially given the country's considerable political and social unrest at the time, they had to be prepared for anything, including emigrating at a moment's notice.

Maria's dreams, though vivid, were uninformed. She had never experienced firsthand the trials of leaving her country, of finding herself in a new and completely alien one; she had never known what it felt like to be an immigrant, an outsider. Her grandparents had arrived in the US undocumented, in a time when they could afford to do so, and had since lived illegally, though comfortably. They had switched abruptly from Catholicism when they settled down, to an indolent kind of atheism that still bore the severity of tradition practiced in the former religion but neglected all other parts. Maria's mother resented this, as she resented growing up in a spanish-speaking family living in an english-speaking country, the languages harshly contrasted in her mouth; she had a mild but perceptible accent, a mix, tarnishing her words when she spoke in either language. Maria was all American it seemed, and she couldn't decide whether this was, as her mother believed, part of her beauty, or whether it was a grave loss of culture and history. Still, she dreamed about her grandparents, their lives, about which she had heard so little, and about what it would have been like to live in a place like Chile in the 50s, 60s, 70s. What it would have been like to see a ruler like Pinochet; what it must now be like to see his legacy from afar, to not have been there as so many others were. She desired their Chile in the way that someone desires the impossible, something vague and shadowy in their minds, alive in pieces of stories and built from imagination and longing. Maria knew this was naïveté but in dreams she saw a country vibrant with colors and sounds, alive in a way she herself had never known.

Forty years later, from the year her grandparents fled, is the anniversary of the day Allende shot himself amidst the billowing wreckage of the presidential palace, surrounded by Pinochet's troops. This date is overshadowed by another anniversary, one even more tragic: it is twelve years since three planes crashed into the Twin Towers and the pentagon. Now, this day will be, amongst so many other memorials, the anniversary of the death of Maria's

grandmother. Maria's mother wondered about the significance of this date, the simplicity of it, and decided that even though she didn't really believe in such things, it must be cursed. Maria couldn't help but think that all things, in their way, were connected.

Maria's grandmother's funeral took place on an ominously sunny day, silent for a stifling weight in the air. Maria had left the reception early for the airport. She didn't see this as disrespectful, because in the pocket of the already packed bag sitting in her mother's car there was a plane ticket to Chile. She was flying to Santiago, first through Los Angeles and then down, from there the plane roughly mirroring the route that her grandparents had taken, by car, bus, and on foot, 40,000 feet below.

If Maria had been a heartbreaker growing up, she had had few friends and gained little lasting attention for it from her peers. She was a solitary kind of presence, unapproachable in a way that drew pity in fine lines on the faces of those her age, a magnet working both ways. In high school, she knew and was liked by everyone peripherally, but no one intimately. She dealt on the surface. She graduated from a comparatively average private school dead middle of her class, a young woman of average academic inclination, but possessing an interesting understanding of communication and manipulation.

Indeed by the end of her senior year Maria already had outstripped her mother in a foundational education and the ease with which she spoke on it, and in a general facility with words and good social timing. She looked almost indifferently at this woman who raised her, the coldness growing like a fog between them as the years passed. Maria's mother was the manager of the local Super 8 motel, the creases around her eyes and the silver in her hair showing this every day. She liked to see herself as an entrepreneur, a business woman; the manifestation of all the prospects of this country, so full of meaningless promises. Certainly she had worked a great deal to arrive at this point, a generous decade past the middle of her life, had directed her energy towards her life and Maria's, so they would be able to slip more seamlessly into the stream of American culture. The young assistant headmaster of the prep

school Maria had attended had once told Maria that no river is the same when you look at it twice, both literally and philosophically. Her mother saw culture through a narrow and idealized lens; America was filled with almost nothing but immigrants, and it remains a country of them—Maria had been proud when she'd realized that it was impossible for a place so diverse and divided to have just one overarching culture.

Maria's dreams had been, in their vivid richness, surprisingly close to the Chile she finally encountered personally, but had not prepared her for the reality of a country vibrant but still recovering from a tumultuous past—or perhaps this was just her own projection. She moved through the clamorous streets in a kind of personal haze that was both new to her and somehow fitting of someone who at once belongs fiercely and finds themselves stranger to a familiar place.

Every pair of eyes she met seemed to be her grandmother's. She was in a crowd, bright colors and waving flags, shouts echoing through hollow space. Independence day. It had been exactly a week since Maria had been rushed by cab and alongside a panicky mother to the bright white aisles of hospital sterility, down a busy corridor to a small room where in an offensively large-looking bed lay the gaunt remains of a woman once filled with limitless energy, around whom a small but important piece of the world had seemed to revolve. Maria had been wrapped in a surreal calm that day, clear-eyed when her mother was shrieking through confused tears at the nurses, expressionless when the cabs to and from the hospital, house, and undertaker seemed to be overflowing with oppressive and palpable emotion. She felt a near-emptiness crowded with ignored thoughts.

In the more personal section of her recorded posthumous directions, Maria's grandmother had directed her to Chile. This wish was set out in so straightforward a way that her mother had no choice but to agree. Just short of eloquently the mandate rested on a piece of typed copy paper, a page out of anything in the world. Though in life Maria's grandmother had barely mentioned the subject, other than in guarded flashes of insight into the life she and

her family had led before emigrating, Maria had found herself staring at an iron grasp on identity and value in thin black lines of type. She had never realized how much importance her grandmother had placed on her own cultural ideals, and the maintenance of her history, because she had seemed so completely to incorporate those principles into her personality. It certainly would not be Maria's mother who would explore their heritage, Maria's grandmother had known this: this self-made woman still gripped too strongly the fibers of the America she had created around her. So it was with an interesting kind of purpose that Maria booked the first plane ticket she could find to Santiago, ready to see in the daylight the shimmering images that had become so familiar to her at night.

Chile. Maria had always felt for her grandmother an undefined admiration, and saw in her a pride different from that of her mother, and somehow more noble. Surely to belong so fully to a place was to know one's self in a profound way, to carry a duty extending beyond the personal: an obligation to one's history. What is culture if it is not cultivated within, coaxed up from its infinite and deeply grounded roots? Her mother had not wanted this history, and all that came with it, but making one's own life wasn't wrong; it was the perhaps the belief in a defining culture to which one belonged so completely, a culture that united a country so divided as this, and one that wasn't even definable itself, that bothered Maria. Her grandmother, possibly the person with whom she'd been the closest in her life, was now, finally, pushing her towards the history she had never bothered to become a part of. She was American, yes, by every measure but some blood, but she felt, perhaps finally, ready to dig deeper. To be American was not to belong to any unified society, but rather to be lost in a constantly changing sea of cultures, mixing together. Maybe it wouldn't be bad to find just one to hold on to; clearly this had been her grandmother's intention.

Maria had stayed in Chile for 10 days. She could not make herself feel anything more than peripheral gloom for her grandmother, the guilt of this inadequacy washing over her. In her dreams she had begun to find familiar but unidentifiable landmarks, large and small buildings of all kinds. Always, in the distance and almost out of sight, stood two soaring identical towers.

If it had been a trip to “find” herself, it had only half succeeded, but sometimes we don’t realize we’ve been impacted by something until we’ve long since passed it by. Maria had adored the colors and sounds, the flavor of a country whose identity was rich and strong remained on her tongue. She had called on an acquaintance of her grandparents from the 60s, and over coffee they had discussed at length her grandmother, and all that Chile represented. She tried again to imagine the streets her grandmother must have walked 50 years ago. She bought a small carved wild cat of light wood, painted in black and red and lined with more color, for her mother, wrapped in a piece of brightly woven cloth, and left Chile feeling not necessarily fulfilled herself, but with a sense of having completed her grandmother’s directions. She had loved Santiago, certainly, but she had loved it as a tourist, and had barely felt the tug of history in those swarming streets. It had been a duty, and had felt like it despite her expectations. She hadn’t known how to belong.

From here Maria is lost. She remembered the last time her grandmother had spoken to her, her lips thin and pale, the creases surrounding them slithering across her face. “You know, Maria, the only way we can become ourselves is by learning what came before us. That’s the most important thing we can do.”

It was two weeks from her death, and they were at her kitchen table, the wood scratched and stained.

“I know you’re American, and that’s important, but you can be lots of things. I want you to remember your past. Not just right now, but sometime.” She paused, her eyes glittering. “When I die, I don’t want our history to die, too.”

These words had meant little to Maria at the time. Her grandmother’s age was merely a number, and the possibility of her death a distant and surreal future. Looking back, Maria was taken aback by the clarity of that message, and wondered why she hadn’t seen it at the time. *You are American, but you can be lots of things.* Maybe the resolution to her struggle with the pull of time and generations was just that. Still, if she hadn’t felt the profound connection she

had anticipated in Chile, where was she left, in this sea of pale ghosts rippling with fragments of identity, calling themselves a country—who was she to claim citizenship here?

Back in Boston, Maria slept fitfully, dreamless minutes shattered into the crisp night. She could smell the dampness and the fog in the air all around her, and outside she could see in the fluorescent glow of the streetlamps that it was beginning to drizzle. It was growing light by the time she finally slept fully, and this sleep too was broken, mid-morning, by her mother's voice, unmistakable in the hallway outside her apartment door.

In the night all things are connected; in the daylight it is for us to draw the connections, if we want. Just as any river, the rush of history is in no way constant, and it meets us when we start to define our cultures, or when we start to become defined by them.

In Boston the air turned from grey to white, a slow change, empty and quiet. From her window Maria could see a shadowy apartment across the way, and the empty street below. In her room were colors of all kinds, the walls shedding brilliance. On the ceiling hung red, white and blue, unintentionally patriotic, the colors shared by so many nations.