

Pablo is about 5'7, lean, with a prominent nose and curly dark hair and a beard, both of which show flecks of gray. He meets me at the Ezeiza airport on Saturday morning wearing Ray-Bans and holding a white sheet of paper onto which he has written "AIFS," my study abroad sponsoring organization, in permanent marker. When he talks—which is almost constantly—you notice that for a relatively young man, he has bad teeth. They're slightly crooked, stained yellow, and one has a silver crown on it. He smokes expertly as we wait for our cab driver, speaking around the cigarette about literature. I'm glad he's speaking in English—it is difficult enough to understand him between the cigarette and his rapid speech. Somehow all of this makes him absurdly charming. Despite the fact that I have not slept since 4:00 a.m. Friday, I am all eager listener. It's the only way I can contribute.

Our cab driver is not interested in talking. She is an old woman, if her cotton-fluff hair is any clue. She turns the radio on softly—a gentle but unmistakable hint. I will learn later that the radio station is one of the most popular in Buenos Aires. It is February 29 and they are playing Christmas music. Have they stretched the last season, or do they begin celebrating the next even earlier than we do in the United States? Not long before we leave the airport, our driver's mother, who must be ancient, calls her. "No, Mama, I'm with a client. I'll see you later. Love you. Kisses," she says in Spanish. Perhaps the Buenos Aires sun or curious fares have aged the driver prematurely, and she is only 60 or so.

Even the flat expanse of highway fascinates me. This is the greenest summer I have ever seen.

Pablo switches to Spanish to talk about Thomas Pynchon, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jorge Luis Borges once he realizes I can keep up with him. He smokes equally well in either language. Without so much as adjusting his cigarette, he asks why Sanders has trouble with Black voters when he marched for civil rights. "There are photos of him with Martin Luther King," he nearly shouts. I try to explain to him that Black voters are not a single voting bloc, that support for various candidates tends to vary dramatically by voters' ages. I want to tell him that some voters think that, for many years, Sanders simplified racism as being only a function of capitalism, unwilling or unable to recognize that the two are overlapping but distinct. But my Spanish is inadequate; it doesn't matter anyway, for we have arrived at my homestay in Cañitas.

My host mom, Graciela, greets me with a hug and presses her left cheek to my right, kissing the air beside my face. It's how people greet each other here in Buenos Aires, especially for the first time, and it makes me miss my parents profoundly. She shows me around the apartment, the big living room with parquet floors, the galley kitchen, the balcony. My room is separate from the others and tiny. With the twin bed, the desk, and myself inside, I can hardly find room for my two suitcases and duffel bag. The walls are white and empty save three floating shelves above my desk. I have my own bathroom, though it takes me 10 minutes to figure out how to flush the toilet (by pushing a button on the wall adjacent to it). My room is next to the back door.

Whether it is Pablo's talk of literature or this closet-of-a-room, I think of the Clarice Lispector book, *The Passion According to G.H.* It is the internal monologue of a woman describing her horror after crushing a cockroach in the drawer of a wardrobe. The entirety of the novella takes place in her previous maid's room, which, like my own room, is blank and without character. My room is spotless and mercifully without roaches. I put my things away and call my mom before Graciela calls me for lunch.

She's cooked corn, a quinoa patty, and what I think are sweet potatoes with some kind of butter substitute on them. There's also some wetly gleaming lettuce, which might pass as a salad. I am a picky eater, a pathologically picky one, given the number of occupational and food therapists my mother took me to see throughout my first few years of life. It is one of the things about myself that I like least. I have had quinoa only once but like sweet potatoes, and lettuce doesn't have any taste to speak of. I tell myself that I will eat as much as I physically can.

The sweet potatoes turn out to be two slices of pumpkin, the butter substitute a gelatinous fat-free cheese that makes me gag. I am ashamed of my reaction to my host mom's hospitality and try to disguise how little I eat by talking as enthusiastically as I can manage. "You are very picky," she tells me. Thinking badly of myself magnifies my loneliness: I don't want my own company. I go back to my room, which I now believe to be servant's quarters, and cry. I take a shower; the curtain rod falls down, and I have to fix the curtain and cry; I have trouble plugging my adapter into the power strip beneath the bed, begin to sweat, and cry; I realize the floor is sticky and cry. I call my father and cry.

"I can't do it. I want to go home," I tell him, wiping my nose with my hand like a child because I cannot bear to get up for a tissue.

"I know it's hard, and you're low on sleep and that doesn't help either. But you're my curious, smart, determined girl," he says. He tells me I'm a pistol, which is one of the highest compliments he gives out.

I fall asleep for a couple hours, wake up, cry, and call my dad again. I fall back asleep and don't wake up until 8:30 Sunday morning. It's a new day—outside and inside me, as I will soon discover.

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Nearly everything about Buenos Aires delights me. I am one block from Avenida Borges. I like the sunburn I get from walking around La Boca and Parque Nacional de la Memoria; I like that there are trees on nearly every street; I like riding the *subte* and looking at the women's manicured hands clutching their bags in their laps or tapping on their phones. I like that the streets are full of dogs, universally spoiled and almost universally uninterested in me.

I love the kiosks on every corner, especially the one down the block from me, worked by the young man who's so handsome he's almost pretty. I am an ardent feminist, and it embarrasses me to admit that I'm more curious than offended when the young guys hanging out on the corner turn to each other and start talking about me. They likely imagine I don't understand. I get dizzy from the smell of the *fruterias* and their boxes of apples and plums and bananas. If I'm especially lucky, they'll have cartons of strawberries out for me, too. I haven't bought anything from them yet, but I imagine the joy I'll feel eating the fruit and want to dance.

In the morning, I eat a *medialuna*, a sweet croissant, and drink tea and read, knowing that the waiter will not rush me by bringing me the bill until I ask for it. I ride the *subte* to Plaza Italia and walk through the Jardín Botánico, and lose myself on its grounds. For the first time I can remember, it doesn't make me nervous to have no particular destination. At home, I strictly regulate my leisure. Getting lost and being late are the greatest sources of my anxiety. Here, I wander aimlessly, taking the path that is most beautiful to me, if not necessarily the most efficient. I smile at the man who has found the perfect bench in the gardens to read his newspaper, just out of reach of the nearest sprinklers. He doesn't see me and this pleases me all the more. I walk through the same sprinklers he has worked so hard to avoid. I laugh: it is always summer, and I am always a child. This world is all impressions: I worry that I will kill them by writing them.

Watching the young couples makes me giddy. A woman kisses her boyfriend goodbye as she walks him to his job; a teenager intertwines his arm with his girlfriend's, allowing her wrist to balance delicately on his forearm. It fills me with the sweetest longing for love. I decide to love this place.