

# 1

## Crossroads

Buenos Aires, 1995

Confusion surrounded me as I got off the bus. Jet-lagged and still attuned to a different time zone, the strains of “Still, still, still, one can hear the falling snow” in the scorching summer heat of Argentina only heightened my disorientation. Dreaming of snow in the dead of summer added another layer to the already surreal experience, etched with both poignant emotions and the absurdity of life's unexpected twists. Memories of life in Buenos Aires in 1987, when I had first set foot on Argentine soil and called this country my home rushed back into my mind amidst the hustle and bustle of this metropolis. The street noise, the young boys hawking newspapers on every corner—I smiled as a memory flooded in of back then, when Lorenzo and I had perfected the nasal sales pitch, mimicking those newspaper sellers: ‘La Nacion, La Crónica, La Prensa...’

Buenos Aires in 1995 was a city of contrasts, juxtaposing stark poverty with a rich history, beautiful Spanish/European-style architecture, and expansive parks. The bus stop where I had just disembarked was located adjacent to Plaza San Martin, a beautiful square that honored an Argentine Military hero pivotal in South America's victorious fight for independence from the Spanish Empire. I looked around. At first glance, not much had changed since 1987. The chaotic traffic, the impulsive Italian-style drivers still unleashed their tempers without warning, their rapid Spanish oaths still echoed through rolled-down windows, and the symphony of car horns still tuned to every imaginable pitch—it all still felt like home. Unclaimed car alarms added to the cacophony, a discord of sounds that I always believed the music by composer Astor Piazzolla captured like no other.

In 1987, I chose Argentina for my year abroad. At the time, I was a young 22-year-old student from the Netherlands who had just been accepted at the Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires to study classical piano. The bustling metropolis I had landed in still seemed like a maze, and warnings about certain areas being "dangerous" loomed in my mind. With no way to verify the truth, I relied solely on my instincts, hoping they wouldn't lead me astray. Then, amidst the uncertainty, in a place where I didn't know a single soul, I met Lorenzo. A person I inexplicably trusted from the moment we met. A person I recognized as if we were related. Our meeting was a sensation reminiscent of falling in love—the inception of our friendship marked a profound and deep platonic bond that unfolded without grandeur. While romantic tales of love at first sight abound, narratives of friends recounting the moment they "fell" for each other are rarely shared. The challenge lies in discovering nuanced words to convey this profound kind of love, as friends seldom verbalize the profound care and connectedness that characterize their relationships.

As I write this, a cherished early memory of my friendship with Lorenzo—a leisurely stroll with him through a park in Buenos Aires—comes rushing back to me. A memory of a balmy summer evening when, amidst century-old Ombú, Linden, and Floss Silk trees casting lengthy shadows in the sunset glow, we made our way to an open-air performance by our friends from the Teatro Colón Ballet. Our senses, already heightened by the twilight of day went into overdrive when the nostalgic piano tunes of Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto in G, ever so faint yet perfectly soothing, reached our ears. As the world transformed before our eyes and painted the skies with its vibrant spectrum of hues, in stark contrast to the music's delicacy, its emotional intensity took our breath away. Both being musicians, the bond of sound connected Lorenzo and me like nothing else ever could. Without uttering a word, as if the music had brought us to our knees, Lorenzo and I sat down in unison, captivated by the unhurried, lingering melody set against a waltz-like accompaniment. In the distance we caught traces of movement from our ballerina friends. Complete and utterly bewitched by the intricately crafted melody they seemed reminiscent of white herons

—graceful slender birds that carried messages between the spheres on the wings of music.

I vividly recall that day, when this stroll in the park occurred and also my urging need to ask Lorenzo if he was familiar with Ravel’s music and if he had ever played it. However, like many other questions at the time, those inquiries would have to be postponed until later. Our paths at that time had only recently crossed, and neither of us had yet any grasp of each other’s language. In 1987, at the crossroads of Argentina’s fledgling democracy, I embarked on the journey of shaping my life. On the brink of adulthood and liberated from the constraints of my roots, I embraced my new surroundings as a budding artist, eager to discover my own distinctive voice and leave my impact on the world. Despite Argentina’s substantial economic challenges, optimism prevailed within the country’s newfound freedom. Riding the coattails of the nation’s emerging sense of freedom, I found the wings to take flight. I entered adulthood at a global crossroads, on the opposite side of the world from my upbringing, in an era when the globe confronted the dire consequences of AIDS—an epidemic that upended societal norms, fostering uncertainty, fear, blame, and a longing for escape, while devastating communities and leaving countless lives shattered in its wake.

In the years that followed my year abroad, the friendship between Lorenzo and myself deepened, defying geographical boundaries. Images are etched in my mind of trips together through Europe and of riding the Ferris wheel at the Place de la Concorde in the heart of Paris, always full of laughter for no apparent reason. We stayed in touch through mail, at times through long-distance phone calls, but most of all telepathically. From the very beginning of our friendship, we had developed an innate ability to seamlessly convey thoughts between us, bypassing the usual sensory channels of communication.

Always homesick for Lorenzo and South America, I returned to Argentina in 1992, to explore the possibility of turning this country into my permanent base. Memories of blissful days driving with Lorenzo across the Argentine pampas with his dog Chazz,

the heartwarming scene of its head out the car window, ears fluttering in the breeze, and a seemingly joyful smile on its face as we crossed the vast plains. A fairytale-like vacation spent with Lorenzo in Mar del Plata—endless hours riding our bikes up and down deserted beaches, just the two of us and our devoted dog. Lorenzo, then a good looking aspiring dancer and musician full of life and promise, added his vibrant presence to those cherished memories.

Once Spanish was no longer a foreign language to me, Lorenzo and I caught up on all we hadn't been able to express before, and I realized that beyond all our silliness, there was another layer to my friend that I hadn't been able to grasp before. I caught a glimpse of Lorenzo's complicated relationship with his mother when I accidentally uncovered a family secret—her dependency on alcohol. It was a secret so carefully concealed that as his closest friend, I was taken aback that he had never mentioned it to me, although Lorenzo was convinced he had. My friends' persistent need for his mother's approval resembled an equally excessive dependency, leading me to ponder whether it might be connected to a hereditary inclination toward addiction. I experienced firsthand the cracks in the facade of "keeping up appearances," a behavior instilled in Lorenzo at a young age by the prominent family he belonged to, the same family that pretended his sexual orientation, let alone his illness, even existed.

"While guardian angels sweetly slumber," the Christmas tune continued, "And watch you as you sweetly slumber". Back to 1995, when I was in Buenos Aires at Lorenzo's behest as he faced a terminal illness and above all else, wished for me to hold his hand. Nervous anticipation filled me. Lorenzo, my beautiful gay friend and soulmate, whom I hadn't seen for years, now bound to a wheelchair, grappling with AIDS. I felt utterly unprepared and terrified. In Buenos Aires, meeting points are defined by the names of intersecting streets. Sergio, a mutual friend and my ride to Lorenzo's house, had selected the crossroads of "Santa Fe y Esmeralda," names that even then sounded like the title of a book.