

Story for performance #980  
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Tags: [water](#), [music](#), [celebrations](#)

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The first and last time I arrived at Puerto Santa Maria de Victoria the full moon was scattered across the ruffled lake. We had been under sail for several hours, navigating darkened headlands that poked into the beaten silvery waters. I found the nightscape disorienting, the inland lake so extensive one could easily have been at sea. The jagged mountains and the hills tumbled at their base lent a dramatic defining rim to the expanse, but at no time had I been able to get a sense of the lake's topography. I was not concerned—the captain of the little ship was local to the high country, and most of her crew bore the distinctive features of the indigenous population. The country had recently wrested its independence from the former colonial power, and the mood in the capital was buoyant and naively vigorous. The jubilation and modernity of the coast had not journeyed with us however: I shivered as the playful night wind died and the ship moved into the shadow of Monte Antiguo.

I must have dozed off because I was woken by sounds of enthusiastic partying drifting across the water. Strangely, where before there had been intense darkness, now I could see the night lights of the port. These were bright and multicoloured down near the water, softened by the night mist but nonetheless cheerful. The lighter atmosphere seemed to temper my earlier misgivings. I slept again with the local guitar and pipe music drifting through my dreams.

At dawn the steward brought a large bowl of spicy coffee and I awoke travel-weary and stiff from the damp. The lake had changed again and I was dispirited to see a dreary thick mist surrounding us; the little schooner felt tacky on every surface and the crew was markedly sullen. As the strands of mist separated, I could glimpse the port. A ramshackle collection of wooden buildings and wharves seemed not to obey the waterline, but rather to have emerged from the lake and then to have collapsed back against the hills with the effort. Even at this distance I could detect a muddy, slimy cast to the sorry structures, which bore some of the architectural distinctions of the colonial style—pitched rooves, squared-off arches and steep external staircases. Between us and the port were perplexing forests of dead trees rising from the lake, skeletal branches providing refuge for flocks of a large dark bird who seemed as disinclined as I to start the day.

With the first glimmer of sunlight, the captain ordered the dinghy and within minutes I was headed portside, skirting the sunken forests and holding my breath against the dank miasma. How a location could attain such a lovely aspect at night and be so dreary by day was incredible to me, but I had little time to dwell on this conundrum as we quickly arrived alongside a rickety jetty and I was ashore.

My account was with one of the local chandlers and I set off to find his workshop amid the small winding streets and precipitous alleyways. Business was swiftly concluded. Heading back to the jetty, I passed a cantina and heard the music of last night, only now, less fulsome and more melancholy. Peering into the smoky interior I saw the most beautiful girl bent over a guitar, her profile caught by the only shaft of dusty sunlight that penetrated the bar. As her fingers picked away at the delicate melody I was mesmerised and stood on the threshold for what must have been several minutes. The light appeared to be dancing to the tune, but my rational mind determined it must only be the movement of the notes. She turned to me and smiled, the languid, moist mouth, the curling hair and the eyes that were dark yet burnished, all the while teasing out the sad melody. I could smell her, almost taste her and I was done, immobilised by a total submission to this gorgeous creature. She began to sing, which only increased my frozen fascination.

Suddenly the light was gone, and I came to my senses. I supposed that a cloud had obscured the sun, but when I turned back towards the street, I saw that it was on dusk. Could I have been standing there all afternoon? The dreary town was coming to life, strains of music started up from many quarters and it looked set to party as it had the night before. I hurried back to the jetty, anxious now for my passage home. But the lyrics of the beautiful songstress rang in my head. A sort of folk tune, I remembered only the line 'Your fate is sealed, the love of my life; seek to find, what is hidden in the scrub...'. Predictably in that maze, and hurrying in the gathering dark, I lost my way and found I was at the shore some distance from the jetty. At least I could see the dinghy there waiting for me, and as I raised myself to wave and sing out, I stumbled on some hard object amongst the greasy tussocks. I bent down and felt a box, smallish and hinged, with a fretwork decoration on the lid. Most concerned to get aboard and away from that port, I grabbed the box and made as fast as I could to the dinghy.

It was afterwards in the bright cabin that I examined the box more carefully. Some instinct kept me focused on the outside, the strange embellishments that were both pattern and figure. I touched the delicate hinges, the little metallic feet; I polished the inlaid mirrors that were really silver discs. It felt inevitable, it felt fated as I finally opened the lid. What appeared before me was like a lake of mercury, and in it, moving across it like oil on water, with terrible clarity, garishly alive, were all my fears, my nightmares, my dashed hopes and my darkest expectations.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kate Richards.*