

“If not for Cosmos”

DAY 27: BEAGLE CHANNEL, ARGENTINA*



Voyaging along the Beagle Channel with a southern giant petrel. (photo: Dan Linehan).

Bang, bang, bang.

I looked up from the expedition gear cluttering the floor and draped over everywhere else. The sudden sounds stopped me from puzzling how to pack up the mess. At this stage in the voyage, I was used to the occasional alarm. Sometimes a drill. Mostly a wildlife spotting. I checked the porthole right away, now an instinct. Nothing but quiet and calm darkness. After being aboard a ship, which was like a pinpoint of floating light on a vast sea, night after night, I'd learned that the dark took on many distinctions. Sometimes it was never really darkness at all. The Eskimos in the Arctic had many words for snow. How many words for night had I already encountered? Now, I didn't feel the motion of the waves.

Bang, bang, bang . . . BANG!

I opened the door. Cassandra, bundled for the freezing cold, radiated her excitement.

Our ship, the M/V Southern Aurora, anchored in the Beagle Channel for the night. Because the seas of the Drake Passage were unusually calm, we made the crossing from Antarctica to Ushuaia, Argentina, in less than two days. The port had no room because of our early arrival.

“Scott, get your jacket. Come outside. Hurry,” she demanded in her heavy Chilean accent.

Cassandra had a beauty that effervesced. It was the way she talked, the way she moved, the way she held herself. She didn't just walk. She half danced and half bounded from place to place. But now she acted in a way I never seen before.

On land, Cassandra wouldn't have given the impression that she made her living sailing on the highest of all the seas. She was by no means fragile, but her delicate-looking frame didn't appear sturdy enough to be making such voyages. It only took a minute or two after meeting her to understand that she was indeed built to weather anything in her way. This was only the second time in 25 days that she came to my cabin door. I felt my blood surge. I got to see her again. I knew each time could be the last.

"It's over here somewhere," I said, not wanting to look away from her light brown eyes or her long, dark brown hair freed from the ponytail I always saw her wear, until this moment.

"Hurry. Hurry."

"What's going on?"

"Just get your jacket and come on before everyone else ruins it," Cassandra answered.

"I'm looking for it."

She spotted a tiny part of the jacket underneath a pile of folded clothes, rushed in, yanked it, sending everything else flying, grabbed my hand, and pulled me out of the cabin.

We weaved through the narrow passageways. We were strangely soft and fluffy in our clothing compared to the metal structure around us, which seemed too massive and heavy for a ship that was buoyant in water.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

Cassandra unlatched a square-shaped steel door that looked like it was sealing off the entrance to a dungeon. Using both arms and all her weight, she budged open the bulky door. It led outside, midway along the left side of the ship. She took my hand again. I did not mind the tow one bit.

"Stay down," she said. I complied.

We passed a row of bright portholes belonging to the lounge. The expedition members and staff inside enjoyed themselves as if nothing unusual were happening.

"Don't let them see us," Cassandra said, with her voice just above the sounds of the water's calmness. "Keep low."

"I am keeping low. This better be good."

She turned and answered with only a crooked eye and mischievous half-smile as if to say, It's always good with me.

Just before we reached the rear observation deck, Cassandra said, "Close your eyes, Scott. Don't look yet."

"You're not planning to toss me overboard, are you?"

"Yes. Now keep quiet or else I'll get caught. And stop peeking."

I felt the roughened surface of the deck more than ever as I let my boots drag a little to be sure of my footing. She guided me to the railing. I seized it with both hands. Not that I didn't trust her. I picked up the habit—which I learned the hard way—of always needing to have at least one hand holding on to the ship while I moved about or it rocked around.

"Okay, you can look."

We were in the channel where the closest lights on shore were miles and miles away. This was the same water that Charles Darwin sailed through, his ship the channel's namesake.

"What, no plank? No sword to poke me over with?"



Anchored in the Beagle Channel with the Moon and a comet soon to follow. (photo: Dan Linehan).

“Shush. Look over there,” Cassandra said, pointing up to the heavens above the right side of the ship.

How could I have missed it? How could such a thing sneak into the night sky so unannounced? The McNaught Comet streaked across the Solar System, its tail a wake of ice and rock shimmering in sunlight emanated by the Sun hiding on the darkside of Earth. Moving thousands and thousands of miles per hour, the comet looked as motionless as the Moon.

Out from nowhere, she handed me binoculars. I was used to her magic tricks. I felt the warmth she transferred to them radiate to my hands, up my arms, and into my chest.

“It’s amazing,” I said. “I once saw a comet while on an airplane. It was Hale-Bopp, I think. But it was nothing like this. Have you seen a comet before?”

“Yes. I have a telescope home in Chile.”

We huddled close, sharing the binoculars and watching the comet for an hour. Orion’s Belt, the Southern Cross, and the Milky Way seemed brighter than I had ever seen. We were, after all, anchored in the middle of the Beagle Channel, waiting to get into Puerto Ushuaia. Hardly any light shone from our ship or a nearby fishing boat. We talked about the silver ring on her finger, my silver hoop earring, and the healing powers her mother claimed silver possessed. In her late 20s, she was the oldest of five. I was the oldest of six.

With all the matter of the cosmos above us, I could not think of anything else except her. Standing close to her was as if we stood together since before all the stars that we watched that night began to shine. But Cassandra needed to go. She had to work early in the morning. We had already said goodbye for the night more than two hours ago. All this time with me could cause her trouble.

We climbed down to the next deck and slowly walked alongside the handrail to the front of the ship. An officer making his rounds said hello but did not make a fuss about seeing Cassandra with me.

I turned to watch the officer disappear into the metal catacombs. “I’m not going to get you in trouble, am I?”

“I’ll be okay.”

Approaching a secluded section of the ship, I took Cassandra by the arm, tugged her into the darkness, and kissed her. She resisted a little at first, but her kiss grew from timid to tender. She pulled away, looking over my shoulder. This was dangerous for her. No one else walked nearby. I wrapped my arms around her once more. This kiss far outshined the first.

If the port weren’t so crowded, our first kiss and those that followed would never have happened. Though we were at sea together for weeks, the start of our romance took until now. My heart had needed time to defrost, taking the cue from all the melting glaciers I had witnessed. I didn’t realize what a heating effect Cassandra had become until it was almost too late.

The crew was forbidden from getting involved with the passengers. If Cassandra and I got caught, nothing would happen to me. She, on the other hand, would lose her job as well as any other chance to work aboard a ship this season.

“The Other Side of the Comet”

PRESENT DAY: BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA*

On the edge of his bed, Scott Sullivan sits, facing the bedroom window of his third story apartment, troubled by the many, many years that have passed since the night anchored in the Beagle Channel. He pours the last of the water from a clear-glass pitcher into a wine glass, resting on a slightly tilted, tile-covered nightstand.

He lives in an apartment in the San Telmo barrio of Buenos Aires. The neighborhood is a mix of older buildings as varied as the dispositions of Argentine rulers. Outside on lively cobblestone and paved streets, in any direction or distance, it is easy for him to find a cafe with his favorite meal and drink of empanadas and malbec wine. Although not all empanadas are equal, finding good vino tinto is never difficult.

His bedroom window seals tightly when it’s closed, and a thick strap to its right rolls and unrolls a hefty set of exterior blinds made of large wooden slats, which keep out all light and most noise and cold. But now, there isn’t any reason to keep any of these away.

A drawn, woven shade blows from the window sill when the breeze stirs. As the breeze grows silent and the shade falls back, the wooden rod sewn into the bottom of the shade makes a gentle thud when it taps the sill. He listens to this tapping as words in Spanish from people on the street drift up, and he allows himself to be mesmerized by the sounds and the rhythm.

As the window shade lifts, a momentary pulse of light filters in. He watches his reflection in a small mirror to the left of the window come and go, come and go, reaches to his face, and traces along the creases. The wrinkles must surely be cracks in the mirror. “Damn mirror. Keeps breaking,” Scott says out loud, though he has given up trying to fool himself. There used to be a day when he always felt and looked much younger than his age. Now, it is apparent to him that the balance has shifted way too far in the opposite direction.

The other side of the room is alive with photographs of whales, seals, albatrosses, and penguins. Icebergs and glaciers and vast expanses of frozen land. The photographs stretch the length of the low, but long, dresser in several successively higher rows like a series of mountain ridges growing in size. None of the photographs show people, but each snapshot is still a storyteller to him. Looking them over, he says, “Hello, friends. My old friends.”



In San Telmo, Buenos Aires, tango is sung in cafes and danced in plazas. (photo: Dan Linehan).

The tapping of the window shade becomes louder. He sees the image of himself as a younger man when he was handsome and his long hair and close-cropped beard were fully brown and tinged with red. Back then, adventures always propelled him. Where is that man? He looks at a photograph of a comet hanging on the wall. It is here that he finds that man again.

Largest of only three photographs hanging on his walls, he pulls the photograph of the McNaught Comet off, stares, sighs, then turns it over. Taped to the back of the picture frame is a DVD in a paper sleeve, but his bedroom doesn't have a DVD player, television, or computer.

He walks out of his apartment, through the flimsy door, and hesitates to shut it behind him. He sighs again and slowly seals off his refuge. He trembles slightly as he inserts the skeleton key. But to him, it feels as if he's locking the door using a key made with a soft rubber spine, not a metal one. The staircase to the second floor has tall, narrow steps. Walking down is always harder because the steps are notched at the bottom, so there's an overhang to slip the toes of shoes under on the way up. But no such advantage is afforded on the way down. Scott sidesteps these stairs then heads down the hallway to a marbled staircase that takes a quarter spiral turn to the ground floor. Its inside track is utterly unnavigable because of how closely spaced the steps are, but the steps along the outside track are wide enough to easily accommodate even those in a less than sober state. Though the wine from last night has worn off,

he still wobbles. Scott reaches for an elusive railing to stabilize himself before remembering that it remains affixed only to a ship from his memories. He clenches the DVD with both hands.

In the downstairs commons, the television is off and people are milling around as usual. The room has tables, chairs, and sofas for the residents to gather and socialize. He switches on the television and DVD player and pulls the DVD from its sleeve. “Melina,” in red indelible marker, is written on the DVD.

In a lone chair pulled in front of the television, Scott fumbles to press play on the DVD player. Even after so many years have passed since he last watched the video, the button is almost too painful for his fingertip to touch. Somewhere from deep inside, Scott has believed that he’d never again see the video. Logic and willpower did not inform this belief. Not only would he have no choice but to watch it, he’d also have to suffer through it in a public space. Scott has not thought such an intrusion into the most intimate moments of his life was possible. Until now. His most guarded and buried memories are about to be released and exposed in a room with strangers because of a personal request that he finds unimaginable to negotiate or refuse. Throughout all the dangers Scott has faced over his lifetime, he has never felt so vulnerable.



Vanishing glaciers on the Andes Mountains, Argentina’s Puerto Ushuaia, Beagle Channel, Chile, and then the clouds and sky. (photo: Dan Linehan).

Contact brings the screen alive, showing a side view of a young man inside a hotel room sitting at a simple desk and typing on his laptop. He searches for songs. His brown hair is long and wild, and he has a full beard like a mariner. He wears blue jeans and a dark blue sweater with two white horizontal stripes. He wears eyeglasses but still looks rugged. A tall, half full bottle of water, two empty wine glasses with drops of red inside still wet, an empty bottle of malbec, and a vase with wilted flowers cover the rest of the desk. Behind him are two large windows, but the curtains are drawn. The young man on the screen is Scott from a long time ago—fifteen days after having kissed Cassandra under the McNaught Comet.

Melina Hernandez, a filmmaker from La Plata, Argentina, films him. As a child, she lived in Canada while her father attended graduate school. So her English is fairly good. Melina’s accent had seemed slightly French to Scott even though she is a Spanish speaker. She pronounces “that” as “dat,” and the sound was so intensely evocative to him that he had felt his insides resonate with breathless desire. Melina hides behind the camera. “Melt with You” by Modern English plays on his laptop: *“I’ll stop the world and melt with you. You’ve seen the difference, and it’s getting better all the time. There’s nothing you and I won’t do.”* Hearing this song, he remembers they loved the same music. The playlist became of the soundtrack for their lives. But in the video, Scott doesn’t sing along with these words. He sings a different song.

SCOTT (singing): Lay, lady, lay.

MELINA: So, Scott?

Scott turns to the camera as Melina zooms in for a close-up. His hair reaches to the middle of his shoulder blades.

MELINA: Tell me, why do you have your hair long?

SCOTT (singing): Stay for a while.

MELINA: Why?

SCOTT: Because when I’m in Antarctica and the Sun is really hot and direct—and with the hole in the ozone layer—it keeps me from getting sunburned. I wear my bandana and mi hat, my hat.

He covers his mouth and nose with one hand and his forehead with the other.

SCOTT: And I look like a bandido because I rob fat American tourists, who are on big cruise ships. They are very gordo and dumb.

His smile isn’t from the trouble of the past but from the trouble to come.

* The photos and excerpts from the novel *The Princess of the Bottom of the World* by Dan Linehan were first published in the *Homestead Review* (2015).

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