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Aaron thought it strange, yet fitting, as he hiked to a high point on the rim of the *Lagoa das Sete Cidades*, as he trekked around the heights of the volcanic caldera above the lagoons of the seven cities, that he left no footprints.

The earth on which he walked had rose to meet his boots in one of three textures: first the soft green pastures where the cattle roamed, and stared at passing hikers, as if they owned the place; the hard packed dirt of the rim trail, high above and circling the twin lakes and surrounding farmland that filled the crater of the dormant volcano; and, occasionally, the hardscape evidence of violent but past volcanic eruptions on *São Miguel*, a 300-square-mile island that is the largest and most-populated island in the sparsely populated nine-island archipelago of the Azores — *Açores*, in the Portuguese.

Officially the islands are called an “autonomous region” of Portugal. It as even more autonomous these days.

Aaron was not all that good at geography, so he had only a vague understanding of where *São Miguel* was to be found on a map; had he been more aware, he would have known that the archipelago was just about in the center of the North Atlantic Ocean. He’d read it was within a few hundred miles of being equidistant from Lisbon, in its mother country, to the east, from Morocco, on the African Continent, to the southeast, and Newfoundland, Canada, to the northwest, which was just under 2,000 miles away.

So, basically, Aaron was in the middle of nowhere.

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In his 29 years of childhood, he'd had always been a wonderer, but he was not one of the *Romeiros*, the Lenten pilgrims criss-crossing the island this time of the year, this season before Easter. They were almost everywhere, he noticed, and today he'd seen a group of the walkers up close, as he drove out of the city, as what space traffic there was stopped at their crossing of a road. Now he saw another group, in the distance, on a road bisecting the crater floor.

Like the group of *Romeiros* below, like all the groups of believers in an age of disbelief, he too was on sojourn, seeking something more.

When he spotted them, Aaron stopped, stepped closer to the edge of the crater, to where the ground began a steep decent to the valley below, a decent appearing deceptively smooth, almost inviting, by the winds and rains of hundreds, maybe thousands, of years since the volcano had initially exploded with the fire of creation and then, when cooled and settled, created a hardscape of black, seemingly porous, lava rock easily mistaken for petrified sponges.

At the edge of the crater, he pulled his Leica camera up from where he always carried it, hung low on his chest, its strap around his neck, focused it and snapped three shots of the line of *Romeiros* below, which, from this distance, appeared as a brightly colored snake moving slowly, gracefully, along a meandering dirt road.

Aaron, depending on the year and job, traveled with as many as a dozen different cameras and video recorders. Each excelling in specific situations and each limited in others. But the Leica he carried — the metal-bodied, 35-millimeter manual-action masterpiece of German engineering perfection — traveled with him everywhere except bed and bathroom, nearly every waking minute of the day. It had its laminations, but despite a wide-range of abuses, it rarely failed to capture the image entering its lens, the image his eyes found attractive.

After capturing the moment, quickly, he knelt, swung his backpack to the ground, extracted his Cannon digital SLR, with its always attached 70-300 zoom lens. Kneeling on one knee, his other foot anchored to the earth, as riflemen have prepared to shoot since the invention of rifles, one hand holding the camera's focusing lens and at the ready, the other hand the body, with a trigger finger at the ready on the shutter button. He again focused in on the colorful snake below — this time making out the forms of a dozen or so men and boys, most clad in modern hiking boots and fairly new jeans, but most also with always colorful, sometimes well work, ponchos — almost small blankets — drooped from their shoulders.

He snapped a burst of shots, a digital slideshow of the subject, judged the shots to be too distant to be of much later value, and just as methodically returned the Cannon to its spot in the bag. He then stood up and, again, took in the incredible views of the *Lagoa das Sete Cidades*.

The islands of *Açores* are mostly sharp rock, from remembered and forgotten volcanoes.

Much of it, he had quickly learned in his less-than three days on this island, is colorfully splashed with lush wild gardens, some perfectly kept and some unkept except for natural selection, or blanketed in forever-green pastures filled with lonely cattle awaiting the sizzle of steak-on-stone but, no longer, the leather tourist trade. Oh, there are people, more men than women, it appeared to Aaron, but most of the people he'd seen seem out of place, out of time.

There are old business men who wear expensive Italian shoes to the office but lunch at a beach on the bay port of *Ponta Delgado* where they bath communally with grimy young auto mechanics and deeply tanned retail salesmen. The youth are poor but fit and talk mostly of soccer and music and drinking beer, while the old men are affluent and corpulent and filled with

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stories of business deals done and women bedded and other lies they tell when they are not drinking *Porto Blanco* wine and gambling.

The women, too, seem to fall into general social pigeonholes: older women who are indistinguishable from mothers and grandmothers everywhere in Iberian Europe — colorful in attire and timeless in expressionless facial features until they laugh at humor spoken or remembered; and younger women who dress conscience of the latest fashion magazine style and make themselves up as if they were being photographed in the same, for both the job site and the after-hours society — but they only smile when they sense it is the stylish thing to do.

Aaron's observational opinions of the island are flawed, of course, first because his visual attention is skewed toward the unique, the attractive, rather than the mundane, but, second, because he'd only scratched the surface life on island as he started this very strange assignment.

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