

Punto Rosalía

Version 4

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About this edition

This is the fourth edition of the English version of the book, containing sixteen stories. It is also the last installment of a four-part series I'm releasing in 2017.

If you want to become a supporter of this project, please contact me. The same if you want to help me to translate these stories to your language :)

Introduction

The first four stories in this book are some of my favourite ones. "Point Rosalía", actually, gives its name to the book. "The Duel" hides a little secret about who the main character really is, and so does the "The Enlightened". Finally, "The Saddest Day of my Life" is as short as it is personal.

The second four stories are also very nice ones. "The Hotel" hides something more than a bad memory. "Applause" combines fun, drama and politics. "The Success Formula" is quite explicit and brings a little bit of the engineer living inside me. "The Possible" talks —maybe— about unplanned happiness.

The first of the third group, "The Fugitive", is maybe the most sophisticated. The next one, "Fiction or Reality", of which I am very fond, provides the answers to the questions it proposes. "The Asimov Mosque" is half a tribute, half an experiment. "The Dinner" is roughly about my impressions of Vietnam.

The last group includes diverse and nice stories too. "Lost Postcards" honors the anonymous heroes living among us. "The Job" is a story of contradictions taking place in the impressive city of Moscow. "The Lesson" delves into students' wisdom and the value of friendship. "Piety, punishment or silence" is a short story of a short trip.

Let's read them! :)

Point Rosalía

I met Olivia in Berlin, shortly after I arrived in the city without any precise plan. Spring had just started to give hints of its arrival and I was not so impressed by the city. Although I trusted the good recommendations that I had received and was enthused by the prospect of new adventures in this place overflowing with history, which was becoming more and more popular among young Germans, I never imagined that the following months would be the best of my life. And even less that afterwards the worst months were to come, months that have lasted until now.

I think of Berlin every day, no matter what I do. Every little thing in the present refers back to that period and it converts to such a futile and inevitable comparison. I remember walking the 17th of June Street that goes through Tiergarten in my red shoes, worn jeans and curly hair that was growing freely, just like my beard. Alone, or holding hands with Olivia, looking at each other, so completely in love. I could not believe (and still cannot) that I was in that place, living that experience. It seemed like a piece of fiction; and just like every story it also had its end.

I knew that Olivia was all I needed from the first moment I saw her. She was born in the US, spoke strikingly clear English and her Spanish was also very good. Tall, with an athletic body and blonde hair, she liked to wear a braid. She also had a big flower tattoo over the bigger part of her back extending in branches down to her right leg and up her left shoulder.

After some time I confirmed what I had guessed before. Her genuine freedom that needed no fancy speeches, her spontaneous and infectious smile, her calm and optimistic spirit, her romantic clarity to understand what is really important. And there was something else, that was to affect our whole relationship and, even more, my whole life: Olivia preferred women.

This made me feel considerably privileged in her company and the topic of her sexual orientation was an unlimited source of conversations and playing. Walking down the street, Olivia was my girlfriend, but also my best friend — a combination that promised an instability that had no end. We found, in women, a shared passion and we learned to mutually grow our desires for them, which of course included their seduction and conquest. Olivia could never explain why she had chosen me, something that in the end, did not interest us much. Sometimes the truth cannot be explained.

The connection that we managed to develop was wonderful. Our shared life flowed naturally, we laughed very often and we innocently enjoyed our extensive intimate moments, from playing in the grass in a park (when the sun finally decided to show its face), to staying in bed, while alternately reading aloud some of our favourite texts combined with the healthy exercise of making love. Almost nothing worried us, and problems that once seemed to be important fell into the category which they never should have left: insignificant. We had a relationship destined to last forever — that is to say, an impossible relationship.

After her insisting for some days, I gave in and agreed to show Olivia how we "porteños" approach women who we do not know, an unusual practice in Germany and the United States. We did it at any time and in any place: in the square, in a bar or on the street, in the most shameless, amusing and direct way. The open-mindedness of

Berlin women (what we could apply to the whole of Northern Europe) made it much easier to approach them — if done in a thoughtful way. The convenience of "being a latino" and the benefits of "being from Buenos Aires" added to this and not only evoked a far, exotic and passionate place, but it also simply sounded good to foreigners.

When we wanted to switch from just having fun to concrete results, certain locations proved to be especially effective in the hour of seduction. Our favourite place was Möbel Olfe, a bar situated a few meters from the station Kottbusser Tor and very close to our apartment. It was a popular meeting place for all those of unconventional sexual preferences. The ambience was very warm and it was the perfect spot to start a good conversation, our strongest weapon; so it was unusual (and disappointing) to end the night leaving Möbel Olfe alone.

In a short space of time, Möbel Olfe became our second home. We used to arrive early to "adapt" to the place, choosing a comfortable seat, taking our time and drinking a cocktail until we became a part of the ambience. Tables were small, round and tall, made for standing. From there we would carefully observe each woman coming into the bar, awaiting the appearance of our chosen one — a moment in which we would start to move as quickly as possible. One of us would get closer (for example, the one who caught her first glance) and the other one would keep the table and give gestural support from a distance. The invitation had to be friendly but bold, and our intentions had to be very clear from the start. If fate was not on our side we would continue our conversation, laughing and learning from the lost attempt. And we would always try again.

It was unlikely that a woman who came to our table would not end up in our apartment. By working together we doubled our chances and the alcohol would take away any doubt that could stand in the way of our eventual companion. The kiss, as always, was the most important moment (and the one I enjoyed the most) and, of course, it was reserved for the one who achieved the better connection. Within our cooperative seduction, this was the only playful competition that we allowed, but once fulfilled, the kiss of one would open a door to the kiss of the other one. Sometimes we would delay the moment just for the pleasure, and this delay became the first foreplay of what was about to come.

I cannot remember all the women that we met in Möbel Olfe, although it is impossible to forget some of them like Ingrid, Sofia, Juliane, Emma or Sandra with whom we shared unforgettable moments. But it was remarkable that all these experiences happened in perfect harmony and complicity with Olivia, whom I loved deeply.

This darkness gave consistency to our relationship and opened the door to a paradise in which insecurity or jealousy seemed to be absurd feelings. The more we would surrender to the risk of other women, the stronger our connection became. Just like an acrobatic couple, we would expose ourselves to the danger of big jumps with full confidence.

As we pushed the limits of our adventure, I understood that at times in order to free ourselves it is necessary to seek what we are afraid of. The attraction, the risk and even the rejection fed our excitement and breathed life into our relationship. New women were exempting us from the lethal threat of a love routine, and they turned out to

be an effective and unexpected solution — opening a path to a future free of any obstacles.

However, nothing lasts forever and our love, just like any other, was doomed to end. But we were also destined to play our part, which was not to accept what was about to happen. This is basically the only thing one can do (especially if the ending is inevitable). First we ignored it (up to that moment), and then we resisted it.

When Rosalia entered Möbel Olfe, I could not imagine that her attractive appearance was hiding the inevitable. I realized by her moves that she was Latina (her copper skin, her natural movements, the expressive look) and, judging from her playful smile, she realized the same about me. And maybe she realized even more than that. Olivia and I chose her immediately, so without any doubt I went up to her and in just a few minutes Rosalia was talking and laughing with us.

In the course of the conversation, our connection became more and more intense, and unlike on the other occasions there were no breaks or interruptions. We could all sense it, but only began to worry when the phenomenon drilled the boundaries to which life had accustomed us, feeling a weird discomfort that, nonetheless, made us want even more. Our faces transfigured into expressions we had never seen before, and we finally reached a point where we saw souls, instead of faces. The looks were burning and the bodies, out of control, were pushing to get closer, until they got wild and we kissed with an anxiety that soon became urgency. A moment later, between nails and tears, we left the place.

It was a Friday night and in the apartment there was food, wine and especially desire in excess. We made love to each other with exaggeration and without rest. We only managed to stop, exhausted, on Sunday. Rosalia left the apartment in the morning (forever) and we did the same in the afternoon, completely lost, to walk in silence along the cold banks of the River Spree.

The highest point is also the first point of the fall. Rosalia was the name of this point and we were never again able to get over her interruption in our lives. Something very fragile, that we could not come to understand, had hopelessly been broken, although it did not make sense to admit it or to confess it. However, the essential that nests in the very depth of our soul is something we cannot decide: it emerges and finally prevails.

The mutual incomprehension appeared for the first time in our lives, in almost imperceptible ways, and it kept growing until it possessed everything, despite (or maybe with the help) of our resistance. Differences that we had always ignored, escalated absurdly and became harsh fights. Reconciliations became shorter and we gave in to the suicidal temptation of judging each other heartlessly. The patient dissatisfaction was besieging us, and after a few weeks of free fall, our love story came to an end.

Complete distance saved us from the storm of feelings. I spent weeks lying in bed depressed or taking walks around the city, which became shorter each time, as I sought answers to help me go on. Anxiety overtook my chest, and not even crying could make it disappear. I could hardly eat. The atmosphere of desolation was completed with the arrival of a winter as similarly tough as indifferent. In a very short time, my life in Berlin, the beautiful city that I thought I had loved, became hell.

I knew I was in a dangerous trap, from which I desperately tried to escape. I

changed habits, visited postponed places, and started new relationships, means so rational as well as useless that only helped to accelerate the drowning. I was scared. I used my last breath to move to Genoa. Some trivialities, such as the sun, the food and the beauty of the nearby villages helped me stay afloat. But the fundamental remained unalterably bad.

I thought about going back to Berlin, but it was no longer possible. I thought about searching for Olivia and Rosalia, but I could never find them. I thought about forgetting everything, but what sense does it make to think about the impossible?

After several months, I returned to Buenos Aires (where I think about this story, over and over again), looking back on my past, that I believed had been happy. Surrounded by pain and subtleties, I could not have been in a better place. But there is no cure for the ghosts of Olivia and Rosalia that are still haunting me. Everything seems insufficient.

Contrary to what I have always argued, I now leave the sources of happiness to dwell outside of me, and thus I accept my own punishment. Internal happiness is convenient, but unreal. It is secure, but also limited. Seeking real happiness is actually seeking misfortune.

It is spring and for one moment, the delicate warmth of the sun is calming me. Far from the noise, sitting on a bench with a view over the misunderstood Rio de la Plata, I ask myself if the extraordinary justifies the high price of senselessness.

The Duel

That day in December, Alexei was nineteen years old. He woke up early enough to have his usual breakfast and to arrive on time at the agreed place. He considered quitting, not because he was afraid of dying, but due to the extreme tiredness that had been experiencing during the past few months. More than anything he wished to stay in bed, safe from the painful world surrounding him.

He got up, wrapped himself in a blanket and sat down in front of a small heater. He remained there, still for a couple of minutes. When he finally focused, he heated some water and prepared a cup of tea that he drank with some pieces of old bread. After that, he took a small mirror and looked at himself. He saw messy long hair and a grown beard. He found nothing of value, nothing that could push him to cowardice.

His life was a heavy cross to bear. In his own words, he was "as sick as someone could possibly be", a condition which was as terminal as it was as full of opportunities. The first of these, The End.

He walked to the window and looked through it with a more apathetic than reflexive gesture. The flatland of the city allowed him to only see other houses of the neighbourhood. In contrast, he remembered the unevenness of his hometown, Nizhny Novgorod, which offered more generous views that were an invitation to dream. He felt an unusual nostalgia for that place which he never really appreciated.

When he could not wait anymore, he put on his coat. He left everything tidy and closed the door, with instinctive hope to return. He walked to River Kazanka that was running calmly, silently and unstoppable, just like death. He looked to the west and was able to visualize the city Kremlin, with the staggered Siuyumbiké Tower standing out. After that, he looked to the east where his opponent, dawn and The End, were waiting for him. He walked there, resigned.

The cold was beginning to be felt in Kazan, although the worst was yet to come. It had always been like that, but he could never get used to it. Even worse, he viscerally detested it. This tangible hate became his last anchor and turned into the most determined hope. If The End was to be postponed, he wouldn't hesitate; he would leave behind all dungeons and would head to some place in the south: Caucasia, Italy...it really didn't matter.

The path was opening along the south bank of the River. The certain possibility of his last day made him see everything a lot brighter and he could perceive more details that he had overlooked before: like the cracking of the candied surface or the, hard caressing of the wind caressing..

Slowly, the light was gaining space and it was obvious that the sky obscured the city. Although the horizon was clear in all directions, thick, dark, grey clouds were threatening to unleash their angry rain or even snow. He was a skeptical man, he didn't believe in inexplicable things, but he gave in to the temptation take the weather as an omen; possibly just like his opponent did, in another part of the city.

Under the guise of common sense, fear finally appeared on the scene. He had to admit that the duel would not solve anything, for anyone. On the contrary, everyone would lose. But there was no way back. The man that was looking at him from the highest point of the hill hadn't even imagined that Alexei, with his tiring and monotonous

step, could be having doubts. Common sense cannot prevent fate, no matter how strong it is.

No. As always, it was not about a woman, honour or his word. He needed that critical moment to set himself free, and any ending would bring inevitable liberation.

He arrived at the place, and his opponent was waiting for him. He felt a strange satisfaction: he preferred stories to have two characters. He walked up to him. Once they stood face to face they shook hands firmly, trying to win the duel in advance. They agreed that the fight would be private, without witnesses and denunciation. The winner would walk away and anonymously call the police. As they previously agreed, the weapon would be the same and they would shoot only once. They shook hands again and the code of honor was set.

From that moment on, everything happened beyond his control. He saw himself instigating an enormously meaningless outcome that he was unable to stop. He stared at himself walking slowly and taking his position, relaxing his neck, taking a deep breath, and loading his weapon. He finally saw himself becoming a stupid and incomprehensible person, just like many with whom he had interacted in his short, but hard life. They had once fascinated him so much, but he never believed he could become one of them.

The outcome was short, surprising, and shortly after, painful. He fell on his knees while his hands turned more and more red, as he held the lower part of his chest and remained lying on a thin layer of snow. He saw his opponent run to him, grasp his shoulder in a gesture of support and run westwards. He could also see The End slowly coming closer.

The pain and the cold were growing, although not as much as his freedom, that was now finally complete. Once his essential freedom was defined, he only needed to know whether he would live or not. Two policemen arrived to intervene in this case, they lifted him up on one of the horses and took him to Fedorovsky's house, the renowned doctor that lived a few minutes from there, in a big (orange) house.

Fedorovsky believed this was one of those cases in which the recovery of the patient would be decided deep in his soul. The doctor did his part and applied the recommended procedure which had positive results after a few hours. When Alexei woke up, the police questioned him but they only got evasive answers disguised by pain. The experienced doctor requested a private moment with the patient. After a few minutes he came out of the room to inform the police that it was "a mistaken, but necessary suicide attempt." The police looked at him for a moment. Without interest in the irrelevant truth, they made a note in the report and left.

The Enlightened

For my beautiful sister, Mer, who looks for inspiration to reach clarity, but also the clarity to inspire herself. Blessed are those who do not fear dilemmas.

He had a gust of mental clarity—a moment of inspiration—and suddenly accessed a profound vision, that brought definitive calm to the demons that had been torturing him every night for the last few years. The sandy breeze of the desert interrupted the ecstasy and brought him back to the human plane of his consciousness, together with a new cluster of truths that would underpin the unstoppable deployment of his actions.

Coming back to town, he understood that it is determination which changes the world and not the truth or a lie, insignificant accessories which small men use to avoid transcendent decisions. He reasoned that miseries are often an indispensable part of the whole; that a truth needs, sometimes in an irremediable way, the defect of deceit in order to impose. There was no place in his revolution to stop to resolve contradictions and he convinced himself that, if some day they came to be known, they would be forgiven by other men as imperfect as him.

He decided that he would change the world in his way, with the options that were available, instead of waiting for better men to do so in a cleaner way. He assumed without the ability to achieve the latter, he admitted that his actions would not stand apart from his own speech and that he would also be a sinner. This did not stop him. On the contrary, he would present himself as the first of the sinners.

A masterpiece — that is what he believed to be the work which had built in his mind and gave his body and soul its accomplishment. He warned that the time of men is scarce, especially for the achievement of great work, and that he should not be distracted by hesitations that only drive him away from the final result.

He knew that, sooner or later, he would face death. It almost didn't disturb him, with all the stoicism that a human is capable of... so little, and perhaps for this reason, so inspiring. His death was not only inevitable, but also necessary.

More than the fear of his own death was the idea of failure. The possibility of surrendering his life in vain tortured him. He tried, without success, to set aside the scene of his spirit. He turned to face it and foresaw that a failure would not be important, since in this case he would give life by his own law: surrendering his life to other men.

He reviewed the broad outlines of his plan and felt at peace, as realized in advance. He understood then that the true realization was, after all, to surrender himself completely, leaving the afterward consequences on a second level; that was: to surrender to fate, erasing the possibility of choosing other ways.

Finally, he felt full and happy to understand that the meaning of his life was determined, that this search that always tormented the majority of the human race was over for him. He summed up this feeling of happiness on credit in a maxim: "Blessed I am, because I believe without seeing".

The Saddest Day of My Life

I have clear images of that period of my life, even though a little bit mixed, like a film in the middle of the making; the context comes to me, although, blurred. Let's say that I was about ten years old. Or let's say something more precise: I could still feel the anxiety before a football game; playing without thinking about the time; and supporting my team with passion. It was when we used to play football in a *potrero*: a clearing of land located in the middle of the *plaza*, that at the time I thought was big. The boys of the neighborhood, many of whom we only knew by their nicknames, used to arrive there, often with their relatives; him and my sister were also playing.

It was one of those games during which I had to deal with a new situation: I had started to play better than him (the one who had taught me to play). I refused to accept it and that overwhelming battle against the inevitable extended during many games, in which I lowered my level of playing deliberately, trying to keep my new superiority hidden. However, this form of (not) playing proved to be unsustainable and, in the nick of time, I had to give in to the fact that things had changed. The new state became normal and extended itself into the future. Years later, almost without realizing, there were no games in the *plaza* nor with him.

This was not, however, the saddest day of my life.

Many years later, that bitterness that I thought had been extinguished decided to return, with another face, but with the same roughness. He had an accident (from which he never recovered completely) and had to have emergency surgery. Perhaps for the first time, I felt responsible for him. Then, besides feeling the pain of his suffering, I felt (selfishly) alone, unprotected and wanted to cry, just like I feel now while diving into the memories of those feelings.

Also, I understood that one can be happy even in a state of sadness. Because of this, despite everything, I was glad to be by his side, now that he needed me and I tried to give him, for the first time, the security that he had always given me. Fortunately, he made a recovery after surgery, but something had changed forever... and with a decidedly bitter taste. As always, this new situation also became normal. But the second time always brings with it a lesson, which is not brought by the first time nor the third one: the possibility of repetition.

This was not, however, the saddest day of my life.

The saddest day of my life is yet to come. But it is so painful, I can already feel it.

The Hotel

For Vili

We met again on Danube shores, next to the magical Chain Bridge (officially named Széchenyi lánchíd), in Budapest. From the sepia tone around us (which, come to think of it, had a subtle violet tint), there was a feeling that the sunset would reach us soon. Judging by the clothes we were wearing, it was probably the beginning of autumn.

You arrived very late, although I didn't realize it in the moment. We hugged with great feeling, a hug that seemed to stretch on for several minutes. Standing by the bridge, very close and with tenderness, we talked in a tone that was soft and sweet, with eyes glued on each other as we started to rebuild the intimacy we once had.

I came to Budapest to see you; it seems that I had missed you a lot. Everything indicated that it was not the first time that we met in the city and that we had once been happy here. And when I say everything, I mean your eyes, so special and so radiant.

After many years in your beloved Sofia now you were living in Budapest, in a neighborhood where you've always wanted, on the West side of the city, not far from Buda Castle. I don't remember if you had mentioned this wish before, but I am sure it was the case.

You wanted to show me something, a surprise. We walked a few blocks, holding hands, walking away from the river until we came to your blue car. I noticed you were more determined, or more impatient, or with less time (perhaps all of it was true).

We headed North, not too far from the center. We were searching for "the hotel", as you explained with ease. The idea of "the hotel" sounded familiar to me, although I understood neither its meaning nor the reason we were going there. As we were arriving, you pointed it out to me: a big hotel, on a hillside of the other side of the Danube. It was imposing, as is almost everything in Budapest (it reminded me of The National Archive Building) and it had a multicolored zigzag roof, like the one of The Saint Matthias church.

I knew that in the past we were insistently looking for "the hotel", although I didn't remember—nor do I now—why. And I knew that the reason for this search was in the phrase written on the front of the building, just below the roof, the phrase that now was clearly exposed.

I could see the phrase, but I couldn't—nor will ever—know what it said.

We looked at each other in complicity, as if I also had understood the meaning of the phrase. I was surprised that we stood contemplating "the hotel" for some minutes in silence, perhaps with the fear of not seeing it again (or perhaps worse, not seeing it again together). Still in silence, we went back to the car that took us to your apartment.

You had prepared a meal of intense and delicious Slavic flavors, although I could tell neither what it was nor how it looked. You were lighting the last candle, casting an orange hue across scene, when I grabbed you from behind. The dinner was necessarily and indefinitely postponed as we hugged, kissed and loved with desperation until the candles died out. Afterwards, when it had become completely dark, everything went black forever.

Applause

For my friends Germán and Jakun

Exactly thirty years ago, in 2016, I was sitting where you are sitting now, more precisely there, in the center, at the back of the auditorium. I was about twenty when three young foreigners, a bit older than me, sat next to me. After a short casual conversation, I learned they were two Argentineans and a Korean. The relation between them seemed very good, although I had the impression that the Korean wasn't enjoying the company of Argentineans in the moments like the ones I will describe below.

Here, from where I speak to you right now, was the President, offering the speech for the opening of the event dedicated to young university students of this institution, like you, under the motto "Let your voice be heard". At that time, the President had been in the office for more than thirty years, in a system that had little democracy. And perhaps that's why he was treated with respect (which almost always covers up fear) and his monotonous speeches were tolerated, although they lacked the even the slightest amount of empathy for the public and could last up to three hours, regardless of the insignificance of the event.

So that's how the President started his opening speech for the event and we all prepared to listen to him for a long time.

After fifteen minutes, it was obvious that nobody was listening to the President. It was also obvious that this was absolutely of no importance to him, since the speech continued in the same monotone tonality. In a tacit agreement, this situation would go on till the President would decide to finish.

However, Argentineans by my side started to show signs of impatience. At first moving on their seats, then talking between themselves (in Spanish, with others they always spoke in English) and finally, laughing. I remember they kept repeating the sentence "Vamos redondeando, querido" (an Argentinian expression that refers to asking to finish an exposition) which they found funny.

In twenty minutes, the one that was next to me started to fill in the questionnaire on the event satisfaction (that actually hadn't started yet). On a question to mark the event, he gave four points. To justify this mark, he filled the place for the text with the following message: "The opening of the President was too extensive and uninteresting". Given that he did not speak the language, the second reason seemed to me rather bold, although certainly the simple observation of the public (everybody was with their cell phones) was justifying the conclusion. In a few minutes, he added the second message on the paper: "President's message has gone in the opposite direction to the event's motto". He put away the sheet, looked at it with satisfaction and kept it very carefully in his folder, as if it were the most important among all documents that he had.

At forty minutes of President's speech, the other Argentinean (who had a blue and red shirt), started to explain something to his compatriot that judging by their abundant sign language, seemed like a plan. A plan that involved all the students that surrounded them, just as he finished with his compatriot, he began to offer instructions to the Korean and others that surrounded him. The other Argentinian did the same, in this case including me:

—When the President makes another break, we will start to applaud. And we don't stop until he goes away— he told me with a thumb up and a facial expression of optimism (raising his eyebrows and nodding his head) that left no room for negativity. It was true: the President would make a break every ten minutes, drink a sip of water and go on.

The moment of a break came and the Argentineans started to applaud with determination. More for the inconvenience to leave them alone than for the desire to join this almost adolescent idea, we—the neighboring students— followed them. And the rest, who were very much distracted, followed us by inertia. The applause surprised the President (he didn't say anything that was too relevant), who at first opened his eyes looking at the public and then tried to search for explanations among his assistants, that were also looking at him puzzled.

Besides, the applause lasted more than normal, since when it started to naturally fade away, the Argentinians applauded even stronger, adding in background "Vamoooo" (a very informal supporting expression) that was encouraging students around him and we were starting to enjoy it genuinely with mischief. When student's discomfort became greater than the Argentinean support, the applause stopped and the President continued his speech.

The Argentineans congratulated us on the sly and made a sign (moving forefinger in a circle and nodding affirmatively) that we all interpreted "when he makes a break, we do it again". Meanwhile, the Korean put his head in between hands and was shaking it in a sincere disapproval gesture.

So we did some ten minutes later when the President made his predictable break and drank water. Enormous applause exploded (with the epicenter being the Argentineans) and it was more awkward than before, as it was actually the extension of the previous. Nonetheless, the applause lasted longer than the first one. Discomfort of the President and his assistants became obvious, along with fear of some students. The applause finally ended.

The President continued his speech, but it was obvious that his voice was tense and he was more prone to making mistakes. Murmuring was increasing to the point that minutes passed and the President didn't make the break that we were all waiting for. After twenty minutes without a break, his throat couldn't go on and forced him to make the expected pause. And then, the applause exploded, but this time it lasted even twice the length than previously.

The applause stopped only when five security officers headed to the end of the lounge and asked the Argentineans to be escorted outside. The Argentineans were refusing to stand up, crossing arms and asking explanations for this requirement. In a risky play, they said they would only accept police orders. The act was interrupted, with hundreds of students, some officials and the President himself looking in the foreground of this tense discussion and the beginning of a tussle. A few minutes later the police arrived and after repeating requests for explanations (that were never given), the Argentineans accepted to leave the lounge. In a gesture of notable nobility, the Korean withdrew voluntarily with them.

Escorted by the police, the three foreigners headed towards the exit, before the stunned look of all the public. Then, an internal force that I didn't know until that moment

took me over. It was my destiny. Without any possibility to choose, I started to applaud. My friends looked at me surprised, but quickly understood and joined the applause. The applause didn't sound like fun anymore, but as the demand to finish all this: it was firm, hard and monotonous like President's speech.

In a pair of minutes, the President completely understood the message and furiously gave a fist punch on the lectern and left insulting followed by his advisors.

When all the officials had disappeared, the applause became jovial and festive. Screams and some singing joined in. As the celebration was extended, we looked at each other with disbelief and each look enclosed a recognition, a congratulation.

Like a waterfall, lessons came to me one after another. These are the lessons that I want to share with you today.

Don't accept sermons, nor unilateral speeches. Don't offer reverence or fear. Resist with intelligence, originality and with joy: an applause can also be an act of rebellion. Ask for explanations and don't quit until you get them. Ask, always ask. Don't ever leave alone the one who is right. Don't talk too much and, instead, listen with attention.

As the President of this great nation, I propose to you that, today and always, more with actions than words, you make your voice be heard.

The Success Formula

[The Dr. Engineer Armando Sanguinetti gets into the classroom where he is going to lecture the first class of his well known and classic course on Probability and Statistics, in the Faculty of Engineering at the Buenos Aires University. He dresses, of course, in a red and blue squared shirt, black jeans and excessively worn out shoes. His figure has been damaged by years of sedentary lifestyle and it seems that his sight followed the same path, as he wears big augmentation glasses. Additionally, it seems as if he has some trouble with one of his eyes, because before starting to speak he adjusts his eyelid (wetting his ring finger with saliva), gesture that he will repeat during the whole introduction and later on, during the entire class. After general greetings, he starts his introduction.]

I like to start this course by asking what the purpose of math is.

[Sanguinetti quickly glances over the class, inviting the students to answer. Some students answer shyly, giving the proper trigger to the professor.]

As you can observe, most of the answers describe concrete applications of math such as building a bridge, launching a satellite to space or doing finance and accounting in a company. You also named other sciences using math, like Physics, Electronic or Computing. From a technical point of view, all the answers are correct, but sometimes correct things are the best way to hide the truth.

Truly, the answer is simpler: the main purpose of math is to understand. It is a tool that let us organize concepts, make them interact, see what happen with them and take conclusions.

[Sanguinetti makes a pause that let the students digest the concepts he just provided]

Let's see how this works when we think about the famous and generally elusive "success formula".

Every day, tons of wrong people are looking for success, that result that is so ephemeral. They wrongly believe that this result is going to lead them to get the over-promoted happiness. They look that hard that it is impossible to suggest them other paths.

The most efficient and less probable way to hit, it consists in not to make mistakes. A "more human" alternative is to make mistakes, preferably not too many and as fast as possible. The quick mistake saves us precious energy and puts us right back in our way.

To summarize, as we are incapable that all that people stops looking for success, we are going to try to help them to find it as fast as possible. So that, we are going to provide the success formula. And when I say "success formula" I mean a real formula, not meaningless words.

Let's start by agreeing on the meaning of "success formula". We understand by "formula", the symbolic structure of factors that lead to a repeatable result. By "success" the achievement of preset objectives, assuming that time and pattern are embedded in the objective.

To achieve success you just need to develop four fundamental factors: Capacity, Effort, Creativity and Courage. It is clear that if we maximize all of them we will improve

the objectives achievement, while if we minimize them, we will get partial or no achievements at all. It is needed, for the formula to be useful, to find not only factors that contribute to success (well known by many people) but also the proper combination of them, in a way that we optimize results.

Firstly, we need to know that two factors, Capacity and Effort, lineally contribute to get results, while other two factors, Creativity and Courage, make them exponential.

[Sanguinetti goes to a corner of the classroom, grabs a black marker and, showing his back to the students, starts to write in the board. The students take the chance to exchange incredulous looks among them.]

Let's assume the next variables:

CA = Capacity

EF = Effort

CR = Creativity

C = Courage

S = Success

exp = "Exponential" (This is the function that multiplies a value by the times the exponent indicates.)

$$S = (CA + EF) \text{ exp } (CR + C)$$

[Sanguinetti stairs at the class again although he leaves his hand roughly pointing to the "success formula" that he has shown. Then, he proceeds.]

This first version of the formula. It lets us prove some phenomenons that we know intuitively, but now we can observe them clearer in a formal way:

Capacity and Effort are important and necessary, but lineal, predictable and limited. Creativity and Courage are the ones that speed up goal achievement.

Maximum Capacity and Effort without any Creativity and Courage can get you farther than zero Capacity and Effort combined with maximum Creativity and Courage. But not much farther.

If we propose the same level on each factor, we face many possible situations. If those levels are low, Capacity and Effort will produce the highest contribution. If all levels are high, Creativity and Courage will contribute the most. Obviously, if all levels are intermediate, then all factors contribute in a similar proportion.

The number of conclusions that we can take from this formula doesn't end up here, but I believe we all have understood how it works, the most important piece of a comprehension process.

[Sanguinetti puts his hand down and leaves it lying, adopting a whole more relaxed position]

In general, Education and Work focus in developing our Capacity and Effort in relative detriment of our Creativity and Courage. Most of the subjects and activities in traditional Education lead to increase our Capacity in technical areas, based in Effort. It ends, effectively, improving both. I can remember a few times when Creativity was stimulated, but I'm sure I can't remember any time when Courage was.

Although I don't have proof at this moment, I feel that Courage is even more

important than Creativity because its presence itself is essential for Creativity to have any value. If we assume that Creativity consists in finding new paths, unexplored and sometimes risky, the Courage is the engine that turns it on.

That's why, in my free time, I'm working in a short book about "Strategies, techniques and exercises to develop Courage".

[Sanguinetti makes a pause, almost imperceptible, in order to evaluate the reaction or interest of the students in his new development. Then he turns to the board and points his black marker again.]

Thus, we can write the formula even better in this way:

$$S = (CA + EF) \exp (CR \exp C)$$

The next possible step in the formula would be to define different scales for each of the factors, objective criteria and adjustment variables to arrive to a convenient range of results (for example, from 1 to 10).

As simple as it seems, we have reached the "success formula". Thanks to Math, we can understand better. But we shouldn't cheat ourselves: we can take advantage of any conclusions if only lead us to new questions.

[Using his particular body language, Sanguinetti ends his introduction. Just a few applause are heard from one of the corners of the classroom. He erases the board, and then stairs again at the audience. He rhetorically asks himself, what probability means.... and starts talking about that subject.]

The Possible

"Her face had been distorted by a chance or the destiny, but still it was her." Peter Epr said evoking his delayed encounter with happiness.

I felt an irrepressible attraction for them both since the first moment I saw them, even before we started to talk with (sometimes you know, certain things a lot before experiencing them). They looked and they moved as if they were one, in such a tuning that if it wasn't natural, it had been built throughout the years. I needed to come close to them, in all the possible ways. And this time, unlike many others, the desire wasn't limited to a simple man's fantasy (when comfort or insecurity cease to impose), but I was completely determined to bring my drives to the realm of reality.

The paradisiacal Thai beaches were providing the ideal context. The spirit of vacation, freedom, and adventure could be felt in each centimeter of the island where destiny had united us in the same very short space of time. The overwhelming sun was undressing their bodies, bathing them in sweat. The rest was filling us with the energy and the threat of the end that was pushing us to release it without speculation.

They were Dutch, which was a great, even sufficient argument; their names, Hannah and Inge, were stressing it even more. They were beautiful, although not that much to make them inaccessible; and a little bit older which gave me (even compromising me) greater boldness. I also assumed—as it almost always happens—the search for new experiences was the thing that brought us here.

Being Latino fitted perfectly in this scenery and I had no doubts about feeding the stereotypes—I knew—it would play in their thoughts. This was especially true at the moment of first impression, so that when I came close for the first time, on the beach, I did it in a carefree and smiling way, yet decisively. The conversation and the night advanced fast and I didn't miss the chance to make jokes about their beauty and age. They invited me for a dinner, which I believed to be an award for my behavior.

Hannah was the first one to blow my intentions by mentioning her boyfriend. And the second one was contributed by Inge, confirming to me that she didn't have one. Recovered from the initial impact, I decided not to pay too much attention to these type of declarations, that had many times shown to be a formality, a mere necessity of etiquette for a social conversation.

The following days brought only intense emotions (that is to say, happiness) and up to one moment, I was able to forget her, who was so far away. We went around the island with bikes, visiting each and every corner, we swam in all secret beaches—when it was possible, naked—and every afternoon we would join volleyball games that lasted until the sunset, together with other travelers that were coming from the farthest nations of the world, with their exotic characteristics and languages.

In a game, in which we were losing control with no worries, we were seducing each other slowly and silently with the implicit and deceiving suggestion that at the end actually nothing would happen.

I genuinely wanted them and I let this desire be expressed in the most natural and transparent way whenever I had the opportunity. It also happened that this desire without bonding slowly turned towards Hannah, rebalancing the complex link that,

consciously or not, we were building between the three of us.

One afternoon we were walking together when Hannah confessed me the dissatisfaction with her lifestyle (a temptation accessible to the shadow of a palm that rests beside a turquoise, phosphorescent sea), that, in my interpretation, was including the relationship with her boyfriend. I listened to her attentively, feeding her relief, and afterwards, I unfolded my vision on the subject, one of my obsessions. It seemed that I had touched her and I knew –now for sure- that she wanted me.

The end of the shared adventure began to glimpse. Few days seemed weeks and a natural feeling of nostalgia (and of emotional and physical closeness) added up to already intense cocktail of emotions that we were sharing. The moment of definitions was coming close to its culmination and even though we didn't talk about it openly, each of the three could feel it.

That night, perhaps the last, we shared two bottles of a delicious wine on the beach, protected by a calm sea and thousand stars. After a long conversation and a long silence that said everything, I kissed them (first Hannah and then Inge) and those kisses were a pure feeling. Caresses were gaining intensity and the eternal Thai heat became unbearable.

But immediately as I was kissing Inge, Hannah let go of my hand, stood up and left us in one move. Without interrupting Inge (who did not flinch at her friend's departure), I tried to understand what was happening. Hannah's kisses, still fresh on me, made me realize that the answers were to be searched for in her mind, not in her heart. Perhaps her boyfriend, perhaps Inge, perhaps both.

With difficulty, I stopped Inge for a moment and tried to convince her that we should go after Hannah, but her only response—corporal and silent—was determination to occupy firmly the place that her friend had just left. Rendering to the intensity of her opposition, I surrendered to the incomplete consumption of our triangle relationship and when staying on that beach became untenable (an imperfect solitude, an insufficient darkness), we decided to walk towards the South, where we hoped to find the intimacy that the distant usually offers.

We reached the end of the beach and only there we discovered the shades and the peace we were looking for. The place was aesthetically less beautiful than the ones we passed by on our way there (next to the beach there was a gray wall, some rocks and pastures) but sometimes the beauty has the shape of the necessary.

On the beach, with the same sea next to us and below the same stars, we resumed our ritual of kisses and we loved each other as it was the first or the last time (actually, it was so), while—without saying it—we were thinking of Hannah.

When dawn began to creep in, we got dressed and came back holding hands till the apartment where perhaps Hannah was sleeping. When we arrived, outside I said goodbye to Inge with a long kiss, full of contradictions, that was filling my chest with anguish. She looked at me as I was walking away and sending her the last kiss from the distance before turning around the corner. Afterwards, unable to hold my tears any longer, I walked aimlessly to my hotel.

The Fugitive

To my friend, Fabián

It's not difficult to get information on Dagan Zhou. A quick search on the Internet will reveal that he was an ancient Chinese diplomat, who is still nowadays known for his trip chronicles to the Khmer Empire, currently the territory of Cambodia, where he served for the Chinese royalty towards the end of the thirteenth century. The available information also points out that there are no official (Chinese) records on this diplomatic mission and that there are very few certainties regarding how he spent his days after the mission.

His chronicles, titled "Customs of the Khmer Empire", nowadays known as "Customs of Cambodia", consist of a document of about forty pages, which represent only a third of the original version (the missing pages are considered lost). There, Dagan Zhou develops, through classical Chinese writings (although with some localisms), the most complete description ever recorded about the daily habits of the Angkor inhabitants, the capital of the powerful Empire and the biggest city in the world before the period of Industrial Revolution. It is estimated that it reached a population of one million and that just its temples required more supplies to be built than all Egyptian pyramids together.

Dagan Zhou also describes in detail the magnificent Temple of Angkor and focuses on the celebrated temple of Angkor Wat. He points out that "it is oriented, according to the wise instructions of the King Khmer, to the West, with its back to the sunrise, diametrically opposed to all other temples, to its builders (former kings) and to all old fundamental ideas (about God, Death and Time)". The interpretation is so subtle that, since the original is lost, it manages to go unnoticed, even for modern scholars: King Suryavarman II, constructor of Angkor Wat, was the first of the Khmer Kings to believe—or to know—that time could be arbitrarily traversed, even towards to the past. There is no reference, however, to the punishment which anyone who dared to embark on such a deed would face.

Digging in a bit deeper, it's possible to find out that Dagan Zhou also had other names, such as Zhou Jianguan, Zhou Dake or Cao Ting Yimin (*Thatched Courtyard Recluse* in English). However, what is not known is that each name corresponded to a different period and place and to separate groups of people (if this is actually possible). And that there were as many different identities as the duration of the apogee of ancient China allows: Mei Ling Zhou, Zhou Akame, Zhou Lin, etc.

I could go on talking about Dagan Zhou just for the sake of entertainment if I didn't hold in my hands a document, unknown to almost everyone, titled "Motul Chronicles: the land and its people". These records offer a description of what was everyday life like for the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Mutul (one of the most powerful Mayan kingdoms), especially the city of Yax Mutul (the great capital, known today as Tikal) and its majestic pyramid temples. About a hundred pages of Mayan chronicles.

The writings are Mayan, but they show traces of an early accent to be found on the Pacific coast (that is to say, they differ from the isthmian that prevailed in the Kingdom) and the author is Zazil Ha (which means The Princess of Water). There is not much

information about the author, what motivated these works, or any related texts since these chronicles are one of the few documents that survived the massive destruction perpetrated by the Spaniards, along with the Madrid Codex, the Dresden Codex, the Paris Codex, and some isolated pages of the Grolier Codex (whose authenticity is unfairly disputed).

Just like Dague Zhou describes the temples of Angkor, Zazil Ha provides a detailed account of the pyramid temples of Tikal. The “twin-pyramid complex” captivated the author: nine twin pyramids built facing each other. Within this group, the Yaxhá Complex is granted full attention: a smaller one built outside of the city (about 30 km), that—according to the author—“is the only one of the nine that is oriented with its back to the sunrise”.

The mere coincidence of metaphors on such a specific topic is not only unlikely. The structure of the chronicles, the narrative style and the aspects that call the attention of Zazil Ha are of condemnatory similarity to those offered by Dague Zhou. The more noticeable difference can be found in dates: Mutul Chronicles date back to 546 AD whereas the chronicles of the Khmer Empire date back to 1297 AD.

Sacrificing consistency, other characters could be added to the human chain whose most solid links are Dague Zhou and Zazil Ha. These characters (if the plural is applicable), remain secondary ones are subsequent in time and can be tracked in Rome, London and, more recently, New York.

History teaches that the same roads inevitably lead to the same destinations. It seems that Dague Zhou hasn't learnt much from his predecessors' tragical, inescapable and unavoidable endings. He was probably reluctant to accept, perhaps, that his travels were against The Law.

Great journeys are never experienced due to Time, but in spite of it. Pretty much in the same way that Christopher Columbus, his contemporary Marco Polo or the great Chinese traveler Xu Xiake have embarked on theirs. They will differ in something, however, since the end of Dague Zhou (and this story) will be quite different and much sadder.

To arbitrarily travel through time doesn't mean to govern it. Dague Zhou can have a thousand names and live in a thousand places in a thousand times, but it is inevitable that the eternal hand (in the most literal sense of the word) of The Law, my law, will eventually reach him.

Fiction or reality (a meeting with Martha Argerich)

To Lisa.

I met Martha Argerich in Frankfurt, on Thursday, March 10th 2016. Or perhaps the day after, I couldn't tell. It wasn't easy to arrange that meeting as she lived in Brussels and I lived in Buenos Aires, and both of us used to travel around quite frequently. It's possible that there was still a more fundamental fact that stood between us: she was a very famous artist and I was what is generally known as "Mr. Nobody", so she didn't have the slightest idea about my existence.

The meeting happened in one of the few places in Frankfurt where fiction challenges reality: the German Film Museum. In that place, there was a very elegant and very German bar. I was in charge of choosing the place and it certainly wasn't a casual choice. It was one of my strongest arguments to convince Martha to accept my invitation: If I, a complete stranger, disappointed her, at least she would find comfort in having seen that place.

My other strong argument was the elaborated invitation letter that I had prepared, which was quite unusual. Providing a full account of what I mean here will require another story almost as long as this one and that would entail an unacceptable risk. Therefore, this explication will be put off for another opportunity. What I can surely say is that I promised her (if we met) to add to the letter a handwritten dedication.

The last of my arguments was perhaps the weakest, though still my favorite and I strongly believed in its potential. The woman that I was thinking about every day at that time had a striking physical resemblance to Martha (but with a generation gap), she lived in Frankfurt and was also invited to our meeting. Her name was Kati.

These arguments that some might say were "full of fantasy" emerged from the imperious need to support the cold truth, which was categorical but still insufficient: I really wanted to go to her concert in Frankfurt, on March 9th 2016 at 20:00, but I didn't manage to arrange the flights, buses and trains (from Buenos Aires) to arrive in time.

Misfortunes, if one knows how to look at their consequences, have the benefit of opening new possibilities. And to me getting to meet Martha was this new possibility that filled me with motivation and enthusiasm.

The letter for Martha already written, the next challenge was to make it reach her hands, but also to make sure she read in time. One option to achieve this was to send the letter in an open envelope, exposing its peculiarity, so that, with a lot of faith in the intermediary, it would speed up the process. The alternative, which was what I decided to do in the end, consisted of a striking envelope (bright-coloured, although not yellow, with a subtle childish touch) with this supposed intriguing title:

MARTHA ARGERICH

If the content of this envelope is read today, it could become true.

If not, it won't.

To explain which of all the abovementioned factors made Martha decide to accept my invitation would be a mere exercise of imagination and, to be honest, having a

strong imagination was never really my thing. When we met, she mentioned that the letter had been “quite unusual” and this was enough to me.

The physical resemblance between Martha and Kati was quite unavoidably the first topic of conversation, which was an excellent ice breaker, and the mood became quite familiar very fast, giving room for a warm feeling, as if we had known each other for a long time.

This resemblance that Martha described as “unreal” paved the way for the topic that almost took over the whole conversation: the boundaries between fiction and reality. Perhaps due to my educational background as an engineer, in my opinion the author’s reality was the one that shaped fiction. Martha’s opinion was the opposite: it was fiction (and that included imagination) which drags and affects reality. Besides, Martha predicted that in a “very short time” she would have the opportunity to prove to me that she was right.

—I hope so. Time unveils the truth, although not always «in a very short time»—I replied with a smile.

—I don’t think that time unveils the truth—Kati intervened.—Instead, I like to consider time the best separation between fictions and realities. The essential difference between the two is consistency, one of Time’s daughters—she completed.

Kati didn’t clarify whether she considered consistency an attribute of fiction or reality. However, anyone who had been there would not have needed clarification.

The conversation continued until Martha said she had to leave. Saying goodbye in a cheerful mood, she confessed to us that our meeting felt like «part of a story».

—Those moments that seem to be fiction are the best of reality. It’s a thin line between those two worlds—she said reflectively.

I had already thought a lot about it, so I didn’t hesitate and said:

—It’s true. Quite often the line between fiction and reality is just a matter of choice.

Buenos Aires, February 29th 2016

The Asimov Mosque

This is the first time that I am writing without being alive. I have never thought it was possible, but once again I have confirmed that facts outrun theories. I am happy to be able to write again after almost twenty-five years. I feel much lighter and free, without the burden of my body and my history. The counterpart is the absence of my tireless obsession and a much weaker and carefree inner strength. Everything indicates that being alive is the most powerful motor of literature. Or perhaps it's to be oneself to the fullest.

It's also the first time that I write in Spanish. The world looks a lot different from here, much softer, more rounded and more musical. I can see colours more intensely, especially red and green. Inconsistency seems less problematic and I am no longer in a hurry when writing. The latter awakens quite an understandable concern in Juan.

While I would prefer to do it alone, I feel comfortable writing with Juan's help. His technical education, his capacity for abstraction and his austere style allow me to unwind myself comfortably.

Unlike others, such as McCartney, he has no interest in filling me with his ideas, although he is in the perfect position to do it. Besides, he took the effort to get to know me so that I could express myself in the most possible authentic way. He has read several of my essays, novels, interviews and biographies and it has turned out to be more than enough; I couldn't dare to ask him to also read my five hundred books or my ninety thousand letters. He did all this work with the noble purpose to help me fulfill one of my dreams: to visit the Azimov Mosque, which was built by my ancestors in the city of Kazan, Russia.

Probably you don't know but I was born in the Soviet Union, although my family emigrated to the United States when I was only three years old. My parents had the courage to leave behind everything they had been determined to live and go for what they wanted for our future. They even took big risks to do it in time, as the United States imposed strong restrictions on Russian-Jewish immigrants shortly after our arrival. Once there, my parents opened a candy shop that also sold newspapers and magazines, which became essential resources for me to develop my passion for writing.

Not having visited the Mosque, a source of pride to our family, has made me feel in debt not only to myself but also to my parents. A debt that extends to those ancestors who believed it was possible to build it and did it, despite the adversities that they had to overcome to achieve it.

I've always been afraid of flying, that's why I travelled only twice in my life by plane and none of those times it was to visit Kazán. My vast scientific knowledge and my confidence in statistics couldn't help a lot to defeat this fear that was rooted deep inside. I also didn't travel by ship, as I couldn't afford the necessary time due to my editorial commitments. But I've never deceived myself. I am aware that these were mere excuses, the most accessible way to disguise a weakness of the spirit. I haven't even allowed myself time to do the imaginary trip to the most accessible world of literature, despite having written so much.

But I want to leave behind this grief. Now I am in Kazán and it's my opportunity to change a destiny that seemed doomed. I will be here for four nights, in the company of

Alena, a Russian guide who will be the interpreter when we meet people in the city. Alena is a beautiful woman, not a big surprise considering I am in Russia. The misfortune of not speaking Russian, being a Russian, seems limitless.

Not many things strike me as surprising anymore, but Kazan managed to do it with its beauty, which feeds from the waters of the famous river Volga that is both wide and majestic. It's situated some eight hundred kilometers to the east of Moscow and it is also the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. The population is divided between ethnic Russians (Orthodox Christians) and Tatars (Muslims), very different peoples that have nonetheless learned to coexist in an exemplary way.

After touring the peaceful central streets of Kazan and its Kremlin, we finally made our way to the Old Tartarus District, the Tartar neighborhood par excellence which houses most of the more than fifty mosques in the whole city. Actually, it's possible to see the minaret of a mosque from any point of this district. They are all different and it's a great pleasure to discover them round every corner.

I am very passionate about history, so I found it really captivating to find out how Tartars ended up in this district. This story includes a legend that is, at least to me, touching. After the Russians took over Kazan in 1552, Muslims were dragged here, at that time outside the city, behind the lake Kaban with the purpose to make it difficult for them to access the Kremlin if there was a rebellion. The incalculable treasures of the demoted Tatar Kan, which I imagine are intangible, were then hidden in the Lake where a gigantic Azhdaha snake protects them.

As I try to imagine the appearance of Azhdaha, we finally arrived at the Asimov Mosque. The first thing we saw while stepping out of the car were renovation works in progress, which I sincerely found disappointing. With one part of the structure covered with construction materials and the other with exposed brick, the image was notably different from the photos that I had seen and what I actually expected. In a few minutes, once the initial disenchantment was over, I feel better realizing that the work in progress will allow many others to enjoy it in the future.

Probably due to my Jewish roots, I immediately spotted the Star of David crowning the Mosque, a symbol that in the world of Islam is known as the Seal of Solomon. These roots, however, don't make me a religious person, although I am interested in the topic from a historical and philosophical point of view. My father was an Orthodox Jew with a solid education, but his heart didn't respond to those beliefs so he never asked me to follow in his steps. However, in a way, I did follow his example and became an agnostic merely due to a lack of strong arguments to sustain that, deep in my heart, I was an atheist. That is, I was a believer after all. This unfortunate conviction entails, however, one benefit: the duty not to leave anything unfinished.

We entered the Mosque complex and a very nice lady, after interrogating us, expressed a surprising love for Argentina. The lady presents us Azat, the Imam in charge of the Mosque with whom we started a nice conversation. When we asked, he confirmed that I had never visited the place, something that we obviously knew. Curiously, he added that, encouraged by this story—and possibly without the intention of fulfilling any dream—, many tourists came every day to visit this place. Having heard this, I could not help feeling depressed.

The Imam tells us that the Mosque started as a simple wooden structure. Only in

1887, after being granted the corresponding permits, my great uncle Murtaza Asimov was able to start a new construction based on stone, which remains nowadays. Disconsolately, as some relatives have confirmed, he died before he could see it finished. It seems that the Asimov are genetically bound to be late.

Inside the Mosque, the first thing that caught my attention were the stained-glass windows, something unusual in the Muslim world, according to the Imam. The pastel colors of the walls and carpets, with white-color predominance, enhance the windows and the main red carpet. The Mosque is relatively small and has a calm and spiritual atmosphere, it surprisingly strikes me as a great place to write, an idea almost opposite to my old fantasy of locking myself up in a magazine kiosk in the New York subway.

We go out to the patio and, next to the Mosque, there was the Madrassa. It was holidays time, so we could tour the not too big facilities, the patio and the playground. I'm excited to think that someday, students taking classes here might read some of my stories. Foreseeing the possibility that they might also read these lines, I would like make good use of my privileged position to tell them the following: do not waste time, go after your dreams.

After saying goodbye to the Imam and the nice lady, we finally left the Mosque. It was quite an objectionable visit, I know, but I didn't want to miss this last chance to try. I have faced my shadows and, thanks to that, I have been able to achieve a greater understanding, perhaps one of the most beautiful experiences of life... and the afterlife. Now I feel much better. Juan is proud of me. And so am I.

The Dinner

“Trông ra cửa Tam quan, thấy một người con gái rất đẹp. Ông bèn đi theo thì chợt người ấy biến mất.” Bích Câu kỳ ngộ

“He looked through a window and saw a beautiful woman. He stepped outside to go after her, but she had suddenly disappeared.” A weird meeting in Bich-Cau

It must have been the first hours of the night. A waterfall of incomprehensible words was intervening into the scenery of my dreams (that I don't remember anymore) until it woke me up becoming the driver's worldly voice spreading from the microphone speakers. I felt unusually tired, starving and alone. I contemplated the internal design of the bus and was surprised once again, just like when I came in the first time: there were three rows and two levels of seat-beds and behind everything two flat levels with five seats each. I was in one of those seats, on the upper level, together with other four guys that I assumed were Vietnamese (as I assumed for the rest of passengers).

While I was waking up, I felt the climate of relative silence: televisions which were projecting karaoke performances were switched off, as well as the explosive sounds of videogames that had entertained some passengers during the beginning of the trip.

As the bus stopped, passengers started to get up and walk to the front door. We were all barefoot in the bus and, as we went down, we put on some public flip-flops that the driver put outside on the floor, next to the door.

When I stepped outside, I took a look around. We were in a classic stop along the route, somewhere in central Vietnam heading to Hanoi. There was a cool breeze outside that I thought I had forgotten after weeks of suffocating heat in the South-East Asia. Before going away from the bus, I checked the license plate of our bus—at the moment the only one—to keep an eye on it and make sure it wouldn't leave without me.

I looked at the clear sky with plenty of stars, the Moon almost full; I enjoyed the clean air for some minutes as I was stretching my muscles that were lethargic due to the lack of comfort in the bus.

At one end of the bus stop there was a fox sitting on the edge where the darkness extended watching us intensively. I had the impression that it was concentrated on me. I sought complicity (or perhaps security) of other passengers, but nobody had noticed: some went to the toilet, others were smoking (or reflecting while smoking) and others were still stepping out of the bus. Maybe they were not sufficiently awake or nobody cared; maybe foxes were common in the area. To confirm my doubt, I walked in diagonal to the other end of the bus stop where a sandalwood tree of intensive fragrance grew and reminded me of the Tagore's phrase: “be like the sandalwood which perfumes the axe that wounds it”. In fact, the fox followed my movements by shaking its head slightly, accompanying each of my steps; I stopped and stared at it for a couple of minutes, but it persisted.

The situation with the fox came to a dead end, so I left it and joined passengers that were going to the toilet. In the meantime, I was wondering if the stop would be long enough to eat something, as I hadn't had dinner yet.

Coming back from the toilet, I met the driver and his assistants organizing people in a group of tables. Since I was the only foreigner (or at least, the only one of a different

appearance), I had caught everybody's attention ever since I came on the bus; it's possible that I was the first Westerner that these persons had the possibility to see from close, performing mundane tasks such as eating or going to the toilet. One of the assistants came close and placed me at one of the tables, together with two men and three women who were watching me slyly during the entire dinner without daring to talk to me. I didn't know, until the end, whether they knew each other, because they didn't even speak to each other.

I found it impossible not to pay attention to an attractive woman, dressed in purple, who was sitting unexpectedly alone at a smaller table, few meters away. She was young, let's say tall, with an athletic body that was giving the impression of confidence. Besides, she seemed somewhat oblivious to the entire situation that was happening in the place.

At our table, there were some ten plates with different food (cut in small pieces) placed in the center to share. Together with these plates there was a generous rice fountain with a big spoon and several small deep plates. One of the men took the control of the fountain and started serving white rice in each small plate, passing them to all diners, accompanying them with a friendly smile.

I decided to behave in the most possibly neutral way and follow what others were doing. Once the rice was handed around, the server started to distribute pairs of sticks for eating, delicately cleaning each of them with a paper before handing. Luckily, I had already got used to eating with sticks for the past few weeks.

As I was waiting for someone to start eating, I decided to take a look at the woman in purple, who had attracted me so much. Secretly, I searched for her among heads that were interposing between us and when I finally found her I was surprised to face her glance, focused on me sharply, in a totally different way than Asian women (to tell the truth, different from any other woman) that I had met up to this moment. I held woman's glance as my heart was beating faster, but this didn't surprise her nor made her doubt. Her glance was both strong and serene, and it had a certain sweet harshness, as if for a long time she had succeeded in transforming a great pain into confidence.

A head of one passenger that took a seat right between us separated us again. The crossing of glances had left me exhausted, so the interruption was a relief. I was surprised, and unlike many other times, I didn't have it clear what I was supposed to do next.

One woman at my table started to eat and the others followed, so I decided to (try to) forget for a moment the woman in purple and join them. I started selecting food that was easier to maneuver with sticks: solid chunks of regular shapes (like a tofu cube); as I gained confidence, I continued with the rest of the food, some of which turned out to be totally unknown to me.

One of the plates had a kind of tortilla that seemed delicious, but surprisingly was not cut and it seemed impossible for me to access it with my sticks. A minute after, I watched one of the men using his sticks to cut the tortilla and, with determination, appropriated it slowly before my eyes. The scene was filling me with impotence, but I had no other choice than to concentrate on eggplants, tomatoes and those orange pieces that tasted so well.

As they finished eating, passengers got up and went to the toilet, the bus or simply

stood outside next to the road. Tables where we had dinner were getting empty one by one and I knew that a new visual encounter with the woman in purple would be inevitable. There was only one couple left and it was a great surprise when they got up from their tables and, behind them, a huge emptiness got disclosed. There was nobody.

The woman had disappeared. Immediately, I looked around the entire bus station to see her, but it was large and visually clean, without obstacles that could hide a person. It was impossible that I hadn't noticed that she abandoned the place.

I got up and went all over the place and all hypothesis without any result. There was only one bus, ours. I got close to waitresses and with gestures I tried to get information about the woman in purple and what could have happened with her, but it was in vain, waitresses didn't understand or didn't want to understand.

I looked for another perspective, so I sat on the chair where the woman was sitting a moment ago. I imagined myself (few minutes ago) seen from there. I went over table with my eyes and I discovered that on top of it there was a small branch, almost invisible due to similarity of colours. I took it and for its smell (that I was still able to remember) I could recognize it was sandalwood. I knew I had to have it, so I took it and put it in my backpack.

I continued contemplating the scene, searching for answers that my reasoning was denying. There was a series of small painted canvas. I was shocked to see, painted in one of them, a woman in purple. I looked around me. In the scene, that took place in a home environment, the woman in purple was alone and seemed to be preparing a meal, maybe a breakfast.

With a mixture of anxiety and—I must admit—a bit of fear, I came closer to canvas to have a better look. I knew I had to have it, so I took it with extreme precaution and subtle tremor in my hands, simulating that I was looking at it more closely. With the canvas in my hands, I started walking in the front of each of the other canvas, observing them in detail, simulating a genuine interest that would eventually bore those who might be watching the situation. The succession of canvas took me to the end of the bus station where I had seen the fox that was no longer there. I stepped for a moment into the darkness, put the canvas in my backpack and trying to walk naturally, returned to the bus.

I took flip-flops in my hand to get on the bus and went to the back, where the four Vietnamese boys had already gone to sleep. I accommodated myself and almost immediately fell asleep deeply till I woke up the next day, in Hanoi.

Lost postcards

“One day the mailman arrives to her house to hand her in something quite curious: a letter he found stuck in the mailbox when they replaced the old mailboxes in the village. The letter had been there for thirty-five years. She looks at the envelope. It is, indeed, addressed to her. She opens and reads it: it is a crucial message.” Gabriel García Marquez

It has been several years since Osvaldo Robledo started living two lives: during the day he is a responsible employee at the post office, in whose headquarters he processes and delivers tens of thousands letters a month. At night, however, he devotes his time, without speculations, to what he believes to be the ultimate meaning of his life: to organise and deliver to their destination the postcards that the post office system has heartlessly labelled as “lost”.

Within the universe of letters, Osvaldo has a weakness for postcards. He appreciates the powerful simplicity of combining a beautiful image with a concise and upfront message that everyone, including Osvaldo himself, can read. He finds it quite surprising that a person decides to pay in order to send this public message thousands of miles away running the risk that it may never reach destination or—even worse—that it may never get answered.

What calls Osvaldo’s attention, all in all, is what postcards actually represent: an actual delivery (that he needs to tend to with his own delivery). It’s clear that passion—and, essentially, life—cannot be attached to an object if meaning is not assigned to it: each postcard that is not handed over may prevent a real human story from happening. It is precisely that possibility that torments him and, in difficult times, it pushes him to move ahead (after all, that’s the purpose of torments).

Only a few know that Osvaldo lives two lives. Among these few, several describe him as “insane” or “a lunatic” or simply “a poor guy”. Some of his relatives try, whenever possible, to avoid him. But Osvaldo doesn’t care, he is absolutely certain about how important it is for the postcards to reach destination. And if the price he has to pay to achieve such deed is having his relatives and acquaintances show no contempt for him, then so be it.

Unlike when he started to work at the post office, Osvaldo is not concerned about money anymore. He isn’t. Osvaldo works there because it’s the perfect place to rescue “lost” postcards. At the same time, the post office gives him a salary, that is to say, the possibility to afford his operative expenses. Osvaldo has learnt how to stand in the way of “lost” postcards so that they come easily to him: he is in charge of collecting and taking them, along with all other “waste” in the paper category to the recycling department in the post office, located on the second basement level.

Osvaldo’s favorite moment is when he finally comes back home and analyses the new postcards, which become part of him, of his dreams and—there’s no point denying it—of his frustrations. Handwritten messages often bring him to tears and it is there that he finds the strength to go on despite being offered no empathy, facing the difficulties, the fatigue, the cold and rainy days.

The postcards which are loaded with passion, desire and even drama are his

favorite ones and he gives them the highest priority when it comes to organising the clandestine deliveries. He gets bored with long and/or informative messages (usually in small print, enumerative in nature and seeking to maximise the use of space), deprived of feelings (he calls them “transactional messages”), but—although many times he would like to—he doesn’t throw them away, since the mere fact that a postcard was sent deserves his respect and commitment.

The delivery of “lost” postcards is not a minor challenge. The very same post office has abandoned them (abandoning also its mission), in spite of the multiple verifications carried out by prepared and experienced people (although possibly without sufficient motivation or self-esteem). Therefore, research tasks play a key role in Osvaldo’s agenda and include everything, from translations to trips, interviews with people from the neighbourhood or long days of reflection.

The mission that Osvaldo has imperiously embarked on is mathematically overwhelming. He collects around ten “lost” postcards from the mail every day. But he can only solve, on average, three a day. This implies that the twice undelivered postcards are accumulated at a rate of seven per day or two thousand five hundred and fifty-five per year. Osvaldo doesn’t want to give up on any of them and watches, often with deep sadness, how they get piled up in the “workroom”.

The most elementary reasoning leads Osvaldo to conclude that his entire life will not be enough to deliver all the “lost” postcards he has in his possession; in fact, the longer he lives, the greater the number of undelivered postcards under his responsibility will be. Neither can he avoid wondering what will happen with the postcards (and their stories) in the thousands of other post offices or with those in his own office when he is no longer there. Many times, during his monotonous day in the post office, he thinks of possible collaborative systems to replace and transcend him, but he never reaches a viable solution.

Being aware of how small his contribution is tempts him to give up, but a very deep and dark force grants him the certainties that his sensibility and sanity systematically seek to destroy.

However, not everything is a lost cause in Osvaldo’s life. Each time he solves and delivers (always anonymously) a postcard, the happiness that invades him is so enormous that compensates him for the martyrdom this postcard may have inflicted on him for weeks or months.

At night, before falling asleep, he relives each of the deliveries in detail and tries to imagine the moment of reception, especially when it has been a long time since the original delivery. In such case, he also enjoys imagining how senders would have been surprised to discover that, perhaps years after they had sent it, their postcard finally arrived at its destination. However, time is a tyrant and it is impossible not to wonder if delivery (that is, the message) came too late. The truth is that he would like to devote some time to get to know these people, but thousands of postcards await their destination, piled up, in the “workroom”.

It has never occurred to Osvaldo that his task is heroic or that—as Borges could have suggested—people like him are the ones who are, in fact, saving the world.

The Job

It was in the morning, on October 17th, when the day to do “the job” had arrived. The night had been quiet, without howls or wails, therefore he was confident that all would turn out well. He went to the toilet, sat down, urinated and relaxed while he rubbed his eyes to fully wake up. He rinsed his face and went out to the corridor. He got into his little daughter’s room, looked at her tenderly for a few seconds and closed the door.

The apartment was very tidy and clean. Already in the living room, he saw the piano he joyfully played almost every day after dinner. He came close to it and moved it, uncovering a small horizontal door on the floor. There was a suitcase down there. He took it out and from it, he seized a gun. He then placed everything back down there exactly where it was.

From the balcony he enjoyed the great view of a fully sunny Moscow, just as he liked it. The heat and humidity were unusual for that time of the year. On the horizon he could see a storm coming forward which promised to be intense.

He went back to the kitchen and made breakfast quite delightedly. He served it and enjoyed it while he examined the photo of Nikita Jakov, the famous journalist, whom he liked. Life was unfair. Immediately afterwards he focused on memorizing the number on the back of the photo.

Already in the car, he drove contentedly, enjoying the comfortable leather seat. At the last corner before reaching his first destination, he gave way to a thin and bony-looking old woman, who, with an injured leg, crossed the street slowly and, on reaching the other side, thanked him with a steel-gray smile. A hundred meters from there, he switched cars.

The dark clouds had already reached the sun and were about to take over the sky. The flashes of lightning were growing with increasing spectacularity and the crashes of thunder could make anyone shiver.

He drove north until he reached the Moscova River, whose water was flowing down black. He crossed the bridge and reached Mokhovaya Avenue, which led to the heart of the city: Red Square. The traffic was heavy and slow. Calmly and far from being overwhelmed by the situation, he took a minute to appreciate the National Library, the Manege and the entire Kremlin Western wall. He loved that part of the city, his city.

The slow speed encouraged him to observe the people, who suddenly began to point toward the sky: among the lightning, a bright and persistent luminous sphere moved slowly, following the storm. Also, not far from there, an unusually huge bird was flying over the area. He watched the phenomenon as long as he could, but he couldn’t allow himself to be off task.

He reached the point at which the Avenue became Okhotny Ryad Avenue and the majestic old Moscova Hotel emerged on the right. He had reached his destination. He parked right opposite the hotel in the spot that another car had left free for him to park immediately after he arrived.

As soon as the engine stopped, a strong wind broke out, making dust, leaves and demons fly. A very old man in strange clothes walked past the car, whistling, staring at him. A branch struck the back of the car. He muttered insults but managed to remain

calm, confident there would be no unexpected incidents.

He looked at the watch, there were still ten minutes to go. He spent that time observing the architecture of the Hotel, for which he felt an inexplicable magnetism. He found it surprising that the design chosen for such an important building was asymmetrical, with markedly different side wings. The general style was Stalinist, solid and relentless. One of its wings followed that line, hard and efficient, with small windows and few details. The other, kind and colourful, had larger windows with ornaments. A design quite fearful of delving into its contradictions or, perhaps, courageous enough to expose them.

While he was examining the great classical columns in the central porch, rain started pouring with an unusual fury and began to fall with drops as heavy as stones. People running in all directions and seeking shelter added drama to the scene. He did not like rain, but the downpour favoured the execution of "the job," as if the storm had also been accounted for.

When the time came, he tightened the knot of his tie and got out of the car. He looked in all directions adjusting his jacket and, underneath it, the gun. He wasn't at all impressed by the rain, although it was pouring heavily, and in a few seconds he was completely wet. He strutted towards the hotel door, where many walkers had found shelter. Asking permission with genuine kindness, he infiltrated into the central hall.

With the complete confidence of a guest he strolled past the reception, pretending to dry his face with a handkerchief. He took the lift along with several other guests, and even managed to relax during the seconds it took him to reach the floor where he was going. When he arrived, he greeted soberly and stepped out of the lift. He walked to the room whose number he had memorized early that morning and, on the way, he looked straight at the security cameras, which had already been disconnected.

He used the key card he had been provided. In a single movement, he entered the room and soundlessly shot Nikita Jakov in the back five times. The journalist, who was caught off guard while working, had no chance to react. He took his pulse and confirmed that he was definitely dead (not even the Waters of Life and Death could have resurrected him).

He carefully closed the room door after leaving and, as quietly as he had entered, he left the hotel. The torrential rain had turned into a soft drizzle. He got on the car and went all the exact way back, switched cars again, and then finally back to the parking lot in his building.

He came close to the tree he had planted and caressed the old boots that hung from it. Without removing his tie, he entered the building and climbed to one of the top floors, to his flat, which had no mirrors. As he entered, he heard his wife's voice. She was giving directions to his daughter who was already running from the kitchen to greet him. They hugged with deep affection for a few seconds and, at her question, he answered yes, he would have all day to play with her.

The Lesson

“And Frezza, who perhaps needed to have one of his moments (and who knew the answer), stood up and said: I don’t know.” Alejandro Dolina

It’s been almost twenty years since the last time I saw Facundo, but I consider him my friend.

Facundo was the type of guy who knew how to face the consequences of a noble action. For example, in high school, in those life-or-death football matches he would never hesitate to invite students who could barely stay on their feet and who would usually lose the ball a few seconds after receiving it. This meant that other good players in his own team (he was a great player) would lash out at him, shouting just a few centimeters away from him, believing—poor guys—that that meant being brave. He would answer back, also shouting, that “bad players” (that’s the way he was calling them; sometimes good requires some harshness to make an impact), classmates after all, had the right to play as well.

Let’s say that Facundo was the kind of person about whom one could narrate any noble story and everyone would immediately believe it to be true.

He was that friend I met again when we started high school, after not having seen him for several years, since his father was in the military and his family had to move often to different parts of the country. With little experience in that type of encounters, that day I found it difficult to get used to the presence of my old friend after so many years (four years are an eternity when you are twelve). Everything felt more natural for him and he did not hesitate to call me his best friend when completing an exercise in the English class.

The presence of Facundo was just one more ingredient in the strange and intense experience of beginning secondary school. The new system was disturbing for us: a rector, attendance monitors and fourteen teachers (all wearing suits and with serious faces) replaced the sweet teacher to whom we were accustomed. In addition to this, we had to cope with the threatening presence of older students, who welcomed us throwing oranges at us (the neighborhood was full of orange trees) from the opposite sidewalk as we entered the school building. The collective feeling of the new group was that high school was going to destroy us. I tried to stay calm: if almost everyone—including some louts— managed to pass the year then so would I.

That was the atmosphere when we had the first geography class, with dreadful Mr. Gauna (who would, years later, call me, due to another incident, “the devil’s advocate”). Gauna was famous for assigning twos (i.e. 2 out of 10) to everybody. I was aware of such fame, but I didn’t let rumors affect my own impression of him.

Gauna introduced himself impetuously in the front of an absolutely speechless class. He explained what Geography was, described the material we would use and announced that the next class, the following day, we would have an oral exam (which was, for us, the first oral exam ever). Having said that, he told us to remain silent and waited for the end of the class.

That following day came and Gauna entered the classroom without greeting us. He asked straightaway who had been the top student the year before. When all those

who knew me, that is almost everyone, turned to me, I only managed to confirm that it was right, that I had been the top student. “Come to the front, top student!”, he barked disproportionately, trying to spread the terror. I stepped forward as resolutely as I was capable of and, without warm up, Gauna crushed me with questions I wasn’t able to answer. “What kind of top student are you? You don’t know anything” and other mean remarks like that were used by Gauna to beat me mercilessly. “You got a two, sit down”, he crowned my public humiliation.

I sat down and was so angry that I could barely restrain myself and hide my angry tears. “Son of a bitch ...” I kept saying over and over again, unable to understand what had just happened. Panic had taken over the class. Gauna’s perfectly premeditated message—I understood it much later—was very clear: “If I did this to the top student, imagine what’s left for you—miserable ones—”. In the meantime, my classmates were most likely going over the details of their future schooldays, which promised to be dreadful.

In the meantime, and to everyone’s surprise, Facundo raised his hand.

— Excuse me, sir, I come from another school and I was the top student there. I think I should be tested as well.

Silence even deeper than before followed my friend’s intervention. We all looked at him, not being able to understand what the fuck was going through his head. Gauna was the most surprised of all and stared at him, as he analyzed how to react to such unexpected challenge and yet to sustain his repressive maneuver.

— And who are you?

— Facundo “Caña”—said, while Gauna browsed his notebook.

— Here it is, Facundo Cag-na.

— No, “Caña”. It is pronounced “Caña”—he provoked him.

— Cooooome here!

Long before knowing about Dolina, Facundo walked to the front of the class, convinced that he was doing the right thing. But doing the right thing does not usually translate into having a sound knowledge of Geography. Gauna crashed him with questions he was not able to answer, then boasted about how poor his performance was for a former top student and finally made him go back to his desk. “You got a two”, sentenced Gauna, in an attempt to double the impact he had made when it was my turn. But the result, on the contrary, turned out quite different. The scene, since it was a remake, lost its impact.

Facundo headed for his desk, a lot more relaxed. Turning his back to Gauna, he smiled at the whole class, looked at me conspiratorially and sat down. He had accomplished his mission: my humiliation, which was now shared, became lighter to bear. My classmates felt more relieved, positively affected by a weird combination of surprise and amusement. Unwillingly, Facundo had earned his respect, especially of the new students. That day, the lesson was not taught by Gauna, and neither was it a Geography one.

Piety, punishment or silence

The screams brought me back to reality—if that was the reality—but it wasn't that bad: annoyances annoy less when you are about to arrive. It was already dawn and I was trying to fully wake up when I realized that the lady sitting exactly behind me had missed her stop. She had to get off in Pinamar but the bus was already on its way to Gesell, the final destination. The lady began to shout and moan, and, at times, it was difficult to tell her screams from the sobs. Still shouting, she headed for the driver's cabin, located on the lower floor. Even from the back of the upper floor we were all still able to hear her. She insisted on returning to Pinamar and, not content with the driver's refusal, she demanded, unsuccessfully, to be allowed to get off there, where "La Negri" could pick her up more easily. Returning to her seat, she loudly asked the passengers whether the drivers had really announced the arrival to Pinamar. A unanimous, resentful and joyful "yes" buried the lady's last hope, who had no other choice but to sit down, call "La Negri" and explain to her the details of her situation—panting—for ten neverending minutes.

While all this was going on, I was thinking about three ways of confronting the scene: I could intensify her agony requiring her to immediately stop such crazy behavior, I could rescue her from her drama by generously comforting her (which might include a hug) or I could remain silent so that the scene would conclude as soon as possible. At first, all alternatives seemed reasonable. I couldn't see clearly which was the right one, which one to choose (we don't always choose the right one, even though we can tell which the right one is), and not even which one to avoid.

The verbal punishment option seemed natural, comfortable and even desirable. I could sense that people on the bus were craving for someone to put this lady in her place and compensate for the injustice and frustration of having been brutally awakened. I even dare to say that the passengers were demanding it. But what sense would it make to punish a lady who was falling apart? Isn't it a cowardly act to push down someone who is already falling on their own?

The alternative to sympathetically comfort the lady felt exhausting. How tiring it is to be good! And even worse, such option promised to be massively rejected, since passengers would find it unacceptable that, instead of judgement, the lady was granted mercy. But well... that is what greatness is about after all, granting pity to whom perhaps doesn't deserve it.

Remaining silent seemed the safest and least exhausting option. The one everyone would, in the end, choose. Widely known and opted for, silence is the favorite choice of cowards, the mediocre and the wise.

Towards the end of the scene, still having time to intervene, my understanding had progressed remarkably. Piety was the correct and punishment was the incorrect one. However, more due to laziness—hopefully, drowsiness—than by wisdom or mediocrity, I chose silence.

We arrived in Villa Gesell, it was six o'clock in the morning. I could feel the cold and the freedom. And, most importantly, the joyful feeling of not having to go back to Pinamar.

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In case you want to help me to translate some of the stories into your language, just let me know

Bureaucracy

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Final comments

It would be great if you shared with me your comments on this edition and/or, especially, on the stories. You can do this by sending me an email to [jmguerrera \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:jmguerrera@gmail.com)