

By the book

BY JULIAN NEUER

Hi, Professor Dias. The usual?"

The bartender flashed a neutral smile at Pedro. No hint of judgment, although it might be too early in the afternoon for a drink. How convenient that classes were done for the day, and that the *Buenos Orígenes* sat just across the street from the university's main entrance.

"Yes, double, with extra ice, please."

"Hot today, isn't it?"

When the drink came, the bartender left him alone. As Pedro dropped some ice cubes in the ouzo, the liquid turned from clear to milky, as it should, and the glass misted up.

The TV blabbered at the bar. A soccer game. Pedro ignored it. In his head, his own private match had been playing over and over for almost a week, and the result was always the same. Elena had won, he had lost.

Seven years of his life. Of *their* lives. But now, with Elena gone, he felt like the seven years were only his, not hers, not theirs. Hadn't Elena made it clear that she was glad to leave them behind?

Pedro had started seeing Elena while they were still graduate students in Brazil. They did not go to the same university, which made it all the more complicated. They had met at a conference far from home, in sunny Rio de Janeiro. (The heat in Buenos Aires this time of the year always reminded him of Rio.) They had spent the entire night at the hotel bar, just the two of them, drinking ouzo, pouring their souls out, laughing and crying about each other's stories.

"Elena, everybody invents their own complicated rules."

"Yes, but it's all about power. We like to feel we're in charge, but it's all coincidence. Or chance. Or God. Or fate. Or synchronicity. Whatever. Not us."

"But we still have some say in what happens, don't we?"

"We like to think so, because we are obsessed with control, but whatever little part of the world we manage to affect will sooner or later revert back to chaos, and so will our little games. But we shouldn't worry. It's not the end of the world."

Ouzo or no ouzo, Pedro could get drunk on Elena's laughter alone.

"And what would you do if you had control of things?", he asked.

"I'd keep the morning from coming."

When morning came, they were still together.

After the conference, they met frequently. The flexible schedules of the academic life would allow them to see each other for days, now in his city, now in hers. They longed for a real life together. The situation in their native Brazil was bleak for young PhDs then. No job openings anywhere. No research opportunities. When they heard of the tenure-track positions in Argentina, they did not hesitate.

Six years at the university of Buenos Aires. He had been

Pedro Dias before; now he was Professor Dias. Elena became *Professor* Mendes. They moved to a nice little apartment in the Recoleta neighborhood. An apartment with a study. They could work from home part of the time. They progressed in their careers. They made friends.

After six years in Argentina, they had learned to feel at home at their new job, at home in their new country, at home with their new language. Pedro loved to hear Elena speak her perfect Spanish, no trace of a Brazilian accent to it.

Elena would mutter to herself, even when Pedro was around.

"Where did the nice people go?"

"What, honey?"

"Nothing."

"—"

"My mother used to love artists. Musicians, dancers, actors, painters."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"—"

"She didn't like writers, though. Which is funny, because writers are the only artists that are honest. All the others pretend to be what they are not, to be doing what they are not doing. But writers are themselves all the time. They always admit that they are just doing what they seem to be doing: telling us stories. Writers are honest all the time, even when they try not to. Even when they don't want to."

Elena was no writer. Elena was a linguist. Pedro, a computer scientist. The conference where they had met had been about Computational Linguistics. Its main theme had been the development of computer systems that could generate and understand natural language, the everyday language that people speak among themselves. Such systems existed, but were far from perfect. According to Elena, they would always be. As people have trouble understanding people, so do machines, she used to say.

"It's over! Don't you understand?"

"No, I don't understand! Will you please explain?"

"I can't. I don't know. Sorry. I have to go back."

"Where to?"

"Home."

"Where's home?"

She packed two small suitcases and flew to Brazil the next day.

Around seven o'clock, the *Buenos Orígenes* began to fill up with students. The noise drove Pedro away. Stumbling out the door, he found himself in a river of people. He stopped in the middle of the crowded sidewalk and rested the palm of his hand on top of his head, with a slight pressure towards the front, as if trying to keep his receding hairline from receding further. It was a habit he had. He did it every time he needed to think. He stood there for almost a minute, motionless while the



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flow of pedestrians adapted to his presence, deflecting around him.

He decided he didn't want to go home.

Pedro felt his thoughts misting up, like the ouzo he had consumed. He knew that the secret to drinking ouzo was in the ice, which kept the mind cool and the body hydrated. Did the monks who had invented ouzo in 14th-century Greece know this? Pedro liked to think that the ouzo gave him access to some ancient Greek wisdom — albeit with the right to use modern conveniences, like iceboxes and taxis. He flagged a cab and asked the driver to take him anywhere. No particular destination. He rolled the windows down to feel the wind in his face.

But the wind was too warm. Minutes later, Pedro started to feel queasy, asked the driver to stop, paid the fare and got out, somewhere on *Avenida Córdoba*.

"Pedro, I resent the way you speak to me sometimes. It sounds like you're telling me what I can and can't do."

"Sorry, dear, I'm just trying to help. Sometimes I see you take a wrong step and I want to warn you."

"But you shouldn't do it. You shouldn't judge me so lightly. I had my reasons."

"But—"

"You know, people shouldn't try to police or correct other people. Nobody's perfect enough to do that."

"I'm not saying that I—"

"You know who should police and correct people? Machines. Computers. And you're not one of them. You're not rational enough. I hope not."

She had said it seriously, but he couldn't help laughing. After a while, she laughed too.

Now, try as he might, he couldn't remember what that conversation had been about.

Walking down *Avenida Córdoba*, Pedro reached the *Galerías Pacífico* mall. He hesitated to go in. The clash between the sumptuous architecture and the pragmatic store windows made him even queasier. But he needed water, coffee, some *alfajores*, and a restroom.

Then he remembered the *Galerías* housed a *Centro Cultural* dedicated to the writer Jorge Luis Borges and to Argentinian art in general. Elena had often come here, and many times had invited him along. He had never shown much interest. Now, eager to relieve his ouzo-induced malaise — and to somehow atone for his past indifference — he proceeded in.

He had to negotiate an army of plastic human figures sitting at a hundred tables equipped with chess boards, geometrically disposed around the entrance to the *Centro*. One of those contemporary art exhibits, probably. What do they call them? Installations. Yes, an installation consisting of hundreds of dummies playing chess.

How quaint.

As he passed, he accidentally brushed against one of the

boards. The two players glared at him, one of them sounding out his anger in a loud grunt.

"¡Perdón!," stammered Pedro.

People, not dummies! Hundreds of people playing chess, motionless, silent, each one of them striving for control of the black and white chessmen in their respective game.

How quaint.

Elena liked to quote Borges: "The individual is all that exists. The masses are just an abstraction."

Or something to that effect.

"I don't like Borges," Pedro had said. "If he thought the individual was so important, then why did he always make his characters look so insignificant as they faced up to magical monsters, to large libraries, and to immortality as a curse?"

Inside the *Centro*, past the chess players, Pedro found an exhib-



"It's not you. It's me."

He wondered what would be waiting for him in his home country, a land he had turned his back to six years before.

it about the work of Fernando Amaral, an Argentinian writer he had never heard of, someone who, according to the booklet, had been forced into exile during the military regime and had died abroad a few years ago. Glad to learn something not about Borges, Pedro checked out an audioguide, put the earphones on and ambled around the panels, listening to Fernando Amaral's biography and to excerpts of his books in a baritone voice.

When people die, are they freed from the shackles of cultural relativism? And if so, do they become absolute? I have yet to die, but I have left my country, and with it my culture. Am I absolute now? Or am I going mad? When people go mad, do they become absolute?

What if Pedro went back to Brazil now? He wondered what would be waiting for him in his home country, a land he had turned his back to six years before.

Religion amounts to trying to convince other people that they should talk to themselves to feel better about their fears. I had a friend who used to talk to herself. Whenever I asked her what she had said, she would talk to me about something else. (I wish religious people would change the subject too.) When I left Argentina, my friend stayed behind. Now I miss her; even though I know her quiet speeches were not directed at me.

I know how it feels. I miss Elena too.

Where are the good people? The sages? The artists that can make the human race worth paying attention to? Where have they gone? If you're anything like me, you must feel most artists just lie to you nowadays. The only hope we still have is the writer, because writers find it hard to lie, even when they try to.

Funny. Elena used to say that. Who was this Amaral guy after all?

That is why I write. To keep myself from lying. To remind myself that I am not in control, that my life is like a labyrinth — or like a large tree, rather, with many branches. I climb all the way up to its canopy to get a good view of the surroundings, but all I can see are the leaves. You ask me what the leaves are? Fate? God? Choice? Coincidence? Synchronicity? Call them whatever you like. It doesn't matter; it doesn't change what they are. To me, they are the pages where I write my life, and they never, never let me tell a lie.

Was Elena quoting this Amaral writer in all those conversations?

No, she was not.

Pedro startled. What had the audioguide said?

No, Professor Dias, she was not quoting me, insisted the audioguide.

Pedro looked around, searching for something to provide a rational explanation to what he was hearing. All he saw nearby was a life-size cardboard stand-up of Fernando Amaral.

The answer is not always in the rational, Professor Dias. The rational is just another attempt at control. Didn't Elena tell you how it works? You should know better.

Pedro rested the palm of his hand on top of his head. Other patrons of the Centro walked by, indifferent to him, although

he was having a conversation with a machine that seemed to know him and his personal history in detail.

I am not a machine, Professor. Machines can't understand people well enough to talk to them. Machines can't even talk in any reasonable sense. You of all people should know that.

But hadn't Elena said that only machines were rational enough to judge, police and correct people?

Yes, she said that. If you'd rather think of me as a machine, that's fine. It doesn't matter. Just listen to me. You want Elena back? Then go find her.

"I—", started Pedro, but checked himself when a young man with a ponytail cast a curious glance in his direction.

The audioguide went on:

Afraid to go back to Brazil? Afraid you'll be a foreigner in your own country after all these years? Remember you were a foreigner here six years ago, and you made it. Now you wonder whether going back to Brazil is the right thing. Don't you know that question makes no sense?

Don't you know that question makes no sense?, repeated the guide. *Haven't you learned anything, Professor Dias?*

Don't you know that question makes no sense?

That was all he could take. Pedro snapped off the earphones, dropped the audioguide and stormed out of the exhibit. Outside, he rammed into the array of tables near the entrance, knocking chessboards over, sending tens of black and white chessmen tumbling chaotically all over the polished floor of the *Centro Cultural Jorge Luis Borges*.

A week later, Pedro had partly gotten over the incident. Partly. No sane human being could entirely recover from an experience like that. He certainly hadn't forgotten it. He was sure he never would. He remembered every sentence, every inflection in the voice that had spoken to him from the audioguide. His memory replayed the text several times a day, everyday.

Don't you know that question makes no sense?

Don't you know---

"Your coffee, sir."

The girl behind the counter did not smile — not even neutrally. She obviously did not care about Pedro, or about whether he was coming or going.

"*Gracias*", he mumbled, but she had already turned to wait on another customer.

Pedro was careful not to burn his fingertips on the hot cup. He gazed at the smoke spiraling up from the black coffee. When he thought he had waited long enough, he drank it all in one gulp.

He returned to his reading. When the announcement came over the PA system, in a silky female voice, he carefully closed the book.

Flight AR2276 to São Paulo, Brazil, now boarding at gate three.

The voice on the PA paused for a second and added, in a tone that sounded sincere:

Have a nice trip back home, Professor Dias.