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## Joy

Alexis Levitin

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES:** Alexis Levitin's half century as a translator resulted in forty-eight books, including Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugenio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions. His short stories began in the fear-tinged isolation of the pandemic. So far, he has placed thirty-one stories in magazines such as *Agape*, *Agon*, *American Chess Magazine*, *Bitter Oleander*, *British Chess Magazine*, *El Portal*, *Gavea-Brown*, *Latin American Literary Review*, *The Nonconformist*, and *Rosebud*. A collection of chess-related short stories, *The Last Ruy Lopez*, will be coming out in 2023.

Who can understand the human heart?

Everyone envied them their good fortune and their happiness. Carol was beautiful and young, free of vanity and pretensions. Her eyes were bright green and always ready to smile. She loved to paint and that is what she did. There was a stillness to her canvases that gave each scene, each depiction, the flavor of eternity. A grey cow, sitting placid beneath a grey palm tree, appeared prepared to remain motionless till the Second Coming. The huddled houses of the fishing village at night, with just a streetlamp casting a weak glow, seemed to reveal their quiet communality on her canvas. The painting was a study in shades of black, with a slightly different hue for the night sky, the quiet lagoon, the rising forested hills, the dark blocks of the houses themselves. In her most celebrated painting, the downtown warehouse of the provincial capital with its empty pier stood in naked symmetry in the midst of a deep silence. The government center had bought that canvas and placed it in a prominent position in the entrance hall. On all her canvases, time stood still, and the local upper crust, both from state government and from the regional branch of the federal university, was fascinated and bought everything the local gallery displayed.

James was a professor of American Literature, presenting, as best he could, the special flavor of his home country to Brazilian students, both eager and laid-back. Because he hated the Puritan in himself, he loved teaching *The Scarlet Letter*. Most of the students could not accept Hester's final self-immolation, her deliberate return to the town of her torment, her insistence on placing the hated symbol of her sin upon her breast once again, even when the townsfolk had finally abandoned their self-righteous cruelty. Adultery, their church had made clear, was a deadly sin, but in their own hearts it made their blood throb and their eyes glisten. He himself was torn by mixed emotions. He was filled with awe and admiration, contemplating Hester Prynne's passion and pride, but he was also terrified. He assumed that Hawthorne had felt the same way.

Back home, in their bungalow on the edge of the lagoon,

1 James engaged in perhaps the only manual labor of his life: he built the frames for Carol's paintings and he stretched the canvases. To his surprise, he was able to do it all: measure the boards, saw them clean, create triangular pieces to support the corners, nail them together, place a supporting cross brace down the middle

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of the larger frames, measure and cut the sturdy canvas, use clumsy pliers to pull the material over the stretcher bars, then finish the job with a stapler, tightening the canvas to its frame. He was not good with his hands and he had never built anything in his life except childhood sandcastles at the beach, so he enjoyed the unaccustomed sense of fulfillment that came when he leaned each finished, clean canvas up against the wall. He had the pride of a seneschal, a valet of art. His father had been a skilled draftsman and his sketches of the very young and very old were filled with an ironic, yet warm perceptiveness. James had inherited neither his father's warmth nor his talent. Ironic perceptiveness perhaps.

And so they lived on the edge of the lagoon, envied by all. She painted, he prepared her canvases and, of course, his classes. At night they would eat fresh shrimp from the fisherman living in the neat wooden shack next door. Quite often, in late afternoon, they had the chance to watch Valdir perform his artistry. Standing in the shallows on the edge of the lagoon, he would rock his whole body, then uncoil, throwing the shrimp net in a whirling circle with the grace of a ballet dancer, the eternal elegance of a Michelangelo. Right arm still extended, feet firmly planted in the muddy bottom, he would watch his net sail in its perfection, then settle gently on the water and slowly sink out of sight. Bringing the catch in reminded James of Marcel Marceau, that beautiful mime, the quiet harmony as the slender old fisherman slowly, very slowly, hand over hand, drew in the collapsing net, rich with its delicate load. James felt surrounded by art. Carol and Valdir were both possessed, without knowing it. But what about him? Did he have an art?

Despite his doubts, stepping back from himself, from the

two of them, he could, on occasion, see how fortunate they were. Their days were sunny and warm, their nights cool and pleasant. The village was tranquil, nestled between forested hills with troops of small monkeys and the distant roar of Atlantic surf. How could one not be happy? Yet, now and then, despite the screens, a high-pitched whine close to his ear would remind him that, even in paradise, there are creatures created to drink your blood.

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When summer break at the university was approaching, they managed to book passage on a Spanish cruise ship heading for Antarctica. On the ship they ate well, tried their hand at bridge with Argentines much more skillful than they, and played ping pong on a table that rose and fell with the rolling of the waves. They laughed at their ungainly situation and James grinned, remembering Charlie Chaplin's brilliant shipboard dining scene in *The Immigrants*. How he would have enjoyed the ping pong match, with the swaying deck, the tilting table, and only the small white ball keeping its place in the air. Dizzy from the ship's motion and the illusiveness of the ping pong ball, they abandoned the table and, clutching each other's arm, descended the narrow stairwell to their cabin in the lower depths. He managed not to vomit, despite his nausea, but for James making love that night was out of the question.

The jumping-off port for the Palmer Peninsula was Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. The water in the harbor was greener than Carol's eyes, James thought, but icy cold and crystal clear. It suggested something eternal and boundless. In fact, it had nothing to do with Carol's eyes, and he felt foolish for having thought so.

With the balance of the day to explore, they took an ancient taxi inland, towards the snow-capped mountains rising beyond the town. They shared the ride with two other tourists from the ship, an elderly couple, wiry and fit. Loren and Sue had lived for decades in South America, but now had retreated to Washington, D.C. He was on assignment for National Geographic, doing a photo article on Argentina, its beauty and its troubles. When the unexpected tour to Antarctica was announced, they couldn't resist. Luckily, there was an Argentine research station on the Palmer Peninsula, so it was easy to convince his employer to include the tour on his bill.

Arriving at the base of the mountains, they gathered fallen branches from the woods and dragged them towards the middle of a wide hollow just beneath the ramparts of friable red stone. There

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they built a small bonfire and huddled around it, warming their hands. The snow-capped mountains rose above them. Loren was a

true outdoorsman and, when a couple of mountain climbers arrived in a second battered taxi, he decided to accompany them up the steep face. After half an hour, they disappeared from sight, enveloped in a sudden snow cloud. James wished he had gone with them, though he realized he had neither the skill nor the gear for such a venture. The others all had sturdy mountain boots and he, absurdly, was wearing tennis sneakers. Excluded from the real adventure, he waited with Carol and Susan down in the valley. They were talking away happily, so he busied himself returning to the nearby stretch of forest to gather more wood for their blaze. He piled some of it on and the flames leapt up, the dry branches crackled, and Carol and Susan, still chatting away, laughed at something between them, in their bulky orange Antarctic Touring gear.

It wasn't long before the three figures reappeared high on a col, returning from above the snowline. When they were all gathered round the fire, watching the charred logs shift and drop, the mountaineers talked about mountains, while bars of chocolate went around. One of the strangers revealed that he had just a week before gone on a mission to retrieve the frozen body of an American climber lost on Aconcagua. It had been a difficult rescue, if one could call it that, since the dead American was about six foot four and frozen solid. He said that in a month he would be leaving for an expedition to Mount Everest. Listening to them talk, James wondered where he fit in. He had always dreamed of Mt. Everest, but he suspected he would never get there, not even to base camp. Having a dream was easy. Incarnation was something else.

As he listened, he watched Loren, who had squeezed down between Carol and his wife. Loren smiled at Carol, then murmured something to his wife, while handing her an elegant bar of Toblerone chocolate. Though listening to the mountaineers, James kept his eyes on the elderly couple. He could see that they were comfortable and secure with each other. He could see that, old enough to be his parents, they were still in love. He envied them and wondered whether he could ever achieve such a thing, whether such a thing could ever happen to him?

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The passage through the roaring forties lasted most of the night and into the next day. It was as rough as had been predicted and James and Carol took turns vomiting. But then, on the far side, the ship came out into the clarity of a low-lying midsummer sun, and, in the distance, a bank of white clouds signaled the ice-clad coast of Antarctica. The late afternoon never really ended, and the half-light, James felt, was both enchanting and disturbing, as if they were on another planet. Suddenly, a few hundred yards away, a blunt headed sperm whale surged almost perpendicular from the water, rising ponderously, like a slow-motion lift-off at Cape Canaveral. Then it fell back with a crash and disappeared. There

was utter stillness, as if the coldly beautiful world was holding its breath. Then a second massive creature burst from the sea, the same trajectory, the same slow ascent, the same falling back, as it, too, disappeared beneath the icy water. All eyes were turned to where the whales had risen and then vanished. At first there was an awed silence. Then someone called out "Welcome to Antarctica," and the spell was broken.

satisfied. Cautious due to the threat of drifting ice, the captain was loath to put into the narrow harbor, the destination listed on their itinerary, the spot where Scott had overwintered. He didn't want to be stuck with eight hundred tourists on the ageing Cabo San Roque, surrounded by ice floes, with diminishing supplies of food, diminishing rolls of toilet paper, and increasing anxiety. So, he anchored just beyond the natural harbor and James had to content himself with glimpses of the tops of the masts of the two research vessels that had made it inside. How he envied them.

As for himself, for Carol and the others, they could gaze at towering glaciers and bluish ice floes. They could watch the ominous dorsal fins of killer whales and the frantic leaping of penguins from the water, followed by their stolid waddle inland. But they themselves were only allowed to visit two islands off the Palmer Peninsula. The great adventure at last, thought James, but they were not permitted to set foot on the Antarctic continent itself. It was little consolation for him to remember that even the legendary Christopher Columbus had never set foot on the American continent. Nor had Magellan, in fact, completed his famous circuit of the world. He had died from a poisoned arrow in the Philippines. And before them all, there was Moses,

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perhaps the most unfortunate, not allowed by Jehovah to enter the Promised Land. At the thought of these predecessors, he gave a wry smile. But he was not reconciled.

Carol, on the other hand, loved the ice cliffs, loved seeing the killer whales, loved the Adelie penguins hobbling on the ice, loved the endlessly lingering twilight of the polar summer. She sketched everything she saw, even her fellow tourists. As far as she was concerned, they were indeed in Antarctica. And she was happy. Her happiness irritated James, though he knew it was absurd.

On one of the islands where they were able to land, James carried camera equipment for Loren. They walked down a long stony beach towards the snorting, belching, roaring agitation of Southern Elephant Seals in their breeding season. Fully twenty feet long, enormous males challenged each other for dominance. Loren photographed them in their vicious, slow-motion combat, neck braced against neck, bulging chest against chest, yawning jaws twisting forward to tear out flesh, then twisting away. Except for their bleeding wounds, they looked like Sumo wrestlers. Indeed, the heavier combatant normally was granted his space, and the smaller male,

overwhelmed by close to four tons of aggression, would back off in defeat, then turn to the water for comfort. James was impressed by these battles and was glad to be helping the photographer with his varied cameras, lenses, tripods and other paraphernalia. Though he loved to travel, he had never carried a camera. He wasn't sure why. This was as close as he had gotten. Carol took a batch of snapshots with her Kodak. They would develop them back in Brazil. But James knew they wouldn't be like the ones that Loren was taking for National Geographic.

When the cruise ship steamed north, James and Carol parted from their group, including the couple from National Geographic, during a brief stop in the Falkland Islands. Wandering the roads around Port Stanley, they experienced three or four seasons in just a few hours. There was brilliant sunshine, then violent gusts of wind, then a snow flurry, then a hazy calm, then sunshine again. They walked along the coast, they walked amongst the pastures. They had afternoon tea with a couple of red-cheeked Welsh sheep farmers, who invited them in. The farmers said it was a hard life, but a good one. As for Argentina, it was a foreign country to them. No one in the Falklands even spoke Spanish. The friendly couple ended up offering them a room for the night and they accepted. It was genuine hospitality, but James understood that to be proper guests in

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that small house they had to sleep silently. So, in the sagging bed, he gave Carol a peck on the cheek, murmured good night, and rolled into himself.

The next morning, they were given a warm send-off (almost no one ever visited the Falklands, after all) and boarded a small plane for Rio Gallegos, the nearest town in Argentina. They had read about Cabo Virgenes and its huge penguin colony. Even after their Antarctic adventure, Carol wanted to see more. Back in southern Brazil she had painted the sad little penguins that arrived on their beach during mid-winter storms, exhausted and dying. Only one that they knew of had survived, living alone as a sentinel in the garden of the governor's palace. She had been jubilant finally to see living, thriving penguins at last, and she was eager for more. James, still feeling thwarted by their failure to set foot on the continent itself, feeling cheated out of the culmination of the great adventure, thought that perhaps a visit to the remote tip of South America, with its vast Magellanic penguin colony, might provide something to fill the void.

In Rio Gallegos they hired an eager young taxi driver for the day. Carlos knew nothing about penguins, had never even heard there was a colony, but was willing to give it a try. With the rather vague destination of Cabo Virgenes, they headed south. There were, of course, no road signs. At first, they passed through fenced-in sheep country, and all they saw were great pastures of grass and endless flocks of dirty beige sheep. After an hour or so, the fences disappeared, and they began to see the soiled woolly coat of dead sheep

lying beside the road. They were a bit shocked, but Carlos considered it normal, since there were endless sheep and no fences, and he just kept driving along, looking as if he doubted the gringos knew what they were doing. After another half hour there was a change: instead of dead sheep, they began to find dead penguins beside the dirt track. Carlos perked up, never having seen a penguin before. In fact, as he explained, this was the furthest he had ever driven from downtown Rio Gallegos. Carol looked sad, gazing at the helpless small bodies, but James, still smarting from the Antarctica anticlimax, took it as a good sign. Soon they would arrive at the colony.

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And then they did. The road by now was more sand than dirt, and the taxi was laboring along in second gear. But at the next modest rise, they suddenly saw the South Atlantic shimmering beneath them. It was filled with penguins. Thousands and thousands of them dotted the water, and as the surge mounted and waves crested, many of the penguins simply surfed ashore. The waves were huge, the penguins very small, but they were utterly at home in the surge. Carol stood in the wind on the edge of a dune, gazing out in triumph. James himself felt inspirited, as if perhaps his Antarctic funk might be lifting. He glanced at Carlos, and could see that even the taxi driver was happy to have come along, and not just for the forty dollars.

The stiff breeze blowing in from the ocean, however, was cold. Carlos, wearing just a windbreaker, finally retreated to his taxi. James and Carol, after gazing their fill, dropped back from the edge of the cliff, taking shelter in a sandy bowl surrounded by clumps of scraggly dune grass. It was there that Carol saw a tiny penguin hidden in a hollow it had carved from the sand beneath a thick cluster of grasses. James watched as she bent closer, almost cooing. She reached forward, still murmuring, and held out her hand. Suddenly she pulled it back with a jerk. Still hunched over the penguin's nest, she exclaimed: "He bit me. He bit me!"

She was not aggrieved; she was filled with wonder, transfixed with joy. Her eyes sparkled with the miracle of life. This other being had touched her, had made contact. "He bit me," she murmured again, standing up next to James. He took her hand, and without realizing it, gently began to caress her cold fingers. They were trembling. Then he stooped and kissed her on the lips. It was a long, soft kiss, and he felt as if a dam had suddenly broken inside him. "Could this be what had been missing? Could life really be like this?" he thought. And for a moment, at least, he truly loved her.