

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz  
4110 Faith Ct.  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(703) 472-6463  
[mtravies@gmail.com](mailto:mtravies@gmail.com)

2620 words

## **Christmas in Ushuaia**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*All people have had ill luck, but Jairus's daughter and Lazarus had the worst.*  
Mark Twain

1.

Laz pulled the parka closer to his body, ineffectually trying to ward off the gelid wind that blew from the mountains. Argentina was supposed to be warm in late December, but in Ushuaia, at the end of the world, the temperature rarely rose above fifty degrees. “Today, not even fifty” Laz mumbled. Talking to himself was just one of the habits that over the years had attached to him like fleas on a dog’s fur.

He had not come to this remote outpost to see the sights -- Ushuaia held little of interest to entice a seasoned traveler like himself; it was described in the tourist guides as merely “a sliver of steep streets and jumbled buildings below the snowcapped Martial Range” of the Andes. He was also not interested in a trip to Antarctica, or in hiking the steep trails of Andorra Valley or trekking to the Martial Glacier, a couple of hours from town. “I’m not athletic” he told himself; not that his arthritic knees would have allowed him to go ambling about as he used to in his youth.

He had signed up for a four-hour boat cruise on the Beagle Channel that would take him to his goal, the area around the Les Eclaireurs lighthouse. Sailing along the channel off Ushuaia,

the boat had passed by sea lions basking on the rocks, cormorants sitting on nests, fur seals, and other wildlife he did not recognize. On Martillo Island, the boat had come close to what the guide described as one of the largest penguin colonies outside of Antarctica. Laz had taken numerous pictures, although he had no expectation he would ever show them to anyone.

The boat finally arrived at Les Eclaireurs lighthouse, an iconic symbol of Ushuaia that the locals called the "lighthouse at the end of the world." Its distinctive red and white stripes contrasted sharply with the backdrop of snow-capped mountains north of the channel. Laz would have liked to disembark, but this was not permitted.

The end point of the boat tour was small Bridges Island. Passengers got off and set out on a walk, in search of native flora and fauna. At one point along the trek, Laz paused to gaze at the sprawling view across the Beagle Channel, with Ushuaia in the distance and the lighthouse not far to the northeast.

An albatross, gliding on enormous wings, circled around Laz. It spiraled down and landed a few yards away, righted itself and began pecking the ground with its longish hooked bill in search of morsels cast away by the sea. It paused for one moment, raised its head, and stared at Laz as if offering encouragement.

Laz extracted from his coat a small notebook with dirty, worn covers and opened it.

2.

Each page of the notebook bore line after line of miniscule, crabbed handwriting. Some of the entries had become blurred by contact with liquids; others were obliterated by thick horizontal lines. Some entries were in pencil, others in inks of various colors. There were gaps in some pages, as if the writer had given up on his task only to resume it sometime later.

Laz read aloud one of the entries on the first page, which stood out because it was a little larger than the others and seemed to be inscribed with greater force. He read aloud: “they all laughed at seeing my legs encased in plaster casts. I said that I had to wear the casts for eight weeks to straighten my crooked leg bones, and they laughed even more.” The rest of the entry had been blacked out.

Laz tore the page and flung it away, and the strong breeze carried it towards the icy realms to the south. At the sound of ripping paper, the albatross jumped a little, but planted again its long, webbed feet on the rocky soil and resumed its dinner.

Laz started to read aloud again from his diary, but had to stop almost at once: the fierce wind choked him and paralyzed his throat. He continued tearing page after page from the notebook, sometimes stopping to read to himself a few lines, tears forming in the corners of his eyes at some remembered event. The wind carried away briskly each of the pages; the albatross paid no attention to the ceremony after the disturbance caused by the first sheet.

A voice near Laz’s ears broke his concentration: “What are you doing?” It was the guide, bringing the rest of the passengers back to the boat. “Littering is a criminal offense in Tierra del Fuego. Stop it or I will have to report you.”

Laz smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m done.” He pocketed the remains of the notebook and joined the caravan.

3.

His bare hotel room weighed heavily on Laz’s spirit. He had to get out, find some company. There was light in the sky even though it was past nine thirty p.m. He went into the first restaurant he came across and asked the girl at the reception booth: “Are you still serving dinner?”

“Of course,” she replied. Her Spanish had a strange undertone, as if it was not her native tongue. “Yesterday was the solstice. We will be open until midnight every day, including Christmas, through the end of the month. Would you like to be seated?”

Laz nodded and was led into a room with large rustic tables and high back, dark wooden chairs. There were simple Christmas decorations on the walls, wreaths of plastic holly and Santas and reindeer imported from northern countries.

The restaurant was packed; however, around the corner they had an overflow section that was almost full already. There were no single tables available, so the hostess indicated that Laz would have to share space with four other diners. Under normal circumstances, Laz would have walked away. But that night he welcomed being with others; besides, this was high season in Ushuaia and other restaurants might be just as crowded. He sat down and greeted his companions.

The table was occupied by a tourist couple that spoke in some European language Laz did not recognize; they ignored everybody and spent the rest of their stay talking loudly among themselves. The other couple were locals: a dark, middle aged man and his ample, fair skinned wife. Laz sat next to the wife, who announced: “I’m María Eugenia, and this is my husband Héctor.” “My name is Lázaro Cruz” Laz replied. María Eugenia immediately drew Laz into an amiable, mostly one-sided conversation.

As a waiter brought him a menu, Laz noticed that the European couple had their entrees – a lamb dish and some stew – before them; the locals were starting on their appetizers. Half a dozen beer bottles littered the surface of the table.

“What are you guys having?” asked Laz to María Eugenia. “We are sharing the king crab appetizer, which is the specialty of the house” she beamed.

“Is it good?” inquired Laz politely.

“Here, taste it.” María Eugenia speared a morsel on her fork and handed it to Laz. He was somewhat startled by the unhygienic gesture, but blinked nervously and accepted the gift. “This is very good” he acknowledged.

“What else is good around here?” he then asked, emboldened by the woman’s familiarity.

“Just about everything” replied María Eugenia, chewing on her crab. “I am partial to the black hake, which they cook in parchment. And you must drink the local beer.” She pointed to one of the empty bottles on the table. “That’s Cape Horn Stout, my favorite.”

The waiter returned and Laz was ready to order. “I’ll have the king crab appetizer and the black hake for the main course. And a bottle of Cape Horn Stout, please.”

The beer came first. It was dark, sweet and slightly bitter. By the time the appetizer came, Laz was on his second bottle.

The food was quite good, and the beer grew on Laz as he ordered yet another bottle. He was only a casual drinker, and by the time he finished with the hake he was on his fourth bottle and already feeling tipsy.

His chit-chat with María Eugenia had continued unabated through dinner. As the waiter brought out the dessert menu, the lady bent her head in his direction and asked him in a confidential tone: “So, since you are not on your way to Antarctica, what brought you out to the end of the world?”

Laz was feeling pretty drunk by that time, and whispered back: “I... came to rid myself of my sorrows.” He hiccupped.

“What do you mean?” replied María Eugenia, surprised.

“It’s a long story” slurred Laz. “What should I get for dessert?”

## 4.

Amid bites of tiramisú and sips of disappointingly weak coffee, Laz told a tale from his childhood. “I was raised in a middle-class household in Buenos Aires. After the birth of my sister Elisa, my mother was too weak to handle the household chores by herself, so she contacted the rector of a Salesian Brothers congregation in our neighborhood, to see if they could provide an orphan girl that could be hired to help around our house. There were no children available, but they had a recent female arrival from Tierra del Fuego: Kuluána, a Yaghan Indian of indeterminate age who had been rescued from her declining village by Salesian missionaries. The mission had closed down for some reason and the wards they were trying to civilize were scattered all over Argentina.”

“Kuluána was old and nurturing, and became a second mother to Elisa and me. I would confide to her many of my childhood pains and fears, not daring to raise them with my distracted mother or my very distant father. Once, when I was thirteen or fourteen, Kuluána spotted me hiding in one corner, crying. She came over and, putting her arm around my heaving shoulders, asked: “Lazarito, what’s the matter? Why are you crying?”

“Between sobs, I related what I felt was a world-ending tragedy: ‘Elena Santos has dumped me. She says I’m too boring, and would rather be friends with Arturo.’ She gave a short laugh and replied: ‘And what do you propose to do about it?’”

“I dunno” I answered, and broke into loud sobs. “I want to die!”

“Kuluána assumed a vague expression, as if trying to bring back something from the dim past. Finally, she squeezed my shoulder and said: ‘Lazarito, where I come from, a village way south of here, we have an ancient custom. Whenever we feel overwhelmed by sorrow, we get on

a canoe and paddle down, get close to the big frozen water, and cry aloud the name of the person or thing that's hurting us, so that the wind will carry it away to the gods at the land of eternal night and we will be rid of it. I never tried doing this myself, but my *kippa*, my mother, said that it had worked for her and others in the village.”

“Do I need to travel all the way south before I can feel better?” I rebelled.

“No, child,” she answered. “The pain will soon go away by itself; you'll see.”

“I didn't believe Kuluána but the pain slowly faded away, as she had predicted. All the same, I started keeping a diary in which I would record all the sad events of my life in the off chance I might have to call them out some day. With the years, my sorrows multiplied and my diary became full, little by little. Last month my lifetime companion passed way, leaving me totally alone and feeling as disconsolate as I was the day of my conversation with Kuluána. Remembering the Yaghan folk story, I decided to take a special Christmas vacation in Ushuaia and scream my woes into the land of eternal night. I went on a cruise of the Beagle Channel with the intention of shouting out each of the sorrows and misfortunes of my life. Only it was too damned cold, so instead of talking I just tore away the pages of my diary and cast them out to the wind. I'm sure the gods of the eternal night know how to read.”

5.

Héctor, who had remained silent through the dinner, lay his beer bottle on the table and asked: “What sort of stuff did you have in the notebook? Just the bad things?”

Laz, who was near passing out, revived enough to reply: “No, all sorts of things. As the girl said years ago, I'm boring. I write everything down, sometimes in detail.”

“And you tossed the whole thing out to the gods?”

The question startled Laz and woke him up a little.

“Yeah, but they are supposed to read only the bad parts.”

María Eugenia picked up from her husband. “And how are they supposed to know which parts are good and which bad?”

Laz was saved from having to answer the question by the European couple, who had just paid their check and got up with a clattering of chairs, said “*buenas noches*” in barbarous Spanish, and took off.

Laz was still watching the Europeans make their exit when María Eugenia resumed: “See, it’s not always easy to tell. Our son Carlos died in an avalanche earlier this year. We were, and still are, devastated by the loss. He was our only child, and we miss him terribly.” She was for a moment overcome with a motion, but she checked herself and resumed: “But his death has brought my husband and I closer together, and we are enjoying helping raise little María Luisa, our granddaughter.”

Héctor cut in: “When I was a young man, I was fired from a job as insurance adjustor because my manager wanted to make room for his nephew to be brought in, fresh out of high school. I was appalled and downcast by the injustice, but in the process of looking for another job I met María Eugenia. So, you can say that a great ill led to happiness after the fact. Didn’t something like that ever happen to you?”

Laz started to protest. “Well, that may have occurred in an instance or two, but there is no comparison between getting fired from a job and losing your wife or your parents, and experiencing other losses, as I have.”

María Eugenia would not let him go on. “Yes, if you live long enough, you’ll gather your share of sadness. But if you try to erase everything in your past, your life will become as empty as your notebook after you had cast its pages to the wind.”



“Maybe the gods of the eternal night don’t know how to read, after all” replied Laz vacantly, resting his head on the table and starting to snore.

María Eugenia elbowed him back to wakefulness. “Time to go to bed, my friend. Tomorrow is Christmas. Would you like to come have a holiday dinner with us?”

“That would be nice” replied Laz, slowly getting to his arthritic feet. “Let’s go get the checks.”

Laz insisted on picking the tab for his newly acquired friends. “That’s unnecessary” protested María Eugenia. Laz shushed her aside. “I owe you a debt of gratitude, for you guys have made me think. I’m not sure, but perhaps this is a good time for me to take stock and appreciate the miracle that it is just to be alive, no matter the ups and downs.” He struggled to get his parka on, and on his way back to the hotel a thought occurred to him: “I bet I could reproduce from memory much of what was in that notebook. I might give it a try.”

THE END