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Papa Pedro's Children

by

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The infant looked up at Peter Carlson, gurgling happily as the tall, bearded man struggled with the wet diaper. “Bwa-ba. Bah!”

“That’s right, Cassie,” Peter said, stripping away the cloth cover and shoving the whole mess into a nearby bin. “We’re changing your diaper. Want to be clean, after all.”

Cassie made no comment, contenting herself with chewing on a tube of ointment. Peter took advantage of the distraction to wipe her down, inspect for rash, and dry her off with a clean towel. Then, as Cassie flung the ointment to the floor, he wrapped her up in a clean rectangle of cloth, another cover, and a pair of fleece pants. It was cold outside. How cold? “Command: weather,” he said.

Twelve degrees, said the system voice in his left ear. *Twenty percent chance of precipitation. The wind chill brings it down to 10 degrees.* Peter took a moment to convert the numbers into the more familiar 50 degrees Fahrenheit. After nearly 10 years in Vicuña, he still had trouble with the metric system.

“Hah, hah!”

“Hat. Okay, Princess, we’ll get you a hat.” Keeping one hand on the kicking baby, he reached into a nearby dresser and pulled out a bright red knit cap. It was too small. Peter shook his head. “I *know* this fit yesterday.” He dug further into the drawer and found another cap, this

one a patterned alpaca wool hat with big ear flaps. He pulled it down firmly over her head, scooped her up on his shoulder, and grabbed his jacket. “Let’s go for a walk, Princess. Papa hasn’t been outside all day.” Cassie drooled her agreement over his cuff. Peter barely noticed; he had long since given up trying to stay clean around the children. The housekeeper did a decent job with the laundry and the groceries, but there was always *something*—a toy underfoot, a soiled blanket, a cloth alligator dripping with saliva. The program had offered him a full-time *au pair*, but Peter balked. He had so little time with his foster children as it was, he couldn’t imagine sharing them with anyone.

The outside air felt refreshing on his face. Peter took a moment to zip Cassie up inside his oversize jacket, then jammed his hands in the pockets to keep them warm and support her hips. As always, she kicked happily against his ribs, and tried to flail her arms. You could almost see her brain growing neural connections, feel the strands of fascia wrapping themselves into ligaments, tendons, and muscle. A sudden motion caught his attention. He freed a hand and pointed. “Look, Cassie! It’s a rabbit! Well, a *viscacha*, anyway. Might as well be a rabbit.” She wobbled her head in the general direction and squealed her delight. “That’s right, Princess. Cute rodent.”

They continued down the walking path between the cottages, merging with the other small groups of parents, children, and the occasional *au pair*. Peter heard snatches of conversation in French, Spanish, English, and even German. It felt good to see so much life, a happy contrast to the bleak picture painted by the news the government censors permitted him.

Cassie sensed his mood, or some shift in his body language. She slapped his jacket with clumsy hands and sang in some language only she understood. “Bah, bah, wah, ma, ma, da!”

“Tell papa all about it,” Peter said.

They found a bench under an oak that still had a scattering of leaves across its crown. He unzipped his jacket and extricated the baby, who stood on wobbly legs. A leaf drifted past her

eyes, and she grabbed it. “La!”

“Leaf,” Peter corrected. “See the veins.” He traced the leaf with one finger, then did the same to his own hand. “*Ádra.*” His hands looked so old: rough like tree bark. Cassie had clear, smooth skin, like most babies.

Cassie grabbed at his hand, which caused her to lose her balance and plop down on her diaper. She didn’t notice, engrossed with her poking and prodding at his knuckles. She pulled his fingers apart, twisted them, then pushed them back together before stuffing them into her mouth and biting down.

“Ay! No, Cassie. *Inte bita!*” He pulled his hand back. “Blow!” Peter puffed in her face until she giggled. When she made to grab at his hand again, he pulled it back. “Are you hungry, Princess?” He pointed to his mouth. “Bottle?”

“Bah-bah!” she replied, her brown eyes bright and happy. Peter patted his pockets, but found nothing. Cassie started to squirm.

“*Djävulen,*” he whispered. The Devil. Then in a louder voice, “Command: assistance.”

“*Dígame,*” said a polite voice.

“I need a bottle of warm formula right away, please.”

The system switched over to a human operator. “*Right away. Do you want it brought there?*”

“No, the cottage is fine. We’ll be there in a few.”

“*It’s no problem, Peter, really.*”

“I said no,” he replied firmly. “We can wait a minute, can’t we Princess?” He swung the baby onto his shoulders, and began to step-bounce-step toward his cottage. Cassie pulled hard at his thinning hair, steering him right and left until they reached the door, which unlocked and slid open to admit them. A bottle sat on the table in the entryway. Peter swung the baby down into a football hold and grabbed the bottle. He kicked off his shoes, shrugged his jacket to the floor,

and made his way into the living room. There was a blanket on the rocker, and he tucked it around himself and Cassie before testing the bottle. The formula was body temperature, so he set up a gentle rhythm with his right foot while propping her up against his bent left knee. For some reason, she preferred to feed at this angle. She drained a liter of formula, belched like a sailor, and snuggled into the crook of his arm. When she stopped sucking at the empty bottle, Peter pulled the nipple away and pushed the tip of his index finger into her tiny mouth and stroked the upper and lower gums. Just as he suspected, he felt the sharp edges of new teeth, white stalactites and stalagmites. Right on schedule.

Cassie was two months old. Dr. Hidalgo's gene therapy manifested itself differently in each child, but Cassie's growth would probably follow a steep upward curve, somewhat like the first segment of a roller coaster, before leveling off. Like the other members of her birth group, she'd reach final maturation in about a decade. Long before then, she would master at least two languages, and demonstrate additional aptitude for something else, like music or math, or even *fútbol*. It was an unlooked for and wonderful side effect of the Hidalgo therapy.

Peter put the bottle down, tucked his other foot under the blanket, and drifted off to sleep along with his foster child. But the memories were waiting, as they often did.

#

It had been raining, a light, cold drizzle that had started around sunset. The rusted air conditioner on the roof provided some shelter, so he'd crawled in there with his backpack and the tequila he'd bought in Quito before the last of his credit cards died.

The *Carabineros* of Santiago had been clearing the downtown streets of vagrants for days in preparation for the new *presidente's* attendance at the national opera's opening performance of *Carmen*. His Excellency Esteban Sabio had come into office with an agenda to combat corruption in the government, and reboot Chile's economy following the global economic meltdown associated with the frightening epidemics in North America and Europe. The election

was marked by widespread voter fraud, intimidation, and a last-minute bombing of Sabio's campaign headquarters.

Now, a month into Sabio's term, the internal security forces were taking no chances, so Peter had sought the shelter of the roof in case someone decided to look past his ratty gray beard and sunburn. As an illegal alien and worse, a *norteamericano*, he was particularly unwelcome. Twice, women in the marketplace had spat at him, crossing themselves and hissing "*¡Enfermo!*" and "*¡Diablo!*" at his back.

For some reason, the first, deadliest plague had failed to establish itself south of Baja, seeming to prefer cooler, richer parts of the northern hemisphere. When Washington State declared martial law over the health emergency, Peter had locked up his faculty office in Seattle and filled his ancient Subaru wagon with food, water, his army survival pack, and a few treasured books. He figured he would head into Mexico before the borders became impassable.

His ex-wife Helena didn't want to leave, and she refused to let Peter take their daughter Judith across state lines. (While Helena didn't have sole custody, the family court judge had been less than fair about visitation rights, in Peter's opinion.) Finally, he decided to go alone, promising to return for the fall semester. Things had to be better by then, he told her.

He was absolutely wrong.

#

Peter had just opened up the ceramic bottle of cheap liquor when he heard someone whispering, terse rapid-fire phrases. For a moment, he feared that another homeless man coveted his spot, which was far too small to share. He scrunched himself up against the cold steel cabinet, and listened. His hand crept to ankle sheath where he carried his Ka-bar knife.

The voice was too soft and his Spanish too poor to follow the conversation, but it soon became apparent that he was eavesdropping on someone's radio conversation.

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of an ammunition clip sliding into place.

Peter risked a quick look. In the fading light, he saw the form of a man lying prone, the top of his head barely clearing the edge of the roof. A sniper rifle lay under his right hand. Night vision goggles covered his eyes, and he was dressed in civilian clothes. The voices leaking from the gunman's earpiece became agitated, before a burst of static cut the connection.

#

There was a soft chime in his ear.

"Peter?"

"Hmm?"

"Peter, it's Javier. Are you awake?"

"Ja. Si. I'm here." He automatically checked the baby, who snoozed and drooled contently. *"¿Que hora es?"* He whispered, knowing the phone clipped to his collar would pick up his words.

"A little after 3. You've had a long nap," said Javier.

"Jeez. I better get moving." He started to straighten up.

"In a moment, Peter. We need to talk before the angelito wakes up."

"Sure. ¿Qué pasa?"

"English, please, Peter. English," said Javier. A little laugh. *"While we all appreciate your efforts, your teaching accent is starting to creep a little south lately."*

"Oh. Perdón— Sorry."

"Cassiopeia will have plenty of time to refine her milk tongue. For now, let's have you focus on doing your job, yes?" There was a click of keys. *"I interrupted your beauty sleep to remind you that you have appointments with the doctors today."*

Right. Peter had almost forgotten. "Gotcha. Cassie's due for an immune check." He shifted in his chair, moved the baby to the other leg and stretched his left leg to relieve a building cramp. "Do I need to do anything beforehand?"

“Just show up. Medical office 5.”

Cassie opened her eyes slowly, then yawned and farted. “Pa!” she cried.

“I’ll let you go. Ay te miro.” The connection closed with a soft click.

Peter lifted the baby in both hands, bringing her level with his face. She grabbed his beard and pulled him close. “Pa pa pa!”

“That’s right, Princess. Papa. Papa Peter.”

She responded by trying to eat his nose. He tolerated this for a few moments, then gently disengaged her and stepped over to the changing table. After changing a typically full diaper, Peter carried Cassie over to the middle of the floor. He spread out a wide, yellow alpaca wool quilt embroidered with letters and numbers in black yarn. Kneeling on the blanket with Cassie propped up between knees, Peter worked his way through the alphabet, forward and backwards, sounding out each phoneme carefully. Three of the quilt’s squares were smeared with black marker; they now contained the letters å, ä, and ü.

One of his early foster children, Virgil, had once asked Peter during a visit to the Family House, “Papa Peter, why doesn’t English have those letters? They’re so *useful*.”

After language, they worked on motor skills. Peter laid out a selection of brightly colored balls carved from local malachite. He picked up a ball at random, put it into Cassie’s hands. She dropped it, of course. He repeated with exercise, placing her hands around the shiny green sphere and squeezed gently. On the fifth try, she managed to hold it for a moment. “Very good!” Peter said and clapped his hands. Cassie giggled and managed a fair approximation of applause.

They moved on to back exercises next. With the baby lying supine, Peter dangled a mobile of Noah’s Ark over her face, holding it just out of reach. Cassie grabbed at the parade of passing animals: antelopes to elephants, monkeys to zebras. From time to time, the animals would hover and drop closer. She lunged enthusiastically, snagging a pair of goats. “Go! Go!”

“That’s right, Princess. They’re called goats.” He leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“*I svensk, get. Y-et.*”

“Ye. Yee!” she replied and stuffed the goat into her mouth.

“Okay, I get it,” he said. “You’re hungry.” He scooped up the balls into a mesh bag, hung the mobile on the wall, then unfolded a plastic gate to confine Cassie. “Back in a sec, Princess.”

He stepped over the gate and into the kitchen, where he put a bottle of formula in the warmer. He also located some bread and cheese for himself, and poured some cold yerba mate into a sports bottle. Part of him desperately wanted some coffee, but he was kidding himself. Even decaf triggered acid reflux these days. He was probably the only Swede in the world who didn’t have a daily *fika*—coffee break.

He put everything on a tray and returned to the living room. Cassie lay on her stomach, pushing herself up with arms. “Ba, Ba!”

“Bottle,” Peter said and set the warm bottle on the blanket.

Cassie reached over with one hand. Her other arm trembled, and she flopped faced down.

“Good try!” He took a bite of bread and cheese, then propped Cassie up in his lap and gave her the bottle. She took three hearty gulps before pushing it away. Peter looked down. “What’s wrong, princess? Not warm enough?”

“Ba! Ba! Buh, buh, buh!” She squirmed out of his lap and rolled/crawled over the blanket. She rested her hand on the letter B. “Buh.”

Peter blinked through a sudden upwelling of tears. In that moment, Cassie had sounded exactly like Judith the first time she had read to him. “That’s my girl. Now, can we finish our snack?” He pointed at the bottle, then at his own mouth. “*Dricka.*”

Cassie crawled back to him and seized the bottle. She drained it, then gnawed on the nipple while Peter finished his own sandwich. He piled the dishes on the tray and pushed it to the side for the housekeeper. “Time for a bath before the doctor, I think.” He scooped her up and headed for the bathroom.

He managed to bathe and change the baby into a new outfit before they had to leave. As he snuggled her into the carrier, he padded down his pockets in an old, useless habit. He no longer carried money, or identification, or even keys. The RFID chip in his wrist took care of all that. The only thing he really needed was a spare bottle for Cassie. He tucked that in a pocket.

He wasn't allowed to carry a pacifier, in the event Cassie had a meltdown. None of his foster children had used them, on strict orders of the program's pediatrician. The explanation was complicated, but he knew it was related to their accelerated and sometimes random rate of physical growth brought on by the Hidalgo gene therapy. Peter suspected that the other foster parents would never consider such a crutch. Babies cried. That's what they did.

Fortunately, Cassie loved to have her forehead stroked, and the massage immediately calmed her. She wasn't a fussy baby, unlike Judith, who had suffered from inexplicable meltdowns well into her third year. Peter had always dreaded his wife's frequent business trips. Helen worked as a corporate trainer, and often flew to the New York to meet with clients. Every month, Peter stocked up on extra toys, books, and other distractions. Eventually, he realized that most of his problem was his own anxiety. With the help of hypnotherapist, he managed to calm himself to the point that he could handle solo parenting for entire days without losing it.

It was a bitter disappointment, but not a complete surprise, that Judith had elected to stay with her mother following the divorce. In the end, it was probably best that she hadn't come with him. Peter had been lucky to escape when bandits carjacked him in Puerto Vallarta. If his family had been with him....

The shadows had grown longer by the time they reached the medical buildings. Peter checked in at the desk, which was only a formality since his RFID chip had already synched with the appointment computer. It did give him an excuse to chat with Ignacia, the pleasant young receptionist who favored alternating strands of glowing fiber optics in her hair.

He set Cassie down on the floor to crawl about for the few minutes they had to wait.

Then a nurse appeared in the door. “Peter?” he said. “We’re in here today.” Peter took Cassie a few doors down the hall into a warm, comfortable room. Smells of mild disinfectant and baby powder lingered in the air. The nurse stripped Cassie to the buff, weighed her, measured her, and checked her eyes and ears. “Is her appetite still good?”

“Better than mine,” Peter said.

“I should hope so,” the nurse said. “We have to run some deeper scans this time, so you’ll have time to see the doctor yourself. End of the hall, on your right.”

Peter took a step toward the door, “Um, should I —“

“Go see Dr. Sandoval, Peter. She’s very busy, you know. Don’t worry about Cassie—we do this all the time.” The nurse picked Cassie up and went to another room, singing the first verse of “Happy Little Llama Goes to School.”

Peter found the doctor’s office small but neat. There were the usual framed medical degree and family photos, plus an amazing array of hanging plants soaking up the output from full-spectrum lights. The doctor put down her datapad when he walked in and offered her hand. There were dark circles under her eyes and her lab coat was wrinkled. “Good afternoon, Peter. Please sit down.”

He selected a chair opposite her, sinking into the soft cushions. He felt the lumbar support gently push him forward and the padded arms warm to match his body temperature. “Nice,” he said.

“One of perks of government service,” Sandoval said. “That and a steady paycheck.” She glanced over at her datapad. “How are things going?”

“Not bad. My knees are getting creaky, but I can’t complain.”

“But you just did, yes?” She laughed. “You’re due for a physical yourself, and we’ll get to that in a few minutes.” When she saw the look on Peter’s face, she added, “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.”

“It’s not that. I’m just used to being in the room with Cassie when she gets her exams.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I’m sure she’s doing fine. Mama Adoncia is helping out today.”

Peter felt himself relax. *Mama* was an honorary title given to the senior caregivers.

Adoncia had raised nine of her own children, in addition to fostering dozens here at the center.

She’d been there since the beginning, and had shown Peter the ropes in his early days. He trusted her completely.

“Besides,” Sandoval continued, “You’ll need to start transitioning little Cassiopeia in any event. She’ll be moving into the Family House soon.”

“Oh.” Peter felt a familiar knot forming in his stomach. “That’s ahead of schedule, isn’t it?”

“A little,” the doctor said. “Please don’t think it’s any reflection on you, Peter.” She glanced over at her data pad, frowning her brow. “There have been some... changes at the Ministry of Health.”

Her tone reminded Peter of his annual review with the English department chair at the university. “Someone cut your budget,” he guessed.

Dr. Sandoval picked up a tiny worry doll from her desk and rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. “True, but it’s more complicated than that, especially given the current political situation.” She stood up and dropped the worry doll into a pocket. “Come on now, let’s have a look at you.”

Peter loosened his shirt and sat quietly while she listened to his lungs, tested his reflexes, and took blood and saliva samples. “How are you sleeping?”

“Well enough, I suppose,” Peter said. “It helps that I’m chasing Cassie around all day.”

“How are your dreams?” she asked while putting together a lab bag.

“Could be better. They *are* better,” he amended.

“We have some very good therapists here, Peter. Some of them were in the army

themselves. They know what it's like."

"Yeah, I guess," he said. Then, to change the subject, he said, "So what *is* the current political situation?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "President Sabio announced today that he's leaving office before the next election," Sandoval said. "So we're going to shut down the infant program and move on to the next phase."

"Oh," Peter said. "Did you lose your job?"

She gave him a wry smile. "It takes more than a special election to fire senior civil servants," she said. "No, I'll continue to monitor the health of the children, but indirectly. Still, I'll miss this place. It was a lot of work. A lot of love." She sighed and looked around the room. "We accomplished amazing things here; one day I hope we can talk about them."

"What do you mean?"

Sandoval labeled Peter's samples and put them in a pickup bin by the door. "There are a lot of people who believe the plagues were a by-product of gene therapy research, so Hidalgo spend a lot of his fortune to get people to look the other way when he opened this place."

"Sounds like Hidalgo is getting out of town, just in case the new administration isn't as amenable to his work."

"Things change, Peter. Only the bureaucracy remains." She stood up. "Speaking of which, Colonel Ortega said he'd stop by and see you tomorrow to fill you in. Now come on, let's see if they're done with Cassie."

They walked to another part of the building, and Peter caught glimpses of other families. He was pleased to see several male caregivers, though they all seemed much younger than him. Then he heard a familiar laugh. A door opened in front of him and there stood Mama Adoncia, with Cassie clinging to her leg. The baby was trying very hard to haul herself upright.

"*Hola*, Peter. It's good to see you again," Adoncia said. She was a handsome woman his

age, with broad shoulders and frizzy gray hair that fell past her shoulders. Laugh lines framed her mouth and eyes.

“You, too,” replied Peter. He leaned forward and kissed Adoncia on both cheeks, lingering a moment before kneeling down to gather up Cassie. The little girl hugged him with surprising strength.

“She’s a feisty one, that little Cassie,” said Adoncia. “It must be her *Mapuche* blood.”

Mindful of his knees, Peter stood up, still holding Cassie. “You think so?” He grinned. “I thought it was because of the clever genetic engineers down in Santiago.”

Adoncia sniffed. Then, looking at the doctor, she said. “I wasn’t born yesterday, you know, not like these *niños*. I know good family when I see it.” She leaned down and poked Cassie in the stomach, who laughed and kicked Peter so hard that he almost dropped her. “When I met Cassie’s mother, I could tell right away she was *Mapuche*. Very pure.” She looked at Peter. “Her ancestors kept the Spanish awake at night for almost 300 years, you know.”

“She’s keeping up tradition, I assure you,” Peter said.

“*¡Excelente!* Sleep when you’re dead, I always say.” Adoncia turned to the doctor. “Everyone is healthy, then? Ready to go home?”

“Everyone is fine.” Dr. Sandoval clapped Peter on the back. “You take care. We’ll talk again.”

Adoncia insisted on walking Peter back to his cottage. When she opened the door, she took one look around, and shook her head. “This is terrible! Who’s your housekeeper, some Peruvian princess who doesn’t want to get her hands dirty?”

Peter glanced at the piles of toys. “It’s not her fault. I just don’t want to be disturbed.”

“*Madre de Dios,*” Adoncia said. “You look after Cassie. I’m going to check the kitchen.” She stepped into the other room, and Peter heard a muted curse. Then he heard cabinets opening and the clatter of pots and pans. “I’m ordering you some decent food, and then I’m going to

make you dinner. *Varones!*”

Fifteen minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Peter left Cassie in her bouncy swing and opened the door to admit a teenage boy struggling under the weight of four shopping bags.

“¿Cocina?” he said. Peter pointed.

Adoncia pounced on the delivery boy like a hawk. “¿Dónde está el pollo?”

The young man offered up one of his bags, which Adoncia snatched away. She came back for the others a moment later and dismissed the boy with a gentle shove between the shoulders.

Peter perched on a stool in a corner of the kitchen, balancing the baby on his lap. Cassie watched with wide eyes as Adoncia transformed tomatoes, garlic, onions, rice, and chicken into the best dinner Peter had eaten in, well, a long time.

Cassie was the center of attention, of course, and Adoncia tried to feed the baby bits of soft vegetables and rice. About half made it past her mouth. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” said Peter. “She’s not scheduled for solid food yet.”

“The girl wants to eat,” replied Adoncia, weaving her spoon toward Cassie’s tomato-stained mouth. “Let her eat. Don’t worry, I’ll clean her up.”

After dinner, Peter cleared the table while Adoncia changed Cassie into a nightgown and rocked her in the big chair. He felt a stab of jealousy, then dismissed it, and headed to the kitchen to wash up. If the *abuela* wanted some time with the baby, who was he to say no?

“Our little *Mapuche* is asleep,” whispered Adoncia as she walked into the kitchen. “Busy day for her, yes?”

“Busy day for everyone,” Peter said, hanging up a dish towel. “Thanks for dinner. I really needed some company today.”

“Ah, so you heard,” Adoncia said. “I learned about it myself only yesterday. We’ll all have to leave soon. No more *niños*.”

Peter nodded, then yawned loudly. “Sorry. All that good food made me sleepy.” He rubbed his eyes. “Better send you home.” He walked Adoncia to the door and gave her a hug. “What’s going to happen to them?”

She patted him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, Peter. I know there are angels watching over us.”

#

They let him keep Cassie for another two precious weeks, and then one morning Pedro reluctantly handed her over to Adoncia, who looked at his red eyes and whispered, “Be strong! It’s not good to cry in front of the other *varones*.” She tilted her head to indicate the movers who were loading up the van with all of the blankets, bottles, and toys.

Peter nodded.

“Now give Cassie a kiss so we can leave.”

He leaned in and kissed the baby’s forehead. “Goodbye, Princess.” He stood there for a long time after they drove away.

There had been transitions in the past, of course, brief periods between assignments when Peter had a few days or week to himself, before the next baby arrived. It gave him a chance to get in some walking, and read, and sleep, but there was always the next child to think about. This time felt different. Empty.

After two days by himself, Peter was immensely grateful when someone knocked at his door after dinner. He opened it to find Colonel Ortega, dressed in pressed fatigues, balancing a shopping bag on top of a cardboard box.

“Some help, *amigo*? I’m about to drop the scotch!”

Peter grabbed the bag, then stood aside as Ortega pushed past him and plopped onto the couch.

“I’ll get some glasses,” Peter said, and went into the kitchen. When he returned, he found

Ortega sitting up straight, looking around the room. His box sat on the floor between his feet.

“So you’ve heard about the changes, *sí*?”

“*Ja.*” Peter pulled over a stool and set out the glasses and the scotch. “Dr. Sandoval mentioned Sabio’s retirement.”

Ortega nodded. “He decided some time ago. The conservative *Alianza* has been gaining strength, and there have been rumors about this place, which hasn’t helped. Still, we did our best.” He sighed, and Peter saw a tiny slump in the soldier’s posture.

“What do you think about Hidalgo?” Peter asked.

Ortega snorted. “He was a rich man, with a rich man’s ego. He wanted to send Chile’s special children out as teachers to help Europe and America rebuild in our image. Sabio didn’t buy that, of course, but he owed Hidalgo a large campaign debt, so he had to let him try his experiment.

“Politics makes for strange allies, but you know all about that, eh, *amigo*?”

“I wasn’t trying to be political at that moment,” Peter said. “I was just saving my own skin.” He poured a couple of fingers of scotch into each glass. He handed one to Ortega.

“Spoken like a true draftee,” Ortega said, accepting the glass.

“Actually, I volunteered. I needed the money for graduate school. It was just bad luck that we got involved in Iran when we did.” He raised his glass. “*Skål.*”

“Cheers,” said the Colonel. “Still, it was a terrible waste. Your country sent soldiers all over the world, and when the plague came, you had to bring them home to bury the dead.” Then he glanced at Peter’s face, and his voice softened. “Forgive me, my friend. I sometimes forget that you had a wife and child.”

Peter lifted his glass and took a deep, distracting swallow. “It was a long time ago, and it’s been helpful for me to be here around the children. I’m going to miss them...”

“Don’t worry,” Ortega said. “You’ll see them again. You have my word on that.”

Peter leaned forward in his chair. “The last time you gave me your word I was lying on a rooftop with a broken arm. I thought I was going to die.”

“I have never shot an unarmed man, Peter.”

“Then it’s lucky for me I dropped my knife when I did.”

They shared a brief laugh. Ortega said, “I wish to know something, since we are having a confessional of sorts..... Why didn’t you just hide when you saw the soldier? It wasn’t your fight.”

“That’s a good question,” Peter said. It was one that he’d asked himself many times. “I wasn’t going to do anything until I saw his rifle. It wasn’t just some crazy who thought God told him to shoot the president. It was an *assassin*.”

Ortega nodded. “You have done such things yourself.”

“Only in a war, and only because someone was shooting at me.” He took a sip. “Every mile I traveled since I left Seattle, Miguel, I felt like I was giving up on civilization. Running away. By the time I reached that rooftop, I think I just reached my limit.” Peter grinned. “And to be honest, you guys would have turned that building into a crater once he shot the president. I really *was* just saving my own miserable skin.”

“Whatever the case, you saved a good man’s life.” Ortega raised his glass. “To old soldiers.”

“Old soldiers.”

Ortega looked at Peter for a moment, then reached down and opened up the box on the floor. “I have a few things for you here. Sort of a retirement package.” He pulled out a datapad with a cable that ended in a padded cuff. “Give me your arm, please.”

Peter leaned forward. Ortega slipped the cuff over the other man’s arm and touched a few keys on the datapad. The screen lit up with a photo of Peter, without a beard. He looked younger, happier. His name was listed below that, along with his security ID, and various health statistics.

“Where did you get that?” asked Peter.

“Photoshop. I had someone take your photo from the internal security file. Then we made you beautiful and young again.”

“And thinner,” commented Peter.

“It’s an old picture, and old information.” Ortega said. “Sadly, some of the original files for Sabio’s security department, along with all the material related to the Hidalgo project, were lost during a particularly bad system crash. The data archivist has since retired to somewhere in Costa Rica, I think.” He began typing. Peter’s name disappeared, along with his address.

“This is your new home,” said Ortega, typing in numbers. A photo of a old building with trees and a seedy lawn appeared. “A small apartment in the sleepy part of the city near a community college.” More pictures appeared: a tiny kitchen, living room filled with bookshelves and piles of knick knacks, academic journals, and a well-worn datapad. “We found someone near retirement, and doubled his pension on the condition he give up his apartment and most of his furnishings. He was quite happy to do so, especially since the extra pension is not showing up on the tax rolls.”

Ortega rummaged around in the box and brought out a paper-wrapped parcel. “I was able to save this.” He handed it to Peter, who set down his drink and tore open the paper. Inside lay a much-thumbed copy of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Tenth Edition*. “I thought you would need this at your new job.”

Peter flipped open the book at random and read a few lines from Henry Vaughan:

*They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit lingering here;
Their very memory is fair and bright,
And my sad thoughts doth clear.*

He closed the book and let his hand rest on the cover. “Thank you, *mi amigo*. I’d forgotten about this.”

“Think nothing of it, Professor Adrian.”

“Excuse me?”

Ortega gestured toward the datapad. “I thought it’d be prudent to make some small changes to your *curriculum vitae*.” Now, under Peter’s picture, was a different ID number and name: Pedro Adrian, Ph.D. “According to your new records, you were born in Sweden,” Ortega said. “Your mother was Scandinavian, and your father a political refugee from Chile. You lived and worked in the US until your divorce, and then you decided to move south to discover your other ancestry.” He scrolled down the page. “Let’s see... you taught English in various places along the way, worked on a farm, and finally ended up here.” He looked up. “I thought you could learn to answer to ‘Pedro’ more easily than the first choice.”

“Which was?”

“Guillermo.”

“Ouch,” said Peter. “You’re right. ‘Pedro’ works better.”

“*Gracias*, Professor Adrian, *gracias*. Now then, someone will take you to the bus stop tomorrow. Here are the keys to your apartment.” He handed Pedro a small key ring attached to a paper tag that had his new address scribbled on it. “In a few weeks, you will have a class full of specially chosen young people anxious to apply their advanced English skills to the great works of foreign literature.”

“That doesn’t give me much time,” Peter said, “but I’ll manage. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“*Exactamente*.” Ortega slipped the cuff off the other man’s wrist. “Your ID chip is reprogrammed, Professor. Now I must be going. You’re not the only person I have to see this evening.” He packed up the datapad and stood. “I’ll leave you the bottle.”

“I appreciate that.” Peter looked up. “Tell me, something, Miguel. Do you believe in angels?”

“No, but I believe in good people, like Sabio. And you. Good night, Pedro.”

Later that night, after several more glasses of whiskey, Pedro took a long look in the mirror and shaved off his beard. He cut himself quite a few times; he'd fallen out of the habit (and his hand wasn't exactly steady). Then he crawled off to bed.

The next morning, Pedro moved slowly in deference to his hangover as he prepared for his journey. There wasn't much to pack into the cheap suitcase they'd given him: a few changes of clothing, a toilet kit, and his Norton Anthology. It didn't add up to much, he thought, not for 10 years and 22 foster children. He wished they'd let him keep his pictures. But they weren't his children. They never were. He was only borrowing them, like all foster parents.

He sat on the couch and waited for the bus that would take him down from the mountain and into Santiago.

Ortega had deposited a “salary advance” in his new bank account, and Pedro used the first ATM he found at the bus terminal to get some cash, unsure of how many merchants would accept his debit card. There were beggars, of course, waiting around for change from the relatively wealthy travelers, but far fewer than Pedro remembered. It was a good sign.

He had time before his connection, so he strolled through a busy marketplace, looking like just another tourist with his suitcase and his sun hat. He dusted off his Spanish and bought a wallet, a wristwatch made in Korea, and some sandwiches and fruit, plus a bottle of *agua mineral*, for his next bus ride. It was warmer than up in Vicuña, and Pedro relished the feeling of the sun on his face as he tossed crumbs to the pigeons.

He had a tense moment when a police officer walked by his bench, turned and asked what he was doing.

“*Esperando el autobús, señor.*” Just waiting for the bus.

“*Sí. Pero léa los signos.*” He pointed to the sign that stood next to the bench. The sign showed an icon of a bird with an open hand and a trail of crumbs. The whole thing was covered

by a slashed circle. *Don't feed the birds.*

“¡Perdón! Lo siento mucho.” Pedro quickly put his uneaten sandwich back in the bag and shoed away the pigeons. The officer nodded and walked away. Pedro waited a few minutes, then made his way back to the bus terminal, where he bought a notebook and some pens. He wrote his first lecture, slowly, savoring the words, leaving spaces for questions, and then put everything into his suitcase when he heard his bus announced. What he really needed, Pedro realized, was a proper book bag, something in leather with straps and brass buckles.

He boarded the bus with half a dozen other people, found himself a seat in the back, and fell into a doze. He dreamed of a laughing girl named Cassie.

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“Buenos días,” said Pedro. “Bienvenido a la encuesta de Inglés 101 Literatura.” He switched on his datapad and began typing. His name appeared on the large, faded datawall behind him. “That will probably be the extent of my Spanish for today.”

There was some polite laughter, plus a serious guffaw in the back of the classroom. Automatically, Pedro looked up to see who his class clown might be for the semester. It was a young man with bright brown eyes and the beginnings of a mustache. Pedro rubbed his own lip, which felt strange after all these years. At least he was getting better at shaving.

“Perhaps we should start with names. As you can see, I’m Professor Adrian.” He pointed at the young man. “And who are you?”

“Virgil Gutierrez.”

Pedro opened a new page on his datapad and began adding names to a seating chart.

“And you, young lady?”

“Madeline Sanchez, Professor.”

“Keep going, please, down the row.” He wrote down the names: Isabella Vargas, Sophia Torres, Diego Muñoz, Julian Rios, Gabriel Vega, Jose Castillo, Maria Flores, Catherine de

Guzman, Jennifer Sanchez, Angelina Peña.

Angelina. Pedro stopped typing and looked up. All the students were staring at him with gentle smiles. He looked more closely at the young woman who had just spoken. She was dressed in new school sweats and sandals, her hair tied back. She had a small nose and long, delicate fingers. Pedro was suddenly struck by the strongest sense of *déjà vu*. He looked down at her ankles, saw a tiny spot of red.

“Is something wrong, Professor?”

He realized he was staring. “No, nothing’s wrong. You remind me of someone I once knew....” His voice trailed off. “Tell me, is that a tattoo?”

“No, Professor. It’s a birthmark,” she said.

Pedro sat back in his chair and felt his breath catch. Now he could see them clearly. It was Angelina. And Gabriel. And Cathy, and Maria. And the others. His children. Then he remembered Miguel’s promise. “I see,” Pedro said, his voice creaking. “It becomes you.”

He wanted to open his arms and embrace every one of them, but of course he couldn’t do that. Still, they were *here*, and now there was time to discover these beautiful people he had started on their journeys.

Pedro took a deep breath and felt himself truly relax. He stood and put his hand on the battered textbook in front of him. “Now then, let’s have a look at *The Canterbury Tales*. Who would like to try Middle English first?”

All of them raised their hands.

THE END