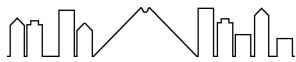


Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

Chain of Love



Urban Volcano

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Illustrations: Börkur Sigurbjörnsson
Publisher: Urban Volcano

<https://urbanvolcano.net/>

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CHAIN OF LOVE

I opened my eyes and raised my seat back from a sleeping position to a laid-back position. Outside the window the sun was rising over the horizon, painting a pinkish layer over the light-blue background. We were driving along a highway, past a mixture of low- and mid-rise buildings—entering Buenos Aires, I guessed. I looked at my watch. It was just after six o'clock. If I remembered the schedule correctly, we had still a good hour's drive ahead of us before reaching Retiro station,

which probably meant we had not yet reached Buenos Aires itself but were perhaps passing through some of its satellite towns.

The bus was mostly silent, apart from the low hum from the engine and the murmur from the friction between the tires and the tarmac, combined with occasional deep-sleep breathing and light snoring. I guessed most of the passengers were still asleep, making the most of the time before we reached our destination. I had slept like a log, had been tired after yesterday's walking and was knocked out almost immediately after finishing the champagne glass they served after dinner. I smiled at the thought. Until recently, bubbles and buses had not been associated ideas in my mind, but I was really enjoying the bed-bus concept of South America. I was surprised by the comfort and liking the option to step on a bus in the evening in one town and wake up the next morning in another location, hundreds of kilometers away. Going from one thing to another was exactly what I needed at the moment. At the end of a fifteen-year-long relationship and on a ten-year work anniversary, I needed a few weeks of distraction in my life to break up my habits and bridge the gap toward a new beginning. It was a turbulent ride, though. My spirit was constantly oscillating between ups and downs.

“Awake?” a young girl whispered, her head barely reaching over the headrest of the seat in front of me.

“Yes,” I replied. “The morning sun woke me up.”

“I just woke up because I didn’t want to sleep anymore... but I didn’t wake my mommy. I’m a good girl. I can wake up on my own and allow Mommy to sleep.”

“That’s good,” I said, yawning. Even if I was technically awake and well rested, my brain was not yet firing on all cylinders.

“That’s how I make the chain of love longer.”

“Huh?” I asked, gradually waking up. “Chain of love? What’s that?”

“It’s a chain of being good,” the girl whispered, inching her head a little higher over the seat back. “My daddy’s boss allowed him to go home early yesterday. Daddy read a story to Javi. Javi is my little brother. Javi gave me a big hug before we got on the bus. I allow Mommy to sleep and she will be kind to somebody today. That somebody will be kind to somebody else. Then the chain of love will go all over the world and end all wars and pain.”

“Interesting,” I said, nodding my head. “All wars will end just because your daddy’s boss allowed him to go home early yesterday?”

“Yes,” the girl replied without a hint of hesitation. “And because Mommy taught us to make the chain longer.”

“Nice! I like that. But what happens if someone breaks the chain?”

“Uh...” The girl placed an index finger on her chin and paused for a moment before continuing. “No problem. Just start it again.”

“Impressive!” A chain of charitable acts that spreads through the world and rids it of misery and acts of cruelty. Now, there was a concept I really liked.

“Where you coming from?” the girl asked, changing the subject.

“Iguazú.”

“What were you doing in Iguazú?”

“Exploring the waterfalls and the power plant.”

“All alone?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not sad because you have no one to talk to?”

“I have people to talk to. I talk to other guests at the places where I’m staying.”

“Are they also on the bus?”

“Who?”

“The other guests.”

“No. Some left earlier. Some were leaving later. Some were traveling to other destinations.”

“What did you talk about?”

“This and that. Where we were from. Our jobs. Our travels. There was this one couple at the hotel in Iguazú who had an exciting cruise coming up. They were going to sail on the Southern Ocean around Antarctica, and we talked about their plans.”

“Going with them on the cruise?”

“No.”

“Where you going?”

“Buenos Aires.”

“Why?”

“See the city and visit an acquaintance.”

“What’s an acquaintance?”

“Someone you know a little but not really well. In this case, someone I’ve met a few times at conferences.”

“What’s a conferences?”

“An event where people get together and talk about their work.”

“Going to stay with him?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Matteo.”

“Is he your friend?”

“Well...” I took a peek out the window as if I expected to find the right answer along the highway. “Yes and no. We’ve met a couple of times. Went

out to dinner and drinks with other people from the conference. Not sure if he qualifies as a friend, though.”

“He’s stranger?”

“No...” I hesitated, again consulting the highway outside the window. “Not really... either... I guess.”

“Good,” the girl said with such a serious expression that I got the feeling I was being lectured. “You shouldn’t talk to strangers.”

“María,” came a female voice from the row of seats in front of me. “Who are you talking to?”

“The man behind us,” the girl whispered back, sitting down in her seat and disappearing from my view. “He’s alone but not sad.”

“You remember what I said about talking to strangers?”

“Yes, Mommy... but I started.”

“In that case...” the woman whispered to María before turning in her seat to face me. “I hope she didn’t disturb you.”

“Not at all,” I replied, smiling. “I enjoyed the company.”

“Very good,” the woman said, turning back in her seat.

The mother and daughter continued whispering and I returned to admiring the view outside the bus window. It looked as if we had finally entered Buenos Aires. We drove past densely populated areas and

I watched the buildings pass by without trying to pay them any special attention. I enjoyed letting the surroundings get sucked into my subconscious without thinking too much. That was one thing I had vowed to do before setting off on my trip through South America. I tried to plan ahead as little as possible and let myself drift, following the direction of the wind. There was nothing I necessarily needed to see, no place demanded visiting, no photo had to be taken, there was nothing I was absolutely required to remember. I had decided I needed two months in a foreign environment to clear my head of the life expectations I had consciously and unconsciously constructed through the years. Upon returning to Barcelona, reality would kick in again. I would have to build a new daily routine—a life without Mercè. Also, I felt I should decide if it was time for a career change after ten years at the university. Change into a softer line of work, perhaps—something less computational. Maybe something where I could apply my joy of creative writing. Not that I had any idea what that could be.

However, that was something to think about later. For now I had to attend to what was happening in my immediate surroundings. The bus had stopped at what seemed to be a fairly big bus station. The crew made no announcement about where we were and I couldn't see any signs with station names. Most, if not all, of the

passengers were preparing to step off the bus. I looked at my watch and browsed the bus schedule. According to the schedule, we still had half an hour to go before we would arrive at the Retiro station in Buenos Aires.

“This is Retiro,” said a woman who was obviously able to read my mind or gestures. “We’re ahead of schedule.”

I looked up. María and her mother were standing in the walkway between the rows of seats, ready to leave the bus.

“Enjoy your stay in Buenos Aires,” the mother continued before leading her daughter by the hand down the aisle.

“Bye, stranger,” María said and winked.

“Bye, thanks,” I replied, watching as they made their way toward the exit.

I picked up the linen bag I used to hold my most valuable and essential possessions and stepped off the bus together with the last group of passengers.

After collecting my backpack from the luggage compartment, it was time to head into the city center. I knew the main square was east of Retiro, but upon stepping through the station doors I realized I had no idea through which entrance I was exiting, nor did I know which direction would take me east.

I stopped for a moment and looked over the surroundings. The streets were waking up. There wasn't a big crowd of people outside the station but a few merchants were setting up their stalls and an occasional passer-by made their way past the merchandise. By the looks of it, it did not seem as if I had left through the main entrance.

I walked down the ramp from the station and into the street. I turned right and followed the station wall, carefully taking mental note of signs with street names. After a couple of blocks I turned right without hesitating, again being careful to remember the street name. I walked to the next crossing, crossed the street, and turned back. I crossed another street, turned left, and walked over to a bench in a park adjacent to the station, directly across the street from where I had exited.

When traveling in unknown places I didn't like looking at a map while standing or walking in the middle of a street. I didn't want to draw attention to myself as the proverbial lost tourist. I felt like it made me vulnerable to mugging and tricking.

I took off my backpack, sat down on the bench, and picked up my Lonely Planet guide to South America. Normally I would have searched for a café before consulting the travel guide but on my short walk

around the station, I had not encountered any. Maybe I had been too occupied with remembering street names.

I looked at the map of the Retiro area and started locating myself using the street names I had noted in my mental notebook. I was pleased to find out that a single street would take me directly to the center, where I wanted to go. Albeit a decent walk, it was a straight and easy route. I just had to follow San Martín and it would take me straight to Plaza de Mayo. As it turned out, the walk was straight south rather than east as I had for some reason mistakenly thought.

I entered the center at the northwestern corner of Plaza de Mayo. It was still fairly early in the morning and I had plenty of time to kill before getting in touch with Matteo, my acquaintance. Or was he my friend? Or a stranger? In any case, it was still too early to call. In fact, I was unsure of when there would be a good time to contact him. It was a Saturday morning and I had no idea about his weekend routine, or the local etiquette relating to pre-lunch phone calls.

I started my exploration of the city center by walking down to the Casa Rosada and back. Then I threaded the streets around Plaza de Mayo, looking at nothing in particular but drinking in everything at the same time. I walked past a newsagent who was opening

his shop. I went in and bought a map of the city. I reasoned that when looking for Matteo's place it would be better to have a detailed map rather than the spotty sketches in the Lonely Planet guide. In particular since I blamed it for this morning's confusion between east and south. It's not you who is messed up, I said to myself, it's the travel guide's fault.

After circling the streets around Plaza de Mayo for almost an hour, I came across a café that looked inviting. I had not been looking for a place to sit down but realized the walk through the center had stimulated my appetite and thought it might be a good idea to have some breakfast and explore my new map to try to get oriented. I ordered a cappuccino and a croissant, unfolded the map, and made my initial attempt at locating Matteo's place. With the map spread out in front of me on the table, I realized I was faced with an enormous city and a single street name. I had practically nothing in my hands to narrow down the search. Needles and haystacks came to mind. Neither did I know anything about the neighborhoods of the city nor did I know in which neighborhood Matteo lived, or whether his address was in the center or suburbs, north, south, east, or west. I tried to scan the map from the top left to the bottom right, but soon recognized this would take ages. Then I took a look at semi-random points around the center and read

the street names in the vicinity, in the hope of finding Olavarría. Neither approach was successful. For a moment I regretted having left my smartphone behind in Spain. Finding the address would have been so easy with a proper phone and a data plan.

I had decided to leave my smartphone behind in order to cut all connections with the old world during the two months I planned to spend exploring the new world. I had decided to take a break from the digital world and live an analog life for a few weeks. There were more things in life than algorithms, I convinced myself, not everything needed to be calculated. Yet I did struggle with trying to live my life less algorithmically. It was just the way I thought.

Without having found what I was looking for, I folded the map and finished my breakfast. It was still relatively early in the morning and I wondered if it was now late enough to call Matteo. It was half past nine and I reasoned it would probably not be decent to call him until ten. However, I had hardly finished that thought when my old not-so-smart-phone started ringing.

“Hi, it’s Matteo. How are you? Have you arrived in Buenos Aires yet?”

“Yes, I arrived on a bus early in the morning. I’ve just finished my breakfast.”

“Very good. Where are you?”

“Close to Plaza de Mayo, I think, I seem to be quite without a sense of directions today.”

“No worries. That’s a perfect location. It’s very easy to get to my place from there. Go down toward Casa Rosada, stay on the right side, and take bus 64 heading for La Boca. The bus will turn south and go past San Telmo, then under a bridge and past a park on your right. Then the bus will turn left into La Boca. You should get off before it turns right again, at Puente Nicolás Avellaneda. Then walk back a block and a half and turn left into Olavarría. My place will be on the right, above a pharmacy. Got it?”

“Yes. I think so. Casa Rosada, right side, bus 64 to La Boca, south, San Telmo, bridge, park, left, get off before it turns right and then back, left into Olavarría, and a pharmacy.”

“Exactly! See you in a bit.”

“Okay, bye.”

I repeated the directions in my head. Casa Rosada, right side, bus 64 to La Boca, bridge, park, left, get off before it turns right, and then above a pharmacy. That didn’t sound that hard.

I paid my bill and headed across Plaza de Mayo toward Casa Rosada, reminding myself of the first part of the route, bus 64 toward La Boca. As I came to the

bus stop, bus 64 to La Boca was arriving and I hopped on.

Once on the bus I asked the driver how much the ride cost. He pointed me to a machine further down the aisle. I walked to the machine and read the instructions. It turned out I had two options to pay the fare. I could either pay one peso with a transport card or two pesos with a two-peso coin. I had neither. I only had a two-peso bill.

“Can I pay with a two-peso bill?” I asked the driver.

“No.”

“Do you have change for a bill to coin?” I asked, even if it was practically the same question as before.

“No.”

I stood for a moment and contemplated my options. The bus had already started moving so getting off to look for change was not an option. On the other hand, I felt bad about just sitting down without paying.

“I’ll take it.”

A man in a blue uniform walked toward the ticket machine and paid my ride with his transport card.

“Thank you very much,” I said, handing him my two-peso bill.

“I paid only one peso with my card and I don’t have any change.”

“That’s no problem,” I said, extending the two-peso bill toward him. “My ride was going to cost me two pesos anyway.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the man said, holding his hands up, as if he was surrendering to someone assaulting him with a weapon.

“No, please, take it,” I insisted. “It’s the least I can offer.”

The worker shook his head, smiling, and returned to his seat. I thanked him again for the favor and found myself a window seat farther back. I felt awkward accepting the man’s help. I was pretty sure my liquidity was better than his and the two-peso bill would be of better use in his hands than mine. I wondered how I could pay him back. I would have liked to do him a favor someday, somehow. However, it was unlikely that our paths would cross ever again. On that thought, my mind wandered to Mercè. Would our paths cross again? It seemed impossible they wouldn’t, yet it was hard to imagine how that encounter would play out, given all that had happened, given all that was said, given all that had been shouted.

When the bus stopped at the next station, the two passengers sitting in front of me stood up and left. A woman and a little girl. Just before stepping off the bus, the girl turned around, faced me with a smile and waved. I was taken aback. It was my new friend María.

Before I could wave back, the door had already closed behind them and the bus started moving.

Was this some sort of a sign? Was my episode with the worker just one link in the chain of love? Maybe María's mother had been kind to this man and he had played his part in the chain by paying my fare. Now it was my turn to be kind to someone. My turn to extend the chain of love that would eventually end all wars and misery of this world. Perhaps the man was not a part of the chain that had started when María's father's boss had given him half a day off. The man could equally be a part of a different chain of love, a different thread but weaving the same fabric of kindness that spreads over the world and safeguards us all. I shook my head and decided that was enough lyric prose for the time being, I had a place to get to.

I looked out the window and tried to remember Matteo's description of the route. Bus 64, park, get off before it turns right. That was about all I could remember. How on earth was I going to know when to get off?

I took out my map and unfolded it as much as the limited space on the bus allowed. Now that I had the name of the neighborhood I should be able to perform a more effective search for Matteo's address. My eyes wandered over the map and quickly traced the route of the crow's flight from Casa Rosada, over San Telmo

to the La Boca neighborhood, and then zoomed in to search for Olavarría. Bingo. There it was. I moved my gaze back toward Casa Rosada and tried to replay Matteo's description on the map. Turn south and pass under a bridge. I looked out the window and saw we were approaching a highway overpass. I went back to the map and found the park and the left turn into La Boca. It was all coming back to me. Now I only had to get off before the bus turned right, after having turned left. I looked back out the window. The overpass was behind us and the park was on our right. Soon the bus took a left turn. Everything was under control and it would be a piece of cake to find the right place to get off.

I started listening to the names of the stations and tried to locate them on the map to make sure I got out at the right one. At first I struggled. I was too slow in my scanning. Gradually I got the hang of it, though, keeping my index finger on the map, listening and looking out the window. But, just as I had developed the system I was so captured by the view that I decided it was much more interesting to observe the surroundings of this unfamiliar city than to track the bus journey on a map. In fact, it was really not that difficult to know where I should get off. All I had to do was to wait for the bus to turn right. Then I would know I had missed my stop but was at

least in the right neighborhood. I could worry later about finding the right house. So I removed my finger from the map, stopped listening to bus stop names, and enjoyed the view.

Eventually, the bus turned right and I rang the bell and got off at the first opportunity. I looked around to familiarize myself with my surroundings. On the other side of the street there was a promenade that ran along a canal. On my side, there was a row of run-down buildings. For a moment I thought I remembered some stories about La Boca not being the safest place in the city. Maybe it had not been a good idea to deviate from the scripted route. Despite my worries about this not being a place for a public display of disorientation, I sat down on the bus stop bench and looked at the map to try to find my exact location relative to where Matteo lived.

“Looking for something?”

My heart jumped and I fastened my grip on the map and pressed my knees together to secure my backpack. I looked up and saw an elderly man sit down beside me.

“I’m looking for Olavarría,” I admitted.

“Olavarría,” the man said slowly. “Continue on this street until the next intersection, then turn right and Olavarría will be the third street you cross.”

“Thank you very much!”

I put the map into my backpack and followed the old man's directions with mixed feelings and slightly worried about whether he was sending me in the right direction or leading me astray. However, in an instant I was standing in front of the pharmacy Matteo had described to me over the phone. Now, it seemed I owed two acts of kindness to the chain of love.

After walking around in San Telmo for over forty minutes looking for a place to have lunch, I was glad to finally see a café that looked promising. La Poesía. Although I claimed to be a man of prose I decided to drop in. I had passed several nice-looking places on my morning stroll, but upon entering each one I had found something that turned me off. Too empty. Too crowded. Too bright. Too dark. I didn't have clear criteria for what I wanted in a place, but for some reason, when it came to making a decision, I found it easy to speculate that around the corner the grass might be greener, the furniture might be browner, or the food might be tastier. I did that every so often when I was deliberately looking for a place. I walked until I was too hungry to continue. Then I finally entered whichever place was closest to my point of desperation and I usually ended up eating at places that were much inferior to the ones I had passed but

discarded. I was glad that this seemed not to be the case with La Poesía. Could it be that for once my indecision had paid off?

La Poesía had a mountain hut look to it. The tables and chairs were made of wood, old but stylish. The walls were covered with black-and-white pictures and artifacts from the past. Despite being antique, the café had a fresh atmosphere, the interior seemed carefully curated, and every item was in the right place while not seeming artificially staged. The place looked naturally charming.

The café was about half full. The patrons spanned a wide range of ages and appearances. By the front door were two elderly men engaged in a lively discussion. On their table lay a pile of worn-out books. I could not hear their conversation, but I imagined they were book critics arguing about the literary value of some old classic. Toward the back was a group of teenage girls chatting while glancing at their mobiles. In between there was a woman in her midthirties—I guessed—typing away on her laptop, latte on one side and a notebook on the other.

I found myself a table in the middle of the café and sat down. Again, I reminded myself of how lucky I had been with being picky about the place to have lunch today. If I hadn't been, I would probably have missed

this one. There was something about this café I would have been sorry to miss.

I ordered myself a steak sandwich and a beer. It was my third day in Buenos Aires and I had not yet had a steak sandwich. Over breakfast this morning, Matteo had recommended I gave it a try. Himself being a vegetarian, it may have sounded a curious suggestion, but entirely consistent with the character of the man who I was now in no doubt of calling a friend, rather than an acquaintance or a stranger. He had an ear for listening out for what I generally enjoyed and then provided tailor-made recommendations using his local knowledge of the city.

While I waited for my food, I picked up my notebook and started writing my travel log for Buenos Aires. It wasn't very much of a travel log, though. It was just a log—a collection of random, or at least pseudorandom, thoughts about everything and nothing. I hadn't done much, in the touristy sense, that is. I hadn't done all the essential things I should have done according to Lonely Planet. I had just walked around aimlessly, thinking and observing the life of the city, occasionally sitting down for a while, jotting some well-chosen words in my notebook. I had been able to relax and get over my initial paranoia about safety in the city. My writing was fluent and I felt better than I had done in a long time. My time away from home was

doing me good. My spirit was definitely being lifted. I didn't feel bad about not experiencing the city as most tourists did. Instead, I was experiencing the city in my own way. I'm a thinker, I wrote in my notebook, and if a city encourages me to think, I think. I'm a walker, and if a city encourages me to walk, I walk. I'm a writer—in a liberal sense of the word—and if a city encourages me to write, I write. Even in Buenos Aires, I don't need to learn how to dance tango as long as I have my pen dancing across the paper.

Between sentences I looked up from my notebook and across the café, to the bar, drinking in the atmosphere of the place, and not least of all to steal a peek at the waitresses who I found very beautiful. After a fifteen-year-long relationship with Mercè I felt like I was for the first time in a long time paying attention to beautiful women—consciously, at least. If only Mercè had had the same monogamous vision of our relationship, then there would have been no Fábian, no explosive revelation, and no breakup. On the other hand, there would have been no trip through South America, no revitalizing stroll through Buenos Aires, and no new adventures. Maybe the whole thing was turning out to be liberating for me rather than humiliating.

It was at the end of one of those glances, and when I was about to return to my writings, that I recognized

a familiar person standing at the bar talking to one of the waitresses. If I was not mistaken it was Ellen, a Canadian woman I had met over breakfast in Iguazú a few days earlier. I had had an interesting chat with her and her husband.

“Hey, what a coincidence to see you here!” I said as I walked up to the bar and greeted Ellen.

“You here! How nice! You speak Spanish, right?” Ellen asked and sighed. “I want to order a steak sandwich to take with me on the bus to Bariloche but I don’t seem to be able to get across that I want the sandwich as a takeaway.”

“No worries,” I said and turned to the waitress. “*Quiere el lomito para llevar.*”

“*Ah, para llevar, ahora sí,*” answered the waitress, smiling with relief. “*¿Lo quiere completo?*”

“You want the complete sandwich?”

“What’s complete?”

“With ham, fried egg, cheese, bacon...”

“No, just the plain steak sandwich,” Ellen replied. “I remember having one when I was in Buenos Aires twelve years ago. It was delicious.”

“*Solo el sandwich,*” I translated to the waitress but decided to leave out the latter part as I judged it irrelevant to the order. I continued my job as an interpreter, translating the last part of the business exchange involving the payment.

“Why don’t we go over to my table while you wait for your food,” I said and pointed toward the space where I had installed myself. “I’m waiting for my own sandwich.”

As we waited, we recounted our adventures since we had last seen each other in Iguazú. Time flew by and before we knew it our sandwiches had arrived.

“I’ll have to go now,” Ellen said. “I cannot be late for the bus.”

“Well, enjoy Bariloche, and your cruise, and your sandwich. Not necessarily in that order.”

“Thanks for stepping in to save the order. If only I could repay you somehow.”

“There’s no need for reimbursement. I’m just extending the chain of love. You don’t owe me anything. I just deposited an act of kindness into the universal world bank of love. You can do the same by helping someone else. We can then make withdrawals when we need them. We don’t need to pay back favors in a reciprocal manner. We just need to keep being nice to each other in order to keep the bank liquid.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” I replied, smiling. “Some other time. Go catch your bus.”

My contribution to the chain of love had been quite small. No lifesaving acts of heroism. Nevertheless, it made me feel good to be finally part of the chain that

would eventually spread all over the world and bring an end to all wars. Every link in the chain counted, I guessed, how small or big.

As my gaze followed Ellen to the door, my eyes stopped abruptly at a table by the entrance. Yet again, I had come across María and her mother. The little girl smiled at me and I winked.

Börkur is an avid storyteller with a keen eye for quirky characters, funny dialogs and vivid scenario descriptions. Much of his writing falls within the genre of realistic fiction and his stories are more often than not based on real events in the author's life. Although the tales contain grains of truth, they are melded with fiction, making the reader curious to know the line between reality and fantasy.

Books

Among Other Things, flash fiction (2024)

Talk To Strangers, short stories (2019)

Flash 52, flash fiction (2017)

999 Abroad, short stories (2012)

Links

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