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ENTENDÁMONOS so we understand each other

This is not a story of heroic feats, or merely the narrative of a cynic; at least I do not mean it to be. It is a glimpse of two lives running parallel for a time, with similar hopes and convergent dreams. In nine months of a man's life he can think a lot of things, from the loftiest meditations on philosophy to the most desperate longing for a bowl of soup — in total accord with the state of his stomach. And if, at the same time, he's somewhat of an adventurer, he might live through episodes of interest to other people and his haphazard record might read something like these notes.

And so, the coin was thrown in the air, turning many times, landing sometimes heads and other times tails. Man, the measure of all things, speaks here through my mouth and narrates in my own language that which my eyes have seen. It is likely that out of 10 possible heads I have seen only one true tail, or vice versa. In fact it's probable, and there are no excuses, for these lips can only describe what these eyes actually see. Is it that our whole vision was never quite complete, that it was too transient or not always well-informed? Were we too uncompromising in our judgments? Okay, but this is how the typewriter interpreted those fleeting impulses raising my fingers to the keys, and those impulses have now died. Moreover, no one can be held responsible for them. The person who wrote these notes passed away the moment his feet touched Argentine soil again. The person who reorganizes and polishes them, me, is no longer, at least I am not the person I once was. All this wandering around "Our America with a capital A" has changed me more than I thought.

In any photographic manual you'll come across the strikingly clear image of a landscape, apparently taken by night, in the light of a full moon. The secret behind this magical vision of "darkness at noon" is usually revealed in the accompanying text. Readers of this book will not be well versed about the sensitivity of my retina — I can hardly sense it myself. So they will not be able to check what is said against a photographic plate to discover at precisely what time each of my "pictures" was taken. What this means is that if I present you with an image and say, for instance, that it was taken at night, you can either believe me, or not; it matters little to me, since if you don't happen to know the scene I've "photographed" in my notes, it will be hard for you to find an alternative to the truth I'm about to tell. But I'll leave you now, with myself, the man I used to be...

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PRÓDROMOS forewarnings

It was a morning in October. Taking advantage of the holiday on the 17th I had gone to Córdoba.¹ We were at Alberto Granado's place under the vine, drinking sweet *mate*² and commenting on recent events in this "bitch of a life," tinkering with La Poderosa II.³ Alberto was lamenting the fact that he had to quit his job at the leper colony in San Francisco del Chañar and about how poor his pay was now at the Español Hospital. I had also quit my job, but unlike Alberto I was very happy to leave. I was feeling uneasy, more than anything because having the spirit of a dreamer I was particularly jaded with medical school, hospitals and exams. Along the roads of our daydream we reached remote countries, navigated tropical seas and traveled all through Asia. And suddenly, slipping in as if part of our fantasy, the question arose:

"Why don't we go to North America?"

"North America? But how?"

"On La Poderosa, man."

The trip was decided just like that, and it never erred from the basic principle laid down in that moment: improvisation. Alberto's brothers joined us in a round of *mate* as we sealed our pact never to give up until we had realized our dream. So began the monotonous business of chasing visas, certificates and documents, that is to say, of overcoming the many hurdles modern nations erect in the paths of would-be travelers. To save face, just in case, we decided to say we were going to Chile.

My most important mission before leaving was to take exams in as many subjects as possible; Alberto's to prepare the bike for the long journey, and to study and plan our route. The enormity of our endeavor escaped us in those moments; all we could see was the dust on the road ahead and ourselves on the bike, devouring kilometers in our flight northward.

¹ At the time a national holiday to commemorate Juan Perón's 1945 release from prison. General Perón was president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955 and from 1973 until his death in 1974.

² The Argentine national drink, a tea-like beverage made from the herb mate.

³ *Granado's Norton 500 motorcycle, literally "The Mighty One."

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ELDESCUBRIMIENTODELOCEANO discoveryoftheocean

The full moon is silhouetted against the sea, smothering the waves with silver reflections. Sitting on a dune, we watch the continuous ebb and flow, each with our own thoughts. For me, the sea has always been a confidant, a friend absorbing all it is told and never revealing those secrets; always giving the best advice – its meaningful noises can be interpreted any way you choose. For Alberto, it is a new, strangely perturbing sight, and the intensity with which his eyes follow every wave building, swelling, then dying on the beach, reflects his amazement. Nearing 30, Alberto is seeing the Atlantic for the first time and is overwhelmed by this discovery that signifies an infinite number of paths to all ends of the earth. The fresh wind fills the senses with the power and mood of the sea; everything is transformed by its touch; even Comeback* gazes, his odd little nose aloft, at the silver ribbons unrolling before him several times a minute.

Comeback is both a symbol and a survivor: a symbol of the union demanding my return; a survivor of his own bad luck – two falls from the bike (in one of which he and his bag flew off the back), his persistent diarrhoea and even getting trampled by a horse. We're in Villa Gesell, north of Mar del Plata, enjoying my uncle's hospitality in his home and reliving our first 1,200 kilometers – apparently the easiest, though they've already given us a healthy respect for distances. We have no idea whether or not we'll get there, but we do know the going will be hard – at least that's the impression we have at this stage. Alberto laughs at his minutely detailed plans for the trip, according to which we should be nearing the end when in reality we have only just begun.

We left Gesell stocked up on vegetables and tinned meat "donated" by my uncle. He asked us to send him a telegram from Bariloche – if we get there – so that with the number of the telegram he could buy a corresponding lottery ticket, which seemed a little optimistic to us. On cue, others taunted that the bike would be a good excuse to go jogging, etc., and though we have a firm resolve to prove them wrong, a natural apprehension keeps us from declaring our confidence in the journey's success.

Along the coast road Comeback maintains his aviator's impulses, emerging unscathed from yet another head-on collision. The motorbike is very hard to control, with extra weight on a rack behind the center of gravity tending to lift the front wheel, and the slightest lapse in concentration sends us flying. We stop at a butcher store and buy some meat to grill and milk for the dog, who won't even try it. I begin to worry more about the little animal's health than

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the money I'd forked out to pay for the milk. The meat turns out to be horse. It's unbearably sweet and we can't eat it. Fed up, I toss a piece away and amazingly, the dog wolfs it down in no time. I throw him another piece and the same thing happens. His regime of milk is lifted. In the middle of the uproar caused by Comeback's admirers I enter, here in Miramar, a...

*The English nickname Ernesto has given to the little dog he's taking to Chichina, his girlfriend who is holidaying in Miramar.

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...PARÉNTESIS AMOROSO ...lovesick pause

The intention of this diary is not really to recount those days in Miramar where Comeback found a new home, with one resident in particular to whom Comeback's name was directed. Our journey was suspended in that haven of indecision, subordinate to the words that give consent and create bonds.

Alberto saw the danger and was already imagining himself alone on the roads of America, though he never raised his voice. The struggle was between she and I. For a moment as I left, victorious, or so I thought, Otero Silva's lines rang in my ears:

I heard splashing on the boat
her bare feet
And sensed in our faces
the hungry dusk
My heart swaying between her
and the street, the road
I don't know where I found the strength
to free myself from her eyes
to slip from her arms
She stayed, crying through rain and glass
clouded with grief and tears
She stayed, unable to cry
Wait! I will come
walking with you.*

Yet afterwards I doubted whether driftwood has the right to say, "I win," when the tide throws it on to the beach it seeks. But that was later, and is of no interest to the present. The two days I'd planned stretched like elastic into eight and with the bittersweet taste of goodbye mingling with my inveterate bad breath I finally felt myself lifted definitively away on the winds of adventure toward worlds I envisaged would be stranger than they were, into situations I imagined would be much more normal than they turned out to be.

I remember the day my friend the sea came to my defense – taking me from the limbo I was cursed with. The beach was deserted and a cold onshore wind was blowing. My head rested in the lap tying me to this land, lulled by everything around. The entire universe drifted rhythmically by, obeying the impulses of my inner voice. Suddenly, a stronger gust of wind brought a different sea voice and I lifted my head in surprise, yet it seemed to be nothing, a false alarm. I lay back, returning once again in my dreams to the caressing lap. And then, for the last time, I heard the ocean's warning. Its vast and jarring rhythm hammered at the fortress within me and threatened its imposing serenity.

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We became cold and left the beach, fleeing the disturbing presence which refused to leave me alone. The sea danced on the small stretch of beach, indifferent to its own eternal law and spawning its own note of caution, its warning. But a man in love (though Alberto used a more outrageous, less refined word) is in no condition to listen to such a call from nature; in the enormous belly of a Buick the bourgeois side of my universe was still under construction. The first commandment for every good explorer is that an expedition has two points: the point of departure and the point of arrival. If your intention is to make the second theoretical point coincide with the actual point of arrival, don't think about the means – because the journey is a virtual space that finishes when it finishes, and there are as many means as there are different ways of "finishing." That is to say, the means are endless. I remembered Alberto's suggestion: "The bracelet, or you're not who you think you are."

Chichina's hands disappeared into the hollow made by mine. "Chichina, that bracelet... Can I take it to guide me and remind me of you?"

The poor girl! I know the gold didn't matter, despite what they say; her fingers as they held the bracelet were merely weighing up the love that made me ask for it. That is, at least, what I honestly think. Alberto says (with a certain mischievousness, it seems to me), that you don't need particularly sensitive fingers to weigh up the full 29 carats of my love.

*Miguel Otero Silva, left-wing Venezuelan poet and novelist, born in 1908.

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HASTA ROMPER EL ULTIMO VÍNCULO until the last tie is broken

We left, stopping next in Necochea where an old university friend of Alberto's had his practise. We covered the distance easily in a morning, arriving just in time for a steak lunch, receiving a genial welcome from the friend and a not so genial welcome from his wife who spotted the danger in our resolutely bohemian ways. "You have only one year left before you qualify as a doctor and yet you're going away? You have no idea when you'll be back? But why?"

We couldn't give precise answers to her desperate questions and this horrified her. She was courteous with us but her hostility was clear, despite the fact that she knew (at least I think she knew) ultimate victory was hers — her husband was beyond our "redemption." In Mar del Plata we had visited a doctor friend of Alberto's who had joined the [Peronist] party, with all its consequent privileges. This doctor in Necochea remained faithful to his own — the Radicals — yet we, however, were as remote from one as from the other. Support for the Radicals was never a tenable political position for me and was also losing its significance for Alberto, who had been quite close at one time with some of the leaders he respected.

When we climbed back on to the bike again, after thanking the couple for our three days of the good life, we continued on to Bahía Blanca, feeling a little more alone but a good deal more free. Friends were also expecting us there, my friends this time, and they too offered us warm and friendly hospitality. Several days passed us by in this southern port, as we fixed the bike and wandered aimlessly around the city. These were the last days in which we did not have to think about money. Afterwards, a rigid diet of meat, polenta and bread would have to be followed strictly to stretch our meager finances. The taste of bread was now tinged with warning: "I won't be so easy to come by soon, old man," and we swallowed it with all the more enthusiasm. We wanted, like camels, to build our reserves for the journey that lay ahead.

The night before our departure I came down with a cough and quite a high temperature, and consequently we were a day late leaving Bahía Blanca. Finally, at three in the afternoon, we left under a blazing sun that had become even hotter by the time we reached the sand dunes around Médanos. The bike, with its badly distributed weight, kept bounding out of control, the wheels constantly spinning over. Alberto fought a painful battle with the sand and insists he won. The only certainty is that we found ourselves resting comfortably in the sand six times before we finally made it out on

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to the flat. We did, nevertheless, get out, and this is my *compañero's* main argument for claiming victory over Médanos.

From here I took over the controls, accelerating to make up for precious lost time. A fine sand covered part of a bend and – boom: the worst crash of the whole trip. Alberto emerged unscathed but my foot was trapped and scorched by the cylinder, leaving a disagreeable memento which lasted a long time because the wound wouldn't heal.

A heavy downpour forced us to seek shelter at a ranch, but to reach it we had to get 300 meters up a muddy track and we went flying twice more. Their welcome was magnificent but the sum total of our first experience on unsealed roads was alarming: nine crashes in a single day. On camp beds, the only beds we'd know from now on, and lying beside La Poderosa, our snail-like dwelling, we still looked into the future with impatient joy. We seemed to breathe more freely, a lighter air, an air of adventure. Distant countries, heroic deeds and beautiful women spun around and around in our turbulent imaginations.

My tired eyes refused to sleep and in them a pair of green spots swirled, representing the world I had left for dead behind me and mocking the so-called liberation I sought. They harnessed their image to my extraordinary flight across the lands and seas of the world.

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PARA LAS GRIPES, CAMA for the flu, bed

The bike exhaled with boredom along the long accident-free road and we exhaled with fatigue. Driving on a gravel-covered road had transformed a pleasant jaunt into a heavy job. By nightfall, after an entire day of alternating turns at the controls, we were left with more desire to sleep than to continue with the effort to reach Choele Choele, a largish town where we had a chance at free lodging. So we stopped in Benjamín Zorrilla, settling down comfortably in a room at the railroad station. We slept, dead to the world.

We woke early the next morning, but when I went to collect water for our *mate* a weird sensation darted through my body, followed by a long shiver. Ten minutes later I was shaking uncontrollably like someone possessed. My quinine tablets made no difference, my head was like a drum hammering out strange rhythms, bizarre colors shifted shapelessly across the walls and some desperate heaving produced a green vomit. I spent the whole day like this, unable to eat, until by the evening I felt well enough to climb on the bike and, sleeping on Alberto's shoulder, we reached Choele Choele. There we visited Dr. Barrera, director of the little hospital and a member of parliament. He received us amiably, giving us a room to sleep in. He prescribed a course of penicillin and within four hours my temperature had lowered, but whenever we talked about leaving the doctor shook his head and said, "For the flu: bed." (This was his diagnosis, for want of a better one.) So we spent several days there, being cared for royally.

Alberto photographed me in my hospital gear. I made an impressive spectacle: gaunt, flushed, enormous eyes and a ridiculous beard whose shape didn't change much in all the months I wore it. It's a pity the photograph wasn't a good one; it was an acknowledgment of our changed circumstances and of the horizons we were seeking, free at last from "civilization." One morning the doctor didn't shake his head in his usual way. That was enough. Within the hour we were gone, heading west toward our next destination — the lakes. The bike struggled, showing signs it was feeling the strain, especially in the bodywork which we constantly had to fix with Alberto's favored spare part — wire. He picked up this quote from somewhere, I don't know where, attributing it to Oscar Gálvez:* "When a piece of wire can replace a screw, give me the wire, it's safer." Our hands and our pants were unequivocal proof that we were with Gálvez, at least on the question of wire.

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It was already night, yet we were trying to reach human habitation; we had no headlight and spending the night in the open didn't seem much like a pleasant idea. We were moving slowly, using a torch, when a strange noise rang out from the bike that we couldn't identify. The torch didn't give out enough light to find the cause and we had no choice but to camp where we were. We settled down as best we could, erecting our tent and crawling into it, hoping to suffocate our hunger and thirst (for there was no water nearby and we had no meat) with some exhausted sleep. In no time, however, the light evening breeze became a violent wind, uprooting our tent and exposing us to the elements and the worsening cold. We had to tie the bike to a telephone pole and, throwing the tent over the bike for protection, we lay down behind it. The near hurricane prevented us from using our camp beds. In no way was it an enjoyable night, but sleep finally won out over the cold, the wind and everything else, and we woke at nine in the morning with the sun high above our heads.

By the light of day, we discovered that the infamous noise had been the front part of the bike frame breaking. We now had to fix it as best we could and find a town where we could weld the broken bar. Our friend, wire, solved the problem provisionally. We packed up and set off not knowing exactly how far we were from nearest habitation. Our surprise was great when, coming out of only the second bend, we saw a house. They received us very well, appeasing our hunger with exquisite roast lamb. From there we walked 20 kilometers to a place called Piedra del Águila where we were able to weld the part, but by then it was so late we decided to spend the night in the mechanic's house.

Except for a couple of minor spills that didn't do the bike too much damage, we continued calmly on toward San Martín de los Andes. We were almost there and I was driving when we took our first real fall in the south [of Argentina] on a beautiful gravel bend, by a little bubbling stream. This time La Poderosa's bodywork was damaged enough to force us to stop and, worst of all, we found we had what we most dreaded: a punctured back tire. In order to mend it, we had to take off all the packs, undo the wire "securing" the rack, then struggle with the wheel cover which defied our pathetic crowbar. Changing the flat (lazily, I admit) lost us two hours. Late in the afternoon we stopped at a ranch whose owners, very welcoming Germans, had by rare coincidence put up an uncle of mine in the past, an inveterate old traveler whose example I was now emulating. They let us fish in the river flowing through the ranch. Alberto cast his line, and before he knew what was happening, he had jumping on the end of his hook an iridescent form glinting in the sunlight. It was a rainbow trout, a beautiful, tasty fish (even more so when baked and seasoned by our hunger). I prepared the

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fish while Alberto, enthusiastic from this first victory, cast his line again and again. Despite hours of trying he didn't get a single bite. By then it was dark and we had to spend the night in the farm laborers' kitchen.

At five in the morning the huge stove occupying the middle of this kind of kitchen was lit and the whole place filled with smoke. The farm laborers passed round their bitter *mate* and cast aspersions on our own "*mate* for girls," as they describe sweet *mate* in those parts. In general they didn't try to communicate with us, as is typical of the subjugated Araucanian race who maintain a deep suspicion of the white man who in the past has brought them so much misfortune and now continues to exploit them. They answered our questions about the land and their work by shrugging their shoulders and saying "don't know" or "maybe," quickly ending the conversation. We were given the chance to stuff ourselves with cherries, so much so that by the time we were to move on to the plums I'd had enough and had to lie down to digest it all. Alberto ate some so as not to seem rude. Up the trees we ate avidly, as if we were racing each other to finish. One of the owner's sons looked on with a certain mistrust at these "doctors," disgustingly dressed and obviously famished, but he kept his mouth shut and let us eat to our idealistic hearts' content. It got to the point where we had to walk slowly to avoid stepping on our own stomachs. We mended the kick-start and other minor problems and set off again for San Martín de los Andes, where we arrived just before dark.

*A champion Argentine rally driver.

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SAN MARTÍN DE LOS ANDES

san martín de los andes

The road snakes between the low foothills that sound the beginning of the great cordillera of the Andes, then descends steeply until it reaches an unattractive, miserable town, surrounded in sharp contrast by magnificent, densely wooded mountains. San Martín lies on the yellow-green slopes that melt into the blue depths of Lake Lacar, a narrow tongue of water 35 meters wide and 500 kilometers long. The day it was “discovered” as a tourist haven the town’s climate and transport difficulties were solved and its subsistence secured.

Our first attack on the local clinic completely failed but we were told to try the same tactic at the National Parks’ offices. The superintendent of the park allowed us to stay in one of the tool sheds.

The nightwatchman arrived, a huge, fat man weighing 140 kilos with a face as hard as nails, but he treated us very amiably, granting us permission to cook in his hut. That first night passed perfectly. We slept in the shed, content and warm on straw – certainly necessary in those parts where the nights are particularly cold.

We bought some beef and set off to walk along the shores of the lake. In the shade of the immense trees, where the wilderness had arrested the advance of civilization, we made plans to build a laboratory in this place, when we finished our trip. We imagined great windows that would take in the whole lake, winter blanketing the ground in white; the dinghy we would use to travel from one side to the other; catching fish from a little boat; everlasting excursions into the almost virgin forest.

Although often on our travels we longed to stay in the formidable places we visited, only the Amazon jungle called out to that sedentary part of ourselves as strongly as did this place.

I now know, by an almost fatalistic conformity with the facts, that my destiny is to travel, or perhaps it’s better to say that traveling is our destiny, because Alberto feels the same. Still, there are moments when I think with profound longing of those wonderful areas in our south. Perhaps one day, tired of circling the world, I’ll return to Argentina and settle in the Andean lakes, if not indefinitely then at least for a pause while I shift from one understanding of the world to another.

At dusk we started back and it was dark before we arrived. We were pleasantly surprised to find that Don Pedro Olate, the nightwatchman, had prepared a wonderful barbecue to treat us. We bought wine to return the gesture and ate like lions, just for a

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change. We were discussing how tasty the meat was and how soon we wouldn't be eating as extravagantly as we had done in Argentina, when Don Pedro told us he'd been asked to organize a barbecue for the drivers of a motor race taking place on the local track that coming Sunday. He wanted two helpers and offered us the job. "Mind that I can't pay you, but you can stock up on meat for later." It seemed like a good idea and we accepted the jobs of first and second assistants to the "Granddaddy of the Southern Argentine Barbecue."

Both assistants waited for Sunday with a kind of religious enthusiasm. At six in the morning on the day, we started our first job — loading wood on to a truck and taking it to the barbecue site — and we didn't stop work until 11 a.m. when the distinctive signal was given and everyone threw themselves voraciously on to the tasty ribs.

A very strange person was giving orders whom I addressed with the utmost respect as "Señora" any time I said a word, until one of my fellow workers said: "Hey kid, *che*, don't push Don Pendón too far, he'll get angry." "Who's Don Pendón?" I asked, with the kind of gesture some uncultured kid would give. The answer, that Don Pendón was the Señora, left me cold, but not for long.

As always at barbecues, there was far too much meat for everyone, so we were given *carte blanche* to pursue our vocation as camels. We executed, furthermore, a carefully calculated plan. I pretended to get drunker and drunker and, with every apparent attack of nausea, I staggered off to the stream, a bottle of red wine hidden inside my leather jacket. After five attacks of this type we had the same number of liters of wine stored beneath the fronds of a willow, keeping cool in the water. When everything was over and the moment came to pack up the truck and return to town, I kept up my part, working reluctantly and bickering constantly with Don Pendón. To finish my performance I lay down flat on my back in the grass, utterly unable to take another step. Alberto, acting like a true friend, apologized for my behavior to the boss and stayed behind to look after me as the truck left. When the noise of the engine faded in the distance we jumped up and raced off like colts to the wine that would guarantee us several days of kingly consumption.

Alberto made it first and threw himself under the willow: his face was straight out of a comic film. Not a single bottle remained. Either my drunken state hadn't fooled anyone, or someone had seen me sneak off with the wine. The fact was, we were as broke as ever, retracing in our minds the smiles that had greeted my drunken antics, trying to find some trace of the irony with which we could identify

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the thief. To no avail. Lugging the chunk of bread and cheese we'd received and a few kilos of meat for the night, we had to walk back to town. We were well-fed and well-watered, but with our tails between our legs, not so much for the wine but for the fools they'd made of us. Words cannot describe it.

The following day was rainy and cold and we thought the race wouldn't go ahead. We were waiting for a break in the rain so we could go and cook some meat by the lake when we heard over the loudspeakers that the race was still on. In our role as barbecue assistants we passed free of charge through the entrance gates and, comfortably installed, watched the nation's drivers in a fairly good car race.

Just as we were thinking of moving on, discussing the best road to take and drinking *mate* in the doorway of our shed, a jeep arrived, carrying some of Alberto's friends from the distant and almost mythical Villa Concepción del Tío. We shared big friendly hugs and went immediately to celebrate by filling our guts with frothy liquid, as is the dignified practise on such occasions. They invited us to visit them in the town where they were working, Junín de los Andes, and so we went, lessening the bike's load by leaving our gear in the National Parks' shed.

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EXPLORACIÓN CIRCUNVALATORIA

circular exploration

Junín de los Andes, less fortunate than its lakeside brother, vegetates in a forgotten corner of civilization, unable to break free of the monotony of its stagnant life, despite attempts to invigorate the town by building a barracks where our friends were working. I say our friends, because in no time at all they were mine too.

We dedicated the first night to reminiscing about that distant past in Villa Concepción, our mood enhanced by seemingly unlimited bottles of red wine. My lack of training meant I had to abandon the match and, in honor of the real bed, I slept like a log. We spent the next day fixing a few of the bike's problems in the workshop of the company where our friends worked. That night they gave us a magnificent farewell from Argentina: a beef and lamb barbecue, with bread and gravy and a superb salad. After several days of partying, we left, departing with many hugs on the road to Carrué, another lake in the region. The road is terrible and our poor bike snorted about in the sand as I tried to help it out of the dunes. The first five kilometers took us an hour and a half, but later the road improved and we arrived without any other hitches at Carrué Chico, a little blue-green lake surrounded by wildly forested hills, and then at Carrué Grande, a more expansive lake but sadly impossible to ride around on a bike because there is only a bridle path used by local smugglers to cross over to Chile.

We left the bike at the cabin of a park ranger who wasn't home, and took off to climb the peak facing the lake. It was nearing lunchtime and our supplies consisted only of a piece of cheese and some preserves. A duck passed, flying high over the lake. Alberto calculated the distance of the bird, the absence of the warden, the possibility of a fine, etc., and fired. By a masterful stroke of good luck (though not for the duck), the bird fell into the lake. A discussion immediately ensued as to who would go and get it. I lost and plunged in. It seemed that fingers of ice were gripping me all over my body, almost completely impeding my movement. Allergic as I am to the cold, those 20 meters there and back that I swam to retrieve what Alberto had shot down made me suffer like a Bedouin. Just as well that roast duck, flavored as usual with our hunger, is one exquisite dish.

Invigorated by lunch, we set off with enthusiasm on the climb. From the start, however, we were joined by flies that circled us ceaselessly, biting when they got the chance. The climb was gruelling because we lacked appropriate equipment and experience, but some weary hours later we reached the summit. To our disappointment, there was no panoramic view to admire; neighboring mountains

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blocked everything. Whichever way we looked a higher peak was in the way. After some minutes of joking about in the patch of snow crowning the peak, we took to the task of descending, spurred on by the fact that darkness would soon be closing in. The first part was easy, but then the stream that was guiding our descent began to grow into a torrent with steep, smooth sides and slippery rocks that were difficult to walk on. We had to push our way through willows on the edge, finally reaching an area of thick, treacherous reeds. As night fell it brought us a thousand strange noises and the sensation of walking into empty space with each step. Alberto lost his goggles and my pants were reduced to rags. We arrived, finally, at the tree line and from there we took every step with infinite caution, because the darkness was so complete and our sixth sense so heightened that we saw abysses every second moment.

After an eternity of trekking through deep mud we recognized the stream flowing out into the Carrué, and almost immediately the trees disappeared and we reached the flat. The huge figure of a stag dashed like a quick breath across the stream and his body, silver by the light of the rising moon, disappeared into the undergrowth. This tremor of nature cut straight to our hearts. We walked slowly so as not to disturb the peace of the wild sanctuary with which we were now communing.

We waded across the thread of water, whose touch against our ankles gave me a sharp reminder of those ice fingers I hate so much, and reached the shelter of the ranger's cabin. He was kind enough to offer us hot *mate* and sheepskins to sleep on till the following morning. It was 12:35 a.m.

We drove slowly on the way back, passing lakes of only a hybrid beauty compared to Carrué, and finally reached San Martín where Don Pendón gave us 10 pesos each for working at the barbecue. Then we set off further south.

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QUERIDAVIEJA

dear mama

January 1952
En route to Bariloche

Dear Mama,

Just as you have not heard from me, I've had no news from you and I'm worried. It would defeat the purpose of these few lines to tell you all that has happened to us; I'll just say that two days after leaving Bahía Blanca I fell ill with a temperature of 40 degrees which kept me in bed for a day. The following morning I managed to get up only to end up in the Choele Choel regional hospital where I was given a dose of a little-known drug, penicillin, and recovered four days later...

We reached San Martín de los Andes, using our usual resourcefulness to solve the thousand problems that plagued us along the way. San Martín de los Andes has a beautiful lake and is wonderfully set amid virgin forest. You must see it, I'm sure you'd find it worthwhile. Our faces are beginning to resemble the texture of Carborundum. Any house we come across that has a garden, we seek food, lodging and whatever else is on offer. We ended up at the Von Putnamers' ranch, they're friends of Jorge's, particularly one who's a Peronist, always drunk, and the best of the three. I was able to diagnose a tumor in the occipital zone that was probably of hydatic origin. We'll have to wait and see what happens. We will leave for Bariloche in two or three days and intend to travel at a leisurely pace. Send me a letter poste restante if it can arrive by February 10 or 12. Well, Mama, the next page I'm writing is for Chichina. Send lots of love to everyone and make sure you tell me whether or not Papi is in the south.

A loving hug from your son.

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POR EL CAMINO DE LOS SIETE LAGOS on the seven lakes road

We decided to go to Bariloche by the Seven Lakes Road, named for the number of lakes the road skirts before reaching the town. We traveled the first few kilometers at La Poderosa's ever tranquil pace, without any serious mechanical upsets until, with nightfall catching up on us, we pulled the old broken headlight trick so we could sleep in a road laborer's hut, a handy ruse because the cold that night was uncommonly harsh. It was so fiercely cold that a visitor soon appeared asking to borrow some blankets because he and his wife were camping by the edge of lake and they were freezing. We went to share some *mate* with this stoical pair who for some time had been living beside the lakes with only a tent and the contents of their backpacks. They put us to shame.

We set off again, passing greatly varying lakes, all surrounded by ancient forest, the scent of wilderness caressing our nostrils. But curiously, the sight of a lake and a forest and a single solitary house with a well-tended garden soon begins to grate. Seeing the landscape at this superficial level only captures its boring uniformity, not allowing you to immerse yourself in the spirit of the place; for that you must stop at least several days.

We finally reached the northern end of Lake Nahuel Huapí and slept on its banks, full and content after the enormous barbecue we had eaten. But when we hit the road again, we noticed a puncture in the back tire and from then began a tedious battle with the inner tube. Each time we patched up one side, the other side of the tube punctured, until we were all out of patches and were forced to spend the night where we were. An Austrian caretaker who had raced motorbikes as a young man gave us a place to stay in an empty shed, caught between his desire to help fellow bikers in need and fear of his boss.

In his broken Spanish he told us that a puma was in the region. "And pumas are vicious, they're not afraid to attack people! They have huge blond manes..."

Attempting to close the door we found that it was like a stable door – only the lower half shut. I placed our revolver near my head in case the puma, whose shadow filled our thoughts, decided to pay an unannounced midnight visit. The day was just dawning when I awoke to the sound of claws scratching at the door. At my side, Alberto lay silent, full of dread. I had my hand tensed on the cocked revolver. Two luminous eyes stared at me from the silhouetted trees. Like a cat, the eyes sprang forward and the black mass of the body materialized over the door.

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It was pure instinct; the brakes of intelligence failed. My drive for self-preservation pulled the trigger. For a long moment, the thunder beat against and around the walls, stopping only when a lighted torch in the doorway began desperately shouting at us. But by that time in our timid silence we knew, or could at least guess, the reason for the caretaker's stentorian shouts and his wife's hysterical sobs as she threw herself over the dead body of Bobby – her nasty, ill-tempered dog.

Alberto went to Angostura to get the tire fixed and I thought I'd have to spend the night in the open, being unable to ask for a bed in a house where we were considered murderers. Luckily our bike was near another road laborer's hut and he let me sleep in the kitchen with a friend of his. At midnight I woke to the noise of rain and was going to get up to cover the bike with a tarpaulin. But before doing so, I decided to take a few puffs from my asthma inhaler, irritated by the sheepskin I was using for a pillow. As I inhaled, my sleeping companion woke up, hearing the puff. He made a sudden movement, then immediately fell silent. I sensed his body go rigid under his blankets, clutching a knife, holding his breath. With the experience of the previous night still fresh, I decided to remain where I was for fear of being knifed, just in case mirages were contagious in those parts.

We reached San Carlos de Bariloche by the evening of the next day and spent the night in the police station waiting for the *Modesta Victoria* to sail toward the border with Chile.

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Y YA SIENTO FLOTAR MI GRAN RAÍZ LIBRE Y DESNUDA... Y
and now, I feel my great roots unearth, free and...

In the kitchen of the police station we were sheltering from a storm unleashing its total fury outside. I read and reread the incredible letter. Just like that, all my dreams of home, bound up with those eyes that saw me off in Miramar, came crashing down for what seemed like no reason. A great exhaustion enveloped me and, half asleep, I listened to the lively conversation of a globetrotting prisoner as he concocted a thousand exotic brews, safe in the ignorance of his audience. I could make out his warm, seductive words while the faces surrounding him leaned closer so as better to hear his stories unfold.

As if through a distant fog I could see an American doctor we had met there in Bariloche nodding: "I think you'll get where you're heading, you've got guts. But I think you'll stay a while in Mexico. It's a wonderful country."

I suddenly felt myself flying off with the sailor to far-off lands, far away the current drama of my life. A feeling of profound unease came over me; I felt that I was incapable of feeling anything. I began to feel afraid for myself and started a tearful letter, but I couldn't write, it was hopeless to try. In the half-light that surrounded us, phantoms swirled around and around but "she" wouldn't appear. I still believed I loved her until this moment, when I realized I felt nothing.

I had to summon her back with my mind. I had to fight for her, she was mine, mine... I slept.
A gentle sun illuminated the new day, our day of departure, our farewell to Argentine soil. Carrying the bike on to the *Modesta Victoria* was not an easy task, but with patience we eventually did it. Getting it off again was equally hard. Then we were in that tiny spot by the lake, pompously named Puerto Blest. A few kilometers on the road, three or four at most, and we were back on water, a dirty green lake this time, Lake Frías.

A short voyage before finally reaching customs, then the Chilean immigration post on the other side of the cordillera – much lower at this latitude. There we crossed yet another lake fed by the waters of the Tronador River that originate in the majestic volcano sharing the same name. This lake, Esmeralda, in contrast to the Argentine lakes, offered wonderful, temperate water, making the task of bathing very enjoyable and much more enticing. High in the cordillera at a place called Casa Pangué there is a lookout that affords

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a beautiful view over Chile. It is a kind of crossroads; at least in that moment it was for me. I was looking to the future, through the narrow band of Chile and to what lay beyond, turning the lines of the Otero Silva poem over in my mind.

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OBJETOS CURIOSOS objects of curiosity

Water leaked from every pore of the big old tub carrying our bike. Daydreams took me soaring away while I maintained my rhythm at the pump. A doctor, returning from Peulla in the passenger launch that ran back and forth across Esmeralda, passed the hulking great contraption our bike was lashed to and where we were paying for both our and La Poderosa's passage with the sweat of our brows. A curious expression came across his face as he watched us struggling to keep the vessel afloat, naked and almost swimming in the oily pump-water.

We had met several doctors traveling down there who we lectured about leprology, embellishing a bit, provoking the admiration of our colleagues from the other side of the Andes. They were impressed because, since leprosy is not a problem in Chile, they didn't know the first thing about it or about lepers and confessed honestly that never in their lives had they even seen a leper. They told us about the distant leper colony on Easter Island where a small number of lepers were living; it was a delightful island, they said, and our scientific interests were excited.

This doctor generously offered us any help we might need, given the "very interesting journey" we were making. But in those happy days in the south of Chile, when our stomachs were still full and we were not yet totally brazen, we merely asked him for an introduction to the president of the Friends of Easter Island, who lived near them in Valparaíso. Of course, he was delighted. The lake route ended in Petrohué where we said goodbye to everyone; but not before posing for some black Brazilian girls who placed us in their souvenir album for southern Chile, and for an environmentalist couple from who knows what European country, who noted our addresses ceremoniously so they could send us copies of the photos.

There was a character in the little town who wanted a station wagon driven to Osorno, where we were heading, and he asked me if I would do it. Alberto gave me a high-speed lesson in gear changes and I went off in all solemnity to assume my post. Rather cartoon-like, I set off with hops and jerks behind Alberto who was riding the bike. Every corner was a torment: brake, clutch, first, second, help, *Mamáaa...* The road wound through beautiful countryside, skirting Lake Osorno, the volcano with the same name a

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sentinel above us. Unfortunately I was in no position along that accident-studded road to appreciate the landscape. The only accident, however, was suffered by a little pig that ran in front of the car while we were speeding down a hill, before I was fully practised in the art of braking and clutching.

We arrived in Osorno, we scrounged around in Osorno, we left Osorno and continued ever northward through the delightful Chilean countryside, divided into plots, every bit farmed, in stark contrast to our own arid south. The Chileans, exceedingly friendly people, were warm and welcoming wherever we went. Finally we arrived in the port of Valdivia on a Sunday. Ambling around the city, we dropped into the local newspaper, the *Correo de Valdivia*, and they very kindly wrote an article about us. Valdivia was celebrating its fourth centenary and we dedicated our journey to the city in tribute to the great conquistador whose name the city bears. They persuaded us to write a letter to Molinas Luco, the mayor of Valparaíso, preparing him for our great Easter Island scam. The harbor, overflowing with goods that were completely foreign to us, the market where they sold different foods, the typically Chilean wooden houses, the special clothes of the *guasos*,* were notably different from what we knew back home; there was something indigenously American, untouched by the exoticism invading our *pampas*. This may be because Anglo-Saxon immigrants in Chile do not mix, thus preserving the purity of the indigenous race, which in our country is practically nonexistent.

But for all the customary and idiomatic differences distinguishing us from our thin Andean brother, there is one cry that seems international: "Give them water," the salutation greeting the sight of my calf-length trousers, not my personal taste but a fashion inherited from a generous, if short, friend.

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LOSEXPERTOS the experts

Chilean hospitality, as I never tire of saying, is one reason traveling in our neighboring country is so enjoyable. And we made the most of it. I woke up gradually beneath the sheets, considering the value of a good bed and calculating the calorie content of the previous night's meal. I reviewed recent events in my mind: the treacherous puncture of La Poderosa's tire, which left us stranded in the rain and in the middle of nowhere; the generous help of Raúl, owner of the bed in which we were now sleeping; and the interview we gave to the paper *El Austral* in Temuco. Raúl was a veterinary student, not particularly studious it seemed, who had hoisted our poor old bike on to the truck he owned, bringing us to this quiet town in the middle of Chile. To be honest, there was probably a moment or two when our friend wished he'd never met us, since we caused him an uncomfortable night's sleep, but he only had himself to blame, bragging about the money he spent on women and inviting us for a night out at a "cabaret," which would be at his expense, of course. His invitation was the reason we prolonged our stay in the land of Pablo Neruda, and we became involved in a lively bragging session which lasted for some time. In the end, of course, he came clean on that inevitable problem (lack of funds), meaning we had to postpone our visit to that very interesting place of entertainment, though in compensation he gave us bed and board. So at one in the morning there we were, feeling very self-satisfied and devouring everything on the table, quite a lot really, plus some more that arrived later. Then we appropriated our host's bed as his father was being transferred to Santiago and there was not much furniture left in the house.

Alberto, unmovable, was resisting the morning sun's attempt to disturb his deep sleep, while I dressed slowly, a task we didn't find particularly difficult because the difference between our night wear and day wear was made up, generally, of shoes. The newspaper flaunted a generous number of pages, very much in contrast to our poor and stunted dailies, but I wasn't interested in anything besides one piece of local news I found in large type in section two:

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TWO ARGENTINE LEPROSY EXPERTS TOUR LATIN AMERICA BY MOTORCYCLE

And then in smaller type:

THEY ARE IN TEMUCO AND WANT TO VISIT RAPA-NUI**

This was the epitome of our audacity. Us, experts, key figures in the field of leprology in the Americas, with vast experience, having treated 3,000 patients, familiar with the most important leprosy centers of the continent and researchers into the sanitary conditions of those same centers, had consented to visit this picturesque, melancholy little town. We supposed they would fully appreciate our respect for the town, but we didn't really know. Soon the whole family was gathered around the article and all other items in the paper became objects of Olympian contempt. And so, like this, basking in their admiration, we said goodbye to those people we remember nothing about, not even their names.

We had asked permission to leave the bike in the garage of a man who lived on the outskirts of town and we made our way there, no longer a pair of more or less likable vagrants with a bike in tow; no, we were now "The Experts," and we were treated accordingly. We spent the whole day fixing and conditioning the bike while every now and then a dark-skinned maid would arrive with little snacks. At five o'clock, after a delicious afternoon tea prepared by our host, we said goodbye to Temuco and headed north.

*Chilean peasants.

**Easter Island.

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