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If I don't think too hard about my experience in Argentina, it can easily feel like a dream - a sort of extended vacation in which the novelty of it all keeps cross-cultural frustrations at bay. A new and exciting place where a month of cloudy days doesn't bring the melancholy that usually accompanies Minnesota winters.

But as I sit here, in the dead of winter, I can't pretend I just took a five-month getaway to somewhere warmer. Nor do I want to. It was much more. And if I look in the mirror, the evidence is clear.

It is in my lips, lips that now speak Spanish without effort, without thought. It is in my hips, rounded out from eating too much *helado* and too many *alfajores*. It is in my hands, hands that feel strange shaking the hands of others after months of cheek kiss greetings.

And it is in my heart, a heart that knows it can show strength in the face of extreme vulnerability.

And that is where my story starts. It isn't moving or insightful. It doesn't tell of language faux pas, transportation mishaps, or cultural clashes, though I have plenty of those stories too.

It is just my story of falling into place.

I had been in Buenos Aires a little over three months. I was still figuring out the bus system, the school system, and the complex slang system. Some days were a (relative) breeze, others a chore. I would feel like I was finally in harmony with the city, only to let my guard down and slip on a pile of dog poop in the street.

I went to class as I always did, sipping on *té con leche* as my cinema professor extolled the virtues of films about *los desaparecidos*. Class ended, and I, armed with my very *porteña* sneakers dutifully dodged sidewalk cracks and traffic on my way to the bus stop. The 29 made one of those barely stops and I leapt aboard, inserting my 80 centavos. *Ochenta*, I told the driver, and grabbed a nearby pole for dear life.

I despised riding the bus. If the constant lurching that sometimes knocked me off my feet wasn't bad enough, I was petrified someone would talk to me. Argentines are curious and talkative, and hearing my accent could kick off an extended discussion of anything, from what I, a "tourist," was doing riding the bus to my thoughts on American foreign policy.

As the bus neared my stop, it happened. An elderly lady turned to me and asked if this was the only stop on Gallo Street. It was. I froze. Forty people crammed on bus and she had to ask me? "Sí," I managed weakly. She seemed satisfied and I, satisfied I had dodged a bullet, got off at the next stop. I walked a few blocks before I was stopped by another local.

"Excuse me, do you know where Cordoba is?"

"Yeah, two blocks that way, it crosses this street," I responded without hesitation.

The man thanked me and we both walked on, but I took only a few steps before I realized the magnitude of my accomplishment.

I had,

1. Been mistaken for a local,
2. Understood that I was being asked for directions, and
3. Given directions, accurate directions, without 10 minutes of Spanish stuttering.

At home my triumph would have meant nothing, but on that sunny street corner in Buenos Aires,

it meant everything.

I finally felt at home. Although my status as a non-native Spanish speaker and non-citizen often made life more complicated and inconvenient, it also kept things interesting.

I found peace on that dusty street in Palermo. Not because my Spanish was perfect or because I was suddenly given some miraculous gift of cultural understanding, but because I realized that the vulnerability that I felt and the challenges I had faced weren't going to kill me. I suddenly knew that all my misadventures would leave me with the kind of inner strength that can only be the result of facing all this country could throw at me.

I was never afraid to ride the bus again.