

Questions

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“*Oi Pai*,” the Portuguese rolled off Lucas’ tongue as he walked into his uncle’s house, locking eyes with his father.

Lucas had anticipated this reunion for a long time. It took exactly 17 years, 8 months, and 14 days for Lucas and his dad to be together like this again. He reached for his dad and gave him a tight hug like he hadn’t seen him for all those 17 years, when in reality, it had just been a few months since Lucas visited his family for Christmas.

But this hug felt different this time. Lucas sponsored his father to get him a green card. That’s what brought his dad here. This hug signified the permanency of things to come.

“How was your trip?” Lucas’ dad asked.

“It was fine. Nothing that exciting. I can’t believe you’re here. How was your trip?” Lucas asked excitedly. “You’re the one who got on an airplane for the second time in your life.”

“I’m a pro now,” his dad joked.

“You better be, because we have one more flight to catch to our final destination in two days. How are you feeling? Have you talked to Sandra and the kids? What have you been up to with uncle Fred since you got here?” Lucas fired question after question at his dad.

“I feel fine. I am excited to be here. Sandra and the kids are fine. They send their *carinho*. They miss me. They’re slowly getting used to me being gone,” he said.

He lowered his gaze when he said that. Lucas recognized it as the way his dad always said that things were fine, but they were not. Like the many times Lucas asked his dad how things were back home, only to find out from his mom that his dad did not have enough money to buy food, or clothes, or the kids’ school tuition. His dad had a talent for making you believe that everything was fine because he was so optimistic about life.

“Don’t worry. They will be here in no time,” Lucas said confidently. But Lucas wasn’t confident. He was just hopeful that the rest of their family would be joining them soon. The speed of a green card process was as predictable as the weather in Illinois.

For the rest of the night, Lucas, his dad, *tio* Fred, *tia* Rosa, and *prima* Isabel, ate dinner, recounted old memories, made new ones, and lost track of time. It was close to 2am when Lucas got up.

“I’m going to bed,” Lucas announced and looked at his dad. “There’s so much for you to see, now that you’re here.” He landed a kiss in his dad’s balding head and said good night.

The next morning, Lucas and his dad headed down to Miami. Lucas was eager to show his dad parts of his life that he only shared in conversation before. Things like where he went to school, the dorms where he worked during his graduate school years, where he first got in a car accident, where he fell in love with another man.

“Are you hungry? Want to get something to eat?” Lucas asked.

“Not really. I had a *misto quente* and *café*. The coffee here is not very different from Brazil. I was ready to drink some bad coffee in America,” his dad joked.

“Well not every American likes weak coffee. Plus, here in South Florida, they have Brazilian products. We will buy some groceries before heading to Champaign. I brought an extra suitcase just for that,” Lucas laughed.

The weather was warm. They drove with the windows down, something that Lucas asked his dad if it was ok to do as back home the weather was still cool. He hoped it wasn’t too cold for his dad to handle given that he never experienced temperatures below 70 degrees. The heat felt nice, and Lucas wanted to be able take it all in.

They drove down interstate 95 south, towards Miami. Lucas did not miss the South Florida traffic. He had grown accustomed to the traffic of a small college town. The traffic would be the one deterrent to a future life in South Florida.

“What are you most worried about?” Lucas asked as he exited the highway.

His dad pondered for a second, which seemed like years for the silence it created.

“Finding a job as a 66 year old man who speaks no English,” his dad replied with a smile. The unfounded optimism was stamped in his face.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. America does not see age,” Lucas lied. “And you will learn English, slowly, but you will. People will love you and they will want to help you because you are such a nice guy, *Pai*.”

But Lucas worried. He worried for all the unknowns that awaited for his dad, like a thief hiding away in a house, waiting for the right opportunity to strike the unsuspecting victim. He worried for himself too. Since he left Brazil, the closest he had come to caring for something was his fish, Chomps. Now he would need to care for an aging human being.

They arrived at Lucas' graduate school mid-morning and spent the rest of the morning walking around the campus. Lucas introduced his dad to his best friend, Marcia, who still worked on campus. They had lunch together at the student union. As students zipped by, chatting with one another, his dad heard a lot of Spanish, even some Portuguese. He wondered if he could find a job there. It would be a good place to work, he thought. He was surprised how often he thought about a job. He was surprised at how excited he was to be thinking about a job since he hadn't had one for almost a decade in Brazil.

While they were walking in South Beach later that afternoon, Lucas was eager to show his dad the art deco architecture and colors, the Lamborghinis and Ferraris and Porsches parked street side like they were regular cars, and the perfectly tanned people walking up and down the boardwalk on Ocean Drive.

"Isn't this place great, *Pai*?" Lucas asked.

"It is definitely not the boardwalk in *Maçarico*," his dad said after he took a drag of his cigarette, comparing it to the only boardwalk he had ever seen up to that point in his life.

Lucas chuckled. He tried to imagine how it must feel to see things for the first time in life when you are 66 years old. His dad did not have the same opportunities in life as Lucas did as he was busy providing for Lucas and his three other siblings.

"How does it feel to see these things?" Lucas asked.

"It feels fine I guess," his dad replied.

"Did you ever imagine that you would be in Miami at some point in your life?"

"Not really" his dad paused. "What's with all the questions Lucas?"

Lucas was startled by his dad's directness. He could not think of a previous time where his dad was this forthcoming. Lucas wondered if he knew this man next to him.

"I don't know," Lucas said. "I'm just curious to hear how you are feeling. That's all. It's your first time outside of Brazil. It's your second time in a plane..."

"Third," his dad interrupted.

"What?"

"Third time in a plane." Another long drag from his cigarette. A car drove down blasting bachata. They caught a whiff of the salt in the air.

“Ok, third time. That’s what I am saying. You are doing a lot of firsts the last few months. And when I ask you how you’re feeling, all you say is fine”

“What else do you want me to say?”

“Elaborate some more *poxa*!” Lucas said emphatically. “You have to be feeling more than ‘fine.’ You are fine every time I called and asked how you and your family were, knowing very well you guys weren’t fine. But I chose to believe and stayed quiet.”

His dad didn’t have anything to say after that. By this point, they had been walking on the bike and pedestrian path when they stopped and sat on the wall. People rode by on their bikes, runners glistening with sweat ran past them, and rollerbladers with earphones and protective gear glided by them. The mid-afternoon sun was high and hot, but the ocean breeze was cool.

“I just want to make sure you are happy here and this is something you want,” Lucas continued.

“I’m here, aren’t I? So, it is something I want,” his dad said.

“Ok then. There’s nothing wrong with saying you need help, *Pai*. I guess that’s what I am trying to say,” Lucas said.

His dad quieted again.

“Do you want to do anything else here?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t know what else is there to do. What do you want to show me now?” his dad replied.

They spent the rest of the afternoon walking down Ocean Drive. They watched the volleyball players in an intense game of beach volleyball. They walked to the water, removed their shoes and walked barefoot along the shoreline, listening to the sound of the waves crashing, feeling the fine sand on their feet, grains of it getting stuck between their toes. His dad had another cigarette and was lost in thought as he walked.

As Lucas gazed at his dad, he thought about how two people can experience the same place in such different ways. For his dad, this was perhaps just another beach. For Lucas, this was a beach filled with as many memories as the grains of sand in it. He recalled the times he hung out there, making friends, flirting with guys he knew he could have, and desiring the ones he knew were out of his league. He remembered lounging at the beach for many lazy hours, trying the local food, grabbing a cup of coffee, and enjoying a book. His life now was different from those memories.

But for Lucas' dad, unlike what Lucas thought, this was not just another beach. This was his first beach in America. Just the one of many he would come to visit in the next few years in this new country of his. While the name held no significance for him, South Beach became one of his favorite beaches, filled with memories. These memories would stay with him until his death not too many years from now. He didn't know that at that time, but this beach would become his favorite beach in the whole wide world.

After a stroll and dinner at Lincoln Road, they made their way back to Fort Lauderdale. They stopped at the Brazilian grocery store. Lucas stocked up on all the essentials: *café*, *guaraná*, cookies, and *bombons*. When they arrived at *tio* Fred's house, it was close to 9pm. They had an early morning flight back to Champaign the next morning.

By the time Lucas woke up, his dad was having his coffee and smokes.

"Good morning *Pai*. Are you ready?" Lucas asked.

"Yes, just finishing up my *cafezinho*," his dad said as he took a sip of his coffee. They loaded the car with their luggage. They hugged *tio* Fred, kissed *tia* Rosa and *prima* Isabel, and waved for as long as they could before they lost sight of them as the car left the condo.

On the way to the airport, his dad noticed things already familiar to him: the roots of a tree that spills out just a bit into the sidewalk, the Walgreens coming up at the corner, and the way the sun cast shadows at that time of the morning. He thought about how the human mind is peculiar like that. He was here for just a few days, but things already seemed familiar. He wondered about the familiar things his mind would soon get accustomed to in Champaign.

At the airport, they dropped off the rental car and hopped on the shuttle to the terminal. In no time, they were through security and waiting by their gate.

"Do you want something to drink? *Um café*?" Lucas asked.

"Yea I'll take a *café* from *Starboocks*," his dad said, pronouncing Starbucks as it sounds in Portuguese.

"From Starbucks uh? You're already an American," Lucas joked. His dad chuckled.

From the line at Starbucks, Lucas could see his dad. He was fidgeting with his hand, looking side to side. He didn't have a cell phone to keep his fingers busy. His dad noticed a baby to his left, and he played peek-a-boo with the child. Lucas smiled. The thought of things to come

overwhelmed Lucas, probably the same way it overwhelmed his dad. The joy, the laughter, the arguments, the hurt, the love. He knew they would experience them all.

What Lucas wished the most was that he could transfer all his knowledge, all his cultural capital, all the lessons he learned as an immigrant to his dad, like putting it in a USB stick and transferring to a different machine.

“Here’s your coffee,” Lucas said.

“*Obrigado*,” his dad said.

“That’s a cute baby.”

“*É*,” his dad said, taking the first sip of his coffee.

When their boarding group was called, they joined the other travelers in line. Lucas was behind his dad, hand on his shoulder. The airline attendant grabbed his dad’s boarding pass and scanned it. The beep signaled his admittance.

“Have a safe flight Mr. Castro,” the attendant said.

“Thank you,” Mr. Castro said confidently in accented English.

Lucas smiled and followed his dad into the airplane.