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# Way Out

by Mariana Dietl

“I’m leaving, Fer...” *Me voy, Fer.*

“¿Cómo que te vas? ¿Adónde?” What do you mean you’re leaving, where? Fernando halted suddenly and faced his girlfriend, who was walking beside him. Hadn’t she been the one to suggest they go for a walk? They hadn’t done even five blocks yet and she already wanted to turn back, he couldn’t believe it, who understood women?, and yet...and yet there was something in that phrase—perhaps the silence that followed it; or her shifting and evasive look upon saying it; or something else that he could not quite pin down—which made him feel that Luciana’s cutting remark had nothing to do with the stroll they were taking under the shady and blurry autumn sun in the parks of Palermo.

“*Me voy del país, Fer.* I’m leaving Argentina. I can’t stand it here anymore.” Now Luciana was facing him, her eyes framed by tears like a pail about to overflow.

The pail spilled over and the *tipas* and *jacarandaes* of the Rosedal began to whirl around Fernando, like in a children’s play where the main characters are trees, chairs and doors that move about the stage like cynic and exalted human beings. He felt the cool and black soil around his feet crumble under him like they had told him happened during earthquakes or in quagmire sands. He paused. The sweet and solitary fragrance of the eucalyptus and Madonna lilies, until then as familiar and known to him as the *choripán* posts at the edge of the sidewalk, became unrecognizable, foreign, perverse, stale. He knew people who had left the country or had intentions of doing so, but he would have never imagined his fiancé would be among them. Luciana, who, in spite of her economic difficulties—not unlike those of most people—he believed tightly mingled and confused with the swayings and strong temperament of her city: her pride and coquettishness were Libertador, Callao and Alvear, daunting avenues that had nothing to envy the style of the Champs Ellysée; her quietness and magnetism the narrow and badly paved *callejuelas* nourished by bars, *boliches* and—since a few years ago—*maxi-kioskos*; her defiant and self-assured attitude the legions of stubborn and untiring smokers who populated them; her tapered and young chestnut body represented the pleasant decadence, the disenchantment, the impenetrable melancholy of Buenos Aires; her long straight hair the brown movements of the Río de la Plata, and her warm and unapproachable eyes the infinite and deserted *Llanura Pampeana*.

In Fernando’s eyes Buenos Aires was her: Luciana. He could not imagine her anywhere else.

“¿Me oíste?” Did you hear me? Luciana was standing beside her boyfriend.

Fernando heard from afar the thin and almost childish voice of his love, but could not answer her. All he heard was the pronounced *porteño* accent, imperious and confronting, that emerged from a mouth he had broken down with kisses and

*mordiscones* many times before. He shook his head. Perhaps he hadn't understood correctly; yes, that was probably it.

“*Sí, sí, te escuche Gorda, te escuché...*” Yeah, I heard you all right, *Gorda*.

“And you won't say anything to me?”

What can I say to you?, he thought in anguish...that I have no choice but to accept it; that after only a year together I have no right to claim anything; that you oblige me to participate in something I don't agree with...I can't go with you, please don't ask me for that, ask me for anything, but not for that, please, you know I just came back, you know I was just starting to feel at home again, thanks in great part to you, you know I don't want to leave again, you know I can't do that, you know why I came...He straightened his back up. Could it be her strategy to force me to marry?

“And what will become of us, then?”

Luciana turned to him in disapproval. Her maize colored pupils tried to appear casual and assured, but Fernando could see the gusts of blood running through them.

“I don't know, Fer, we'll have to think of something together. The fact is that I'm leaving.”

“You sound determined.” Was this her way of breaking up? Was there someone else? Now he knew why she was in such a hurry to leave the house, as soon as they had finished having lunch with his family. They usually went later. The ice-cream had been just an excuse. He hadn't seen it coming at all.

“I am. The only thing I ask from you is understanding. I cannot go on like this, begging for someone to give me an assignment, *dejando que me forreen y bicicleteen por treinta pesos de morondanga*, letting myself be snubbed and cheated for thirty miserable pesos. You know better than I do that this year I didn't sell a thing, and whatever I did manage to do was for free. Newspapers are in the pits. Better not mention magazines. *Rajan gente de todos lados*, all they do is fire people; imagine if they are going to choose me for an assignment, of all people, with the amount of journalists out there who can do it and are more than willing to, with the amount of reporters who are wandering the streets like starving animals. Most of them have much more experience than I do...” Luciana took a breath and her expression loosened up a bit. “*Fer: no quiero estar más así, entendeme, te lo pido...*” I don't want to go on like this, Fer, please understand me, I beg you. She covered her face with her hands.

“But we've talked about this a million times, Lu, and the last time you told me that you were going to start sending things out to other countries from here.”

“You think I didn't?” she yelled, erupting like thunder before a bad storm. A caramel apple vendor moved his cart a few inches in case the couple didn't see him and ran over him. “We had that conversation over a month ago, in case you don't remember, in this same damn park. And since then, not only have I never received an answer, but even if I had I wouldn't have been able to collect any money because of the *puto corralito*. Or they might have paid me in devalued

currency, or in *Patacones* or *Lecop* or any type of government crap, for that matter, which is the same..." A couple hauling a stroller turned around to watch her cry, but continued to walk: they would have died before being considered *chusma* or gossipy. "I should have left a long time ago. *La verdad es que no sé qué corno hago acá*, most of all considering that Mila and Juani are already there...I should just take advantage of my European citizenship and get the hell out of here."

"*Pero Lu...*"

"If I didn't leave sooner it was because of you..."

"Therefore I take from this that your changed decision means I am no longer enough reason for you to stay..." retorted Fernando, trying not to sound ironic.

Without speaking to each other, and as if they were both being carried by who-knows-what ungovernable force, they began walking once more. The need to focus on what lay before them helped avoid embarrassing looks. Again a promising day of sun and light had been tarnished by the country's situation. This is how this *país de mierda* appreciates the loyalty of its people, Fernando concluded to himself: deceiving and humiliating them like a *cualquiera*. He stepped angrily on the clayey soil that bordered the park, in spite of the discomfort caused by a blister on his left foot. On the sidewalk across the street a row of haughty marble and iridescent glass buildings lay sleeping and exposed with wide balconies facing the *bosques*; a sort of Upper West Side *porteño* (so the owners' wished!).

"If you'd only give me a reason..." she was saying between tears, "but I have no other option than to choose: either I drown here or I do something useful with my life somewhere else. *No puedo seguir esperando que pase algo*. I can't continue to wait for something to happen. Here things are only getting worse. If at least I knew that in a few months or a year things will improve for me, I may be able to hold it out a bit longer. *Pero así no puedo*, I can't like this..." Her agitated sobs had given her hiccups, but it didn't seem funny to either of them. Families, joggers and couples rambling hand in hand went past them; they pretended not to see Luciana's unburdening. At some point, however, they heard a little girl with a fuchsia ribbon hairpin asking her mother: *¿Por qué llora Mami esa señora?* Why is that lady crying, Mami? They ignored her.

"*¿Me decís cuál otra me queda?*" Can you tell me please what other choice do I have?

Fernando remained quiet. He knew his girlfriend was right, but he would have never admitted it to her. How could he tell her she was right while trying to make her stay?

His eyes set on one of the massive lacquered constructions of Avenida Libertador. He stared at it as for the first time, dazzled, even though he lived right around the corner. They walked.

"*A la gente que se fue no le fue tan mal*," the people who left are not doing that bad, murmured Luciana in a barely audible voice. "At least they do

better than if they were here..."

Fernando hated not being able to solve her problem. What he would have liked to do at that moment was throw himself at her feet and promise her the world, but he was scared. He was scared of not being able to fulfill all his promises. Although he held an MBA from one of the top universities in the States and had a good job at an international financial firm, he could not tell what would happen tomorrow. That year alone they had fired a quarter of the staff at his office and rumors said there was another downsizing in the making. Besides, he didn't want to leave the country again so soon: he had only been back for little over a year, and had returned precisely because he had become fed up of missing his family, his friends and his city. A separation from them now would be extremely hard on him, mostly considering his father, whose right side had become paralyzed after suffering two consecutive heart attacks the year before. But because of his mother too, who had become a slave to Lexotanil and during his two year absence seemed to have aged twenty; and because of his eighteen-year old 'little' sister—his only one—who suffered from severe depression and anorexia because she did not know what career to choose, who she wanted to be or how to realign the loose strings of her life.

Fernando felt that he still hadn't been able to fill the vacuum he left behind when he went to Boston. Nevertheless, until that sunny midday of April he considered himself part of an almost extinct race in Argentina: the one of satisfied men; of those who could not complain. Most of all since he had met Luciana. And now she was the one who was pulling him out forever from that status with a single phrase, as one who clumsily touches a card-tower bringing it all to pieces.

"I don't know what to say," he said suddenly. "I'm confused."

"Would you come with me if I asked you to?"

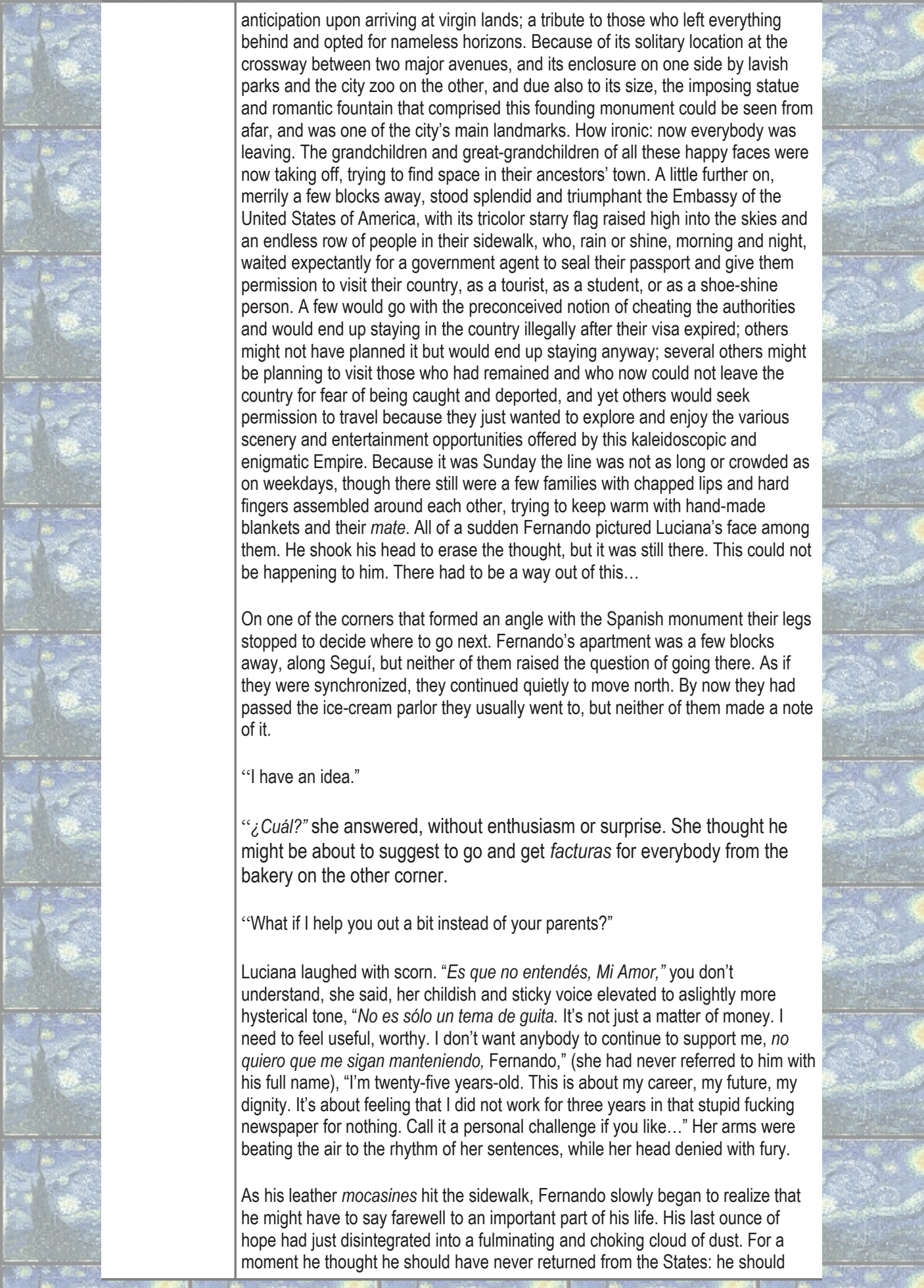
Fernando was moved. He immediately discarded the theory that there was someone else, as well as the conspiratorial intention of trying to force a break up or accelerate their marriage. He paused and turned to face her. She was still walking, so he had to grab her by the arm. Then he said: "*Gordita*, you can't ask me that...you know how hard it would be for me to leave now. I'm just starting to get used to this country again, and you know everything that's going on in my family. On the other hand, it was really hard for me to land this job, and I wouldn't like to leave it just like that...And yet I still don't know what to do...I don't want to lose you..."

"It's easy for you," she answered. "*Tenés laburo, una familia que puede bancarte en el caso de que lo pierdas, un máster en Harvard...*" You have a job, a family that can support you in case you lose it, a Master's from Harvard...

"Your parents help you too, don't they? Didn't Mirta give you a hundred pesos the other week to help you fix your teeth?"

"They help me with whatever they can, but it's not a lot, poor things. It's tough on them. We are from Caballito, not from Palermo like you guys."

They had reached Sarmiento. Ahead of them the Monumento de los Españoles spread out in its dirty-white splendor: with its baroque men and women holding torches and unfurling flags; their expressive faces reflecting the hope and



anticipation upon arriving at virgin lands; a tribute to those who left everything behind and opted for nameless horizons. Because of its solitary location at the crossway between two major avenues, and its enclosure on one side by lavish parks and the city zoo on the other, and due also to its size, the imposing statue and romantic fountain that comprised this founding monument could be seen from afar, and was one of the city's main landmarks. How ironic: now everybody was leaving. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of all these happy faces were now taking off, trying to find space in their ancestors' town. A little further on, merrily a few blocks away, stood splendid and triumphant the Embassy of the United States of America, with its tricolor starry flag raised high into the skies and an endless row of people in their sidewalk, who, rain or shine, morning and night, waited expectantly for a government agent to seal their passport and give them permission to visit their country, as a tourist, as a student, or as a shoe-shine person. A few would go with the preconceived notion of cheating the authorities and would end up staying in the country illegally after their visa expired; others might not have planned it but would end up staying anyway; several others might be planning to visit those who had remained and who now could not leave the country for fear of being caught and deported, and yet others would seek permission to travel because they just wanted to explore and enjoy the various scenery and entertainment opportunities offered by this kaleidoscopic and enigmatic Empire. Because it was Sunday the line was not as long or crowded as on weekdays, though there still were a few families with chapped lips and hard fingers assembled around each other, trying to keep warm with hand-made blankets and their *mate*. All of a sudden Fernando pictured Luciana's face among them. He shook his head to erase the thought, but it was still there. This could not be happening to him. There had to be a way out of this...

On one of the corners that formed an angle with the Spanish monument their legs stopped to decide where to go next. Fernando's apartment was a few blocks away, along Seguí, but neither of them raised the question of going there. As if they were synchronized, they continued quietly to move north. By now they had passed the ice-cream parlor they usually went to, but neither of them made a note of it.

"I have an idea."

"¿Cuál?" she answered, without enthusiasm or surprise. She thought he might be about to suggest to go and get *facturas* for everybody from the bakery on the other corner.

"What if I help you out a bit instead of your parents?"

Luciana laughed with scorn. "*Es que no entendés, Mi Amor,*" you don't understand, she said, her childish and sticky voice elevated to a slightly more hysterical tone, "*No es sólo un tema de guita.* It's not just a matter of money. I need to feel useful, worthy. I don't want anybody to continue to support me, *no quiero que me sigan manteniendo,* Fernando," (she had never referred to him with his full name), "I'm twenty-five years-old. This is about my career, my future, my dignity. It's about feeling that I did not work for three years in that stupid fucking newspaper for nothing. Call it a personal challenge if you like..." Her arms were beating the air to the rhythm of her sentences, while her head denied with fury.

As his leather *mocasines* hit the sidewalk, Fernando slowly began to realize that he might have to say farewell to an important part of his life. His last ounce of hope had just disintegrated into a fulminating and choking cloud of dust. For a moment he thought he should have never returned from the States: he should

have stayed to further his career there, meet someone—preferably an American citizen, so he could avoid all the hassles relating to work visas—and that’s it, end of story. Happiness. At least he would have avoided all of what was happening to him now. Yet he knew that this notion did nothing but hurt him, and that its sole intention was to help him escape from a reality that upset him. He loved his country and Luciana was an inextricable part of it, for good or for bad.

Argentina. Luciana. Argentina. Luciana. Two terms that mingled and interlaced each other indelibly in his unconscious. Why should they separate? Why should they suddenly become incompatible? It would be like separating a tear from a sad face; a hair from a head; ink from written paper. What would happen to Luciana if she left? What would happen to the country if even its most loyal servants abandoned it?

While he lived in Boston he had met a few *argentinas*, but none of them had been Luciana. Most had left Argentina with a project, not determined at all by the country’s situation. Practically none of them had the intention of returning to their native country, at least not in the near future. They were people who would have emigrated even if Argentina were flourishing. The problem, in his belief, was when the Lucianas began to leave because they had no other option. They left because their mother was choking them; they couldn’t breathe. And that’s how they ended up becoming swallows: little birds jumping from cloud to cloud in a frantic search for their destiny amid a pitiable self-exile.

“You’re right, *Amor*,” he said, after a while of silence, shaking up both of them. “¿*Qué querés que te diga?*” What else can I tell you?

They stared at each other.

“I would love for us both to live here,” he continued, “together. I think that if you leave not only I will suffer the loss, but the entire country. Yet at the same time it would be selfish of us, *lo sé*, to ask you to stay, to make such a sacrifice. So go, *qué sé yo*, what else can I say? I’ll visit you whenever I can, or I’ll bring you over here. I’ll do everything for our relationship to continue, despite the distance, I promise...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Luciana smiled. The image of when she first saw him suddenly came to mind, in that *boliche* in Cañitas that disgusted her so much. What first attracted her to him was his discretion; the delicacy of his gaze compared to the rest. Any other would have taken advantage of his Polo t-shirt and Kennedy-style haircut to hurl himself on top of the girl he had chosen to spend the night with given the slightest chance. It had happened to her more than once: cool men in their SUVs, with brand pants and wristwatches and several rounds of tequila on them who believed themselves to be some kind of God of the Universe (or something even better). That night they all seemed to be there, congregated to share the same stifling air of fluctuating lights and smoke.

Luciana had turned up in *Brutal* completely by chance. She hated to go to the *cafés* behind the polo field—precisely because of the people who frequented them—but she had been promising her friend Clara for weeks that she would go with her one time, and she could not make up excuses forever. Clara was in love with the barman.

As soon as she entered the vaporous bar and felt the snaky looks running through her back she felt as if she were a frog who had jumped into the wrong puddle. All she wished was that the night would end soon, or that Clara finally hooked up with the barman and she became free to flee and could fall into her lovely single bed and finish the latest novel by Andrés Rivera of which she had only fifty pages left. Gazing around her she felt sorry for the skeletal twenty-something's—all of them identically dressed in tones of pink, black and *celeste*—who smoked because they did not know what to do with their hands and put up with their sky-rocketing heels without daring to find a place to sit. She felt she had landed on another planet. People were staring at her and Clara from the corner of their eyes, but no one approached them. Must be because we are not skeletons and we buy our tennis shoes at the supermarket, she concluded.

Nonetheless, a while later she felt a pair of timid eyes aiming at her from the other end of the room. What distinguished this look from the rest was that this one didn't go back and forth; this one remained, and didn't judge.

The stare came from a tidy boy wearing a pink shirt and a gray sweater tied to his shoulders, not very different in appearance to the rest of the masculine presence in the bar. He was sitting, alone and at the same time surrounded by people, against a corner. Once in a while he carried a thin and elongated beer bottle to his lips, and then he put it back down on his lap.

Out of boredom, Luciana decided to play a game. She decided to fix her eyes on him to see what he did. At first he reacted as she expected: uncomfortable, evasive, upset; but slowly he started to give in and straighten his gaze. Each time he left it on her a while longer, his eyes increasingly still and fixed on her, surprising her. They continued like that, staring and avoiding each other, staring and avoiding once again, and again, until all of a sudden both eyes got trapped and glued on each other's and as they mingled they fused into one, one gigantic eye.

Then Luciana smiled, the same smile that she was now bearing as they walked across the lungs of Palermo, an upright smile without artifice or make up that showed off her top teeth perfected by years of orthodontics. She felt, then and now, his sweat run along her neck; she had almost been able to smell it from her claustrophobic corner of moving people and *tragos largos*.

She knew how hard it was for him to take the next step. The problem was that if he didn't all would be lost. The game would be over. Luciana became scared; she did not want it to end like this. She wanted to go on.

At last he returned the smile. It was a nervous and awkward smile, rather innocent, childish in a way, but from that moment on Luciana was at ease: she knew he would follow her until the end. She took a few steps from the counter where her friend insisted on resting her huge and tempting breasts and stood up facing him, always facing him. Then, very slowly, she picked up her glass and, holding it in both hands, drank her screwdriver with a straw.

Fernando took a while to react. What's more, for a few minutes he seemed to have renounced to the game completely: he had driven away his gaze and had started chatting with the friends beside him, as if he had suddenly realized they were alive and not just frozen dummies. Then suddenly he would follow the legs of some girl in a mini-skirt, then he would sip beer...

But she did not give up. Her innocent pastime had turned into a matter of life or

death; a battle between two soldiers on opposing sides.

Until he vanished. That's it, all of a sudden he was no longer seated in his bench and Luciana did not see him again. What infuriated her the most was that in spite of never losing sight of him she had still not been able to catch his hazy departure.

Frustrated, Luciana turned around and rested her elbows on the counter, across from the rows of bottles exhibited in glass and mirrored shelves. Clara was still showing off her virtues but the barman didn't seem to realize, or at least so it seemed. Luciana suggested they leave, but her friend begged her to please stay a few *minutitos* longer. Forcing herself not to think of those *minutitos* so they didn't become eternal, Luciana decided to focus on her drink and the disco music playing above her, which she wasn't crazy about but at least preferred to *cumbia* and that heavy monochord tekno that was so fashionable those days.

Not a long time passed before Luciana felt a soft pat on her shoulder. Assuming it could only be a *denso* wanting to socialize, she turned with a gigantic "NO" pressing to get off her tongue. Thankfully she managed to restrain herself, because it was him, her rival and adversary; the one who had abandoned her and was now staring at her, this time at close range, with red cheeks and the beginner's pose of a teenager. They smiled at each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

...as they smiled at each other now, almost a year later. Luciana could already anticipate how hard her departure would be; she already missed him and she still hadn't even made a final decision. She felt the typical knot of goodbyes. She needed to hug him and she did. And yet she sensed that somehow it would not be goodbye for them. As on that night in *Brutal* when they had played their eye-game, she knew he would never let her down.

After they untangled themselves, she suggested they go back for ice-cream.

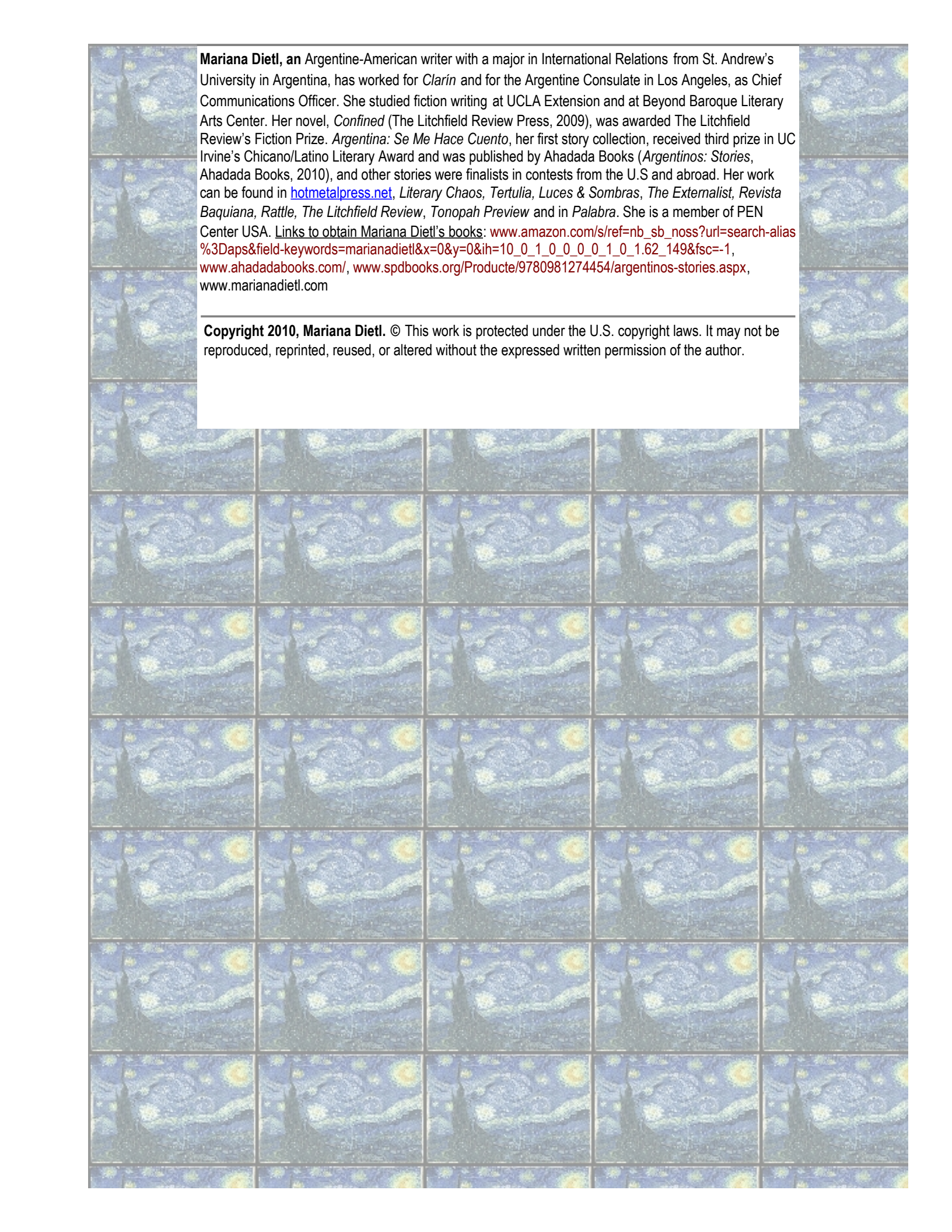
"But, what about our conversation?" he asked, *¿y nuestra charla?*

"We'll have plenty of time for it. Let's just relax now and enjoy the day. *¿Dale?*"

Fernando grabbed her hand and they continued to walk, smiling, without the slightest clue of what was happening or what would become of them and their lives in the days and years ahead. But neither cared for the time being. They walked along Libertador in search of the *heladería*.

Together.





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