

Everything You Wished

In the motel parking lot Jim leaned against his pick-up and looked across the dusky Rancagua Valley. On the other side the yellow and orange rock of the Andes jutted into the sky. In the comuna across from the motel the smells and sounds of any Southern Cone weekend were gaining momentum. Hunks of salted red meat being laid upon lump charcoal fired grills. Caps of liter bottles of lager popping. The sizzling crescendo of fat dripping onto wood coals punctuating the laughter of men. The American rubbed at his stubbly blond beard and buzz cut and breathed deeply the familiar aroma as his wife Rocio and their daughter Anita inquired inside about a room to stay the night. The drive from the other side of the mountains had taken all day.

As the last light played on the rock walls of the mountains to the east the evening hummed lightly. The vibrations materialized as a Renault van that careened off the Alameda into the parking lot. It came straight for him. Stepping aside at the last moment, he felt the van clip the corner of his truck and crash into the wall that lined the parking lot. The van's hood popped open and steam hissed. A woman with toasted skin hopped out and smoothed her jean skirt as if to gain composure. She looked around rapidly and made a motion to the driver.

She walked to Jim, settling just inside his comfort zone and crossing her arms as he backed away slightly. "I can't believe my boyfriend just hit your truck. I'm so sorry. He's drunk." Looking back she shouted to him, "Nacho, get the fuck over here!" before breathing the word "imbecile". Her eyes were green mottled with sage and she moved in a taut, athletic manner. Jim imagined her in the high desert of the Andes, perfectly camouflaged.

He ran his hand across the scraped corner of his truck before speaking. It was warm from the scraping of metal on metal. "It could've been worse. You ok?"

She nodded and rubbed her neck.

“How about your boyfriend?” Jim pointed to the driver, who had his hands in his jean pockets and was slinking out the entrance to the parking lot. When she turned, he took off. She yelled out. “Nacho! Get back here!” He moved faster, stumbling and heading towards the row of bars up the street. Hands on her hips, she sighed.

“My name’s Jamila. My insurance should cover it. What is that, a Toyota Hilux? My cousin has a shop in town that works on those, I’ll call him right now.”

“Wait. We’re headed to the coast tomorrow. This is just cosmetic. We can take care of it on the way back in a week or two.”

“Fine by me. You’re taking this pretty calmly.”

“I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Jamila tensed the muscles in her back and leaned her neck barely to one side. She stared at him with a little smile. The two exchanged names and insurance information while the silhouette of the Andes behind the town revealed itself in the light of the moon. There was small talk and at one point they laughed together, just as footsteps came crunching across the gravel behind them.

“Jim?”

“Rocio! You caught me off guard.”

“Really?” Rocio was holding Anita’s hand. She looked at the woman and then back at him with slight annoyance.

“They have a room available, Jim. But what happened here?”

“We got into an accident.”

“How could we get into an accident if we were parked?”

“I’ll explain it over dinner. It’ll be fine.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Jamila glanced at Jim. “M’am, It’s my fault. I’ll take care of it. I apologize.”

Rocio’s dark eyes were lively in the dusk. “You’d better take care of it.”

Acknowledging only Jim with a shake of her head, Rocio marched past.

Ana looked at her father with doubt, “Was that your friend Daddy?”

“No mi amor, she was a stranger.”

“I don’t like her.”

“Don’t judge so quickly, Ana.”

Rocio piped in. “Now you’re sticking up for that woman?”

“Ro, let’s just unpack.”

“I don’t know about this place, Jim. You saw her. That woman was a pro.”

Ana glanced up. A new word. “A pro?”

Jim shushed Ana and looked to his wife. “Listen, we’ve visited every place in the last couple towns. Let’s settle in for the night. We’ll get to the coast early tomorrow. Let’s go eat.”

Rocio shook her head again.

“Ro, it’s been a long day. I’m this close to losing my patience.”

He held up his thumb and first finger a quarter inch apart, her eyes in the moonlight between them. Rocio sputtered her lips and went inside, leaving him to unpack.

After eating Rocio and Ana got into one bed while Jim poked around. Mosquitoes were hovering in the corners and beneath a splotchy coat of primer were cracks in the walls. There was a speaker in a corner to play piped in music and the door had a latched wooden shade that

could be opened from the inside. Under the shade was a rotating shelf so that somebody could deliver a drink or a meal without violating the privacy of the guests. The motel was, or had been at some time, a “telo”, a motel for sexual trysts. Maybe the woman with the van was a prostitute. She seemed too attractive and personable, but she did have the toughness. As he washed up he watched the red ants in the bathroom corner. Of all insects, these he hated the most, having just recently made an emergency room visit when one had bitten his sack, causing it to swell up and harden until it looked like an overripe grapefruit. He recalled the feeling of humiliation and the smirk on the nurse’s face. She’d been a neighbor of his mother-in-law, the both notorious neighborhood gossips. The memory of Ro’s mom bringing the story up at a family dinner caused him to spit up his mouthwash. He went downstairs to get a book out of the pick-up.

As he was digging around the cab, Jamila came walking out of the hotel’s side entrance. Jim imagined Rocio watching from the window of their room. Jamila saw him and came over as if they’d had a rendezvous already established.

“Hi. Do you have a light?”

“I think I’ve got some matches in the glove box.” He rummaged around and lit her cigarette. She smoked in silence next to him for a moment.

“I’m sorry for any trouble I’m causing you.”

“Thanks, but don’t worry. It’ll work out fine.”

“So was that your wife and daughter?”

“Yeah.”

“An Argentine and a... What are you?”

“American”

“Oh, American. How’d that happen? I mean you and her?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Do you come to Chile a lot?”

“We used to drive over every summer to stay just south of Pichilemu.”

“Pichilemu. My father was born there. We would go to visit his parents all of the time.

My fondest memory is hunting for piure... do you know what piure is?”

“I do. It’s like sea urchin.”

“Right. I’d hunt it with him at night when the tide was low. We would go out just the two of us and walk the beach and count the stars and visit the beach bonfire parties and sing with the people after finding the animals in the cold water.”

“I love piure. A woman taught me how to find it under the rocks in the shallow water at low tide and pull it open and prepare it.”

“With cilantro and lemon juice and diced onion and peppers?”

“And some tomato sometimes, too. It’s delicious.”

She looked softer than he’d see her before. “Well, Jim. I thought you were an Argentine gringo, but you sound kind of Chilean, in truth.”

“Argentina gave me my family but sometimes I dream that one day Chile will give my a home by the sea.”

“If you like it here, why haven’t you been back for so long?”

“I was up in the U.S. for the past couple years.”

“What were you doing up there?”

“I got caught up in some stuff. It’s a long story. It’s my first time seeing my Mendocinas in a while.”

“Hm, Mendoza. I go there often to visit my brother. He married a Mendocina too.”

“So you know Mendoza.”

“I do. I go at least once a year. So you’re here with your Mendocinas. But that’s a long story.”

“Correct.”

“And they’re in bed so early?”

“In bed. Asleep.”

“That doesn’t sound very fun. You think they’d mind me keeping you company?”

His pulse quickened. She brushed her brown hair back behind her head and tied it in a ponytail, then stepped towards him slightly with knowing eyes. Those eyes remained friendly but they revealed a predatory nature. “I’m a night owl. If you want we could go sit and talk. I’ve got a room with a little patio. I have some wine. Not Malbec. Carménère. Do you like the taste of our wine?”

“Yes. But I can’t do that.”

“Are you the cautious type?” Behind her the Andes stood out sharply underneath the stars. She was close and smelled of thyme and jasmine.

“That’s not the problem.”

“I didn’t say that was a problem. Just a reality, perhaps.”

“Maybe I am. Now.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep any boundaries.”

He’d underestimated her. “No problem. It’s just that I’ve learned how hard it is to put something back together after you break it.”

“Understood. It’s important to take lessons as life gives them to you. Me, I’ve learned that life goes by too fast. So I try to squeeze it for what it’s worth.” Throwing her cigarette to the

ground and grinding it out gently, she made a motion as if she was squeezing the hell out of a lemon and smiled at him like she knew he had been through something that made him similar to her, but to different ends. “I saw your wife. The Mendocina. She’s got a strong personality, doesn’t she? I hope you’re fighting a war you can win.” There was a light and warm breeze. Now the sea was in Jamila’s eyes. They reminded him of his daughter’s. *Yeux verts du mer.*

“Me too. I have faith.”

“Ah, a man of faith.”

“No. On the contrary.”

Jamila slanted her head as earlier, but to the other side.

“What does that mean?”

“Well... not that kind of faith.”

“Is there any other kind?”

“Faith in family. That’s what I mean. That people can be rational and work out their differences. That things can change if you work at it.”

She smirked in a caring manner. “It’s funny, the blue in your eyes sparkles when you share a truth. But it went flat as you said that. As if you don’t believe yourself. Faith is a big word. There is nothing rational about it. It starts here.” She pointed at her heart.

“I give you the reason on that. Still, progress starts here.” Jim pointed to his head.

“I think you’ll probably need both. But that’s your voyage to take.” She pulled out a piece of paper and pen and scribbled her name and phone number on it. “I knew you were decent by how you reacted earlier. Decent but a bit confused, no? Perhaps we can talk in another moment. Good luck with your wife. I hope you get what you want. If not...”

He looked at the piece of paper.

“If the time is right, of course. I’ll be here. Or maybe not. Things change so fast.” Jamila touched a fingertip to his cheek and looked in his eyes. Then she turned and walked confidently into the darkness.

When Jim got back to his room he took a quick cold shower, then squashed all of the ants he could find with reckless vengeance, and laid down in the bed next to his wife and daughter. He shook Rocio lightly.

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean ‘what’s wrong’? We haven’t seen each other for over two years. I want to talk.”

“We’ll talk. Just take it easy.”

“It’s been so long.”

“We’ll talk. Have a little faith.”

“You too? What is it with you women?”

“Us women? Who were you talking to outside? I thought I heard you. I hope it wasn’t that whore.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just tired of people asking me to explain my beliefs. I don’t know what to say. I’m of bone and meat and blood. My belief is in the here and now.”

“All I’m saying is to be patient. We waited years for you. Tranquilo.”

“I just don’t want to see this pass us by.”

“This?”

He swept his arm to the open window. “This.” Outside in the distance people joked. Music played from a bar up the street. “I want life again. People are being. I want to be. In the

hospital I just hung out. I should have left earlier but I was drugged and when I wasn't drugged I was scared. I still don't understand what happened. I only realize how much time I lost. How much I missed out on things. Tasting the salt that seawater leaves on your skin when it dries. You and Ana. It goes too fast. Do you remember what our daughter smelled like the first months after she was born? It was amazing, that fragrance. Now it's gone. Don't you wish you could carry that smell in you?"

Rocio sighed as if offended. "It's not my fault you went crazy, Jim. Go to sleep."

With that she rolled back to Ana and left him alone. He read some Saul Bellow and the story seemed to argue to him that if we can laugh then redemption should at least be a possibility for us. The electric fan on the nightstand rotated back and forth across the room. It was pleasant so he fell asleep while reading. At about 3 in the morning he was half-woken briefly by a deep rumbling out to the east. It was a distant earthquake, spreading out from an epicenter on the other side of the Andes. It emanated east across the Argentine high desert but even here in Chile the earth trembled, deep within the lithosphere. The rumbling sensation receded after several seconds but it resonated on in his mind and helped congeal his thoughts. Jamila was correct. The fundamental truth is that life is too short. Before he'd been dead and now he wished it would last longer and entail many dimensions simultaneously so he could live everything he wanted to. To make up for lost time. He peered up at the wall opposite the bed and his eyes tracked a small brown spider that crawled across it. As he drifted back to sleep these thoughts infiltrated his dreams for the rest of the night.

In the morning Jimmy awoke to his wife shaking him violently.

"I think Ana's been bitten by something."

Because of the rare tone of her voice he jumped to look. “Where?”

She pointed at Ana’s leg. A white circle a couple of inches across had appeared. It was hard as a rock and covered with little bubbles of white puss. Ana was barely breathing.

“Jim, let’s go to the hospital.”

Rushing out, Jim spotted the cleaning women in the kitchen next to the lobby. They were smoking cigarettes and drinking instant coffee. Jim went to them with Ana in his arms.

“Do you know what could cause this?” he asked, pointing to the bite.

They looked, then glanced at each other nervously before shaking their heads.

As he weaved the Hilux through black and yellow taxis he tried to remember where there would be a turnaround to get onto the other side of the wide boulevard, the side the hospital was on. One never came and as he passed the hospital and watched it disappear in his left rear-view mirror, he pounded the dashboard with his fist. Ana’s eyes were shut and she was murmuring. Finally he found a turnaround that cut across the treed strip in the middle of the Alameda. It was a one way going the wrong direction and there was a bus coming but he turned into it and squeezed by the bus, both of them with their horns blaring. A Carabinero truck was watching on the other side. It pulled behind him with its siren bleating short controlled blasts but he kept going. After pulling up to the main building, the flashing lights of the Carabinero’s green and white four-door 4x4 came up the driver’s side and two serious looking young officers dressed in their olive uniforms looked at him, deeply annoyed.

“Sir, you can’t go that way through that turnabout.”

“I know, but my daughter was bitten by a spider and I need to get her to the hospital.”

The Carabineros looked at each other. “The araña del rincón?”

“The what?”

“A little brown spider?”

“I believe so.”

They looked at each other and then pointed to a light green building. “That’s the pediatrics ward sir. Hurry.”

Several other young parents were in the emergency room waiting with their children but when the nurse who attended Ana saw the bite she told Jim and Rocio to take the girl inside to see a doctor immediately. Ana looked up at him with her light brown hair tossed to one side and her green eyes sleepy. She asked him if they were at the beach.

“Estamos en la playa?”

“Almost.”

“I don’t feel good. Estoy bien?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll feel better soon. Stay awake.”

“Vamos a Pichilemu? I want to ride the llama who lives by the beach if we go.”

“We’ll be there tonight. I promise. You can have a hot dog and ride the llama when we arrive.”

“Come se llamaba? Estrellita?”

“Was that it?”

“Yes. Now I remember. She was so beautiful and soft. Her eyes were big and brown. Like Mommy’s”

Ana smiled and began to sleep. She was wearing her favorite summer dress. It was of pastels and it was plaid. She snored lightly. He’d been focusing all of his attention on Rocio and had barely spoken with Ana since he’d flown into Mendoza two days earlier. The bite had grown and it seemed darker.

The doctor was a young short man with an indigenous complexion. He offered no comfort, but immediately said that tests must be run and that it was impossible to tell what had bitten Ana as of now. The araña del rincón was common in this part of Chile. It was often deadly with small children. Didn't they know that? Then he asked Jim to leave because only one parent was allowed and it should be the mother who stayed. Jim walked to the waiting room.

The room had open windows, a tall ceiling, and a single row of pale green plastic seats that ran along the walls. Though the sun poured in it felt cool. Several parents sat throughout. The room had been sterilized recently but it would not be clean. Outside the bathrooms at the end of the room sat an old wrinkled woman who focused on Jim. He sat and pretended to watch the soap opera on TV until her gaze burned so that he looked up.

“What's wrong son?”

The woman must have been eighty and was caramel colored with bristly graying hair. She motioned to him. “Come here, talk to me.” He went to her. “What are you here for hijo?”

“My little girl. Something bit her. We were on our way to the coast for our vacation.”

The woman held his hand. “I'm Rosa. Everybody calls me Mami.”

“Nice to meet you Mami.” He thought of his own Mom and wished she were still there to help him. His insides seemed filled with sand and weighed him down. He was sinking into the earth and yet felt certain lightness when she touched him.

“This happens a lot here. The araña del rincón.”

“And how does it end up?”

“Do you want the truth?”

“Yes.”

“It can end up bad.”

He bowed his head.

“You can’t decide everything hijo.”

She breathed out a low whistle. Below in the Alameda were muffled echoes of crowds on their way to lunch. The clock ticked many times before she spoke again. “So, what’s your given name hijo?”

“James. Everybody calls me Jim.”

“James. It will pass.”

“Everything does.”

“Yes. And sooner or later it will not matter.”

“No?”

“Where people like us end up, all will be right.”

“That’d be nice. Where do you think we go?”

“Someplace better, no?” She smelled soft and honest but he felt her bold intent.

“I don’t know and I don’t mean to be rude, Mami, but I don’t suppose it matters. This is what matters.”

“Oh, it all matters son. This. Where we go. Where we don’t go.”

He looked at her sideways, but catching a glance of the intensity of her eyes forced him to look at his feet. “I wish I could say the same.”

She took his hand and held it. The tension in his body released into her hands.

He told Rosa what had happened. He told her how Rocio and Ana were in the back room. How they were far from home, something he was used to. Not them. Surely they felt scared. If Ana were awake she would be holding onto her mother tightly. Outside the windows there were several small white cumulus clouds bunched together high up in the sky blowing quickly out to

the west. Up where they were it was pure and clean. Empty. He told her he feared that those clouds would make it to the ocean long before him. She straightened her sweater before speaking.

“He tests us for funny reasons.”

“I don’t want to be tested. I want my baby to be all right.”

“She will be. He takes care of the babes.”

Jim thought of children being torn to shreds by bombs in wars. Picasso’s Guernica, the way the hall that led to it in the Reina Sofia in Madrid was filled with cruel details from the painting writ large. Job, all of his children torn from him on God’s whim. His friend’s daughter, choking to death as her loving parents tried desperately to help.

“Rosa, I respect your beliefs, but I’m not convinced.”

The old woman was breathing softly but deeply. The periwinkle cardigan sweater that covered her white smock stretched and contracted with her torso and her salt-and-pepper hair contracted with it. She held her hands crossed on her lap and looked past him at people coming in and out of the door before returning her gaze.

“James. What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I love long stories.”

“I fell apart and I had to put myself back together. I was working in the U.S. to save up some cash so we could buy a little plot in Pichilemu to build a home and I started drinking a lot and I missed my daughter so much because she’d just been born and I couldn’t sleep for a long while and I couldn’t think straight in the end. They put me in a hospital. I lost over two years.”

“And now you are here. You have your daughter and your wife and you look healthy. You’re alive. It’s a miracle, no?”

“A miracle of my own making. Nobody was there for me. I had to do it myself. People don’t like true craziness.”

“You did it all yourself?”

“Basically.”

She shook her head. “We never do it all ourselves. You never thought of your little girl during that time?”

Jim knew that she was right. He had thought every day of his daughter. He said nothing. He knew he’d been set up. Mami had been waiting for somebody like him.

“James, I’m going to give you a present. I’m also going to ask a favor of you. I want you to give thanks.”

“For what?”

“For having your little girl.”

“Who am I supposed to give thanks to? I don’t understand.”

“To nobody, just give thanks.”

Jim paused before answering. “Ok. I can do that.”

Rosa looked at him and waited.

He felt her waiting. “I’m giving thanks now Rosa. In my head.”

“You have to concentrate and say it out loud at least. It has to be real.”

“Can I do it later, not in public?”

“That’s up to you.” Rosa went to her backpack and dug around, then put something in a brown paper bag. She thought hard as she did this, then rolled the bag tightly and gave it to Jim.

“Can I look in the bag?”

“Only when you are ready to give thanks, as you’ve said you will. Do you promise me?”

“I promise.”

Then Rocio was in the hallway. There were men talking with her. Jim was standing by Rosa and she gripped his hand and pulled at him. She looked up into his eyes.

“We’re all in this together, boy. You’re not alone. Believe in something bigger.”

“I wish I could. I wish I had what you have.”

Rosa laughed. “You do. Otherwise I wouldn’t waste my time. Trust me, Mami’s got other stuff to do. But you have it.”

The doors to the hallway past the reception area opened and out came Rocio with two men in white doctor’s smocks. Her eyes were more in focus than he’d ever seen. She motioned to him to come to her in the doorway. Everybody in the waiting was silent and looking at Rocio and Jim, all their faces empty and dissimulating. He had no idea what this could mean. He felt small, like a shell on a pebble beach in the San Juan islands of his youth, the wind blowing over him, the warm salty breeze combing the loose particles of sand across his face, blowing away the tide and the crabs and seaweed and leaving him in the mellow sun.

But he wasn’t a shell yet. He stood and pulled Rosa up with him and he hugged her. He felt her power emanating outward. He inhaled the energy in her spiced flesh. Letting go, Jim went to find his child, hoping against the worst. The room was bathed in a light that burst through the open windows of the hospital, a light that pushed through the membrane and into the depth. As he saw Rocio’s eyes red with tears he also saw her chest heaving as if in relief. He wished everything would be fine. He knew it would be. Even if he were wrong he would believe. It was the only way.

Later that night Jim lay in bed after making it to the coast. It was already well past midnight but he wouldn't sleep. The drunken night watchman had recognized him from years ago and had given him the cabin closest to the beach, the smallest and most rustic and the one that they had stayed at their first time here, when Ana was not even a year old. The ocean was visible outside the open bedroom window. Smooth and rolling waves came in with the receding tide. They broke across the bay, laying down in gentle unison for miles. The cd that Rosa had put in the paper bag was in the little boom box Jim had brought. He listened to the Andean flutes and electric guitar and choir singing in a careful Spanish. Her voice was quiet for long moments then rose forcefully above the others, but only when necessary. When it did he felt the invisible roots that stretch across the universe and time and connect all and everyone.

He listened, his wife on one side. The moon painted the ocean a soft white as the voices of young couples on the beach wafted in through the cabin's open windows. He wondered if it would be too much to wish for all of this and beyond. After this day it didn't seem fair to have so much hope. The tide was low outside and he saw scattered figures wading through the cool water, hunting for piure in the moonlight. The sound of guitars came from a group sitting around a bonfire on the beach in the distance. The burgundy-green brilliance of half-filled wine bottles gleamed in the light of the fire. The smell of tobacco and weed wafted across the salty air. On his other side lay Ana, her little leg bandaged. He ran his hand through her fine hair and she opened her eyes.

“Daddy? I don't want to sleep.”

“No? Well then let's go down to the beach.”

“Really? Can we go in the water?”

“Only if you help me hunt some piure.”

“What’s piure?”

“Just get your sandals on. I’ll show you.”

As Ana pulled her sandals from under the bed and sat on the floor to strap them on, Jim looked outside. The night watchman was picking up cigarette butts from the wide gravel driveway that passed between the 11 beachfront cabins. Behind him was a lamp with what looked like dozens of large black moths fluttering about the light source. Above them shone the stars and across the beach sparkled the sea. But the moths hovered around the lamp, jostling with each other, endlessly circling, blind and bumping amongst themselves, burning against the bulb again and again, not stopping, fighting and struggling, even as the father and daughter walked past them hand in hand, laughing and eager to feel the cool sting of the ocean.