

Cholila

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Cholila¹ is a little town in the province of Chubut² in the middle of Argentine Patagonia³ inhabited by around 2000 souls. It is mainly known for its National Barbecue Festival⁴ and because Butch Cassidy⁵ lived there for a while.

I bet you have never heard the name “Cholila” before reading this article. I first heard it through my friend Hernún⁶, who was somehow fascinated with it, maybe around December 2000.

Cholila. The name sounds exotic, remote, and secluded. Well, at least in Spanish, or at least to Argies.

It’s my first time writing about this period of my life. It feels weird to remember those days.

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$ cal 2 2001
    February 2001
Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa
                1  2  3
 4  5  6  7  8  9 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17
18 19 20 21 22 23 24
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One rainy day in February 2001, I think it was the 19th or the 20th, I met a woman from Cholila. Her name doesn’t matter, we’ll call her X. We started dating, and she moved in with me after a few days.

Move fast and break things, they said.

Once I had a love and it was a gas
Soon turned out had a heart of glass

I remember driving one day with Hernún in my car. I had a white first-generation Ford Ka⁷ we affectionately called “Gutiérrez” for reasons that don’t matter now. I told him that I had met a girl from Cholila, and he rightfully

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholila,_Argentina

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chubut_Province

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patagonia>

⁴https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholila#Fiesta_nacional_del_asado

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch_Cassidy

⁶<https://hernun.com.ar/>

⁷[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ford_Ka#First_generation_\(BE146;_1996\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ford_Ka#First_generation_(BE146;_1996))

thought I was joking. After all, it's a small town of 2000 people in a country of 40 million. What are the odds?

It was not a good time. Argentina was breaking apart, I was going through therapy, and I still worked a job that I liked but with people with whom I didn't get along.

But I did get along with her. We clicked instantly.

She gave me a copy of the fantastic book *Recuentos para Demián*⁸ by Jorge Bucay⁹. She wrote a few words in the first page. I still have it.

Times were accelerating. I knew change was near.

\$ cal 7 2001

July 2001

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	
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29	30	31					

One day in July 2001, I woke up in sweat and tears. I had dreamt of riots. She was by my side; she tried to comfort me. I murmured the words, "we must leave."

I had a hard time sleeping anyway. We lived in downtown Buenos Aires, 300 meters from the Obelisco¹⁰, and one could hear massive gunfire every night. The country's social contract had broken long ago, and it was getting worse every day.

I remember my colleagues at work laughing at me when I told them about those gunshots. "They would say it on TV if it was true." I also remember mentioning that I thought the Convertibilidad¹¹ or peso-to-dollar parity could only last for so long. More laughs. My time in that place was over.

I quit my job on the morning of July 20th, 2001. I sold my car in a "Car One" dealership along the Panamericana¹² highway. The following week I went to the bank, wired my economies to my mother in Switzerland, and closed my account. I kept some cash and later bought Traveler's Cheques in dollars to carry safely with me.

\$ cal 8 2001

August 2001

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25

⁸<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34556350-recuentos-para-demi-n>

⁹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jorge_Bucay

¹⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obelisco_de_Buenos_Aires

¹¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convertibility_plan

¹²https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autopista_Panamericana

26 27 28 29 30 31

We planned to go live to Costa Rica, and we bought plane tickets for September 15th, 2001. (I know what you're thinking.) But before leaving Argentina she wanted to introduce me to her family in Patagonia, so on August 16th we left Buenos Aires.

We took the night bus to Bariloche¹³ and then another one to Epuycn¹⁴ along the famous Route 40¹⁵. From there, we took a cab and drove a long, lonely dirt road until we reached the house of her family, who lived in the proverbial middle of fucking nowhere.

Near their home were lakes, forests, sheep, a river, and a dirt road. A few years later, that house would be visible on Google Earth.

These people lived almost wholly cut off from the world; if it weren't for a DirectTV dish on the roof and a mobile cellphone with a somewhat faint and shitty signal. I settled into a dull routine of chopping wood, taking long walks, and disagreeing with everyone about anything. I'm charming like that. They were as lovely as me.

The location was gorgeous, but it could have been a better stay there. I didn't get along well with X's family, and the situation deteriorated badly after a few months.

Apparently I didn't get along with many people back then.

No, scratch that.

~~Apparently I didn't get along with many people back then.~~ X had changed. I didn't know why, but she didn't act the same in Cholila as she did in Buenos Aires. I would later understand.

Love is so confusing, there's no peace of mind
If I fear I'm losing you, it's just no good
You teasing like you do

A few weeks after we arrived, we woke up and watched the twin towers go down¹⁶ live on CNN.

(Anecdote: I had visited New York in 2000, and did the mandatory tour to the rooftop observation deck of the south tower¹⁷. I later learnt my mother was confused and thought I was in New York during that 9/11. I guess I couldn't have been further away from NYC that morning.)

Bin Laden quite radically had just changed our plans, so we stayed in Patagonia.

\$ cal 12 2001

December 2001

Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa

¹³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bariloche>

¹⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epuy%C3%A9n>

¹⁵[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Route_40_\(Argentina\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Route_40_(Argentina))

¹⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks

¹⁷[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_World_Trade_Center#Original_building_\(1973%E2%80%932001\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_World_Trade_Center#Original_building_(1973%E2%80%932001))

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9 10 11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 21 22
23 24 25 26 27 28 29
30 31

Surrealism is not enough to describe some situations. The world as I knew it was tearing itself apart on satellite TV, but the forests, the river, and the dirt road wouldn't care less.

Beginning of December we watched the economy minister (rhymes with sinister) Cavallo¹⁸ announce cash withdrawal restrictions in the country.

We finally left Cholila on December 4th; after the cab to Epuyén, we took a bus and slept that night in Bariloche. On the 5th, we crossed the Chilean border on a bus, went through Osorno, and reached Valdivia¹⁹ that evening. We took another night bus, and on the 6th, we got to Santiago de Chile.

1'400 km in 48 hours from Cholila to Santiago de Chile via Epuyén, Bariloche, Villa La Angostura²⁰, Osorno²¹, and Valdivia. Average speed: around 30 km/h.

In Santiago, over coffee, she finally revealed why she behaved differently in her family's house. A horrendous story that I won't share here.

We went for a walk. I remember people selling pirated copies of the recently released Windows XP in the streets of Santiago. I also remember seeing a magazine cover about Apple releasing a new thing called "iPod" and wondering what that was.

But I digress. We decided to take a small break from each other. I got the news that my mum had had eye surgery, and we decided it would be better for me to stay with her for some time. The idea was to meet again in Santiago de Chile in February 2002 and restart things together.

I still had some economies in Traveler's Cheques; I transferred them to her name. On the 7th, I bought an Air France ticket taking off that evening. The return flight was two months later, around February 20th.

Adorable illusion and I cannot hide
I'm the one you're using, please don't push me aside
We could make it cruising, yeah

We split at Santiago's long-distance bus station. She took a bus to Valdivia. I remember her waving at me from the bus. She was crying.

I took a cab to the airport and flew to Paris that evening. From there, I flew to Geneva on the following day. I landed on the freezing evening of December 8th. Another cab took me to my mother's home in Chemin du Champ-d'Anier street, in Petit Saconnex²².

¹⁸https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domingo_Cavallo

¹⁹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valdivia>

²⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_La_Angostura

²¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osorno,_Chile

²²https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Petit-Saconnex

12'000 km in 24 hours from Santiago de Chile to Geneva via Paris. Average speed: around 500 km/h.

I weighed just 70 kg, my mother barely recognized me, and I fell ill immediately after arriving. I was exhausted and drained.

Later that month, my mother and I watched the December 2001 riots²³ in Buenos Aires, again on CNN²⁴. I saw the gunshots being fired live on TV. I saw the peso-to-dollar parity disappear into oblivion.

The world where I had lived for the past four years disappeared almost overnight.

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$ cal 1 2002
      January 2002
Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa
      1  2  3  4  5
 6  7  8  9 10 11 12
13 14 15 16 17 18 19
20 21 22 23 24 25 26
27 28 29 30 31
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On January 15th, 2002, I spoke to X on the phone for the last time. We argued. Again. Suddenly the call dropped. It happened often because the mobile signal at their location was feeble. So I redialed her number, but this time the voice on the other end told me something different: the number I dialed was invalid. I redialed. Same. Again. Same. Again. Same.

The number was not invalid, and I had not composed it wrongly.

Once I had a love and it was divine
Soon found out I was losing my mind
It seemed like the real thing, but I was so blind
Much o'mistrust, love's gone behind

I must have retried dozens of times until it was late in the Swiss night. I tried again every day for a whole week. The next day I sent her an email. The following day I kept trying. Phone. Same. Email. Same. Again. Same.

Fast forward twenty years later, I never heard from her ever again. Not on the phone, not on email, not anywhere.

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$ cal 2 2002
      February 2002
Su Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa
      1  2
 3  4  5  6  7  8  9
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17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28
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The date of the return flight to Santiago arrived. I woke up, and I decided that I would stay in Switzerland. There was nothing left in Argentina for me.

²³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_2001_riots_in_Argentina

²⁴<https://web.archive.org/web/20011227145908/cnn.com/2001/WORLD/americas/12/19/argentina.riots/>

I cried. I'm like that. I have a terrible habit of longing for the wrong people.

By July, I had moved to a new place in Lausanne and started a new job.

That house is still visible on Google Earth.

Yeah, riding high on love's true bluish light

PS: I don't judge her, nor anyone should. I moved on, and so did she. I just tell this story so that nobody reading it feels the temptation of ghosting²⁵ anyone, ever.

²⁵</blog/radio-silence/>