



- Ghost Town Chaitén -

If You Want to Make God Laugh, Make a Plan.

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1800 Words

Chaitén is a twilight zone – a small Chilean town neither living nor entirely dead.

It's an end-of-days world of creepy abandoned houses, where inside empty homes the wall calendars remain turned to May 2008, dusty tables stand set for breakfast and children's toys lie about forsaken.

The apocalypse arrived abruptly. On May 2, 2008 the nearby Chaitén Volcano began erupting – the first time in over 9,000 years. Many had lived their lives in Chaitén without even knowing that the mountain existed. All of Chaitén's inhabitants – more than 4000

people – evacuated. Then, much of the town was destroyed.

But now, improbably, unexpectedly, a few living souls still cling on, having returned to their homes in a ghost town that lacks electricity, running water or public services of any kind. The scene seems cinematic, hallucinatory – survivors scraping by amidst the ruins of civilization. Eccentrics? Lunatics? It is difficult, at first, to fathom who would so stubbornly struggle on in a place that nature has so decisively set out to destroy.

I arrive in Chaitén on the ferry – the town's only link with the major population centers of Chile. Its departure is delayed . . . and then delayed once again. It dumps me on the darkened shore late at night. The



One occupied house stands on a dark, empty street -- the home of Sgundo and Cora Tacul.

ship's search-light illuminates a highway sign near the jetty. "Chaitén" it reads, and an arrow points off to the right. It is the only indication that the total blackness beyond conceals anything more than the forests and mountains of Patagonia.

I dig out my flashlight and follow the road – until just a few minutes on I stop in my tracks on the edge of a precipice. The road has been washed away. Just a few footsteps separate me from a twenty-foot drop into an eroded gully the width of a four-lane road.

On the other side I can faintly make out a few buildings – Chaitén.

I wander disoriented along dark, silent streets – the reflection of my own flashlight from the mute, empty windows the only sign of human presence. Incipient

panic: What if there's no one here? What if the place is completely deserted?

But then I turn some corner and see a warm glow. A house; a window; electric light. An older woman with

a weary face and nervous eyes opens the door. "Yes, come in," she says, "You can stay."

Cora Tacul and her husband Segundo, a couple now in their sixties, are among the forty or so people who still inhabit Chaitén. I sit with them in their kitchen near a wood-burning stove.



Cora spends much of the day cooking on a traditional wood-burning stove that also heats water in a large tank that hangs right above.

Cora serves me tea with home-made bread and jam; and she and Segundo tell me the story of Chaitén's destruction: of the earthquakes and of the violent eruption in the middle of the night – hot ash raining down, the earth shaking;



The deserted streets and homes of Chaitén. And in the distance, smoke still pours from the Chaitén Volcano.

lighting bolts rending the sky. They describe the flood that wrecked Chaitén when, choked with ash from the erupting volcano, the nearby Rio Blanco changed its course and inundated the town, washing hundreds of houses into the sea and filling many others with a mixture of water and volcanic ash.

Their tale is vivid, but it only hints at the immensity of the weirdness that I find the next day when I explore the ruins for myself.

In the worst affected part of Chaitén a river now flows where, before the destruction, entire neighborhoods stood. A few houses – those that didn't sail all the way out to sea – sit far out in the river's new delta. But whole town blocks have vanished completely, and only the occasional stray piece of furniture – a sofa, an easy chair – standing near the river's edge gives any indication that people

once called this ground home.

In less damaged areas rows of deserted houses line the streets – some filled up to the ceiling with mud but others seeming to require nothing more than a thorough cleaning. Many former residents have returned to reclaim what they could salvage of their belongings. But some rooms remain untouched – showing how abruptly life stopped.



Mementos of another time lie left behind in an abandoned house.

In one bedroom clothes still lie draped on a chair, and the bed appears recently slept in. The calendar on the wall shows May 2008 – the month of the eruption. On the floor lies a book titled “Does There Exist a Creator Who Takes an Interest in Us?”

In a kitchen tins of canned fish and vegetables are



Many former residents have returned to clean their homes and salvage what they could of their property. But some rooms remain untouched – a snapshot of life on the night the volcano erupted. In one bedroom clothes still lie draped on the chair, and the bed appears slept in. The calendar on the wall shows May 2008 – the month of the eruption. One the floor lies a book titled “Does There Exist a Creator Who Takes an Interest in U S?”



In the solitude and eerie silence of a depopulated town, innocent objects take on a sinister quality. Dolls lie cast about in front of abandoned houses and bring to mind horror film scenes. One almost expects to see a doll scratching at one's window at night – with crazed eyes and a knife in its hand.

stocked in a cupboard. A battery operated wall clock still ticks away the seconds. And an empty chair stands next to a heating stove – a small monument to the fragility and futility of human plans.

Chaitén is an ominous tableau, stirring feeling of amazement, awe and unease. But there is also something darkly comic about it – highlighting the hubris and silliness of mankind's purported power over nature.

The whole town has become a memento mori. Black vultures sit on top of the inert, broken street lamps. From electricity poles torn transmission wires hang down like tentacles. Emaciated stray dogs amble about. And children's dolls lie cast away in the street. In the solitude and silence of a depopulated town innocent objects take on a sinister quality, and I half expect to see a doll scratching at my window at night – with crazed eyes and a knife in its hand.



Children's drawings of Chaitén's lie scattered in a deserted classroom.

“We call Chaitén Ground Zero,” Cora tells me, as she stands in the kitchen preparing apple empanadas that she will bake in a wood-burning stove. “Zero water, zero electricity, and zero help from the government.”

A few decades ago, the Taculs explain, Chaitén lay on the frontier of civilization. To live there you had to be self-reliant. Suddenly, those times have returned. Now a gasoline-powered generator provides electricity for light in the evening. Water comes from a well. The wood-burn-



Cora and Segundo Tacul visit a cousing and sit by the stove drinking mate – a hot herbal infusion drunk through a metal straw.

ing stove is used for cooking and baking. And yet, they say, the prospect of beginning anew some place else seems even more daunting.

“Here we have big houses, ample space,” explains Segundo. “Have you seen the apartments in the cities? How people live?” He shakes his head. “Better here. Here I sleep well.” And then he adds with uncalculated understatement, “In Chaitén it’s quiet.”

“Anyway,” he continues, “when I came to Chaitén forty-five years ago we didn’t have electricity, and then for many years we only had it for a few hours a day. We’re accustomed to this.”

Not inconvenience but idleness eats away at Segundo. Behind his house he shows me his large carpentry

workshop where he used to make furniture, doors and window frames. But now, with no electricity, Segundo cannot operate the machines – the generator he has is too weak. “My father was a carpenter,” says Segundo, “He worked till he was 85.” “If they ever restore elec-

tricity I’m ready to work again.” In the meantime Segundo and Cora survive on a government subsidy paid to all the victims of the volcano.

With no job and no television or other diversions that occupy people’s time in more normal places, Segundo and Cora spend much of their time socializing with relatives and friends who still live in

Chaitén and some nearby settlements. “We know everyone here,” Cora says. “There are only a few people left, but we don’t feel alone.”



Segundo Tacul in his carpentry workshop.



“Only these rocks are eternal,” says Claudio Sund, his hand on a couple of volcanic stones from the eruption. “Everything else passes.” “Both of my sons died,” he explains. “One died in an accident and the other from an incurable illness. . . . And then the whole town died.”

Inevitably, though, not everyone in Chaitén has such a strong social network.

One day I chance on Claudio Sund, a welder who lives alone on the edge of town. As I approach his house a dog tears at me – viciously barking. I pick up some stones to defend myself, but at the last moment Claudio runs out of his house and calls off the dog. “He was born after the eruption,” Claudio explains. “No one ever comes here. He’s not used to people.”

Claudio’s face tells a story close to tears. And his words confirm what I can see in his countenance. “Only these rocks are eternal,” he mumbles, showing me a couple volcanic stones from the eruption. “Everything else passes.” “Both of my sons died. One died in an accident and the other from an incurable illness.” He gestures toward the empty street in front of his house and adds, “and then the whole town died.”

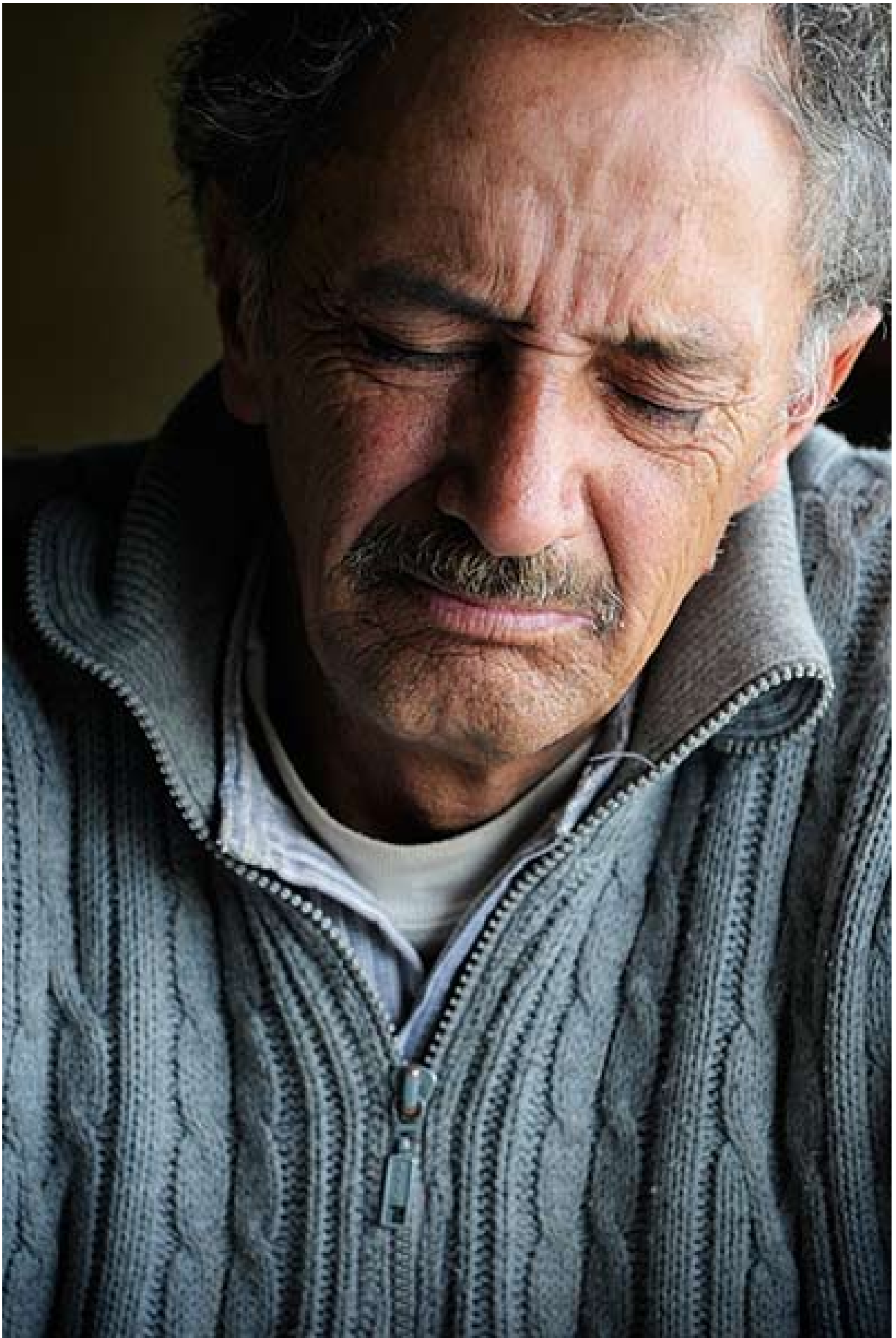
He has no relatives nearby and says that after the eruption none of his friends returned to live in Chaitén. “The solitude gets you, and there is nothing you can

do. I haven’t talked to anyone in five days.” “Still,” he goes on, “anywhere else I feel worse. This is my earth.”

It is fall. All around Chaitén rotting apples lie on the ground – un-harvested, fallen from trees that people once planted. A cold fog from the mountains drifts in, and then quickly is gone. A corrugated metal roof creaks and bangs, twisted and mauled by the wind. And in the background the volcano still smokes. It all calls to mind an old Russian proverb: “If you want to make God laugh, make a plan.”

A town of empty houses and empty streets seem as strange after a few days as it does on first impression. But the people who remain there are not the odd-balls and fools that I expected to find when I first arrived. They are pawns in a tragedy – people terrified of the unknown, preferring the devil they know to the devil they don’t. In Chaitén things are bad, but elsewhere they might be even worse.

But although those who remain in Chaitén express



Claudio Sund lives alone in Chaitén. "The solitude gets you, and there is nothing you can do. I haven't talked to anyone in five days."



“Liberty” reads a street sign, twisted by the wind to point up at the sky, seeming to suggest to all who see it that not on this earth but only, perhaps, in the heavens will we be free from our never ending afflictions.

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their determination to stay, it is unclear how long they will be able to carry on, now that not only nature but also the government has conspired against them.

Concerned that the town could not be safeguarded in the event of another major eruption, the Chilean authorities have decided to abandon Chaitén and build a new town on higher ground in a region to the north. Construction has already commenced.

Leaving Claudio's house I come across a street sign, on a corner a few blocks away. It reads "Libertad" – "Liberty" – and displays an arrow that once pointed in the direction of Liberty Street. But twisted by the fierce Patagonian wind the arrow now points up at the sky – a kind of confirmation to all who see it that not on this earth but only, perhaps, in the heavens will we be free from our never ending afflictions. Chaitén is dying, and soon the ghosts will have the run of the place.

