One Mate for Two

Thursday, 16 July 2026 – San Telmo Market

It had been the Saturday of my first weekend, the fourth of July, a date I noticed and let pass without ceremony, as a man does in the other hemisphere. The doctor's hotel was four streets from this table, and she had a few days left before her itinerary took her south and then home. We had met at a departure gate in Atlanta, the way people meet at departure gates and beside graves: quickly, and truly, because there is nothing to sell each other and no time to sell it. And there we were, standing on the soil of the country we had flown toward all night, in a market older than our two passports, and to both of us it felt entirely natural and a little improbable, like a forecast that came true.

I went to the counter to order, because I was raised by a woman who never let a guest fetch their own cup. Two mates, please. A moment later the woman from the counter came to the table, set a single wooden mate and a thermos of hot water between us, and left.

I gave the tray the look you give a wall that is missing a stud. «Excuse me,» I called after her, polite, entirely sincere. «And the second one?»

She turned around, smiled the smile this city keeps for the foreigners it has decided to be patient with, and shook her head slowly, without a gram of impatience. «It's one for the two of you. You share the same mate. That's how it's drunk here.»

«What?!» The word came out with a laugh behind it, genuine and defenseless, the sound of a man whose entire operating system has just returned an error.

The doctor raised an eyebrow and said absolutely nothing, which is the most expensive thing a psychologist can say. She watched me the way clinicians watch: with her whole body, and with the quiet pleasure of someone whose textbook has just been confirmed in a market café at the bottom of the world.

And I turned to the woman and asked, with the impeccable courtesy of a man who concedes absolutely nothing: «Could we have a second one anyway?»

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They gave us the second. At that moment I felt rather pleased with myself. A week and a half went by, and a winter of daily corrections, before the truth of that chair became clear to me. The thought had been: this is hygienic. The truth was: this is me. Because the woman at the counter was not describing a drink. In a single sentence she had handed me the entire grammar of the country, and I had asked her for an exemption. One mate. One bombilla. One mouth after another mouth, round after round of the same metal and the same water, the server filling and passing and filling again, a circle you cannot join from a distance or join alone. There is no half a mate. You drink what the previous mouth left you, or you don't drink.

And I had spent my life running hard in the opposite direction. Self-sufficient: the word had been praise for as long as I could remember, and I had honestly earned it: cooking, ironing, polishing my own shoes, drawing my own plans and pouring my own concrete, carrying a single bag and asking nobody to lift the other end. A man made like that, when handed one bombilla for two, does not hear an invitation. He hears a shortage. And he asks for a second mate.

And the Monday after that Saturday, at six degrees and not hiding it, I had walked back in under these same iron ribs and bought myself a mate of my own, and a bombilla, and a packet of yerba as green as the mountain, and carried the set home in both hands like a first knife. At the time I told myself that was independence: my own mate, no negotiation, nobody else's mouth. Now I saw it for what it was, from the other side of two weeks. A man does

not buy himself a mate to drink alone. He buys it to have something to pass.

The book continues.