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THE COLD SCIENTIST

BY JALA PEAFEE

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—*Inspirado en Ronald, en la H.B., C.R.*

In their narrow bed, Mar turned over with difficulty and sighed. “*Abrázame, Sandro,*” she said. Hold me. “*¿Qué te pasa?*”

Sandro had been lying awake for the past two hours, staring at the often leaky, badly patched ceiling of their house. House? he thought. Who am I kidding? We live in a fucking *casucha*, a shack. He forced himself to turn to her, pat her growing belly, and smile, though he knew she couldn't see it in this absolute darkness.

“*Nada, cariño,*” he replied. “*Duérmete.*” Get some sleep.

The scrubbed-clean church—by far the largest building in town—was decorated by nature, fuchsia bougainvillea in full bloom brushing in the wind against three of the four whitewashed sides. On the fourth side the blossoms were red. Sandro had visited the church twice since his return to Laguna Jaguares. The first time was the day after he came back, in February, mid-semester, for his father's funeral. He'd hated every minute of the service, its provinciality and worn-out priest, who knew everyone in town all too intimately, insinuating himself into every moment of one's life from birth to death, whether invited or not. It all reminded Sandro of exactly why he'd left in the first place. He'd been in the grad student office, ten thousand kilometers away, tucked into a cubicle experimenting with a new computer program that calculated glacial flow when Johannes had shouted, “Hallo, Sandro, telly phone! Long distanz! From home town, homeboy!”

When his old friends saw him again, standing stoic while the priest went on and on (*let's just get my father under the ground already, can't we?*), they'd whistled in surprise, encircling him and pounding him on the back. These were the lads he'd climbed trees with, hunted frogs with, the boys with whom he'd kicked around a half-inflated volleyball day after day with World Cup fervor. *Well, I'll be damned,* they said. *It's the cold scientist, gracing us with his presence.* Sandro had attempted to smile. He knew that while his mother and sisters were proud of him, everyone else in his home town—*bunch of barbarians*—considered him a pretentious freak. Who ever heard of someone from a

small tropical country going off to live in Norway, in Sweden, in Finland, to study snow and ice—substances no one in Laguna Jaguares had ever even *seen*? And being successful at it, too, winning scholarship after scholarship; Sandro was sure this was the real reason for the slightly malicious gossip that seemed to accompany him every minute since his return to a place he thought he'd escaped forever.

Angrily flinging the worn brake shoes deep into the uncleared brush—jungle, really—surrounding their miniscule home, Sandro sighed. He was repairing the decrepit motorcycle for the third time this week—their only means of transportation, and they were lucky to have it; Sandro had cashed in his return plane ticket for it and to cover the first two months' rent on the shack. He thought of all the hours of research he'd done toward his doctorate and only hoped his advisor would be sympathetic, be willing to wait just a bit longer, even if Sandro hadn't returned immediately, as promised, even if weeks had stretched into months. Sandro and Mar had accumulated an impressive collection of dented aluminum pans and hand-me-down baby clothes from relatives. They mostly alternated eating at his mother's and sisters' places, her folks' place. Sandro made it a point never to think of the risks as his helmetless pregnant wife rode on the back of the bike. Only her supple arms around his waist kept all his responsibilities from shattering onto the rough roads.

Amongst his colleagues, anyone different had been, of course, fair game, and Sandro was a perfect target due to his unusual country of origin and (at first) heavy accent (for Sandro, English proved to be the most difficult part of his coursework, especially the unfamiliar way it was spoken by the many Nordics). The only time he was spared the ribbing was when an actual *woman* briefly entered the program before dropping out (she was pregnant, and no one knew by whom, though rumors flew furiously and some of the guys had started placing bets). He recalled—though he no longer remembered at which Institute; or was it the Snow, Ice, and Permafrost committee?—all the gringo guys needling him: “Hey, I heard that in Costa Rica and those podunk places down there, you guys *eat* iguanas, man. Is that true?”

Another guy, also American, chimed in, “Yeah, dude, I heard that, like, the *tail* is supposed to be, like, the best part or some such totally gross thing, that y'all roast it till it's all crunchy, then eat around the vertebrae like it's a freakin' corn on the cob!”

“No way,” replied Sandro instantly. “Not me, man. I mean, no one eats iguana where *I* come from,” he lied. “Maybe in Guatemala or something. Yuck! It sounds so disgusting!”

Eet sounds so deeesgusting, they mimicked. “Oh, but ve all know,” one of them protested. “It is, how say you?, commoner knowledge. Ve all haf heard about it.”

“Well...” Sandro lied again. “Maybe in some total rural areas or something, some country people might eat it. But not anyone *I* know!” After that exchange, he was slapped on the back and invited out to drink hyper-chilled vodka. The subject was rarely brought up again, and he was eventually accepted as one of them, as a serious scientist of frozen phenomena, even if he did come from a land of butterflies and bananas.

Sandro revisited the church about three months after his father's funeral. Again stoic, he entered this time as a young man with promising postdoc possibilities, and left as a husband. At his side, smiling through her nausea and looking beautiful in a white lace dress made by her grandmother for this

special occasion was Mar, a fifteen year-old girl he barely knew.

When he'd left Laguna Jaguares, a cloth duffel and immense hopes on his shoulder, Mar had still been a child, squatting to draw in the dirt with her skirt hiked up over her knees. He'd paid no more attention to her than to the semi-starved dogs that squealed, mating, along the dusty roads. The last woman he'd slept with previous to the now-adolescent Mar had been at the International Symposium on Snow and Avalanches. She was a forty-four year-old German with knee-high orange leather boots and a peroxide crewcut, a guest lecturer on the dynamics of friction in snow shed design, who'd rolled a condom onto him with her big yellow teeth. He hadn't even been attracted to her, and the act itself had felt more like an unusual kind of vigorous exercise; his orgasm hadn't felt appreciably different from the mild but forgettable pleasure of soaking in the local volcanic hot springs, his habit each evening after the talks.

Though humble, their wedding was a large event, attended by every resident of the town, from the very young to the very old. There wasn't a single person Sandro didn't know by name or reputation (or both), other than the small children and babies who'd been born while he was abroad. *Gallina de palo*—fried iguana—was the highlight of the lovingly prepared repast.

The day after his father was laid to rest, Sandro's mother came to him with an armful of folders, most so old and worn they were falling apart. She didn't say anything at first; Sandro looked at her curiously and leafed through a few. They all involved *terrenos*, parcels of land. Looking more closely, Sandro realized that many of them referred to his parents' (now his mother's) property.

"What's all this?" he asked her.

"Your father was involved in some land disputes, Sandro. He passed before any of it got resolved. I was hoping...you would try to figure out all this paperwork?" she said, eyes begging.

As long as it'll be finished in the next week and a half, he thought, no problem. "*Sí, mamá,*" he said. "I'll try." He picked up another folder. "Who are the other people in the dispute?"

"*Tus propios tíos, Sandro.*" Your own uncles. She shook her head and avoided his eye. She moved close to him suddenly, knelt before him, clasped his hands and kissed them. "*Gracias, hijo, por regresar,*" she whispered. For coming home.

Sandro thought about ice climbing, how sometimes, for no apparent reason, the axe will strike in such a way as to cause the entire sheet of ice to suddenly shear off. If your crampons and the screws that you've so carefully placed hold, you're shaken but okay. But if they don't, well, you can pretty much kiss your life goodbye.

Sandro wasn't sure what exactly had drawn him so fiercely to Mar's young body. It wasn't her youthfulness alone; he'd had older lovers and never minded, in fact often preferred them for their greater expertise. But that evening after the burial, when he'd taken a walk along the road to clear his mind, to try not to think of his father, stiff and unyielding beneath the always-moist ground, he'd seen, backlit in the moth-bombed lights of the little general store, what seemed to him the loveliest vision he'd ever encountered. Mar, leaning against the peeling yellow paint and gossiping with her friend Talía, had been wearing a much-washed, perilously thin dress. Sandro could see Mar's sinuous, impossibly narrow waist, her weightless new breasts. The cloth's transparency made obvious the fact that she was unencumbered by underclothes. As he slowly walked up to the two girls, Mar had giggled: "*Mira, es el científico del frío.*" Look, it's the scientist from the cold. The one who studies cold.

"No, no," joked Talía, grasping at her friend's narrow shoulders to keep from falling down with laughter, "*es el científico frío.*" No, it's the frigid scientist.

Sandro merely stood gazing at Mar, and, a few long moments later, Mar untangled herself from her friend with a barely audible "*¿Tú crees?* Think so?" and then slipped her small, warm hand into his.

He still can't believe he didn't even think of a condom. Not once did it cross his mind, as their sweaty bodies clapped together under the ceiba tree. Not that he'd brought any in his luggage for such a short, solemn trip, but they were easy enough to obtain, even here. In Reykjavik, in Oslo, in Helsinki, he would have reached for one automatically, would have maintained an optimistic stash of them in his closet. She must have bewitched him, was all he could think later, when she came to him, embarrassed, and told him, in her little-girl voice, that she was going to have a baby.

Some things, thought Sandro as he nodded without surprise at Mar's news, never changed around here.

Sandro began making enough at the job he found, doing the books for several nearby tourist lodges, to keep the two of them in *casado*—beans and rice—and to continue paying the rent. Daily he was bemused by the name of the national dish on their dinner table; tourists always grinned when they learned that *casado* meant married. Mar and Sandro got all the fresh fruit they could possibly want from their parents' properties, seeded generations ago and lush with guava and papaya trees, with granadilla and carambola. As he worked mindlessly at the simple additions and subtractions written in careful pencil in the ledgers, Sandro mused pleasurablely about which dissertation topic he would choose—he'd been at that crucial point. He could see all the delicious choices laid out before him like an array of mouthwatering desserts—passionfruit sorbet, Baked Alaska, *granadizos*—shown off on a refrigerated silver tray by a tuxedoed waiter. Would it be something in snow microstructure? Avalanche control? Glacial retreat? Might he make it to Greenland, after all? To Antarctica? At times he became so caught up in his readiness to taste, to savor, that he realized he'd skipped an item on the faintly moldy lined paper, and he had to shake his head, clear the adding machine, and redo that entire column of figures.

Sandro awoke at four a.m., shivering. He shook as he rooted through his several cardboard boxes for another shirt to put on top of this one, a pair of socks. Didn't they have an extra blanket around here somewhere? He spotted the pistachio-colored baby blanket crocheted by Mar's mother, soft as a snowflake just before it melts on the tip of your finger, neatly folded on a plywood corner shelf that Sandro had put up. The fuzzy, delicate square was patiently awaiting their child's appearance and had been adamantly deemed off-limits to Sandro's callused hands by both Mar and her mother. Sandro picked up the gift and draped it around his shoulders.

Noiselessly, he stepped outside and examined the sky. He hadn't seen many bats since he came back, nothing like how it used to be. Jan, one of the tourist lodge owners, a Dutch man who

reminded him uncannily of one of his professors, told Sandro that the disappearance of the flying mammals was due to increased pesticide use on the banana and papaya plantations. Sandro found himself constantly expecting Jan to suddenly launch into an excited lecture about rates of ice melt, but it never happened.

Sandro went back inside. He folded the baby blanket as well as he could and replaced it in its spot. He returned to bed. Mar, enormous next to him, slept soundly. He wondered why he kept waking up with chills, when in fact it was so very warm outside.

They were able to build an addition with the extra money Sandro was earning at his moonlighting job, serving food at two of the same three tourist lodges where he already did the books. He completed the construction when the baby was three-and-a-half months old, and it meant that Mar could finally do the cooking in a separate room from where the three of them slept and resided.

Sandro, making coffee before dawn, watched his wife and small daughter doze peacefully, curled together. When dressing for work, he sometimes still found himself looking around for his down parka and insulated boots. Confused, he would finally open the flimsy door to see his sandals resting patiently at the bottom of the two splintered steps.

Sandro skims through the two heavy textbooks he'd brought with him to study during those two weeks he was supposed to be in Costa Rica for his father's funeral. He can barely recall his fellow students' names, or the face of his advisor, though the material in the texts still seems as exciting as when it was all new to him. Little Julio, on fat, unsteady legs next to Sandro, reaches out and grabs a few pages, gurgles, and rips them with his small fist. Sandro laughs.

The door bangs open and Mar enters with Pepita, their daughter. Two plastic bags of groceries are balanced in Mar's arms over the new swelling in her abdomen. Sandro kisses his daughter's plump cheek when she runs to him. He tousles his son's brown curls. Soon Pepita and Julio will be old enough for Sandro to start teaching them about the differences between lake ice and sea ice, about periglacial activity on Mars and isotopic processes in the hydrological cycle.

And snow, glorious snow. He'll tell Julio how cold it is, colder than anything the little boy has ever felt before, including the slow-moving creek five minutes' north of here. He'll tell Pepita that it's whiter than the Brassavola orchids that bloom high in the trees and delicately scent their evenings. To this new baby, this son or daughter, he'll describe the infinite softness, the chill embrace that awaits the unbearable weight of a human body, falling. And he won't neglect to tell them, also, how much fun it is to play in.

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Jala Pfaff is a writer, artist, teacher and interpreter living in Boulder, Colorado. She holds an A.A. in International Studies, B.A. in Spanish, M.A. in Hispanic Linguistics, and did two

further years of doctoral work in Theoretical Linguistics before deciding she'd rather write fiction than a dissertation. She is currently finishing up a two-year program in classical painting and drawing at the Colorado Academy of Art. Pfaff is the author of the novel *SEDUCING THE RABBI* and her short fiction, essays and poetry have been published in *The Fairfield Review*, *Rose & Thorn*, *Hiss Quarterly*, *Word Riot*, *Stone Table Review*, and *Slow Trains*. The short story *The Cold Scientist* was inspired by a young man she met on a trip to Costa Rica. Please visit the author at www.jalapfaff.com.