

Last Voyage to Coronado

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On my eighth birthday Grandma made gnocchi bolognese, and Uncle Isidro, known to many as “the Spinach,” took the time to teach me something which he considered to be very important. The Spinach, a poor gambler and small time rip-off artist, wore an old felt hat that had become less and less greenish as the years passed, but that’s not how he earned the name. “Romi,” he said to me, “it’s now time that you learn something about this life, and don’t worry,” he interjected, “I’m not going to bring up how I was right in taking Uncle Monti’s money.” At that point he scratched the bottom of his chin and said, “Listen and observe carefully, and make sure that your innocent mother isn’t around.” Before I had a chance to scout the area, the Spinach looked left to right as if being overly cautious was a habit learned from having been caught so many times saying so many bad things. Unfortunately, many of the things that the Spinach said were true, especially this time.

He handed me a poorly wrapped package with gold strings all about it. I could tell that he had wrapped it himself, which immediately aroused my suspicion, for men in this family don’t wrap anything unless they’re up to something shady. “Happy Birthday!” said the Spinach. I began unwrapping the gift with that easily elicited excitement of youth, only to find that the box was empty.

“What’s the idea?” I asked.

“How do you feel?”

“Bad, I guess.”

“Well,” he said, “if you learn to deal with this, with this feeling you have right now, and if you learn to deal with disappointments, one after another, you’ll be one of the few who are content in this miserable world, in this wretched life. Do you understand what I mean? One day you’ll thank me, for I gave you the best gift you could ever receive.” Though I responded in the affirmative, I never really understood what he meant until ten years later, when my story begins.

Maybe the events to be disclosed occurred because the afternoon was too long that day in the city of Mendoza. The province of vineyards, mountains, and condors rested underneath a vernal sun which gave its immigrants no choice but to accept their new reality: that they walked, slept, and ate in the southern cone of a new and distant continent, far away from Europe, far away from the world. “How could it be that we are actually closer to Antarctica than to Italy?” they pondered as they shook their heads.

Crazy Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, Fat Grono, and I squandered many hours at the Café Astoria, the unofficial social and political center of the city. The Astoria was frequented by all of Mendoza’s residents, young and old, but we, the “Young Bohemians,” as they called us,

made it an art form. By the purchase of one cup of coffee in the morning, we could kill hours into the evening, always holding our favorite table out in the front and left of the entrance. We pretended to be experts on everything, as all good Argentine charlatans. We would comment and critique matters of art, history, philosophy, literature, and invariably our discussions would end on the topic of that great war occurring far way, that great war involving everyone, but us boludos [schmucks]. The truth is that, underneath all the sanata [donkey dust] we were doing what all young men have always done and—I am proud to say—will always do: fish for minas [girls]. Some cast their lines more than others, and some appeared not to cast at all (for example, the painter Strack), but we were all fishing in one form or another, whether that be trolling, fly-fishing, or just sit-and-wait fishing.

Some of the more distinguished regulars, such as the young but respected artist Lars Strack, did not speak so much. Strack would sit at a table and gently sketch out the surroundings, drawing a tree here and a coffee mug there. That day he happened to be drawing an Astoria chair which had a stylish maroon-on-black italicized *A* painted on the back. On the chair sat a fat, amorphous man, with the semblance of any old Italian who had had his share of cannelloni and Pampa beef. Puchito commented that the picture should be titled, *Fat Pigeon on the Ledge*, or better yet, *Waiting for Death and More Gnocchi*. Strack smiled and softly replied that titling pictures should be left to writers, who spend their time writing, and not to painters, who have chosen to paint instead.

“That’s interesting, and you have a good argument,” replied Puchito, “but you should call it *Waiting for Death* anyway.”

The most beautiful women of Mendoza invariably gathered around the young Strack. No matter how many in number, he would never lose his concentration. This was perhaps his patented fishing technique, though I must admit that technique played a small role in his social success.

The Bohemians idolized Strack, and we always watched him work from a deferential distance, not wanting to spoil his operation. Strack had all the qualities of a desirable man. He was handsome in a boyish yet elegant way, and his maturity intrigued everyone. In short, he was the Anti-Spinach. Apart from having the right facha [face] and perfect manner, he had the power to immortalize the beauty of any given woman by throwing a few lines here and there, or just as effective, that’s what the minas believed. In this rare case, it did not matter that his family was rich and from Germany. We were proud that such a specimen existed in our dull and transparent sex. I sometimes wonder if the café was big enough for two Stracks.

To all at the Astoria it was implicitly acknowledged that Crazy Kohl, the slender gentleman with the slicked back hair, was the indisputable leader of the Young Bohemians, though no Bohemian would dare attest to it, for such a thing is against the whole philosophy.

Crazy Kohl, too, was an artist of sorts. It had been rumored—as always, by somebody’s aunt—that on his sixteenth birthday, Kohl had painted a huge skull on the wall of his bedroom. The depiction was far from accurate, with its two large, peering eyeballs and a long, salivating tongue. Unfortunately, this whim of his cost him sixteen nights of good sleep and spoiled whatever diplomatic favor he could ever find in Grono’s father. First he complained about nightmares involving the skull. Then he said that at precisely 2:40 am on each night the eyes of the presence would shift from left to right until fixating upon his innocent self, saying “KOHHHHL” in a deep voice, over and over. The worst was when the nefarious tongue of the thing would try to steal his bed sheets. The nightmares persisted even after he and Fat Grono covered the skull with six cans worth of black shoe polish. From this

and many other incidents—all of which were true—Kohl acquired the most honorable of Argentine appellations: Crazy.

At our table, underneath the maroon-and-black Astoria canopy, Eledro, the “voice” of the Bohemians, began to relate last night’s incident. Kohl and Puchito had successfully “made their presence known” at our local theater, the Bolsa. “Making your presence known” at the Bolsa required preparation, at least by Bohemian standards. There are two Visitors, a herald and receiver, who must first watch the target film several times so that the plot is flawlessly learned. Then the most climactic scene of the movie must be identified and timed using a stopwatch. Kohl calculated that, in roughly 86% of the films, the most climactic scene is a romantic one. After all preparations, the Visitors must let their presence be known on a Friday or Saturday night, which goes something like Eledro’s account, though his accounts always seemed to be more interesting than the truth.

As Eledro told it, Kohl sat in the front row, the ideal place for a receiver. (Kohl was a perfectionist, a trait always attributed to his German background.) Two-and-a-half minutes before the target scene, Puchito entered the Bolsa and stood at the back row of the dark theater. In this film the scene happened to be a classy one in which a young maiden disrobes before her lover for the first time. After another two-and-a-half minutes, Puchito initiated the Visitation by calling out through a bottomless tin can, “Torete, are you in here? Are you in this large, dark place?”

Naturally, shouts of protest from the disturbed patrons filled the smoky air of the Bolsa. Kohl estimated that 60% of the audience was saying something to the effect of “Shut up” or “We’re trying to watch the movie,” and 20% was saying something worse. The Bolsa was not as refined an establishment as its guests wanted it to be. Most of the glittered green seat backs were torn, and the bodies resting upon them, if provoked, did not act at all like Cary Grant.

“I am here, Pepino,” replied Kohl, shamelessly oblivious to the pleas of the audience. “I’m up here at the front row. Can you hear me?”

“What?” said Puchito, “Was that Torete, Torete who replied to me?”

The rage in the audience grew like swells in the ocean. Every once in a while, one of the more sophisticated audience members—usually an indignant young woman—would utter some moral lesson about having respect for others, or about how people waited all week to see the Hollywood premier, and so on and so forth. These were the true casualties of the Visitation, and they, not the fat Italian asleep in the seventh row, rendered such missions honorable.

Amongst all the complaints, Puchito’s annoying metallic voice could still be discerned. His voice was obnoxiously metallic even without the tin can, and it was because of this otherwise undesirable physical and social trait that Kohl chose him as herald. His thin build, spiked red hair, and fiery temper earned him the name “Puchito”—small cigarette.

“Mom said that you forgot to flush the toilet, and that the chain, that chain the lifts the plug, broke, so. . .” vociferated Puchito.

“Tell mom that I have a special paper clip that I can use—can you hear me?—that I can join the plug with the thing that . . . and tell mom not to let anyone in the bathroom until I get home, especially Grandma...”

“Would you just go home and flush that damn toilet! And what the hell kind of name is Pepino?” yelled a robust man who was accompanied by a petit young lady. The lady, speaking with the speed of a machine gun, reproached the fat man for making a scene. At this

point, fights of this sort usually ignited amongst the couples, who were in disagreement as to how to deal with the disturbance. Generally speaking, the mina would tell the guy that he either overreacted or underreacted; the guy would tell her to mind her own business; and after a few more interchanges, all hell would break loose. The Bohemians called this the *Domino Effect*. After five minutes, and after the scene had past with rage and without love, Puchito and Kohl escaped the Bolsa through different exits, exactly as planned.

The Bohemians sat at the Astoria showing no pride about last night's success, for such pride would be against the whole philosophy. Eledro added, "It was a successful Visitation, with a Domino Effect."

Crazy Kohl made an important observation, "The less outrageous the contents of our communication, that is, the more acceptable our disturbance, the greater the Domino Effect will be." Puchito and I commented that that was a true and invaluable insight. Only Kohl's powerful brain could reach such conclusions. Fat Grono, known for his dedication to the Bohemians but not for his intelligence, asked, "Did that thing happen when all the guys and girls get into a fight after the Visitation?" Grono had a way of asking that very question which illustrated to everyone that he missed the point entirely. "Yes, Grono," replied Kohl. Kohl often mentioned that Fat Grono was the only true Bohemian, and even though nobody really knew what that meant, it was respected.

Time had passed, and the sun was now directly over the Astoria. The Bohemians were beginning to feel sleepy when suddenly, to the surprise of everyone at the cafe, Max von Hassmann showed up on his motorcycle, wearing his famous black cape, and having his only companion, Faust the Siamese cat, peering from the sidecar. Looking more like chihuahua than cat, Faust was a sophisticated little feline, who never showed signs of fear or unease, even when being driven at 90 mph by the German madman. Hassmann, known to everyone as "the Kaiser," was always thought to be an odd ball who made a big entrance, but he was also believed to have died six years ago, in a duel over a woman. This was his greatest entrance ever. Nevertheless, no one at the Astoria displayed shock or said a thing, as always.

The Kaiser got off his motorcycle and said in broken Spanish, "For those of you who are interested in witnessing an important and noble declaration, I will be back in two hours to take you to Coronado." He and Faust then sped away on the loud vehicle.

The patrons of the Astoria reacted in different ways to the Kaiser's invitation, depending on age, I think. At one end of the spectrum was Don Pellegrino, the Astoria owner, who mumbled something to the effect of "crazy son of a bitch." At the other extreme were the Young Bohemians, who saw the invitation as an opportunity to see Coronado and "learn more about the mysterious past of the great Kaiser," added Kohl.

But before any important decisions were ever made, the Bohemians always consulted the Professor, an old eccentric who sat in the deep interior of the Astoria, where there was never enough light to read. The Professor always had on his table several books, three Egyptian statuettes, and a globe of the world. Nobody really knew what he was a professor of.

"I see you are interested in seeing the Great Town of Coronado, the town in the Andes," said the Professor. "And I am sure that you have come to ask me, Egio Elfemore Rivarolla, for advice about going. Am I right?"

The Professor had a way of saying every little thing as if it were extremely important. We never heard Coronado spoken about with such gravitas. We all nodded our heads and found chairs.

“Of course I am right,” he said, “and of course you will go, for youth will always seek adventure; it is a fact of life. Things don’t change. Young hearts seek adventure, and adventure they will find, even in Mendoza, even in the Astoria, even at the Bolsa. The desire to have things happen *is* the adventure. But beware, for such desires are safe *here*, but not *there* in the Andes.” He stood and pointed to the west. Grono looked toward the mountains.

“And let me go on to clarify that there is no such thing as ‘*the Andes*’—at least not what you envision them to be. I’ll tell you what there is: there are elevations of land produced by the collision of continental plates, collisions which occurred by a mistake made millions of years ago.”

Grono made a face revealing how hopelessly lost he was in the conversation, but the Professor continued anyway.

“There is rock, soil, quartz, and sand, and some forms of life, but no ‘Andes.’ Yet, when youthful eyes such as yours gaze upon these mountains, the Andes become alive. The condors reawaken and leave their large nests, taking flight into the cool moonlight. The lioness becomes restlessly hungry, and the phosphors which the uneducated *campesino* calls “the bad light” begin to seduce and confuse the weak mind of man, the mind that can’t tolerate large skies and dark mountains. This is why we have lost so many young men to the Andes, but the old men always return. So go, but go with the hearts of old men.”

“And what do you know of the Kaiser?” asked Kohl.

“Max von Hassmann is the son of a famous general from the Great War, a war before your time. If I recall correctly, his name was Wilhelm von Hassmann. In any case, his son is the victim of small-town mentality and of the rumors of old hags, hags who have nothing better to do than gossip while sipping their afternoon *maté*, hags who, without the aid of any hallucinogens, imagine duels which never took place. Would you believe that the young German was presumed dead just because he went to live in San Juan for six years?”

That was enough information for Kohl, who decided at that moment to take the voyage to Coronado. He thought it would be good for the Bohemians to leave the city for a few days. Fat Grono went home to obtain the necessary provisions, which always included olives, bread, and a large stick of dried salami. Puchito went to borrow a few bottles of malbec from his father’s cellar. “With the hearts of old men...with the hearts of old men,” Kohl reminded the Bohemians.

We met the Kaiser outside the Astoria precisely two hours after his invitation: he was punctual like all Germans worth their ilk. There were five of us—Kohl, Puchito, Eledro, Grono, and I, and so we had trouble fitting on and around the Kaiser’s motorcycle and sidecar. Kohl came up with a solution. He would sit behind the Kaiser on the motorcycle; Grono and I would share the sidecar; and Puchito and Eledro (the lightest of us all) would share a black wagon that Kohl had chained to the motorcycle. Quiet Faust was in a beige backpack carried by Kohl. Throughout all deliberations and preparations, neither the Kaiser nor his feline emitted a sound. We rode off toward the Andes at around 40 mph, due to the heavy load.

The late afternoon was beautiful, and all that could be heard or seen was our vehicle blowing dust into the air. Everyone was quiet, and we all acquired that imperturbable zombie *facha* that all travelers have.

I looked to my left and saw a large vineyard. “How peaceful is the life of a grape picker,” I said to Grono. Then I looked to my right and saw that Grono was anxiously waiting to tell me something.

“What is it, Grono?” I asked.

“Look at the Kaiser. He has a very strange smile,” he said.

Strange it was. I never saw a face containing so much happiness, but happiness of the sad type, the type tangos are made of. It must have been elicited by the natural beauty of Mendoza’s vineyards, I thought. Hassmann scanned the rows of grape vines, up and down, over and over. The rest of us looked as well, but we couldn’t find what made his blissful experience.

It was only when we reached a rivulet that the Kaiser uttered a word. Though nobody understood what the madman was saying, we all knew that it wasn’t pleasant. Apparently, he was cursing at the sky. In cannon-like blasts he would utter the same expression, maybe changing one or two words. We implicitly concluded that if Faust, his closest companion, remained indifferent to this, then so should we. After several hours, we reached the serpentine roads by which we would climb into the Andes and reach the town of Coronado.

The sun of our afternoon had disappeared, and no moon could yet be seen. The sky belonged to no one. The amber lights of the town of Coronado were in view, and we approached them slowly. It was a real small town, purportedly made up of only those who worked down in the vineyards. To everyone’s surprise except the Kaiser, not a soul was there. Wires ran from rooftop to rooftop, suspending light bulbs which served as the town’s only source of illumination. We saw abandoned homes, empty grocery stores, and a vacated police station that was painted in a color between blue and green. The motorcycle became louder now that it echoed through the empty buildings. Puchito noted that the town had no church. “This is a miserable town,” said Eledro from the wagon, “I will tell people that Coronado is a piece of crap; I can’t believe the professor—mentioning ‘*the city in the Andes*’ with such gravitas!” The Kaiser drove us directly to the *Coronado Municipal Cemetery*, where Grono immediately lost control of his bladder. It wasn’t the type of trip we had imagined. Not at all.

Once the motor of his motorcycle stopped, our hearing was restored. Following the lead of the young German, we entered the abandoned cemetery through rusty iron gates. Slowly he marched to one of the few marked graves, upon which he fixated upon a sacred marble that read “W. V. HASSMANN.” Weeds hugged the stone as if protecting it.

We all stood there for seven long minutes, until Max von Hassmann produced his second Spanish utterance of the day.

“You low, miserable bastard!” he said, spitting on the ground. “You be good witnesses,” he said to us. “Do not be like the people of San Juan who lost discipline after only six years of coming here. What lies below is a man who has taken all from his son—his son’s glory, his son’s wealth, and closest to his son’s good heart, his son’s Camilla Piquielo, my little grape picker. No! fame was not enough for this charming man, the great Herr Hassmann! He had to have it all!”

The Kaiser then dropped to his knees, and with tears and two fists in the air, said, “How could you be such a bastard to your own blood?! Let the whole world know the truth. Let the night and the Andes know my scorn and hatred! And that is why I have been bringing witnesses here every week for the last six years, no matter how far the distance, no matter how long the time, no matter how much the fuel.” A noise from the wagon startled us, but we could see that it was just Faust, who casually walked up to the tombstone and pissed on the grave, as if he had pissed on it many times before.

Confused and perplexed, Kohl’s pupils cyclically dilated and constricted, a symptom of his deep thought. One could almost read the machinations inside his head, and we all knew

that, if anyone understood what all this was about, it would be Kohl. “Are the old hags who lack hallucinogens right? Was the Professor wrong? Is this the result of some father-and-son duel over a woman—a vineyard girl by the name of Ms. Piquelo? Did this maiden fall in love with the Kaiser’s father because the elder had more fame and charm? Where is she today? Is she alive?” thought Crazy Kohl. Despite all the mystery, no one asked any questions, at least not out loud.

The Kaiser soon regained his presence of mind, and without any words, we all started heading back to our city, which we already missed very much. Again we passed through the rusty iron gates of the cemetery.

Underneath the moonlight, as the Kaiser angrily rode his vehicle through the Andes, the silhouettes of hundreds of giant condors could be seen atop the mountains, flanking our right. They were perched side by side, as if in military formation, as if waiting for some signal. I never saw anything like it. The Bohemians were terrified by this newly discovered state of affairs, but they said nothing and maintained their travel facha. In less than fifteen seconds, the giant condors took flight, ascending toward the flickering stars. Their wingspan must have been more than twenty feet. We all watched in awe as they launched in different directions. The beasts dominated the skies—they were in their element, and we were miles from ours.

“Did you hear that?” asked Kohl, “I heard the word ‘YETZT’ fill the skies one second before the animals took flight, but I can’t tell where the sound originated, nor do I know what it means.” Grono and I did not hear a thing, but we never doubted Kohl.

The shadows of the giant condors circled around us. Our speed was now reduced to 29 mph. In the middle of nowhere, we were as vulnerable as a shell-less snail in a cobweb. Astonishingly, the Kaiser remained completely unaware of the creatures. But this did not last long. Noticeable to all and with a loud shriek, one of the giant beasts dove down and tried to snatch the innocent Faust from the beige bag. Faust showed no fear, as always. Fortunately, Puchito hit the huge beast on the head with Grono’s dried salami. As soon as we thought that we had ourselves a victory, we saw seven condors take the body of Max von Hassmann up into the night. As he ascended toward the moon, the Kaiser kicked and cursed, saying “*Mundo de mierda!*” Without its driver, the motorcycle decelerated, and Kohl stared straight at the Andes and said, “You may not believe this, but the beast had the face of a German general. I saw it right before my eyes...’Yetzt’ must be German for something.” No one had the time to understand what Kohl meant.

Fat Grono took the wheel and, now that the wagon was ditched, managed to raise our speed up to 50 mph, but we soon realized that we had ourselves another casualty. Faust was gone. The feline was taken by two condors but did not complain at all, and so no one noticed a thing.

“Perhaps he wanted to go up with his commander,” said Puchito.

“One has to respect that they went to their death being who they always were—the Kaiser bitching, and the cat with no complaints,” said Kohl. Immediately, the condors vanished into the mountains, as if their mission had been accomplished.

It wasn’t until we reached the rivulet that things seemed substantially less ominous. But something unreal and quite sublime happened at the vineyards, right before dawn. Eleven of the “bad lights” that Professor Rivarolla spoke about were there, but they looked like beautiful, voluptuous young women. They were playing around on the fields, and all had the same Italian facha. Of course Grono stopped the motorcycle, and we all began to run between

the rows of green grapes, chasing the apparitions. (I remember that the grapes looked gray in the nightlight.) After several games of hide-and-seek, Puchito tried to hug one of the maidens and fell right through her body. “Wench!” he said. The same happened to Fat Grono, who years later claimed that it was the best opportunity of his life.

“We must evacuate immediately. I understand what is going on,” said Kohl while starting the motor motorcycle. “The hags must have been somewhat right about the Kaiser, but the Professor was even more right about the Andes. It is all in the geography, *and* the observer. Don’t attempt to touch the eleven Camilla Piquelo’s, for they did not spring from your minds. They were created while the Kaiser was remembering his lost love, soon after leaving the Astoria. And those flying monsters north of the rivulet must have been born from his insatiable rage. “Poor Kaiser. Too bad that he did not drive slower toward Coronado. He may have lived to see his lost love instead of the condors. I guess the Andes, like all things, need time.”

And nobody except me understood.

We returned to the Astoria conspicuously lacking the Kaiser and his companion, but as always, no one asked any questions. Looking back I think that the Kaiser was not prepared to deal with this wretched life. He lacked the training I received from Uncle Isidro, the Spinach.

The End