

Two Short Stories: "A Man" and "A Broken Bone"

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I have been a translator, mostly of poetry from Brazil, Ecuador, and Portugal, for almost half a century. My forty-seven books include Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugénio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions.

The pandemic enveloped me in the interior of Brazil. When I saw that the entire city had closed down and that I was the only client left in the deserted hotel, I realized it was time to flee. Twenty-four hours later I was safely home in the forested Northern Tier of upstate New York and that is where I have spent the entire pandemic. The sudden forced isolation, tinged by fear, provoked an unexpected response. Without much deliberation or even consciousness, I found short stories welling up from some subterranean source. I now am forced to believe in the Muse. I have written eighty-three stories since March 24, 2020. Fifteen of them have been accepted for publication. I feel I am writing to redeem my time and to reconcile myself at last to the human condition, the implacable nature of things.

I lived for two and a half years on a lagoon in Brazil. "A Man" is a true depiction of the lithe shrimp fisherman who lived next door. The central character of "A Broken Bone" is fictional, though I did indeed break my hip on Isabela, an island in the Galapagos to which I returned every year for a dozen years, until the pandemic intervened. I love to travel, I love the "other," and most of my stories are set in alien lands where I feel right at home: Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Iceland, Haiti, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina.

A Man

He had been a shrimp fisherman all his life. Even in his seventies, he carried his body like a ballet master, erect and full of grace. To watch him cast his net was to witness an artist at work. First, he would gather the gauzy strands like a thick rope of lace in his left hand. He would then take a cord from the center of the net and put it between his teeth. As in a ritual, rocking backwards and forwards, the accumulated netting swaying from his hands, he would fling out his right arm at the precise moment of his craft, releasing the cord from between his front teeth, and the circular net would spiral through the air, billowing into its fullness, then slowly descend toward the dark surface of the water. But the elegance was not over. With a practiced patience, he would let the net settle towards the muddy bottom of the shallow lagoon. Then, after a pause, he would very slowly begin to draw it towards him, hand over hand, with infinite care, like the Parisian mime Marcel Marceau, for any brusque movement would shake shrimp free of the invisible web in which they were enmeshed. Only when the entire net was coiled in a pail at his feet, did he begin to shake the webbing, loosening the captured shrimp and letting them drop into the orange plastic basin. He was as efficient as a night heron and just as unself-conscious.

Miro's dwelling was a simple wooden shack, with a light bulb hanging down from the thatched ceiling in his main room. Sharing his house was his aged wife, toothless and content, and a young daughter of their old age, eyes askew, a bit feeble-minded, but always smiling and filled with good will. They lived from selling his daily catch, as they always had.

Miro enjoyed helping out his new neighbor, the professor who had rented the bungalow next door. The only man in the village who could read and write. Miro was pleased to have an educated man as his neighbor. It didn't bother him that he himself could neither read nor write. After all, he knew how to cast his net and that was all that mattered. Once the new neighbor, James, (an impossible name to pronounce, so he simply called him Doutor,) knocked on his door in great consternation. The Doutor and his wife, Carol, were almost trembling, as they hurried into his small living space. "Cobra," they gasped. "Cobra!" Miro was amused. He looked out into their well-raked yard and there he saw it.

Now he was somewhat less amused, for this was a dangerous creature, a brightly colored coral snake, fast-striking and venomous. A gringo could easily die, he thought. He grabbed his machete and glided toward the snake, with his usual effortless, elegant stride. Before the snake could slither away, Miro had swung his machete down with a swift and precise motion and sliced off its head. The beautiful slender body, banded in orange and black stripes, continued to writhe on the sandy soil. The severed head lay there with gaping jaws, still ready to bite, if given the chance. James and Carol stood there paralyzed, fascinated. Miro, now that the snake was dead, thought nothing of it. He had helped his neighbors, that was all. He picked up the body with his machete and tossed it in the brush between their houses. He then carefully picked up the severed head with the point of his machete and flung it out into the late-afternoon lagoon. "Obrigado" the gringo exclaimed. "Obrigada" sighed his wife. They were very relieved, and he was pleased to have been able to provide them a service.

One day, the Doutor came by alone and knocked at his door. Miro asked him in and they shook hands, as the Doutor seemed to like to do.

"O Doutor quer algo," said Miro, politely offering help.

"Sim, queremos camarões esta noite, 'ta bom?" Ah, they wanted some fresh shrimp for dinner. Why not. Miro said he would cast his net in a little while, when the sun was lower in the sky. Looking around the small living room, the gringo noticed a newspaper clipping centered on the main wall. Coming closer, he saw that it was a photo of a soccer team. Everyone in Brazil was crazy about soccer, James knew. Even he and Carol were beginning to develop the bug and would attend home games of the two local teams. Once they had been really lucky. The legendary Pele, already a middle-aged man, with his career in the past, had come to town for one last game and had almost scored with an unexpected bomb from midfield. The goalie, taken by surprise, was relieved when the ball soared just above the crossbar.

James looked more closely at the photo on the wall. The players were not in the usual uniform of the two local teams. These uniforms had stripes. "Miro", said James, "gosta de football?" What an inane thing to say. Of course, Miro liked soccer. It was the heart and soul of Brazil.

"Claro que sim," was the only possible reply. Of course. James, curious about the team and where it was from, continued his friendly interrogation.

"Did you root for this team? Did you have friends on this team? Did you play for this team when you were young?"

"No" said Miro, "I didn't play for them, but they were all my friends."

"And what about that uniform? Why the stripes," James persisted.

"Ah, said Miro, "that's because it was the penitentiary soccer team."

"Wow," said James, a bit nervous, "I didn't know they had their own team."

"Oh yeah, they were really good, those guys," Miro added with pride.

"And how come you knew all those guys," asked James, though he felt that now he was barging beyond his neighbor's humble living room and further than he wanted to go.

"Those guys were my friends. We were all in there together," Miro replied, with no embarrassment. James was a bit shocked to hear that his graceful, elegant shrimp fisherman neighbor, the man who had just saved him and his wife from a deadly coral snake, had been in the federal maximum-security lockup. He felt he was invading his neighbor's privacy, but the neighbor didn't seem to mind at all.

"Why were you there," James finally dared to ask.

"Me," said Miro, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world, "I was there 'cause I killed my wife. My first wife. They kept me there for two years."

James couldn't pull out now. He was in over his depth, but Miro didn't seem troubled by his criminal past. "What happened?" said James.

"What happened," said Miro, " what happened is this. I came home one day and found my wife in bed with my best friend, so I grabbed my machete and cut off her head." James could hardly speak. He felt he had entered a new world, like nothing he had ever inhabited or visited before. It didn't enter his mind to inquire after the fate of the best friend.

"When was this," he asked. "Oh, about fifty, fifty-five years ago," Miro said, in a contemplative manner.

"Well, how old was your wife when you killed her," James went on. He had gone too far to back out now.

"She was seventeen, my wife," said Miro. James was appalled.

"But Miro, he said, "just seventeen, just seventeen, she missed her whole life, here you are a man in your seventies, and she died at seventeen. Don't you feel, don't you feel," and the gringo searched for the right word in Portuguese. Miro, trying to help, supplied the word he thought James had been seeking.

"Remorso?" said the agile fisherman? "Remorse? "De jeito nenhum." No way!

Standing tall and self-assured, the fisherman made his simple case: "Um homem deve ser um homem." A man has to be a man.

The gringo had nothing more to say, and, after reminding Miro to bring them some shrimp for dinner, he turned and hurried back to the familiarity and comfort of his wife, with her billowy blond hair, next door.

A Broken Bone

James wasn't rich, but he made enough so he could go on vacation to the usual places. It was surprising he hadn't visited the Galapagos before. But finally he was headed for that great tourist destination. Pretty soon he could check it off his list.

He'd been to Paris, like everyone else, to see the Eiffel Tower (long lines, too expensive, hardly worth the trouble). He'd been to Rome to see the Colosseum (run-down ruins, overgrown weedy patches full of stray cats), Florence for the Uffizi (big deal, those huge paintings that had nothing to do with the real world of today). He even went once to Athens (another shithole, everyone trying to get your money, though the Acropolis looked nice against the sunset sky). He'd been to Southeast Asia (nothing but shitholes, incomprehensible jabbering, streets filled with motorbikes, rickshaws, a million tiny people like ants, all trying to get something out of you. But at least the sex was good, no questions asked, no complications, and the price was right). Mexico, Acapulco, Cancun, crowded, but the hotels were modern and clean and kept the riffraff out, so there he had been relatively content. Everything air conditioned, the pool bright blue and full of chlorine, pretty chicks sauntering around in bikinis, waiters ready with a Tequila or a Cuba Libre, and everyone

speaking English, the way it should be. Yeah, Mexico knew how to cater to tourists, how to treat Americans the right way.

And now he was in Ecuador and beginning to think he had made a mistake. He had been obliged by his itinerary to spend a night in Guayaquil, another world-class shithole. The Oro Verde was fine, nice arts and crafts on the walls, but walking around town was a waste of time. Beggars, bums, drunkards, and rats. Who needs it? He returned disgusted to his air-conditioned room, ordered a fillet mignon and a Coors Lite (they actually had Coors in this shithole) from room service, and settled down to CNN (he couldn't find Fox News, only Fox Sports in Spanish on his large, flatscreen hotel TV). Well, the town sucked, but the fillet mignon was good, nice and juicy, the way he liked it. He ate, watched the news, same old, same old, and went to sleep.

The next day, after a two-hour flight, the plane banked over what looked like a desert. The island was called Baltra and he heard that the American soldiers stationed there during World War Two had gotten so bored they killed all the iguanas on the island for target practice. Who could blame them. The place looked as if it hadn't changed at all. If he were stuck there and had a gun, he'd kill everything that moved. That or just go crazy.

The airport terminal was nothing but a couple of one-story buildings, but at least they were air conditioned. A taxi took him down through the god-forsaken desert to a ferry, the ferry carried him across a channel with some sea birds floating and diving for fish, and on the other side, he found a hotel taxi waiting just for him. One thing he liked: Ecuador accepted dollars, in fact that's all they used. He thought that was a good idea and didn't understand why everyone didn't do the same thing. The taxi dropped him at the Windermere and an attendant checked him in and another attendant carried his luggage to his room. They both seemed to speak English, but with a heavy accent. He couldn't understand why Latinos never learned to speak good English. Were they too dumb or too lazy? Either way, it was a pain in the ass.

He had an OK lobster dinner, though obviously a Maine lobster was a lot better than what they could offer down here. He walked around town, the usual boutiques, the usual ice cream joints, a couple of sexy Indian-looking chicks, a pier with lit up water around it and a seal or two swimming around. It was OK, but no big deal. He wondered what all the hype was about.

After a couple of days in Puerto Ayora and a couple of standard tours, visiting a cave, watching stupid, huge Galapagos tortoises moving in slow-motion, visiting an island covered with bird shit and thousands of seabirds, he got bored and decided to go by boat to another island, to see what was there. He got off at the pier in Isabella, grabbed a cab, and asked for a good hotel. The taxi dropped him at the Mirabelle, where everything was clean, they all spoke English, and his room was air conditioned. Nothing to complain about. But he was wondering why he was there.

The next day he saw lots of sea lions in the water, on the beach, and even lounging on the benches. When he tried to take a seat fac-

ing the water, he realized, just before he squatted down, that it stank to high heavens. What the shit! Benches taken over by sea lions. He bought a beer and watched the sea lions snort, twist around on themselves, scratch and grunt. Had he spent close to \$5,000 to watch lazy sea lions farting around? And those black and red prehistoric-looking things crawling out of the water, those marine iguanas. Ugly as hell. Is that what he had come for? Like most places outside the USA, everything looked kind of run-down and ill-kept. He got another beer, not as cold as he would have liked, and took a cab back to the Mirabelle, where everything was clean and orderly.

He went on a couple of organized tours, though he liked to think he was above the usual tourist-trap activities. He slipped into the water with his rental snorkel and saw swimming sharks and dozing sharks. He preferred the latter. He saw a squadron of small brown sting rays, a few stray marina iguanas, bent on a mission, and several cumbersome sea turtles. He saw all three kinds of boobies nesting on a rocky islet, including the ones with those pale blue feet. There were also lots of pelicans. He saw a semi-active volcano and felt its black sand heated from within. The guide said you could cook an egg in less than a minute by placing it in one of those fumaroles. James blurted out, "Shucks, I forgot my egg," and a couple of other tourists laughed. In spite of that, it was pretty disappointing. He didn't know what he had expected, but this wasn't it.

The third day (he still had a week left on his itinerary), he decided to explore what there was to see on a bike. When he was younger, he had done a lot of sports, but now he had grown a bit thick around the middle. A long ride would do him good. He rented a bike for the day, got a sketchy map of the island, and took off, with a couple of beers in his backpack.

He rode through town, everything looking more broken down the further he got from the water. After a bit, the houses thinned out and a lava desert surrounded him. The sun was hot, he was sweating, but it felt good to be getting a kind of work-out here in the middle of nowhere. He left town, came to a fork in the road, and headed off to the interior, passing through the same endless black lava desert. There was no sign of life anywhere. After twenty minutes the road started to climb and he figured it would be a challenge to ride his bike up into the highlands where, they had told him, there was a tropical forest, instead of the dismal volcanic desert below.

When he began to tire, he stopped and cracked open a beer in the thin shade of the only tree he had seen since leaving town. The beer can was still perspiring, so that was good. He had gotten up quite a sweat and the gradual ascent had left him winded. Now, refreshed by the beer, he got back on his bike, ready to continue the climb to the highlands. But before he even got moving, before he could change gears, without knowing what was happening, his bike wobbled, he lost his balance, and he fell to the ground in the middle of the road. His grip on the handlebars had been so tight he had had no time to reach out a hand to break the fall. He landed right on his hip and he thought he heard a cracking sound. When he tried to get up, the pain was excruciating. He couldn't do a thing

but lie there writhing in the middle of the steaming asphalt road. "That's all I needed," he groaned. "That's all I needed. What the hell am I doing here?"

As it turned out, he was in luck. Within five minutes a battered old pickup, with three kids in the back, came down from the highlands. They stopped, bent over the suffering gringo, separated his body from the bike, lifted the bike and tossed it into the bed. They helped him rise to his feet, but he screamed. They lowered the tailgate, carried him under his arms over to the truck, and slid him gingerly on to the bed. Then the fifteen-minute drive down to town and the local clinic. There two attendants, dressed in white, transferred him to a stretcher. James, though stunned by the pain, had fumbled for his wallet, but the driver, smiling, had gestured no. Giving a wave, the driver with his three kids took off, kicking up sand as he shifted into gear.

The clinic was clean, thank God, but there wasn't much else to recommend it. He lay on some fresh white sheets for hours, while nothing happened. Someone brought him a plastic cup of water. Finally they rolled him to the x-ray machine. They took some x-rays, then rolled him back to the quiet room, of which he was the only occupant. Half an hour later, a young doctor appeared. "Good afternoon," he greeted the unfortunate tourist, "I am Doctor Vasquez. I have to report that unluckily our x-ray machine is not functioning properly today. But let me see," and he bent over and gently manipulated James' leg. The slightest lateral motion sent excruciating pain through his thigh. "Almost certainly, you have broken your femur, but we cannot be 100% sure without an x-ray, which can only be done in Puerto Ayora."

Although the pain when he moved was unbearable, James stubbornly believed that all he had was a badly torn muscle. So he asked to be transferred back to his hotel, where he hoped to recuperate. The doctor arranged for the ambulance and they slid him in the back door. Again, he reached for his wallet, but the doctor forestalled him. "All medical services are free of cost here in Ecuador" he said with quiet pride. James was impressed. He had figured that once he was helpless they would gouge him. The opposite had occurred. The only thing that fully matched his expectations was the x-ray machine that didn't work. Go figure.

He stayed five long days at the Mirabelle. Hobbling to the bathroom, holding on to furniture, even the walls, was an agony. Most of the time, he simply lay flat on his bed, immobile, waiting to get better. They brought him cold coconut water, and that soothed his suffering. But nothing changed and any motion forced a shameful scream from his mouth. He slept, he sipped his coconut water, he leafed through some tourist magazines, he waited for the pain to go away. But nothing changed.

Every afternoon, between five and six, young Doctor Vasquez would come by to visit his patient. "How are you feeling today," he would say. "Nothing has changed," James would reply. "Yes, I am afraid you have a broken femur. You will need to go to the mainland for an operation." James was grateful for his presence and began to

talk, to keep the doctor from leaving. "Are you from these islands?" he asked. "No, of course, not," said the doctor. "I am from Ambato, in the mountains. Here in Ecuador, when we complete our studies, we are required to spend two years providing medical service at no cost in distant parts of the country. I think it is what you call in the United States a hardship post. This lovely island," he said with an ironic smile, "is my hardship post." James was interested. "It sounds kind of like what we used to have on an international scale with the Peace Corps." "Yes," said the young doctor, "I think it still exists." "Is that right?" said James. "I guess that's a good thing." He enjoyed the presence of this clean-cut, contained young man. He was surprised the doctor's English was so good. He was surprised the doctor could give him so much time. He had not looked at his watch once. But finally he arose, straightened the light sheet, and turned to go. "I will come and see you tomorrow," he said, and left the room.

Time passed slowly and nothing changed. It was clear that James had a broken femur, and on the fifth day Doctor Vasquez arranged for an ambulance to take him to the airport with its dirt runway. Three people lifted him up and helped him into the tiny six-seater. The pain was intense, but only when they moved him. The moment he relaxed into his seat the pain went away. Again he reached for his wallet, and again, with a gesture both natural and munificent, the doctor turned away. "We, in the medical service, don't accept tips here in Ecuador," was his polite rejoinder. James thanked him and even threw his arm around his sturdy shoulders. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much. Mucho gracias." A broken step in the right direction.

His medical adventures were not over. The six-seater flew him back to torrid Baltra, with its population of ghost iguanas from World War II. There, to his surprise, medical personnel stood waiting on the tarmac. Two hefty attendants carefully lifted him from his seat and lowered him into an ambulance. No paperwork, no interest in his insurance card, which he waved at them in a futile gesture. The ambulance descended to the ferry crossing, and a ferry was waiting, apparently just for him and his attendants. Back across the channel, with the same diving seabirds as ten days ago. Then the longish drive to Puerto Ayora, though lying motionless on his stretcher he felt no pain. Once in town, they wheeled him into the local hospital, the best in the islands. He had been assured that here, at least, the x-ray machine was in working order.

A good-looking, efficient young doctor, her long hair gathered in a tight ponytail, seemed in charge of his case. She turned from some paperwork to remark: "Welcome to Puerto Ayora. I am Angelina Suarez, emergency room receiving physician. We will do an x-ray immediately. I must warn you, it does seem that you are suffering from a broken femur." He tried handing her his insurance card, but, like the others, she showed no interest. They wheeled him to the x-ray machine and, twenty minutes later, Dr. Suarez, returned to his cubicle. "Yes, as we suspected, you are suffering from a broken femur. We cannot operate here, unfortunately, so you will

need to schedule an operation in Guayaquil." By now, the revelation of the x-ray was hardly unexpected. As soon as the diagnosis was confirmed, he asked them to send an e-mail ahead to New York, so his brother could make all the hospital arrangements. He certainly wasn't going to risk an operation in that seedy port town, Guayaquil.

"In your condition it will not be easy to go out and find a hotel room. If you don't mind staying here, we can at least provide a simple bed with clean sheets for the night. In the morning, we will take you to your flight to Guayaquil." He thanked her for her efficient care. Once again, he was impressed that in this decidedly third-world setting, his two doctors, at least, spoke more than passable English. After an injection right into his abdomen, apparently to ward off the danger of a blood clot, they wheeled him to an empty room. They gave him a glass of water and a plate of lukewarm spaghetti, then left him alone for the night. There was a button to push in case he needed help.

In the morning, there was a reversal. It turned out that hospital regulations only allowed ambulance transfer to the airport for patients flying to Guayaquil for their operation. James had made it clear, in requesting the e-mail, that he intended to be operated on in New York. He could never manage to return to his departing flight on his own, using taxis, buses, the usual ferry, without the help of hospital personnel. And his return flight to New York from Guayaquil was scheduled for that evening. For the first time since his accident, he felt utterly helpless, because for the first time the local medical staff that had been so quietly reassuring, seemed unable to resolve his problem. "I can't go alone," he kept repeating. "Can I pay a special fee for the ambulance service?" No, there were no provisions in their system for "special fees." No one was sure what to do. But Dr. Saurez, returned now to duty, said she would call her brother who had lived on the island for many years. Perhaps he could help. Half an hour later, she returned to James' bedside with a broad smile on her delicate, but firm face.

"My brother has solved the problem," she said, with a combination of pride and relief. "He is a good friend of the governor of these islands." And all of a sudden, everyone sprang into action. The attendants transferred James back on to a gurney, quickly wheeled him down the long corridor, and shifted him, with the usual moment of excruciating pain, into the ambulance. Dr. Saurez walked alongside the gurney. He shook her hand. He clung to her hand. He wished he could have embraced her. He wished he could have given her an enormous tip. Once again, he reached awkwardly for his wallet and once again received the usual reply. "That is not necessary. Medical treatment here in Ecuador is free of cost." He wanted to cry.

Back home in New York they operated immediately. The surgeon was brisk and professional. Everything went well. The bill came to \$56,000, but of course his insurance covered a good part of it. The surgeon visited him once in his hospital room and after that disappeared into the bowels of the system. James spent four months in therapy and slowly got better. He noticed that the therapists timed their sessions to the minute and then were gone. When he thought back to Ecuador, he no longer did so with condescension and scorn. Remembering sturdy Doctor Vazquez, remembering slender and efficient Doctor Suarez, he felt that he had met good people. It was a strange thought for him. He wasn't used to asking himself if people were good or not. And sometimes, during the lengthy period of gradual recovery, he would find himself musing: "Maybe I should go back to Ecuador. Maybe I should give it another try."

He felt uneasy that he had called it a shithole. He began to wonder nervously if something had gone wrong with his whole life. But if that were true, what should he do. What could he do, he asked himself, back in his comfortable condo on the eleventh floor, there in the middle of the greatest city on earth. He poured himself a gin and tonic and gazed out his living room window at the tall buildings all around, fingers reaching toward the sky. "What the fuck," he thought, as he tipped the glass upwards. And he felt doubt come swirling in like the water of a rising tide, disturbing and fresh.