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English M01A

14 February 2024

The Cost of the American Dream

Julián had just flown 16 hours from his home in Argentina to Los Angeles. His entire life was contained in the green suitcase by his side including a few clothes and a scrapbook of family photos. He had lost his father just the year before, but the unstable economy and widespread corruption he was leaving behind would remain for his mother and three sisters, along with their shared grief. Somehow, although Julián knew no one who had even moved across town, he had found the guts to go - to leave family, friends, his language, his culture, the only home he had ever known. All he knew was that an even longer journey would begin the next day, on the campus of one of the most prestigious private research universities in the world. He had no money, hoping the small stipend from the university would suffice. He also did not speak English.

Twenty four years later, Julián sits in the study of his small home in the suburbs of Southern California. He is financially stable, a U.S. citizen, and both a husband and a father - my father. The room is small and Argentine memorabilia fills the shelves. The side table, holding a gourd and thermos of hot water, is covered with greenish brown rings from the yerba mate tea that he has sipped from a metal straw every single day for the past two and a half decades. The steam from the thermos is illuminated by early morning light that penetrates the shutters.

Why mate? The use of this herb can be traced back thousands of years. The plant from which it comes is native to South America. According to an article by Anna Gawron-Gzella and

others, its use ranges from physiological stimulation, to weight control, to inflammation reduction. It is the preferred morning drink for all Argentines. But for Julián, the buzz of the mateine, similar to caffeine, is both a reminder of home and a relentless habit. It allowed him to complete his PhD he admits: “I would stay up all night drinking mate so I could stay awake and study.” He has yet to go a day without it.

Today, and as he does every workday, Julián wakes at 6am. He is a creature of habit, cherishing rituals; he immediately gets dressed, heats water for mate, reads the online Argentine newspaper first, then the CNN updates, eats the yogurt he makes himself, mixed with granola, and finally sits at his desk to begin his job as a mathematician.

I sit beside him as he logs on to the employee network, sipping his mate. He has large bags under his eyes, but your gaze is drawn to his prominent aquiline nose, indicative of his Spanish heritage. His face is no longer framed by the dark curls of his youth but short, sporadic spikes of gray. Thin lips and dark, bushy, and highly arched eyebrows leave him with a sinister expression. Indeed, with his back hunched over his computer screen, he looks like a mad scientist.

After receiving his doctorate in Applied and Computational Mathematics from California Institute of Technology, Julián got a post-doc then a full-time job at Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) - NASA’s only federally funded research and development center. Despite the glamor of

the title, the multiple awards from NASA, and the deep appreciation and admiration he receives from his colleagues for his extraordinary work, Julián resents the tedium of the job, counting down the days until his retirement. “Only nine more years until I’m on the beach of Pontevedra with *una cerveza* in my hand,” he says grimly. He’s been working on the same satellite communication program for nine years. For him, it feels like eternity.

He takes a deep breath, returning to the screen as his phone rings. It's the health insurance company returning his call. This year marks a switch from an HMO to a PPO meaning yet another new American system to navigate. The visits to the orthopedist, two MRIs, and the increase in physical therapy appointments, all a consequence of decades worth of rugby tackles, mean money is pouring out in all directions and there seems to be a lack of transparency, something he is determined to understand. Via phone, in his desperation to understand the bureaucracy of the US healthcare system, he doesn’t exactly come across as a polite client. “*WHAT YOU MEAN* THE RIGHT ELBOW COST MORE THAN MY LEFT ELBOW?” he bellows. Despite his volume, his thick accent often makes him unintelligible to the outsider, and his grammar can be quite *creative*. He repeats his questions multiple times, only heightening the distress of the situation. Frustrated and dissatisfied by the vague responses of the representative, he hangs up. Life in the U.S. seems unnecessarily complex. As he likes to say, “My father died, we buried him, paid his debts, end of story, but here, so much paperwork, so much drama…” Argentina has universal health care. It may not be the best, but it is included. You visit the doctor and it’s free. End of story.

Julián arrived with the absolute minimum of English. But his roommate had a tv and he managed to learn English by watching the American sitcom *Seinfeld* all throughout graduate school. The phrases “*Tippy toe, tippy toe!*” and “*NO SOUP FOR YOU!*” still come out frequently

and with ease, but the *pronunciation* of other words is still a struggle. He somehow still has a limited verbal vocabulary in his adopted language but for some reason, an extraordinary written command of it that he puts to use for his publications. In spite of the limitations of his English, it has become a habit over the years, even to dream in it, to use it while on the phone with his family back home, somehow switching to English out of nowhere and without even realizing it, mystifying his siblings into silence. It is as if he is more accustomed to this constant struggle than he is to speaking his native tongue. Some call this assimilation; he would likely call it a sad loss of home.

Back in his study, four hours have gone by since the insurance phone call and Julián gets up with a groan, stretches and heads to the kitchen. He cuts up an orange and an apple and takes out the large jar of natural peanut butter from the fridge. The apple *with* peanut butter is new to his routine choice of meals. “Emma Stone’s favorite snack is apples and peanut butter,” he recites. “It’s super good! Try it!”

Coming to the US in ‘98, Julián knew two recipes, and two recipes only. “Chicken with onions” and “rice with olives, mayo, hard boiled eggs and tuna” comprised his dinner rotation. Upon arrival in Pasadena, he bought one cup, one plate, one set of silverware, a wooden spoon and a sharp knife from Ross Dress For Less. He had never lived on his own and missed his mother’s skill in the kitchen: *empanadas, sopa de mariscos, y alfajores.* But as time passed, like many Americans who are seeking better health, he learned more about the benefits of plant based recipes and has now completely shifted his lifestyle to eating this way five out of the seven days of the week. On Sundays, however, he lets loose. In classic Argentine fashion, he prepares an elaborate barbecue, *asado* as he prefers to call it. His specialties include *chorizo (*spiced sausage), ribs, *molleja* (the thyroid gland of an animal), and tri-tip. The other five days of the

week, meat-free dinners are prepared by his American wife, Nancy. As the sun begins to set, she knocks on the door of his study, kindly asking if he wouldn't mind helping out in the kitchen. He replies, not quite as kindly, "I can't. Somebody's gotta work around here," ignoring the fact that she, too, "works around here." He may resent his work, but he is disciplined and devoted to it, working countless hours and often deeply distracted by it, leaving the computer only when his stomach growls too loudly.

After dinner, Julián retires to the couch where he watches whatever sports an Argentine team may be playing that night. Tonight: rugby - his favorite. He began playing the sport at the age of seven with his friends in their hometown *Club Universitario*. "I dedicated my life to it," he says. Even today, at 58 years old, Julián will jump at the opportunity to play with a team of strangers and then return home proudly… heavily bandaged and bruised, but proud. He's never happier than when he's on that field. It can be seen in his eyes now, as he gazes intently at the TV where the thuggish men, clad in blue and white stripes, dash across the screen, scoring. "TRY!!!" he yells, leaping to his feet. He takes a final celebratory glug of wine, and announces that he is going to bed. The clock reads 9:14 pm.

Back home in the Southern Hemisphere, the time is 1:14 am but for his family and friends, the night is still young. That far south the sun sets late and a midnight meal is nothing unusual throughout the summer months. His mother sits in her wheelchair solving a puzzle, his sisters

and their husbands are laughing and drinking around the barbeque, and his nieces and nephews will soon leave the *asado* to go dancing at a club until the sun rises. They are oblivious to the cacophonous noise and litter of the city streets. It's all they know.

But Julián wakes to the silence of a quiet neighborhood, a silence broken only by the birdsong of dawn. Whether he is aware of it or not, he spends his weeks instinctively grasping for any bit of home - whether that be a gourd of mate, a glass of Malbec, a rugby ball, or the shoulders of other expat Argentines who stand around someone's backyard grill every Thursday night. He knows he has paid a price in exchange for the education, job opportunities, stability, family, and freedom he has found in the United States. But it will never fully be home. Like many immigrants, he both *never* regrets leaving and *always* regrets leaving. He is both proud of and ashamed of the country he left behind. His salary is generously shared with his mother and sisters, allowing him to feel that he made the right decision. But while his childhood friends regularly gather for raucous reunions at Club Universitario without him, he wonders about the cost of this life of stability.

Works Cited

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