

**Crossing the Border**  
Curt Eriksen

I hear the phone before it rings, but I do not stir and rise swiftly to the surface to greet the clamoring. Instead I turn away from the man who is standing on the corner of a busy street with a spoon in his hand, banging on the red kettle. I can't see his face beneath the peaked cap and the collar of his heavy coat is turned up, but I know he must be my brother. Fat snowflakes swirl around my head and I realize, as I thread through the traffic without a glance back, that he is wearing the coat that should have been mine.

Then I hear it again, the clanging of the spoon, and I burrow deeper into the cold slimy black of forgetting, where I hope the silence of muck will fill my ears. I don't want to be disturbed and wish I could just say, "No!" It wasn't that long ago—this I remember—when the baby finally quit screaming. Something he ate, and later vomited all over the bedspread, made him kick his legs and thrash about with an almighty disdain for the precious contents of his head. In these fits Elias throws I recognize my own failure to come to grips with all that has gone awry in my life, everything that has turned out otherwise than I might have expected.

So I resist, and cling to sleep. But my desire to flee is no match for the ingrained sense of watchfulness. The baby is asleep again in his cot. I reach for the cell phone and press the button to answer it before it rings again.

"Diga?"

Even though I whisper dubiously the voice on the other end is loud and confident: "Did I wake you up?"

I try to focus on the luminous blue numbers, thin as matchsticks, of the battery-operated alarm clock that sits on the bedside table, where the phone was left. It is almost five a.m. Or very nearly ten p.m. back home in the States.

“Of course not, Alan. What’s wrong?”

“I can never remember what time it is over there.”

I rub my eyes. Daniela moans in her sleep and rolls away from me. I lower my voice even further.

“What’s happened?”

“How do you know?”

“Just tell me!”

“Dad had a stroke.”

I take a breath and recall what seems like an image from the dream, that of an old man teetering up to the red kettle on stiff knees and tossing a gold coin inside.

“Well?”

“Yeah,” Alan sighs. “It doesn’t look good.”

Then I hear him draw the smoke into his lungs and I imagine him in his den, the only place in the house where he is allowed to indulge in his passion for slim filtered cigars.

“So?” I say. “Tell me.”

“He’s in a coma now. He’s stable.” I can hear the ice rattle in his tumbler. He swallows some of the diluted whisky. “But it doesn’t look good.”

Before I check myself I wonder aloud, “What should I do?”

“That’s your call, Tom. I’m just giving you the facts.”

\*

I sit at the table with a cup of strong coffee warming the palms of my hands. The steam rises from the cup, but I can't see it even though the velvety dark of the end of night is starting to pull apart. I watch this happen through the window, where the panes of glass attract and gather the faintest trace of the diffused light of a sun that is rising far away, on the other side of the ridge.

I can still smell the sweet and earthy aroma of the second coat of linseed oil that I applied to the floor yesterday evening. The darkened pine is a little sticky beneath my feet. I painted myself to the bedroom door and set the brush aside around midnight. About an hour after I lay down to sleep Elias woke up moaning. Daniela and I have both noticed something, something neither of us wants to admit. So we try to treat him with a peculiar indulgence, and I lifted him out of the cot and laid him down between us. Just when I was dozing off again he spewed his supper all over the bedspread.

I shift my weight on the hard seat of the chair and consider that it is cold in the house, but not cold enough yet perhaps to justify making a fire. The days still warm quickly, soon after the sun has risen. As long as it doesn't rain we spend most of our time outside. And a truckload of split green oak is going for 15 pesetas a kilo.

I don't know how much a flight back to St. Louis would cost, but I know that the number must be larger than the balance in my bank account. It was a carefully calculated move to finish the house, to spend what we'd put aside on the long strips of pine and the five liter cans of linseed oil. But last winter the bare concrete was a constant source of conflict and illness, and the baby hadn't started to crawl yet. Now that he's walking, Daniela insists we must comfort his feet.

Maybe she could borrow the money from her brother? But she'll only remind me that we haven't paid him back yet.

Now the panes of glass begin to glow slightly with the spreading light. I am usually busy and gone somewhere by this time, provided there is day work to be had, and I don't usually sit here at the table and watch this happen. I sip the black coffee and carefully set the cup down again. When I met Daniela she too was fed up with the city. But unlike me she had a job that paid regular, thirteen times a year. I gave up nothing but the teaching that I hated, the tiresome correction of Spanish pronunciation.

“Destined to be a poet, eh?”

That's what my dad said to me long ago when I announced my decision to quit college and leave the country.

“Why Madrid?” he asked.

“Why not?” I said.

We didn't usually speak much more than that. It was as if anything that ever needed to be said, couldn't be said. And all the things that never should have been said had already been blurted out.

The damage was done, that was the thing. So why bother going back now?

I stand up and go into the kitchen and set my cup in the sink. It is light enough to see now, a gray indistinct world filled with familiar shadows. I walk out the door and breathe in the fresh air and soon the pair of dogs are roiling about my legs, nudging my fingers with their wet muzzles. They follow me, raising their tails and dropping their heads to the ground as I walk towards the creek. My dad grew up in the Ozarks and I always thought this place would have reminded him of home. Here too there are the ruins of long abandoned water mills, and people

are generally poor and self-reliant. My dad prided himself on having taught himself everything that he considered worth knowing, but he always refused to come here, to come and see how I had done the same. I'm not even sure he ever bothered to look at a map of Spain and find out where I had decided to sink my roots. Whereas some fathers might have been proud, he seemed to bear me the grudge of those left behind.

When I get to the creek, within shouting distance of the house, I climb down the natural steps cut into the granite and sit on a boulder. The gurgling drone of the wash and spill over the water-smoothed rocks is always soothing. There is peace here, even when it never lasts.

I pick up a flat pebble and try to skim it across the surface of the creek where the water fans out and pools. The last time I talked to my dad was on Elias's second birthday, about three months ago.

"When am I going to see my grandson?" he demanded.

I realize now that his voice had changed, or at least this is the way it seems to me in my memory. The voice that had run roughshod over my childhood and youth no longer contained the full throated imperative of undisputed command. There was a spare rasping quality to it, as if my dad couldn't quite get enough air into his lungs. While listening to my mom tell me about her charity work at the hospital I remembered that he was 78 years old. But he had only recently ceded active management of the firm to Alan, satisfied—after Alan had spent over twenty-five years in the accounting cubicle—that his youngest son wouldn't make any irreversible mistakes.

"Everything I've acquired is going to your boy," my dad said, right before he hung up. "Eventually."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, whether it required some enthusiastic and vocal thanksgiving, or if it was a ploy to lure me into a skirmish. Daniela and I didn't bother marrying and that was another excuse not to meet her.

"It isn't racism," my mother had said, the last time I was home, about seven years ago. I had showed her a picture of Daniela and all she could think to say was, "My, she's dark."

"Cuban," I explained. And I added, despising myself as soon as I said this, "A political refugee."

My mother handed the picture back to me and said, "Don't tell your father."

"That she's Cuban?"

"That she's black."

The dogs hear something behind us and bound away, scabbling through the brush and up the hillside. Though it is darker down here by the creek, in the shade of the alder and ash that grow so thick along the banks, the early sunlight is beginning to filter through the yellowing leaves and I can see the water glint and sparkle as it pours and splashes over the rocks.

They've never even seen a picture of their only grandson, and now my father may not open his eyes again.

\*

When I get back to the house Daniela is in the kitchen, feeding boiled white rice to the baby who sits in the high chair. "Aah, aah," he calls, as soon as he sees me. Daniela glances over her shoulder and asks, "Where have you been?"

"I went looking for the dogs."

She concentrates on the job of trying to get the baby to eat. He refuses by turning his head to one side, then the other, while screaming, "Aah, aah, aah."

“Those dogs are a nuisance,” Daniela says.

I stand behind her and consider the slope of her shoulders.

“Maybe you shouldn’t bother with that. I mean, since he was sick.”

“Do you want to do this!” she says, turning to glare at me. Then she stands up and tosses the plate of rice into the sink. “You’re always criticizing me.”

The baby starts to bawl and Daniela pulls him roughly from the high chair.

“You think you can do any better than this?” she says to me, as she carries him past me and into the bathroom, where she will scrub his hands and face. The baby is reaching for me as she carries him away, howling as if he’d been stabbed, but I don’t even lift my hands.

\*

It’s even worse, later, when I tell her that I am going home.

“I won’t feed those dogs. They’ll starve,” she threatens.

“You could stay with your brother while I’m gone. I’ll sort the dogs out.”

“And how are you going to pay for this, huh? We need diapers,” she adds, almost as an afterthought. “And the washing machine doesn’t drain right.”

That reminds me of the generator, and the valve that keeps clogging.

“At least Ernesto is fond of his nephew.”

“He sure doesn’t like you.”

I don’t know why, have never understood. But it has something to do with me being an American. And white too, perhaps. Even though Ernesto is lighter than Daniela, and they’re both technically mulatto. But Ernesto tries to live as if the Spanish grandfather who provided him with both a surname and the legal basis for residing in this country never existed. His aspiration is to return to a Cuba freed of both Castro and any colonial influence. When we used

to talk, before he developed such a strong disregard for me, he never mentioned the deeply imbedded racism on the island, but Daniela told me all about being a “second-class comrade.”

“You’re his sister,” I say, as if that were reason enough.

“I’ll call him,” Daniela replies. “But he won’t lend you any more money.”

\*

The night before I fly out of Barajas we stay with Ernesto. I can see, as soon as we arrive, that he begrudges me the use of the spare bed. He usually tries to rent that room, but the boarders never last long. Ernesto dreams of a political role for himself in the “new Cuba,” but the only role that would suit him is that of dictator, the role he is hoping to see abolished.

Still, he is generous and tender with the baby, but even he notices and asks, “Shouldn’t Elias be talking by now?”

Daniela and I have cleared the table and she’s washing the dishes while I dry them. There are a few fingers left in the bottle of wine we bought. The baby is sitting on his uncle’s lap, banging a spoon against the metallic rim of the table.

Daniela and I exchange a glance before she says, “Each child develops at his own pace. Every person has his own destiny.”

“I’m sorry,” says Ernesto, waving a hand as if to dismiss what he just said, as if he could wipe his words away. And then he speaks directly to me: “When you are raised under a regime that tries to deny you any shred of individuality, you develop the mistaken idea that we are all the same, practically identical.”

In the past, before my relationship with Ernesto soured, I would tease Daniela about the things her brother said. And she always agreed with me, that although he despised the communists his natural instincts were those of any zealous *guardián de la revolución*.

Now though, I don't risk making a joke that he couldn't even hear. Daniela is not pleased with me. She seems to resent not only my going but my right to be concerned. It's as if all the difficulties I have had, not only with my father but with my brother as well, should bind me that much more firmly to her. She knows I have never got along with either one of them. But I think it is really the fact that she never knew her own father, and that's why she would keep me from mourning the loss of mine.

In addition, there are the practical concerns. I can't afford this trip, and the advance from the man who hires me whenever he needs to top up his crew with my unofficial labor—and no corresponding social security contributions—comes at a price that is usury. And although Ernesto is keen to take Daniela under his wing and demonstrate by doing so what a lousy provider I am, she always tires of the way he preaches to her, reminding her that he had warned her and suggesting that it is not too late to be done with me altogether.

I don't know where the plates and dishes go, and instead of asking I wipe my hands on the dishtowel and leave them stacked on the counter. They are clean and dry, but by not humiliating myself any more than I have already done I am letting Ernesto know that I too can draw a line in the sand. I wonder though, whether or not he will even notice.

\*

Early the next morning Ernesto surprises me by offering to take me to the airport. I can get a taxi but he tells me how much that will cost, as much as to say, "Don't kid yourself."

I am tired of a life of scrounging like this, and dread Alan meeting me at the other end of the long flight. Now that there is the baby to worry about, it's as if my failure to mature into a financially capable adult carries the moral stigma of cardinal sin. I remember again what my dad said the last time we talked, that everything will be for the baby. His firm produces electrical

components that are used in thermostats and radiators. “Every nickel counts,” that’s what my dad used to say to me when I was a boy, and I am sure he is right.

The seats have been removed from the back of Ernesto’s SEAT Panda so that he can moonlight as a delivery man, and Daniela won’t be seeing me off at the airport. I am standing in the living room with the baby in my arms, waiting for Ernesto to get off the toilet. Daniela is cleaning up in the kitchen. Since she woke up this morning she has refused to look at me.

The baby tries to pull my hair and I tell him again not to do that. He tries even harder, scratching my face with the tiny fingernails that are so difficult to trim, until I finally set him down as punishment. Then he goes rigid, his whole body tensing, as the rage boils up into his eyes. When he finally lets the air out of his lungs the howl is that of an animal with a foot caught in the jaws of a trap.

“What are you *doing* to him?”

Daniela appears in the doorway to the kitchen with a large knife gripped in one hand. The blade is dull and greenish in the fluorescent light of the living room and bubbles of soapy water slide down the length of the blade. Although she just happened to be holding the knife when Elias screamed, the tension between us is such that I don’t trust her and I am ashamed to imagine grabbing that knife and turning it upon her.

“What’s going on?”

Now Ernesto is standing in the doorway to the toilet, pulling his pants up and jerking his head back and forth to stare first at me and then at his sister.

Meanwhile the baby has grabbed my pant leg with his fists and he’s sobbing as he frantically demands to be picked up. He has won again, so I pick him up. Daniela sighs and

mutters something, before she turns into the kitchen. Ernesto draws his belt around his waist and cinches it tight.

\*

When Ernesto pulls up beside another car double-parked at the entrance to the terminal he finally speaks: “Maybe this break will do you guys some good.”

I’m touched that he should demonstrate genuine concern. But I reach into the back of the car and grab my bag and say, “You take care of them for me, okay?”

Ernesto stiffens and I realize that I have overstepped some invisible boundary by insinuating that I might not come back, that my paternal responsibilities might become his.

Neither of us knows what to say after that so I shrug and turn away and walk into the building. And once inside I follow the fantasy of never returning to the ticket counter. I have always wondered about the people who simply disappear, the man who walks to the tobacconist on the corner for a pack of cigarettes one afternoon and is never seen again. Not the feeble-minded woman who wanders out of the nursing home during a snow storm, or the child who is abducted by a pederast, nor even the teenager who has had enough. But the fully grown man who possesses both courage and cowardice in sufficient measure to turn his back on a life of commitments that isn’t over yet.

When the woman behind the ticket counter hands me my boarding pass I interpret her smile as an invitation. Not to anything intimate or even personally related to her. I know I am not only anonymous here, but absolutely unremarkable. Still that smile suggests to me a world of possibilities I haven’t yet imagined.

Eriksen—Crossing the Border

Originally published in *Contrary*  
December 30, 2008

<http://www.contrarymagazine.com/Contrary/Border.html>