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Over the rainbow (2014)

In that part of the book of my memory before the which is little that can be read, there is a rubric, saying, *Incipit Vita Nuova*. Under such rubric I find written many things...

— Dante, *La Vita Nuova*¹

¹ Translation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.



Stanzi in Rosario.

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Thermodynamic equilibrium is not precisely static — see Brownian motion — but it is stable. Dynamic equilibria, on the other hand, tend to be metastable, and decay eventually; though of course the definition of “eventually” is rarely obvious —

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Only Angels Have Wings (7/28/13)²

At first I couldn't believe that the guy could have jumped off the Eiffel Tower forty times and ended up like this, but then I remembered the moral of Tom Wolfe's book on the Mercury astronauts, which appears near the very end: he is talking about the later development of the astronaut corps, and mentions, more or less offhand, that out of this group of guys, the best test pilots in the world, the number who died in training flights was just about exactly the number you'd expect from statistics; another way of saying that, no matter how good you are, sooner or later your luck runs out. — Still, what a career. And, as they say in the westerns, he died with his boots on.

A goal toward which I aim myself, of course. — In brief: after a flurry of improvisation which left me sleeping in a garage on the Hill for most of a very cold winter (ironically, this was nonetheless warmer than many apartments I've had to live in), I settled into a daily routine which consisted, mainly, of trekking

² Io [EF]. — This referenced the death in a wingsuit accident of the famed base jumper Hervé le Gallou, in the French Alps in June, 2012; see Ed Caesar, “It's more like a suicide than a sport,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013. — Among the numerous lunatic exploits which made him a legend, De Gallou and a friend were the first to parachute from the top of the Burj Khalifa skyscraper. — Erik is himself a base jumper of some renown, and has done some seriously crazy shit.

over to Starbucks every morning at five to scour the Internet for a job and/or venture capital. I deputized Nina to bombard prospective angel investors with The Pitch,³ composed business plans, and, like a good Mad Scientist, plotted to take over the world. Our efforts met with success on all fronts, and, as of the first of June 2011, we had a couple of backers on the verge of writing checks, I had a job sweeping floors at the University lined up as backup, and, completely securing the situation, Nina's rich uncle succumbed to heart disease and left her his estate. So at that point everything was set, and I expected to be leaving for Argentina in a matter of days. — As if. — Instead the investors backed out at the last minute (as then did the next guys we lined up, and the guys after that, and the guys after that ...), the job lasted exactly a week and a half before I got busted (and thrown into jail) by the university cops for tying my dogs up outside the building while I was at work, Nina's evil sister executed some mysterious legal maneuver which disinherited Nina and left her even worse off than before — and, after spending the whole summer sleeping in the Miata with two large dogs (strange but true, not as uncomfortable as it sounds), I got busted for vagrancy, tossed into jail again, this time for a week, and by the time I got out and spent what money remained to me bailing the dogs out of the Humane Society, my lawyer, who had been holding the title to the car to protect me from the hypothetical threat of the IRS, suddenly went psycho, decided since I was going to die in the gutter anyway he might as well do what he could to expedite the process, sold the car for a few hundred dollars to cover what I owed him (to put the matter in perspective, he was at this point about a hundred grand in debt himself), and left me, finally, deprived of my last asset, sleeping on the creek under the stars. — Thus passed the subsequent winter: when it snowed I sneaked into the football stadium and slept in the stairwell; when it didn't I camped out in a variety of

³ "Right now it's only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept ... and later turn it into an idea."

locations, dodged several camping tickets which could have sent me back to the slammer (the first thing you have to understand about poverty is that it is, basically, illegal), and, gradually, reinstated myself in the good graces of one or two friends who, if they couldn't actually adopt me, at least provided me with a place to bathe and the all-important Warm Place To Shit. — Eventually I negotiated a combination of small welfare checks and “tutoring” arrangements with Arab business students (read: I take their online courses for them and write their term papers) which add up to enough to eat and pay \$350 a month to rent office space, and started sleeping indoors again. — At the moment we have an “art studio” in the cheap seats of the industrial district at the north end of town; into which, finally, I managed to haul all that remains after several hasty moves — most of the books and papers still, but a lot less furniture, and much of that thoroughly busted up by Saul's assistance during the original eviction. — So much the better, I figure: that much less to haul along with me when I finally get out of town. — Which remains the goal, even though like the rainbow it seems to recede as I approach it....

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[continues:]

... it was all pretty stressful, I must admit. One of the daily rituals, for a long time, was dropping by Suzanne's shop on the Hill to reassure her I wasn't dead of exposure or murdered by some psycho, and it always seemed to amaze her I could joke about my situation. But I figure that, appearances perhaps to the contrary, I am stronger than other people, and I can take more punishment. Which is still true, but to really enjoy living on the margins like that you have to be nuts, like Saul.

Whom I didn't trip over sleeping in the woods, since, not wanting to contend with bears and mountain lions, I generally

went east, not west, along the creek every evening. (Where the coyotes are bad enough: Wolfie and Stanzi would frequently bark all night.) This was also convenient to my storage locker, which meant I didn't have to lug a pile of sleeping bags around with me all day, had a place to change clothes, etc. ...

... Aside from a few rather strange encounters with young females who seemed fascinated with the hippie philosopher reading Nietzsche on the university lawn with his cute dogs, I haven't been chased by any women, and of course I haven't had any energy to devote to chasing them, if indeed I wanted to....

{...}

(They all seemed to want to feed me: the artist who shared her seaweed treats, the Asian girl who kept giving me bananas, the neohippie poetess who favored protein shakes, thought my handwriting looked like Greek, and wondered what the equations meant ...)

{...}

In a notebook of the homeless period I find a lengthy discussion of Birkhoff/Von Neumann circuits, some speculations about making balloon animals from superconducting shells to confine magnetic fields and thus constructing machines that could pinch plasmas, and a fantasy about flying kites with carbon-fiber strings in the jet stream. — “Men that look upon my outside, perusing only my condition, and fortunes, do erre in my altitude. For I am above Atlas his shoulders.” (Sir Thomas Browne.)



The office.



The view to the west from the Boulder Creek Hotel.

Subject	June 1st	June 2nd	June 3rd	June 4th	June 5th	June 6th	June 7th	June 8th	June 9th	June 10th
English	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes
Math	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes
Science	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes
Social Studies	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes	Handwritten notes

Test schedule, Summer 2014.

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*Re: You made it, so what does this mean? (10/4/14)*⁴

Christ, another novel — Well, to make the matter at least slightly clearer: nothing happens when I punch the Send button unless I walk across the street to the gas station/diner and indicate with my fetching combination of sign language and pidgin Spanish that I want a coffee (“grande”); after which I can access their slightly more reliable wifi, and try to finish the day’s business. Until that happens I have — sometimes — internet access at slow dialup bandwidth, and something blocks any outgoing mail I try to send with my mail client rather than by logging into the server directly (which doesn’t really work either). — But the situation is otherwise so completely fascinating that I don’t give a shit. — Or wouldn’t if the 16.50 pesos this costs me (divide by 8-point-something-that-keeps-rising for dollars) were not, at the moment, hard to come by. — The latest paycheck from the Arabs should repair that problem. Or so I hope.

Well, obviously it’s all very complicated.

To review the chain of events that brought me here: after a series of random fluctuations in what I laughingly refer to as my income put my nostrils far enough above the waterline to rent cheap office space, I did at least manage to sleep indoors in Boulder for most of my last couple of years there, roughly Thanksgiving 2012—Memorial Day 2014. Since the way I was doing this was technically illegal, like everything else the poor are compelled to do these days, I got evicted twice; the second occasion coincided not only with the advent of warm weather, which made the prospect of going back to the Boulder Creek Hotel a trifle more palatable, but with a veritable Perfect Storm

⁴ To [CS].

of Arab clients who needed help getting through algebra, statistics, and (I know, I know, the irony was crushing) even finance (I aced the course, incidentally, it was kind of interesting), which presented the possibility of making enough of a killing over the summer that I might actually be able to fly my ass out of there, dogs, research materials, and all. So I took eleven online courses simultaneously, billed them all at five hundred dollars a pop, and then blew the entire wad on tickets to the Dark (well: dimly-lit) Continent.

I left September 8, which was a Monday; spent a day, a night, and another day in airports and in transit; and found myself around 5 p.m. local time on Tuesday standing out in front of the terminal in Buenos Aires with two dogs and a couple of enormous bags wondering just how it was that my genius girlfriend had not figured out from all the travel plans I'd sent her that I was actually going to arrive and might require a ride, or something, to get to Rosario. Apparently her son's car was in the shop, or missing some documentation, or both; I never got this part of the story straight, and probably never will. — At any rate she pulled some strings: a cabbie materialized; grabbed the bags; tucked us all into the back of his car; and drove us away to the north. — I had the vague impression all this was going to cost us something like 600 pesos, but soon learned the First Rule of Improvisational Travel: everything costs three times what they say it is going to. The final tab came to 2160, and I think the asshole is still trying to collect the last of it. (With so many others making demands on the Rich American Tourist — honestly, all Americans are rich, they saw that in a movie somewhere — it is hard to keep track.) — Interlude dozing off while the slums of Buenos Aires roll by and are replaced by a landscape that could be the Midwest, for all I can tell, it looks exactly like Nebraska. — Finally arriving in Rosario and driving through the streets to the entrance of a hotel, where I discover I am supposed to spend the night. The bill for this too has somehow mysteriously tripled en route, and there is no way I have enough money left to check

in; real Rich Americans, of course, reach for their credit cards at this juncture, but I need not explain to you, at least, why they practically threw me out of the country. — So, a problem.

Finally we decide to pretend I am going to be back to check in after an hour or so and leave my bags in the keeping of the night clerk, and set off for a gas station/diner where we can sit down and impact our options.

For indeed, Nina was there awaiting my arrival: somewhat older than the girl in the photographs, and somewhat abused by the stresses of poverty and illness, but of course I have myself been clubbed over the head repeatedly for the last three years and don't give a shit, and neither, I guess, does she. — So: love at first sight, sure enough. Now for the footnotes and codicils.

First, there is some unspecified problem with my staying at her house. I had heard nothing about this before I set out, of course, but apparently after such a lengthy courtship no one believed I would ever actually get here, indeed (save for Nina herself) most of the people to whom she has described me thought she was making me up; her son, I guess, included, he being relevant in this connection since he is the other occupant. I guess I have to meet with his approval before anything else can happen. And, for some reason, he isn't home tonight. What this means I can't figure.

Second, I have budgeted this down to the last centime, and even after filling many pages of my notebooks with the calculations came up short at the last minute, meaning I had to negotiate an emergency loan literally while en route to be sure there would be enough to pay my entry fees in Buenos Aires. The plan, from the moment I conceived it, was that I was going to have just enough money to get me here; and after that, though my stable of clients was sure to be good for continued income and there was no problem making enough to eat and indeed to pay Nina's rent, if that should prove necessary or politically expedient, it was going

to take a couple of weeks, at least, for my exchequer to recover, during which time I needed a place to stay that wasn't going to cost me anything. I have explained this to Nina dozens of times, but apparently it all got filed under "When you wish upon a star", not with the grocery list. So now I am suddenly confronting the necessity of paying for lodgings, and I don't have any money. — At least, the ATM says I don't have any money. Since it is telling me in a foreign language and I am six thousand miles from my bank, I am not completely sure of this, but I'm inclined to believe it.

Third, Nina is acting weird. I have learned to read her pretty well at a distance, but everything looks different in closeup. Even though we are holding hands like schoolkids she is simultaneously playing some kind of tragic-renunciation scene that I am having difficulty interpreting. Is she ill again? Is she trying to pretend she's not good enough for me? if so, it's a little late to be explaining it.

So, at any rate, we're sitting in this all-night gas station/convenience store/diner with the dogs tied up outside, drinking espresso, and wondering where the fuck I am going to spend the night if not right there. She is getting more and more stressed by the moment, her hands are shaking, she's cold and trembling (incredibly thin, I really wonder whether she can afford to eat), and, lacking any happier inspiration, I pull my laptop out of my bag and put on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. — Which does fascinate her, fortunately. She begins to revive. We talk about the art of the silent movies, how the acting was more like dance. We trade a few of our favorite jokes about postmodernism.

This goes on for hours. Finally, about four in the morning — bear in mind I have scarcely slept for three days, and have eaten practically nothing since I left Boulder — it occurs to me that the ambiguous result of my attempt to check the contents of my

bank accounts online could have the interpretation that the bastards at Wells Fargo without telling me beforehand have imposed a daily limit on withdrawals. And if I try the ATM again, since it's now past midnight, this time it might work.

And sure enough. I run around the corner, find an all-night bank machine in a lobby, ask the genie to dispense 1000 pesos. And it does. The whole trip is a miracle; why not one more.

So now I can afford lodgings, albeit at a hostel, not a hotel. We get a cab (taxis at least are cheap and plentiful, even at this hour one passes every couple of minutes), run a couple of blocks to a place we'd scoped out earlier, and I plunk down 400 and get a room up three flights of stairs at the top of the building — a real garret, inexpressibly charming, with a door onto the rooftop and a bathroom that looks like somebody's junior-high-school shop project. It is beautiful, like something out of *La Bohème*.

But does Nina stay the rest of the night? No, of course not. She hops into another taxi and returns home, promising to negotiate with her son and return on the morrow.

Which she does, eventually, though not until well past noon. We walk down to the river, through the city parks, and discuss the situation. It develops that her son is adamantly opposed to my taking up residence, at least not until they consult the landlord about the acceptability of the dogs. — Once this question has been raised, of course, I know its answer. — A vacuum opens beneath my feet, the interstellar void: I have risked everything to come to this foreign country, spent every cent I was able to make in the last four years, and now I am stranded, abandoned, doomed. I will die here in the gutter, and no one will understand my elegantly-phrased last words. Except my dogs, who are going to have to gnaw on my carcass to stay alive. In advance, I forgive them.

Nina disappears again and I return to the hostel. Fortunately, nobody asks for money. I spend another night, and go out the next morning by myself. I wander down to the river again, and look at the water for a while. My resolve stiffens. If nothing else, maybe I can sell the Macbook, get enough to buy a junkyard sailboat, repair it, and make my way down the river and up the coast and back to North America. It will be an epic journey, but fuck it, Shackleton got back from the Antarctic. And think of the screenplay.

On the way back to the hostel I stop at an electronics store and try to explain with sign language my need for some kind of converter to plug my computer into; the power supply will work on 220 (I anticipated this problem long since), but the plugs and sockets are different here, and I can't recharge any of my batteries. The kid understands, finally, what I'm talking about, but he hasn't got one. He suggests some other store, I think, but I can't understand his directions. Instead I stop at a little market and buy a small bag of dog chow. The puppies won't have to eat me just yet.

Nina reappears later, after a rough day arguing with the landlord, and confirms the foregone conclusion. — So: homeless again, six thousand miles from Boulder Creek; now what? — Fortunately, another scheme has occurred to me, and even more fortunately (we're still on the same wavelength) exactly the same scheme has occurred to her: we have had a longstanding offer from a guy who has a little resort motel in the wine country around Mendoza, in the west, to come out there (if ever I could get to Argentina) and stay in one of his cabins; he can't afford to invest in our business plan, but he can at least offer free lodging. The offer has been reiterated every few months for the last three years. All we need to do is come up with enough money to make the trip, and we can run away together and live far from the dogrejecting landlords of the cold cruel city. — Moreover, we

both know where the money's coming from. While the Arabs were warming me up in the bullpen during the spring semester, I bought not one but two iPhones (I didn't realize how difficult it would be to get the first one unlocked, and ended up using it only as a camera); these are rarities here, and should fetch a premium. We'll make the rounds of the electronic-toy stores, and whoever drools most uncontrollably will bankroll our pilgrimage west.

As it turns out her son (whom I still have not met) starts drooling as soon as he hears of this scheme, and buys the better of the phones immediately. So I am 3000 pesos to the good at once, and have enough to cover the bill at the hostel, which has been running while these efforts have proceeded. — Alas, I have to move, the room has been reserved for someone else. We bid a fond farewell to the Hostel Malvinas, and, after an ugly afternoon interlude during which we bounce from one place to another in search of an empty room in a place that will allow the puppies, alight finally at — I am not making this up — the famous Hostel Kalifornia.

No, you think I'm kidding:



Here, as it turns out, I spend about a week and a half, burning through the proceeds from the first iPhone, selling the second, and finally (doing homework furiously the while for another crew of Arabs, trying to make as much money as possible, checking the PayPal account every couple of hours to see if anything came in yet, firing off emails in mounting desperation), after more emergency loans secured by the food stamp account I left in the hands of one of my friends back home, get enough to pay for the ride to Mendoza. — Or almost. At the last second (why is this not a surprise?) the price goes up drastically, and the 4000 pesos I thought was going to cover it turns out to be a down payment on the 6000 the guy who replaces the guy who replaces the guy we thought would do it is going to charge. — Well, maybe Nina's son can pay the asshole when he gets back; that terminal paycheck from the employer who laid everybody off is due any minute now. (Any minute now for the last couple of months, in fact, and probably any minute now until Christmas.) — Tell him that; tell him anything. — Fuck it, we haven't any choice. We're going. I can't pay for the hostel any longer, it will devour my funds and leave me back by the riverside wondering whether I should build a raft. (And to think I used to be/So amused/At Napoleon in rags/And the language that he used.)

So: I pack everything up the night before. Nina says she'll be there with the taxi in the morning. The die is cast.

Well. Not quite, of course. Nothing is quite as we expect, here beneath the Southern Cross. Nina arrives, indeed, half an hour late, and announces tearfully (more drama, everything is grand opera) that she cannot go with me; that she is making this sacrifice to ensure my happiness; that the comfort and safety of myself and (of course) my darling puppies is her principal concern; that, therefore, I must climb into the taxi, and allow myself to be carried away — not simply into a foreign country, I am there already, but into a distant dusty rural province where I

am going to have to communicate with the natives like a cave man, in grunts and signs. (Really, the Spanish thing would have been doing better were it not for this ongoing dire necessity of putting all available energy into doing homework for the Arabs.) — She also says something about having to go to the doctor, though whether she is really any sicker than usual I can't figure out. But obviously she thinks she is, and that is all that counts.

My protests are futile, and of course there's nothing I can do about it. I have to leave. I pile my bags into the trunk and climb into the back seat with the dogs. — The driver's name is Angel. His wife's name is Mary. She smiles brightly, and consults a dictionary before offering a garbled greeting. — And off we go. — The trip is supposed to take about 9 hours.

The trip, of course, takes more like 12 or 14 hours, possibly because the interstate highway system has not been invented here and the roads keep petering out and turning into dirt tracks, possibly because even when you find the right road there are no highway signs to tell you that you're on it, possibly because Angel and Mary if they have maps don't seem to know how to read them and though they do have GPS don't pay any attention to what it is telling them, possibly because they stop every half hour out of apparent reflex and ask somebody, anybody, sleeping cabbies, children, domestic servants, animals, which way it is to Mendoza, no matter that it may yet be hundreds of kilometers distant. On two or three occasions even though I have no idea where we are it is clear to me that we have taken a wrong turn, and I attempt to communicate this intelligence without success. Finally, late at night, when we really have arrived, they drive past the place and I have to tug on their sleeves to get them to turn around and go back.

But here we are. Not in Mendoza after all, not even in the outlying San Martin, but eight kilometers out in the country, across from a gas station and in front of a vineyard. A couple of

cabins, each duplexed, divided in two. The proprietor, M. Ponce (for some reason Nina and I always refer to the guy as if he were French, another one of a thousand jokes I cannot adequately explain) greets me enthusiastically: his command of English, of course, has been vastly exaggerated, and it is clear that for the foreseeable future I am going to be talking to myself, or to no one at all.

Well, nothing new in that. I haul the bags into the cabin, take a bottle of the local vintage he offers as a housewarming present, and dine on my last chunk of bread and a glass of wine. I have about sixty pesos left to eat on for a week. But worry about that tomorrow.

Which arrives presently. M. Ponce appears again, and over my (very feeble) protests carries me back and forth along the road gathering assorted presents, among them oranges at a fruit stand and assorted odds and ends from his own kitchen, enough that I needn't worry about starving for a few days more. He introduces me to his wife, his daughters, his mother, his brother, his father, assorted neighbors, and the girl who makes coffee at the diner — with whom, I can tell, I am going to develop a lasting relationship, since it becomes apparent almost immediately that the wifi signal available in the cabin is entirely inadequate (see above), and any serious attempts at communication with the external world will have to take place over coffee (16 pesos 50) at a table with a view of the pumps.

Nina meanwhile calls, writes, accosts me constantly on Facebook chat, and assures me that she will be here in a couple of weeks. The bus is cheap, she says, she'll have the money for the ticket. But first the doctor, the lawyer, the landlord, etc., etc. — And Angel, I guess, who didn't get paid the rest of his fee at once, as we had led him to expect, and now stands out in front of the house all day screaming insults at her and threatening physical violence. (Not a Catholic, of course, but a fundamentalist

converted by one of the evangelicals that form one of our most obnoxious exports; really, I feel better about dumping our toxic wastes in the Third World than I do about this.)

So here I am in rural Argentina, this Land That Time Forgot, unable to talk to anyone, unable to raise anyone on the internet, unable, weird but true, to take my dogs out for a stroll on the dusty country roads that surround us because every household has half a dozen mutts in the front yard who dash out to accuse us of trespassing whenever we approach, really unable to do much of anything except read, write, and do homework for the Arabs. But what the fuck, it's free, isn't it?

Hahahahaha. Of course you knew this was coming. After a week or so, I began to notice a certain agitation in M. Ponce's attempts to communicate: something strangely familiar, something that unquestionably had to do with money. The denial mechanism switched on, and protected me a day or two longer, but finally (the detailed accounting he wrote out and shoved under my nose was of course a great help) I had to face the fact that something had been omitted from all previous imaginings of the pastoral idyll we were sure awaited us here in the west. Something like this: the free rent offer was bullshit. What he was actually trying to accomplish, all this time, was to ensnare a Rich American Tourist (see above) into coming to stay for a protracted period at this wannabe-resort-motel he was having great difficulty renting out to much of anybody, and paying him large sums on a regular basis, in American dollars (illegal for Argentinian citizens to hold, and therefore, on the black market, worth more like ten or fifteen pesos apiece). So what he is now telling me is that he expects 300 dollars American a week. Payable immediately, por favor.

At this, I must admit, I momentarily went ballistic, but there really wasn't much I could convey in pidgin Spanish, ignorant as I am of verb tenses, the use of the subjunctive, and the methods

appropriate for the projection of sarcasm and irony; not that these aren't alien anyway in this part of the world. — What I did manage was to express incomprehension, convey by grunts and signs the necessity for him to talk to Nina, and transmit to her by back channel the urgent necessities of (a) stalling him with bullshit stories about checks coming in the mail and (b) getting her polyglot ass out here as soon as possible so that the two of us can make an escape to wherever the next stop is on this bizarre Odyssey.

Back to Rosario, maybe. I'm not sure. A charming city, really, in which Nina is very much at home and where it would probably be much easier, should the need arise, to find employment as an English instructor — that unfailing safety net for the American stranded abroad without visible means of support. — Though there are other possibilities. We'll have to discuss them.

For the fact remains, despite everything I've related, that I'm still committed to this insane endeavor. Once you jump out of the airplane without a parachute, all that preserves you is the faith that something good will happen before you hit the ground. That the providence that favors fools will protect you; that love will find a way.

And, you know, everything that's happened has only confirmed that. So maybe it's not as stupid as it seems.

Well, we'll see. — I'll keep you posted. My best, of course, to your somewhat stabler girlfriend; and to the city of Poe and John Waters. — Where, at this rate, I may end up yet. Keep watching the skies.

Later.



Espresso on the Avenida Pellegrini.



Unfortunately there was nothing interesting about the number of this cab in Rosario.

{...}

*Continuing the thread (10/21/14)*⁵

(Cliff adds [or “I, Zarkov, have gone South American”])

At any rate:

Maybe the situation was best summarized by a weird moment in Rosario, when Nina and I were walking around looking for a bank where she could open an account. We tried one or two places without success, and then came across an impressive gleaming new location with glass fronting the lobby along the sidewalk. So we decided this looked promising, and Nina started to go in. But paused, staring through the glass at the interior. And just stood there.

So I am watching this, and I really don't believe it, but it is pretty clear what has happened. Nina is looking through the glass at the bank lobby, and she is not moving forward because this big wall of glass is in the way, and somehow she is not noticing that, three feet to her right, the glass door is wide open and people are walking in and out of it. So she is stuck, and muttering to herself, “But they aren't open....?” — At which point, impressed, I'll admit it, I step over to her, grasp her lightly but firmly by the shoulders, and move her sideways just far enough that the open door is in front of her. — And she goes in. — Now, I have dwelt many years in Absentmindedprofessorland myself; a thinly-populated territory, somewhat to the north. But this is halfway to the Pole from there.

As it turned out she couldn't open an account in this bank either, lacking several critical forms of documentation relating to established income, but — should I say typically? — it didn't

⁵ To [CS].

matter because she had an account already, in another bank. She'd just forgotten about it.

Let me continue for a moment on the theme of the bank. I wanted her to open an account so that she would have some kind of routing/account number or address to which I could direct funds transfers, since I was getting tired of being ripped off by the ATM fees that attach, like electronic leeches, to every transaction conducted with a bank card. As it turned out this was NOT going to work, because my bank for some reason doesn't allow transfers to Argentina; nor was my second idea going to work, i.e. attaching her account to my PayPal account (through which the Arabs generally pay me), for rules and reasons known only to PayPal. But if Nina could open a PayPal account, and attach it to her bank account, then I could send money from my PayPal account to hers, and she could transfer it to her bank, and maybe, just maybe, all this would be a cheaper way of getting money from the US to Argentina. — So I have explained this to her now probably fifteen or twenty times, and she still doesn't get it. She thinks the Arabs should pay her so that she can transfer the money to my bank account and then I can have it. Every attempt to explain why this is the exact opposite of what needs to be done has somehow sailed over her head. She thinks the important point here is that if money passes through her account on its way to mine, she won't touch it. That this is not a matter of playing a percentage, or optimizing the efficiency of a transaction, but of making a noble sacrifice.

Is this just Nina? I'm not entirely sure. I am beginning to form the theory that the reason that Americans take a fundamentally ironic attitude toward life — an attitude which I had already observed is very difficult for persons from other cultures to understand (even, take note, persons from disadvantaged subcultures in America itself, black people for instance) — is not so much the wiseass gene that seems to have spread so widely among Yankees, but something more basic. Roughly, irony is

what happens when you contrast fantasy with reality: you say, for instance, “Yeah that’s brilliant all right” about some incredibly stupid idea and you are commenting not only on the stupidity of the idea but also implicitly on the human folly of its author; who probably really DID think it was a brilliant idea, at least for a moment. But to be able to do this you have to have some dim apprehension of what the reality actually is, and more important you have to understand that what we fantasize, what we want to be the case, generally isn’t. I don’t think the ability to perceive this distinction is very common beyond our shores. Not that it is universal even among Americans, but it is one of those characteristics that has distinguished us at our best, and — not to put too fine a point on it — no wonder then we rule the world.

— I am thinking of the whole amazing cast of characters in *Casablanca*, and I am thinking of Rick telling Ilsa “The Germans wore gray, and you wore blue.” Isn’t that the whole point about Bogart? that he is the one who can see things in perspective, the one who can separate himself from his own romantic illusions. Everyone else is to a greater or lesser extent the prisoner of his own fantasies. He’s the realist. He embraces idealism at the end, but what makes this conversion so powerful is that he actually understands what the world is like, and everyone else doesn’t. The Germans are strutting around thinking they really are the master race. The French guys are like Claude Rains, what the fuck if Paris is in the hands of the Nazis so long as he can chase women and win by cheating at roulette. Victor Laszlo is a hero, but he’s crazy and he’s obviously only still alive by sheer dumb luck, he doesn’t have enough sense not to go up against the Germans when they’re all-powerful and can crush anyone who opposes them openly. The Arabs are like Sidney Greenstreet, all they know is cutting deals. Ingrid Bergman is in love with two guys at once, and keeps forgetting the one who isn’t standing in front of her. But Rick is like Odysseus, the man of many turns. He’s the wise guy, the guy with depth perception, the one who sees in three dimensions. He can see things as they are.

Well, I can see things as they are, too, and I know this is just philosophical bullshit, but I can't resist adding an anecdote or two. — My maternal grandfather was not a famous man, exactly, but among a certain class of people he was pretty well known, and after the war he was invited to Japan to lecture and consult in the automobile industry. He gave some talks at Nissan, which I guess is all they expected, I picture a room full of engineers busily taking notes and memorizing everything he said, but really this bored the shit out of him, and he kept pestering his audience to ask him something interesting. “Tell me what your problems are,” he said. Finally they gave in and accepted the loss of face and admitted that they'd designed an engine according to the textbooks, but it didn't work, and they couldn't figure out why. This filled them with shame, I guess. But Grandpa, of course, was excited. “Let me think about it,” he said, and took the problem home for the night. The next morning he explained to them that he thought they could fix it if they just changed the throw of the piston, and that they should try that. — Which they did. It worked. They mass produced the suckers, and called it “the Stone engine” in his honor.⁶ — But what they learned from this, or should have, was more important than any mere technical tour de force: that nothing ever works the way you expect, certainly nothing ever works the first time, and you always have to expect mistakes; the trick is to be prepared to adapt and correct them. That in engineering particularly everything is a hack and a kludge. They simply didn't know that before he demonstrated it for them, because they weren't realists. They didn't have that ironic perspective on their own designs.

Grandpa lived to be 98, and he's buried in Flint. I haven't been back to check, but I picture a long line of General Motors executives out the entrance of the cemetery and around the

⁶ A slightly different version of this story can be found on pp. 268-270 of David Halberstam, *The Reckoning*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986.

block, waiting to piss on his grave.

“But that isn’t what I came to talk about,” says Arlo Guthrie. “I came to talk about the draft.” — The point, I guess, is just that if I told this story to Nina, and added the part about the line around the block, she’d think there really were people pissing on my grandfather’s grave. And then I would have to spend twenty minutes explaining that this wasn’t literally the case, that this was a joke, a metaphor, another symptom of my ironic detachment, an expression of my contempt for the bozos who ran the largest industrial enterprise in the world into the ground by forgetting the qualities that made them great in the first place, by losing the sense of perspective and the appreciation of cause and effect that would once have made it plain to them that doing something like shutting my grandfather up was not going to eliminate the possibility of competition; which is probably what they would think, if they knew the story, because they’re morons. The Japanese, or some of them, learned to think like Americans, and a lot of Americans started thinking like Japanese.

As for Argentinians, who knows what they think like. But they don’t think like us, that’s for sure.

So what happened after I got here? Did Nina ever actually show up? — To date: no. This was not completely unexpected, since the business she was supposed to be taking care of before she left included finding enough money to buy a ticket; that in turn depended on her son getting paid the money his previous employer owes him; and that, in turn, will obviously depend on legal action whose difficulty I can’t estimate here beneath the equator, but which when I attempted it myself, in a country where you never have to bribe a judge, took a year and a half. So I’m not holding my breath on this one, if you catch my drift. — What they will do in the meantime I don’t exactly know, but it will undoubtedly involve desperate improvisation and selling shit on short notice. (Which is how he bought the iPhone,

incidentally: he unloaded his Playstation and got a new toy with the proceeds from the old one.)

So where did that leave me? Completely at the mercy of a more than slightly daffy landlord with whom I am completely incapable of communicating. Every once in a while he and Nina have a telephone conversation which determines my fate for another week or two, but I'm never entirely sure what she is telling him. She called me last week and insisted I had to pay him something, and at that point I sent her an email so clear, concise, and logical that I think for the first time she understood (though of course I know not for how long) that the guy is nuts, that there is no way I can possibly pay him a tenth of what he thinks he is going to collect, that at any moment he can decide to toss me out into the street and then I will literally have to start walking back to North America, that in shoving me into the taxi and shipping me off to this dusty province she was throwing me under the bus, and that I didn't care what she thought, I would pay for the fucking ticket to bring her here myself, just as (predictably) I ended up paying the 2000 pesos outstanding for which our good friend Angel had been camped out on her doorstep threatening to kill her to collect. At which point I almost succeeded in getting her to come, but then there was another emergency phone call which I received five kilometers into the long trek into town to buy the ticket at the bus depot telling me to put it off for a few more days while she and her son negotiate a loan from somewhere else so that they can avoid getting evicted. Maybe she'll be here Wednesday, but I'm not making any bets.

I did succumb to exasperation and attempted to explain to her, loudly and slowly, that I have in the last month spent so much on hostels and wild goose chases to Mendoza that I could have covered their rent until the end of the year; that of course I would have been perfectly happy to do so, and since they were getting evicted anyway the acceptability of my dogs to the

landlord was essentially irrelevant. But this didn't register, of course. Nor did I really expect it to.

As for what else has happened since I was hustled out of town: I think, really, that so long as the status quo was re-established, i.e. Nina mailing me or chatting on Facebook to maintain contact, it was somehow not occurring to her that anything could be wrong. After all, it was just the same as always. The fact that after months of preparation I had spent what was to me a fortune on tickets and moved myself and my entire furry family six thousand miles and that now I had been abandoned in the fucking wilderness was weirdly irrelevant, not an element of the Nina universe; I'm not completely sure that, from one moment to the next, she realizes this has happened. — In fact (no, you believed the rest of it, this can't be any more absurd) the first couple of weeks I had to deal with a recurrence of her paranoia, and received a daily barrage of messages accusing me of chasing bimbos on Facebook, explaining to me that I wasn't really interested in her, that I was just using her and was preparing to dump her for younger and more attractive women, etc., etc. — And apparently her friends encouraged her to believe all this! thus my inclination to embrace universal theories explaining the mental dysfunction of nonAmericans generally, and Argentinians in particular. I really have begun to think they were all dropped on their heads in infancy.

Similarly I'm not completely sure that Nina really understands that I got thrown out of my house four years ago and I've been sleeping in the woods since then. — But you have to understand this, too. That determines my perspective. I'm stranded here, all right, but I'm six thousand miles not from home but from homeless, and in most respects despite the danger of the situation I'm still better off. For instance, I've slept in a bed every night since I left Boulder. That hasn't happened in years. — Again: it may seem like I made an insane gamble blowing my last five thousand dollars on a wild leap into the unknown. But it wasn't

really crazy. If I had stayed in Boulder, my best option would have been to sleep outdoors the rest of the winter in the hope that I could make enough more money that I'd be able to buy a car. Which could then carry me to Detroit, which is the only place left in America that a person like me can afford to live. Whereas, if things had worked out in the way I had every reason to expect they were going to, I would have succeeded in transporting myself, with a one-time payment, to a place where I would not have to pay rent and my meager income might actually be adequate for the other essentials of life. Not to mention the girlfriend. — So, even as a matter of cold-blooded rational calculation, this wasn't stupid. In fact, it was the best option open to me. (Trust me. I'm a mathematician.)

And it could still work out, I haven't given up completely. I still have the ironic perspective and can see this landscape in three dimensional relief: my naive faith in an unreliable female, the distortion of my judgment caused by economic desperation, the tendency to double down on a bad bet and then redouble when it goes bad again ... not to mention the all-encompassing irony that I probably ended up chasing after a woman who comes from a country full of self-deluding fantasists because that was the only kind of person who could ever fall for me. But it's still a question of numbering your options, assessing the probabilities, and estimating the payoffs. And on that basis, honestly, the situation doesn't look any worse than usual.

As for your very perceptive questions: does Nina have an income? can she support herself? has she ever, to my knowledge, been able to support herself? I'm really not sure, but I think no. Once upon a time, before the banking collapse of 2001-2002, she was wealthy, or says she was anyway, and this is consistent with everything I know about her: she behaves like a rich girl who never learned the value of money and then lost it all; in fact the way she lost it all is curiously shrouded in mystery, but it may have happened simply because she didn't have enough sense to

take it out of the bank before it folded. Before that in any case she took several degrees, learned many languages, and was a musician, dancer, and a travelling lecturer. Since then she has had various forms of erratic and occasional income, tutoring, working as a therapist, translations, etc., but nothing ever seems to last very long and there is a consistent pattern of her talking enthusiastically about some new opportunity for a few weeks and then seeming to forget it completely. She has frequently been ill, which never helps, but even when working she never seems to have enough to eat, and when I was better off I often sent her money to keep her from starving.

(Why, you might ask, didn't she just send out her resume and get a job? In the States, I'm sure, she would have ended up on a university faculty. But in Argentina there aren't as many opportunities, and women just aren't supposed to be smart.)

As for how she managed to survive without an income: for a long time she lived in a house that belonged to her uncle, with whom she had a curiously intimate relationship. Her parents died relatively young, and neither her real nor her nominal father was ever much of a presence. Her uncle was the guy who ran her life from a tender age: every prodigy has some puppetmaster who pulls his or her strings, and in Nina's case he was the one; he saw to it that she learned to read at the age of two, that she had piano and ballet lessons, that she had tutors and coaches who crammed her head full of Latin and Greek before the age of ten. She told me she used to lull herself to sleep as a child reciting the names of the Roman emperors in their order of succession. — It seems to have been typical of their relationship that at some point, perhaps as late as her early twenties (I have no consistent chronology for Nina's life and career), she went to Paris for a year to study, and her uncle went along to keep her company, I think literally as a chaperone. And, finally, when inevitably she rebelled against this strict Catholic upbringing and got knocked up by a musician she was playing in a trio with, it was her uncle

who tracked the guy down and arranged a shotgun wedding.

Which Nina still claims was not actually marriage, though they seem to have lived together for the best part of twenty years thereafter. Why exactly I'm not sure; the kid must have had something to do with it, but the guy seems to have been an abusive asshole who hung around, mainly, on the hope that her (of course very rich) uncle would drop dead and leave Nina all his money. — Which Nina's uncle had figured out long in advance of his eventual demise, of course. Thus (a) he never forgave her for sticking with this loser and (b) cut her out of his will.

At any rate you have to picture the two of them living in the same house, Nina upstairs, her uncle downstairs, for twenty years without speaking; a bit like the stories you hear of the Siamese twins who decide they hate each other. — At some point he tried to evict her from the premises, but they went to court over this and — weird but true, Argentine law I guess is very different from American on points like these — it was ruled that she couldn't be thrown out. More than that, squatter's rights being somehow enshrined in the legal code,⁷ she was half owner, and if he sold the place, which he later threatened to do, it was ruled, I was told, that he was going to have to pay her half the proceeds.

So this was the situation around the time that I first made Nina's acquaintance. The husband was gone, or so she claimed at least. (At least once he came into the room while she and I were talking on Skype and started beating her up and tried to smash her computer; there were other such incidents, I think, but she was more successful in concealing them from me.) The uncle was

⁷ At least that was the impression I had gained from her rather garbled explanations of the matter. This can't really be the case, some issue of inheritance from her mother must have been involved.

estranged. The income was nonexistent. The son was old enough that he was starting to work, and she began depending on whatever scraps of his income he threw her. (As for what he depends on her for: so far as I can tell he like his father before him expects Nina the polymath musician dancer and linguist to cook, clean, and do the laundry by hand, such activities being beneath the dignity of Manly Men in the Catholic patriarchy.) The bills were never paid, they had no gas or heat, and their electricity came from an illegal extension cord. The roof leaked, and the uncle didn't fix it. Obviously he was hoping to starve her out.

But he died first, of course, about three years ago. Since this coincided with my first season of homelessness, I was extremely receptive to the idea that Nina was going to inherit his estate (as she assured me was certain to be the case), and save me from what was already a ghastly situation. Indeed I was so receptive that I actually sent her money again, 200 dollars that I didn't really have, to pay a lawyer to facilitate the settlement. This was sometime in July 2011, and in direct consequence I spent a couple of months unable to buy anything, and at one point went an entire week having nothing to eat but dog treats I pulled out of the dumpster behind Petco.

Hmmm, another telling anecdote. They got a new telephone about that time, a landline to replace the cell phones they never seemed to pay the bills for. So Nina called me three or four times a day; sometimes just to ask why her browser crashed when she was trying to talk to me on Facebook. I could find no way to explain to her that she could not possibly afford to do all this; and, sure enough, that particular phone only lasted until the first bill came in, and then was disconnected. — Since then, I notice, her son has usually not allowed her to have a phone of her own, but rather loans her a cellphone when she needs to transact business. (And, I think, watches her while she uses it.)

So is her son in loco parentis? well, not exactly. I am not clear on their precise relationship, but (a) he appears to be a major airhead himself and (b) though he does, e.g., buy food for her, it's only as an afterthought and he only seems to do it every two or three days. At least once she fainted in the street and was taken to a hospital where they fed her intravenously. She's about five feet four, and she now weighs less than 90 pounds.

(Other accidents which have befallen Nina in the last three years: hit by cars twice; third degree burns from an electrical fire which nearly destroyed the house, once; fallen down the stairs, possibly because of fainting, resulting in severe sprains and/or broken bones, two or three times.)

Ah, but I was explaining about her uncle's estate. — Well: there is an Evil Sister. I collected many tales of contested estates after my mother died and my oldest sister went bonkers, and there is always an Evil Sister; it is some kind of natural law. — This specimen is (hahaha, shades of Cinderella) an evil half sister, actually, has a small boy, and lived with the uncle in his half of the house for the last ten years of his life; during which time, evidently, she conducted a continuous campaign for Nina's disinheritance which on the surface appears to have been completely successful, since a will eventually materialized, after several months, which named her as the sole heir and left Nina penniless. — Or more or less penniless. In this as in many respects I have had conflicting reports as to what Nina did or did not receive, whether e.g. she inherited her uncle's (very valuable) library, for instance, whether she got her piano back, whether she retrieved her jewelry, etc. Since presently I discovered that when I made inquiries that were too persistent Nina had a tendency to fall down the stairs and go to the hospital again, I gave up trying to find out. But I think the sister dangled some stuff under her nose just to taunt her, and then took it all back. — As for the uncle's financial assets, which I presume must have been considerable, I have never received a coherent explanation.

I think Nina's sister told her "It all disappeared," and Nina actually believed this, but I'm not sure. When every question provokes an anxiety attack, it is very difficult to obtain information.

At any rate this dragged on for months, and at some point I had to give up and admit to myself that there was no point in counting on this ever being resolved, let alone solving my problems. I stopped thinking about escaping to Argentina and started thinking about just sleeping indoors. And eventually managed to accomplish that, at least.

So everything went along roughly the same for a couple of years, and then abruptly this spring Nina's sister announced that she had sold the house. — Now, it had been established (I guess) that when the house was sold, Nina had to get half the money. So this seemed like good news. However (hahahaha), Nina's sister said — at least I think she said, I am taking for granted that you understand that all this information comes from a neurotic, unreliable, and usually uncomprehending source — that all the money wasn't going to come in at once. Nonetheless a date was given as the date by which Nina and her son had to be off the premises, and Nina's sister gave Nina an advance on the proceeds of the sale, to use for moving expenses and to find a new house.

So they did, and that's why I didn't have a place to stay when I got here.

But of course this is not all of the story. — After a decent interval, Nina made inquiries about the REST of the money. And at this point but not before, so I am told, discovered that the sister had NOT sold the house after all (though perhaps she did move out.) Rather she'd just told Nina this story to trick her into leaving.

And, possibly, to maneuver Nina out of her share of the proceeds should the place really be sold, I'm not sure. Indeed I am sure of nothing about this. Nina is supposed to have a lawyer (though as always whether the guy has been paid I don't know, perhaps this explains why he can't seem to find his ass with both hands.) The lawyer is supposed to be investigating the status of the property, what Nina's rights are, etc., and presumably is going to ensure — someday — that Nina either receives her share of the house, or gets to move back in, or maybe even gets half of her uncle's estate after all, who knows. I don't know anything, of course, about Argentine law, but I know lawyers, and anyone I would have hired (a) would never have allowed this rather suspect will to be accepted in the first place and (b) would have put a hold on the sister's assets while these very dubious proceedings are under investigation or (c) I would have canned him and hired someone else. Moreover the idea that the rich uncle's money could all have mysteriously disappeared is patently risible, and in the States, obviously, all real estate transactions are matters of public record and it would take an instant on the county assessor's website to find out whose name was on the title of a property whose current status this bozo attorney claims is unknown.

So, great, obviously even working through a translator I could ask enough questions in a few minutes to light a fire under this guy's ass. Nor is it inconceivable that I could find a few bucks to pay him an advance, not that he shouldn't be working on contingency. Fortunately for all concerned (since I see no faction here interested in promoting the rational conduct of affairs) I am on the other side of the country. — But the real question, obviously, is why I am the one who has to be thinking of all this. Where is the son? He has an income, and a vested interest in the outcome of the lawsuit. More than that, he's supposed to be going back to finish law school himself, if he ever gets ahead on the bills, and ought to know who to talk to and what questions to ask to find out what the fuck is going on. So why hasn't he taken care of it?

The obvious answers are (a) because cultural programming has turned him into just another Argentine airhead who hasn't got sense enough to pour piss out of a wet boot and (b) maybe this whole story, which makes very little sense, makes so little sense because I'm hearing it all from Nina. Maybe there is some much simpler explanation, without characters that sound like they belong in a fairy tale.

Though I think, actually, that it's just the opposite, that the characters all sound like they came out of a fairy tale not because Nina is making up that kind of story, but because everyone in this benighted country uses fairy-tale logic, and they all really do behave like that. No wonder then I got stuck out here when the clock struck midnight and my carriage turned into a pumpkin.

One more illustrative anecdote: what happened to the iPhone I sold Nina's son? you might ask. — Well, I'll tell you: first he carried it around in his underwear for a couple of weeks because he was afraid someone would steal it. Nonetheless he managed to drop it at least once, denting and scratching it and thus lowering its resale value (he is already thinking he may have to sell it.) Then his girlfriend decided to investigate its contents, did not, I guess, approve of what she found, and tried to smash it with a hammer. — So was this the end of it? no, he took it to a repair guy (I can see, from this and all else I have heard, how the principles of natural selection would dictate the emergence of a large class of genius repair guys in Argentina), and got it fixed. And he and his girlfriend kissed and made up, and will doubtless live happily ever after.

So nobody, but nobody, is touching this Macbook.

The house she lived in with her uncle is real, in any case, though now it looks deserted. I came across it by accident while walking

around Rosario:



Doesn't it look gothic? you can just picture that troll living in the cellar.

So, anyway. Since we have to somehow bring this narrative to a close, at least until our next installment, it is time to draw some neat conclusions.

First, it would have been a good idea to have remembered a famous piece of advice I once gave myself, namely, "Never follow a woman across a state line." Since in this case I crossed about a dozen national boundaries, obviously I lost sight of this principle somehow. No fucking wonder nature is out of balance.

Second, though obviously if I had known a couple of months ago what I know now I would have made very different plans, thermodynamics does not allow us to run time backwards and reassemble Humpty-Dumpty, at least not without performing heinously difficult computations anyway, so the hand I'm going to have to play is pretty much the one I have inadvertently dealt myself. Since I'm in Argentina, I'm going to have to try to make this work somehow. Since I came here to be with Nina, and since the already daunting degree of difficulty of what I have to manage will be amplified by many orders of magnitude if I do not have her close at hand to translate and negotiate with the universe of Spanish-speaking airheads with whom I am surrounded, I will have to patiently exert what influence I may have over her until she suffers the kind of momentary lapse that could cause her to get on the bus despite her best excuses, and join me here in this rustic exile. — After that the odds improve considerably; at least we'll be able to call a taxi to get us out of here if we get evicted. And there are the ongoing negotiations with the Argentine government for support of research; it almost worked three years ago, and it may yet, we'll see. Should all else fail, maybe I can finally get the straight story about the estate fiasco; maybe that is a solvable problem. But I have to be

reconnected to some kind of social network to accomplish anything, and at this time, in this place, Nina is the only link that leads me to it. So even should love prove to be an illusion (and about even that I am still sanguine), I'm bound to her as a business partner, and I have to see how far that will carry me.

Thus, finally, even though there is a sort of nuclear option which would carry me back to the United States, it would leave me there in an even worse position than I was in before I left, far worse than the one I find myself in now. And this really isn't that bad by my standards; nothing like the winter I had to sleep in the stadium stairwell at Folsom Field, for instance. So why should I complain?

Anyway this is where Butch Cassidy ended his days, and who am I not to honor such a distinguished precedent. Particularly when I got vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals. (You must have been waiting for that.)

Which pretty well sums it up at the moment. Is this weird enough for Baltimore? Keep me posted.

Later.

{...}

*Re: Continuing the thread (10/22/14)*⁸

I haven't seen Claire Danes do autistic, but there was a biography of the famous physicist Paul Dirac that came out a few years ago, titled "The Strangest Man," that presented the thesis that he was so weird because he was autistic. One thing that cracked me up (since at that point I already knew Nina) was the offhand remark of the author that Dirac married a foreign-

⁸ To [CS].

born woman, which was common for autistic guys because it was harder for such women to notice their peculiarities. Of course it works both ways, and in this case probably both ways at once.

Basically at the moment I'm out on an ice floe among the penguins. There isn't a lot I can do to make contact with other people, and even if I did stumble across other Americans they would almost certainly be the rich tourists I am assumed to be; the days of the hippie diaspora are long past. Moreover it cost me a fucking fortune, by my standards, to get here, redoubling the original error, since now I have paid out all the money I could make to get to Argentina on the assumption that once I'd managed to do so I could live on nothing, and then borrowed more money on top of that to move out here in the wilderness where, no, really, this time for sure it was going to cost nothing to live. So I am assuming that, though there must be some cheaper form of transport than the taxi to get me, my stuff, and my dogs back to civilization, I'm not going to be able to find it without the assistance of Nina. Therefore I have to get her out here before I can do anything else. — Meanwhile, obviously, I have to try to make some money, though whether this gig as tutor to the Arabs is ever really going to amount to more than three or four hundred bucks a month on a regular basis I don't know, and it is usually an incredible pain in the ass: I can learn practically anything on very short notice, but it takes an effort, particularly when what I have to do is something like somebody's business law exam. For which if I'm lucky I make forty bucks. So this is not what you would call a thriving enterprise at the moment. But beggars, as they say, can't be choosers.

If I had an income adequate to cover the expenses, it would probably be best just to live in Buenos Aires. That is most likely the cosmopolitan environment for which I am feebly grasping. Obviously it is also the most expensive place to live in this country, though by American standards it's cheap; if I had six hundred a month to pay out for rent, I think I could manage.

And really that should not be impossible.

After another month or so I have to start worrying about extending my visa. This was, like everything else, supposed to be simple, but now I'm not sure. Negotiating the extension would also be much, much simpler with the assistance of Nina (I was, naively, figuring we could simply get married). However if at that point she still hasn't shown up, I'm going to have to try to figure out how to get out of here, since I have a ticket back the first week in December, and I would be backed into a position in which it would appear I would have to use it. — I don't think I would; I think what I may end up having to do is figure out how to escape this charming rustication all by myself, go back to Rosario, present myself on their doorstep (incidentally I never saw her house or met her son), and tell the two of them that I'm going to be living with them whether they like it or not, "fuck you" understood.

After which I'll solve the rest of this conundrum. But first, the hell with it, let's eat some ice cream and watch a couple of movies.

Later.

{...}

*Another chapter, somewhat shorter (10/29/2014)*⁹

⁹ To [CS].

This is turning into one of those old movie serials in which the hero falls off a cliff at the end of every episode and then is miraculously seen to have escaped destruction at the beginning of the next, is it not? — “What Has Gone Before: Zarkov, ne'er-do-well scion of an infamous line of Mad Scientists, fleeing his creditors and a lifetime of spectacular underachievement escapes to South America, where a mysterious woman of Italian antecedents has promised him a life of luxury and ease. Instead she betrays him and disappears, turning into a voice on the telephone, another of those Sinister Masterminds who serve as the puppet masters in the classics of paranoid fiction.... .”

Indeed, where did we leave our protagonist? trapped in a cabin eight kilometers east of San Martin, at the mercy of a deranged landlord who was threatening to evict him. As we resume the narrative, our hero is desperately barraging his invisible girlfriend with a series of missives reiterating these dismal facts in the hope that she will, finally, acknowledge her responsibility in inserting him into this impossible situation, and assist him in getting out of it. And, finally — this time for sure? — she announces her intention to hop the next bus for Mendoza, bringing with her the latest load of medicines prescribed by her inventive doctors (this time, I guess, it's supposed to be diabetes) and sending before her a taxi with instructions to pick him up and carry him and his much-travelled perritos into the city, to another, cheaper hostel at which all concerned can reboot this halfassed attempt at Romantic Exile, resume the pursuit of Mad Science, and celebrate the Final Triumph of Love over Neurosis.

Hahaha, as if. — Well, holding up his end of the bargain, Zarkov does indeed pack his things and wash the dishes, and rises at 6 on Monday morning to await the arrival of the cabbie who is going to get his ass out of there. He paces. He waits. He paces. He waits. He paces. He waits. — Finally, around 11 a.m., there is a peremptory knock on the door. The dogs bark. This doesn't

sound like the cab. — No, in fact it is M. Ponce, yet again. This time with the police.

So we find ourselves again facing an impossibly difficult problem of communication, with the added frisson that if we fuck up, we could be going to a South American jail. Somehow, aided somewhat by the fact that the cops have brought along a smartphone with a translation app (very bad, but better than nothing), I manage to convey the intelligence that I am trying to remove myself even as we speak, give them Nina's number in Rosario on the offchance that someone will be able to reach her and she will be able if not to rectify the situation at least muddy the waters sufficiently that I can make my escape, and satisfy the cops — mainly the woman, who seems to be taking point on the matter — that I am not the most irrational person present. — As for Ponce, who knows what he thinks, but he leaves, at least for the moment. Time to dash across the street and fire off fifteen or twenty more emails, in the hope that I can arouse some response.....

.... it is usually, of course, only after the fact, and always like this in the middle of a long and complex series of moves in an extremely complicated game, when you realize that, despite your best efforts, you have slipped up, slightly, Max von Sydow playing chess with Death, and made the critical error that will bring everything down in ruins in the end. — Up until this point Ponce did not have much more than my name and my thoroughly fictitious Facebook profile to identify me. But now the cops have taken my passport number. And I realize, suddenly, that this is the misstep that will make it impossible to renew my visa: I have been denounced to the police as a deadbeat, and I'm probably guilty until proven innocent. Meaning that, in all likelihood, I will have to be out of the country in a month.

And, of course, that I may never see Nina again. — Since, it

develops, there is no response to my emails, my phone only receives but will not send (I followed the directions on their website but it didn't work), the telephone in the booth at the gas station doesn't work either, time is marching inexorably toward sunset, and I have to figure out where I am going to go. Since probably this will (a) require a taxi for which (b) I may have to front money (c) I'm out of funds and (d) I will go mad if I don't do something, anything, I start walking into San Martin to go to the bank; figuring I'll check out the campground I have remarked along the way to see what they charge.

The campground, of course, isn't open (the two descriptions I apply most frequently to all aspects of life in Argentina: "it doesn't work"; "it isn't open"), but as I press forward the phone in my pocket rings, and it is Nina. Apparently she finally got all the emails, and has conducted another whirlwind campaign to relocate me; this time, she says, by taxi to another campground, where I can wait for her arrival, which will be....soon. Maybe not tomorrow after all, but....soon. — Okay, I say, but I can't be back there for the taxi in less than three hours, because I have to walk to the bank and back, which is 15 kilometers. I explain this three or four, perhaps five or six times. Finally it registers. She says the cab will be waiting at 6 p.m. She adds that dealing with all this is extremely stressful for her. — I continue into the city, muttering unpleasant things to myself; extract a thousand pesos from the ATM, muttering unpleasant things to myself; and stop briefly at the local equivalent of Walmart to price tents on the way back: over a thousand pesos, i.e. more than I have on me, and nowhere near as good as the tent I left in storage when I departed Boulder, which cost about 30 bucks on Amazon. Nor do I have my several sleeping bags; naively, I had thought I wouldn't need them. I begin to mutter extremely unpleasant things to myself. Finally, there is the overriding consideration that I am, apparently, going to be dumped in the middle of some kind of park, wherein, perhaps, there may indeed somewhere be bathrooms, wifi, cooking facilities, etc., but in which I am going

to be, basically, sitting in a heap of my own most valuable possessions, laptop, hard drives, books, manuscripts, along with a few items of clothing and for that matter a couple of suitcases which cost me nothing but which I have just priced at the local pseudoWalmart at around 1600 pesos apiece, all exposed and undefended unless I am sitting right there with them, every minute, and way the hell too much for me to be lugging around on mandatory expeditions like trips to the grocery, which by the sound of it could be several miles away. So I am back to sleeping at the Boulder Creek Hotel, far, far, from Boulder Creek, without any of my camping equipment, without any place to store my valuables, probably without any way of making coffee or recharging the batteries on my laptop, and I am going to be sitting there, just sitting there, waiting, just waiting, until Nina shows up, if she ever shows up. And I am to remember this is really stressful for her. — At this point I start muttering to myself very loudly indeed, and making violent gestures that alarm the passersby. Or would alarm them, if there were any. Not that I give a shit.

Thus passes the trek back to the cabin. Where, when I arrive, I find M. Ponce, whom Nina for some reason has deputized to call the cab, and a couple of guys in a nondescript sedan who have apparently come instead. Saying as little as possible to my dipshit landlord, I haul everything out and put it in the car, wave goodbye and good riddance, and we are whisked away.

So where do we go? Straight back into town and past the bank, of course, meaning that the four hour walk was unnecessary. But then onward to the west, after a couple of detours which look as though they have been added onto the itinerary to run up the tab. Finally we pull into something that looks, sort of, like a park entrance, or maybe doesn't. One of the guys in front hands me back his own translating smartphone with the English phrase displayed: Are you going to the gendarmerie? And sure enough there is a very sour-looking dude in the usual scary military garb

coming out of a door in front of us. It is at this point that I realize that Ponce has handed me to a couple of his stooges, with instructions to give me over to the cops. If not to dump my body in the landfill.

But is it that exactly? of course I am not sure, and the exchange with the cop doesn't improve my understanding of the situation. Whatever they are asking him, perhaps it is indeed something about a campground, he doesn't know and doesn't care, and instead of tossing me out in the parking lot the guys confer, turn around, and head back up the road. I try to ask questions but of course get no response. After a few more turns and a couple more miles, they arrive at another cop shop, this one, I perceive, belonging to the tourist police. The stooges indicate I should get out but in truth they look as confused as I am, so I am not particularly apprehensive. And sure enough out of the door comes the female cop with whom I had conversed earlier. Who now produces a somewhat larger pad computer, and we commence a lengthy conversation mediated by something that works just as badly as Google Translate, but much more slowly.

After a while it becomes apparent that the chick and I are bonding in some bizarre fashion, so the stooges haul my shit out of the car and put it in the office, I give them a couple hundred in hush money (whatever Ponce thought they were going to do, they did drive around for an hour and someone ought to pay them for their time), and the cop and I continue our dialogue.

She indicates, first, that the idea of camping in the park, if that was the plan, is a very bad one, for the reasons I had already enumerated to myself on my afternoon walk. I explain that this was not my idea, and that I would much prefer to stay in a hostel, if the presence of the perritos can be negotiated. She expresses some skepticism about my ability to pay. I produce a wad of cash. She asks why then had I not paid M. Ponce. I explain, or attempt to, that Ponce lured me into this situation by offering free rent, that I had become trapped, that what he

wanted was more than I could afford or could pay in good conscience even if I could afford it, that a hostel was a different proposition, by comparison much less expensive, etc., etc. She protests at the length of my explanations, laughing, but I shrug, laughing, and made the obvious gestures indicating that it is a long story and there are two sides to it. In any case I'll front the money if she can find me a place to crash.

Which indeed she does, almost immediately. I am not entirely clear on the details, and there does appear to have been another one of those it's-going-to-cost-this-no-sorry-I-meant-that bait-and-switches interpolated, but the price does not go up as much as usual and will go down quite a bit if I pay for a week, in dollars. Midway through the protracted negotiations we move into her office, she gives me some coffee, and I pull out my laptop to access my bank accounts; she catches a glimpse of the desktop background painting (at the moment Raphael's School of Athens) and exclaims at how beautiful the display is.

Then Nina calls, finally, to find out whether I am still alive, and I hand the phone over and the two females in charge of my destiny exchange the Spanish-language equivalent of machinegun fire for about fifteen minutes, during which, I am sure, more information than any mortal really needs to absorb about the perfidy of M. Ponce and the prospects for Argentine scientific and cultural advancement if I retain my freedom, illustrated doubtless by illuminating quotations from Dante and Borges, comes over the line from Rosario. After which Nina and I converse again, briefly. She assures me that I was not being arrested, which I already know, but does not absorb the intelligence I attempt to convey in return, that this is not at all M. Ponce's fault, since that had obviously been his intention; I leave out the parts about asking her what the fuck she thought she had been doing putting the handling of my escape in his hands and what a clusterfuck camping out in the park would have been. We say good-night, and a couple of guys from the

hostel arrive and start loading me up to leave again.

I bid the lady cop farewell. "Thank you!" I exclaim, several times in succession. "I am very glad to have met you!"

After which I get a ride in the dark that leaves me completely at a loss as to the location of my destination, but it seems pleasant enough: a couple of bedrooms, only mine to be occupied; a bathroom, a kitchen, working television, albeit getting only one or two channels. They even point out a stack of DVDs in the closet, exclaim "Porno!", and mime jacking off, which cracks me up. I walk around the yard in the dark, but can't even figure out which way is south or west: too cloudy for stars, no sign of the Andes.

When I get up in the morning, however, it all becomes obvious. After all that driving back and forth, I have moved exactly one kilometer down the road from Ponce's cabin. I am now right behind the Supermercado on Ruta 50, maybe 7 kilometers out of San Martin. No internet here, but it is just a short walk back up the road to the diner, where the girls will doubtless welcome me back with open arms. Otherwise, I need hardly point out, there is no entertainment whatsoever. There are some gorgeous mountains out the window, but without money and transportation I'll never get any closer to them. What an idiot I was to leave Rosario.

So, great, I know how to forage in these environs. The problem, obviously, is M. Ponce. Far from having left him in the taillights, I am still in his neighborhood, maybe renting a room from one of his buddies, this neighborhood could just as well be a small town, everyone probably knows everyone else, and given the unbalanced nature of the guy and perhaps also the fact that I left a dogstain or two on his covers, he may show up at any moment and start demanding money again and calling the cops. Which won't get him paid, but which can sour my relations with my

new host rather more rapidly than I might want. Not to mention adding to my rap sheet, which is probably already long enough to get me expelled from the country.

So after frantic efforts I am still trapped in rural exile with no obvious way to extract myself unless Nina finally does show up, which at this juncture of course is slightly less likely than the second coming of Elvis. And with a bit more than a month to figure out how to resolve my several dilemmas.

I knew it was a mistake to come down here without a Zeppelin. Or at least a fucking Jeep, for Christ's sake.

Will Zarkov escape this predicament? Or have his fortunes truly hurtled off the road into a bottomless chasm filled with elephant dung? Stay tuned.

Ah, and what was the lady cop's name, you might ask? — Ha! I reply, sometimes the Great Novelist reveals His hand. — It was Sonya.¹⁰

{...}

“A bottomless chasm filled with elephant dung,” or, I left out the cliffhanger (10/29/2014)¹¹

(1) They do have Walmart here. I saw one on the road up out of Mendoza.

(2) I ended up in Mendoza because, true to prediction, when I got back from the diner after sending my mail I found the cops

¹⁰ By cosmic coincidence, also the name of Cliff's girlfriend.

¹¹ To [CS].

waiting for me again. This time I was evicted for no reason at all, but that's the way things work in Mister Ponce's Neighborhood. So they called me a cab, and off I went. Farewell, Sonya.

(3) Joke's on them, I think. Mendoza is beautiful, right next to the mountains, which are fucking spectacular. I don't miss Boulder, but the landscape does get wired in after a few decades. Only problem is.....

(4) Expense. Well, we're working on that. And., of course....

(5) Nina will be here in a couple of days. No, really, This time for sure.

More anon.

{...}

*Re: A haze of whiskey and pills (11/2/2014)*¹²

The Arabs having been dealt with for the evening, after a couple of hours watching television (apparently *Argentine Idol*, with singers, wannabe comedians, and belly dancers, for Christ's sake), drinking wine, and eating dinner with my hosts concluded, a few further notes continuing the thread:

Yes, I did have more than a flicker of paranoia when I flashed the wad in front of Sonya. But it wasn't that much of a wad, in truth, a thousand pesos is barely more than a hundred bucks in

¹² To [CS].

real money, and Argentina isn't Mexico, the cops aren't going to roll you and leave your body in a drainage ditch. Besides, by that time I trusted her, and you're right, I was starting to think the two of us could get pretty friendly if the opportunity arose.

As for how I could get evicted from a different place where I was paying the rent like a law-abiding cash-cow-gringo: more or less as I expected, it was all in effect a small town, M. Ponce knew everybody from when they all played soccer together in high school, or whatever, and it didn't take 24 hours for word to get back to him that I hadn't gone more than a few hundred meters from his tick-infested cabañas; at which point, naturally, he and his old buddy my new temporary landlord compared notes at the local feed store and decided to toss my ass further on down the road. Which no one pretended was fair, but that matters even less here than in North America, where, you may recall, justice has been taking it up the ass fairly often of late.

.....

As for how exactly I keep staying where I am right now, I'm not sure, but it works at the moment and hopefully it can be made to work for a few more days or even weeks. Hopefully Nina shows up almost immediately, All Is Forgiven, we resume the romance where we left off a month ago, and discover some devious new form of economic stability, though this sounds like one of those exotic varieties of matter that decays before it ever really takes form, like the Higgs Boson. Hopefully my paranoid fears of being thrown out of the country as a bad credit risk will prove unfounded, though what the fuck, I guess there's always Bolivia. Hopefully I keep escaping when someone ties me to the railroad tracks, and the serial continues for a few more chapters, though, who knows, even if I don't maybe some South American member of the Mad Scientist's Guild will preserve my severed remains and I'll reappear on the Late Show in *They Saved Zarkov's Brain*.

Fingers crossed. Let's see what the morrow brings.

Later.



