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# **A Miserable Adventure**

Juan Manuel Guerrero

*To the ones that know how to say sorry.*

# Foreword

I will only tell you that I was born, live and will always live in Argentina, a country beyond all understanding, a fertile soil for soybeans and literature, the land of Borges, Messi and Pope Francis. A country that insists on going forward by going back.

A little bit more about me is sketched in the Brief Biography section at the end of the book.

The short stories were originally written in Spanish. The devoted translation to English (for different stories) was in charge of Carolina Quintana and Natalia Barry, both literary translators.

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# The Term

*The explanation of why I forgive her everything resides in my love for her... but which is the explanation for my love for her, I really don't know.*  
—Anton Chekhov

## I

I love Claire. It is she, however, the one who does not love me. Or maybe she loves me the way she can, in her own way, a transactional, efficient, capitalistic way. Or maybe she cannot love me (or love), but she tries. In any case, she expresses her love (which I am not sure whether it is love) in a way so strange to me, so alien, that renders incomprehensible to me. I sometimes feel I am a guest, a visitor to her life, adapting to the theoretical profile of a man that she wishes to have by her side. Or like a piece, sometimes desirable, sometimes necessary, within her chessboard. That's it: her love has sophisticated contours, subtle and inexpressive ones. It has the body of formality, of planning, of efficacy, perhaps the forms in which her love manages, attempts or is able to manifest itself? And despite all these clues, all these roads leading to one single common point, I find it hard to understand reality, which is not visible as it is cloaked, sometimes made of the opposite of visible, which tries to cover it. But there must be some way of summarizing all this, of transmitting it without so much concern, without so much beating round a bush. There is. It is the term.

## II

It is not easy to love Claire, but I do, and it does not surprise me. She's smart, beautiful and has a strong temperament that I sometimes accept as personality. She is a woman of action and ideals. We could do great things together if only we understood each other a little more, if only we wanted to understand each other a little more. And I want to, because we share something very special: our rejection to accepting the terms of reality. Or that is, at least, what I want to believe.

If I had to abridge Claire in only one word, I would undoubtedly resort to the term. If that possibility were banned to me, then I would say she is a hard woman, like a round river pebble, with all the good and the bad that hardness has to offer. A rational hardness that covers a heart as sensible as postponed, a hardness with which I crash inevitably a lot more than I would wish to —and than our relationship can bear.

Only once did I mention the term to Claire, in passing, when I still talked to her in the most spontaneous, unconcerned way. When I had not yet fallen into her logic. I did it a lot before believing the term was the best way to define her, as I believe now. It was the only way to describe accurately what happened just after one of the most important moments of our relationship: the first time we made love.

It all happened in that northern city, so convenient and functional to all, especially her. Maybe it was our love for train-rides that made us meet at the central station, at six in the afternoon. Claire arrived with planned unpunctuality. We walked and seduced each other unhurriedly, beneath the dim light of an autumn sun that greeted us goodbye among the modern towers of the financial district. Night caught up with us and, with it, dinner. We let ourselves be wrapped by our confiding, our gazing and the smoking of the students that stuffed the place, one of the most traditional bars in town. Once at her place, the first kiss took us to bed, where we loved each other with burning anxiety.

Soaked in wet, it wasn't hard to predispose ourselves to the refreshing pleasure of a warm shower. She did it first. When I got out of the bathroom, ready to sleep next to her, I had to adapt myself to a change of plans: she asked me to sleep on the couch. Being in her house, she had the utmost right to ask for it and my naïve times had long been gone already but, still, it came as a surprise. As I looked at the sofa in search of answers, I tried convincing my disappointment that our loneliness there would not be that bad. I could not understand how Claire was able to interrupt in that way the amazing connection we had achieved. I had no doubt then, nor do I have it now, that it had been mutual.

I revealed it to her some time later, when we went back on the details of that night. I still did not understand it. That was the moment when I used the term for the one time. I added that perhaps it was a matter of cultural difference. It wasn't the first time I encountered that type of behaviors in those central lands, where pragmatism reigned over symbols and life tended to reduce itself, with no conflicting, to a bunch of contentions. In these regions, after all, I had witnessed long debates on the convenience or not of having children, in which positions were held by means of additions and subtractions of quantities of time, money and professional development. Even more surprise than the sofa-scene, now far away, was caused in me by her disproportioned reaction to my point of view. At the verge of wrath, she explained that her way of acting was not extraordinary at all, and it was not the first time she sent someone to the couch or got sent there herself. She did not answer when I asked how she felt when being in my place. Undoubtedly, she was very upset by the use of the term but I would only understand the deep meaning of that anger a lot later. She omitted it and steered her discharge at my “generalizing” on human behaviors in those winter-like countries. As if cultures did not exist or were not different from one another. As if these differences could be explained without resorting to general terms. As if one could deny—I used a painful example from my own land—that in Latin America there is a culture of male chauvinism that kills.

Tension reached a point that we had to interrupt a debate which had become abrasive and lacerating. Only toward the middle of the next day could we gain back some normality of events and in the hours that followed it hurt me to understand that we had wasted the precious opportunity of conflict to come closer and enrich one another.

The tendency to quick, explosive irritability in Claire was the new surprise I found within my own hand-reach and, unfortunately, would find again and again each time more frequently. It wouldn't be the last time I would sleep in that couch, one of her many resources, subtle or not, to impose conditions.

She rejects, eventually, the complicity I propose to her. She prefers an empire instead. I don't know yet whether it is a personal or cultural difference.

### III

Arguing with Claire is difficult. She considers them unnecessary, a waste of time. They quickly lead to dead ends, ideal scenarios for tension to mount. She doesn't think worth it or devotes any energies to understanding and softening our differences, both personal and cultural. It is better to ignore, forget and move forward. In the end, time is scarce. It is not odd, then, that she should seek to close arguments unilaterally: "This must be so, there is nothing else to say, accept it. Period". If that won't work—it never does—then she won't miss a chance to close them by slamming doors. When it is time to open them again, Claire usually warns me that I shouldn't be mad at what she is about to tell me, something that has never happened. In the end, to get angry is the clearest way to admit oneself intolerant or lacking of argument.

We almost always speak Spanish, except when we argue. In that case, we switch to English by my own initiative, in order to contribute to neutrality and fluency in our exchange. Besides her own language, Claire speaks excellent English and a very good Spanish. No doubt she would prefer to argue in Spanish, but concretely it is an obstacle when it comes to expressing oneself, and I prefer to avoid it not to complicate matters even more.

Our dull quarrels are just one edge of our communication problems. We have no trouble when it comes to exchanging information of a practical nature, such as timetables, places or tickets. More so, she takes the initiative. Perhaps the only problem is that all that information comes as secondary to me. Things get complicated when we move away from the coasts of concreteness and it is not strange that Claire should ignore my conversation on books, ideas or feelings. If we ride our bikes, she prefers speed to conversation. When we travel, she won't answer my messages. Or does so with complete detachment, as if physical distance transferred to our conversation. And I am not a heavy guy. It so happens that she is too busy. With so much work. And she only likes to answer properly. And she wants to do so in Spanish, to practice the language. This demands time, quietness and concentration from her. All of which she lacks. Therefore, she won't answer me.

When we talk about our relationship and our feelings, Claire "ponders" on every aspect that worries her. If it is a difficult time, she informs me that she is not willing to "invest feelings" in vain. She thinks our conflicts are due to, most of all, my irresponsible practice of "power games". For her, our relationship may go "from a hundred to zero" in a blink; if periods are longer, she draws in the air the time evolution

of those scores, by means of functional curves that go up and down, with peaks at some quarrel or reconciliation. Claire does not study math, or economy, or anything closer to an exact science. Luckily. She is aware of all this and admits it with a pride I can't believe. She defines herself as a "practical" and "non-romantic" person when it comes to love. Thanks for clarifying, Claire.

When it comes to "administering her time", Claire always keeps a schedule handy, ready to be consulted or filled. It is like an extension of her body, almost an organ. Sometimes, that little notebook seems to pulse. It reflects her optimized life in her, full of work and social events that can be booked a full year in advance. During the time of ecstasy, the summer, it is not impossible that we have to book a moment to go for a walk, maybe next week. There is no room for intimacy in her schedule (which need not be physical), that unproductive activity. Her social life is so much more nourished than mine, which does not represent a great merit... after all, I am a writer. That does not mean that she is less lonely (it might even explain it), as many of the people we encounter in those events we attend. Not even I can penetrate that loneliness she confuses with independence. Eventually, schedules, as well as budgets, are the best way to express priorities. And we have very different priorities. For instance, in relation to family or work.

Claire considers her family as a set of adult individuals who share the same last names, almost an administrative issue. They must take charge of their own responsibilities, there is no reason whatsoever why she has to mind them or their troubles. She has a hard time understanding the importance that family has for me and considers an exaggeration that I see it as a "source of unconditional love".

As many of the people in her circle, Claire works a lot and is proud of it. "I have been working real hard" or "I have a lot of work to do" are her top favorite phrases. She often works on Saturday and almost always takes with her some work materials, just in case. Thanks to this dedication, she has a successful career and is on the way of becoming an expert in her field. Her professional life projects solidly into the future and with it, she contributes to the development of her already developed country. And that reminds me: she doesn't like me to say "developed" for it is a word that "crystalizes the existing domination relationships". As I don't want to be a semantic oppressor, I correct myself: her country of a high per capita income.

Claire's interest for politics was one of the things that thrilled me when I met her. For whatever reasons, in the city where she lives (which is not her city, as none is), she helps the most needed with determination, and that has countless value to me. She is a vegetarian and has a strong ecological awareness. She practices a quite tough, progressive, anti-capitalist discourse, nourished by the use of strong words such as "resistance", but which does not prevent her from adoring New York and secretly craving to live there someday. She doesn't fall, at least not in my presence, in the naivety of proposing socialism as an alternative. To my disappointment, we haven't developed political conversation. Perhaps she is not really interested or perhaps she considers me



an interlocutor of little value. After all, I am merely a liberal and, perhaps, my belief in equality of opportunity may strike her as somewhat naïve or insufficient. When we finally establish a political conversation, she doesn't like for us to be lying down or “in positions where one may be symbolically predominant over the other”; translated, one being standing and the other sitting. She believes that most people are not ready to vote. Because, as everybody knows, the only ones prepared to vote are the progressives.

As a good ol'progressive woman, she justly repudiates nationalism and male chauvinism. She does it with devotion, detecting them and pointing at them all the time. Sometimes exaggeratedly, as if she had the urgent need to be politically correct. Almost everything is nationalism from her perspective: pointing out a cultural difference, my Argentine soccer jersey, and the humble peasants who celebrate a national holiday wearing typical clothes. She doesn't understand love for one's own place, which needn't translate in negative attitudes toward others. Almost everything is, besides, chauvinist: to open a door to her, to dissent on chauvinism matters with a woman, and to use words like “air-hostess” or “police-man”. Not only does she believe (like me) that women have the same rights as men, but also that men and women are exactly the same. Any excuse is a good one to qualify me as nationalistic or chauvinistic, although she later ends up admitting, once the storms are over and I demand explanations from her, that no, I am not that.

The network of micro-rules does not restrict itself to our physical posture for political debate. On the contrary, it expands in an entropic mode to all corners of our life together. Some of the micro-rules, it is fair to say so, even have their positive side, like the compulsory nature of doing something on Saturday nights. Others have the color of extravagance —especially during the limited summer-time—, like having to stay outside the house until night falls. This is not about general statements, but non-negotiable laws. I could enumerate the specifics of Clairecian legislation until invading all my story, but there would be no point. To sum up, all these micro-rules turn out to be, altogether, decisively exhausting.

The swampy lands in which Claire shambles exhibits her inflexibility, her structured way of being. She believes that having an explanation for something means being right. Period. This leads her to an incapacity for admitting mistakes and, therefore, offering apologies. She prefers to leave unresolved counterpoints or accepting that both parts are right, although postures may contradict themselves. Only as a last resource, she accepts to offer an apology, always after me and never by her own initiative. When she does so, it is almost never genuinely (I couldn't demand so much from her), but rather more of a practical resource to finalize an argument that she considers too long. She loves, or needs, to be in control. She acknowledges that she “hates surprises” and that she has been called, in the past, “a dominant woman”. Her love switch allows her (she thinks it allows her) to decide her feelings, which may change abruptly with only one click, as if they were a lamp.

Sometimes, her ideas about privacy and intimacy confuse me. Sex doesn't mean much to her, something I began to understand the first time we had it. Instead, sharing a bed (literally, sleeping) renders in her a much more intimate experience. She goes running several times a week but would not let me go with her for "it is a very personal and private moment". She doesn't like to have photographs taken. She practices yoga and meditation; judging by the results, insufficiently. She has trouble, and it doesn't surprise me, sleeping.

Nothing from what has been said prevents her from believing that she is an open-minded woman. And maybe she is, according to her ideas on open-mindedness, which restrict themselves to having a politically progressive discourse and the exercise of sexual freedom. However, this conception does not include flexibility or tolerance or humbleness at other ways of seeing the world or of doing things, however small and insignificant they may be.

A complicated woman, Claire is.

#### IV

I believe Claire suffers from a disassociation. It is the conflict between her reasons in charge and her subdued heart. Everything to prevent the inconveniences of suffering. However, her reasons know that it is no good to live without a heart, so they seek to emulate it in an artificial way that tries to minimize the risks. They erect a façade to the image and looks of her heart which does not demand them to yield control. This unstable castle of artifices generates a collateral curiosity: Claire tends to see causes where there are consequences. Then, she confuses temperament with passion, courtesy with kindness or brutality with honesty.

The term lays bare this conflict entirely and that is why it hurts her so much. Nothing from everything that happened between us—which was a lot—produced such a deep impact on her as the only time when I mentioned it. It defines solidly the way in which her reasons steer her behavior, contrary to her heart. Her heart which chose me and with which I can still encounter at times. That is why a part of Claire brings along the memory of the term in a recurrent manner: it is her heart asking for help.

Then, in the only possible way, with my heart ahead of me, I go in search of hers, without any calculations or speculations. I accept my defects, my mistakes, my faults. I become flexible, beyond the reasonable. I run risks and expose my feelings, now loaded with contradictions. I become inconsistent and often feel like an idiot. I doubt. And in every false move, her reasons punish me and do not hesitate to humiliate me.

#### V

I am willing to love Claire, despite everything, forever. I know it and she knows it. But her reasons won't allow it to me, and they manage to make her heart grow more and more distant each day. Meanwhile, the term inside her moves ahead, over me, and I am unable to control it. The situation, I admit it, is beyond me. I wither, weaken and fade. She perceives it, reproaches it and—it couldn't be otherwise—blames me. In my place,

she would have left herself a long time ago, perhaps on the very same day of our first quarrel. Or the second, as partly she did. But I am not like her and I am not willing to be. So I resist, futurelessly, against the evidence. I not only say I am not giving up, but also do I do it. I will not be the one to abandon her heart. *She* will, in the end, when she leaves me completely.

Expelled from Reader's Square

My forays into Reader's Square require considerable attention.

Almost every time I go there, I go by bicycle. I usually arrive by Las Heras Avenue, although as I am writing these lines I prefer to say that, in fact, I arrive by Libertador Avenue, because it is not wrong to take advantage of some harmless, almost honest misrepresentations.

There is a pleasant bicycle path next to Libertador Avenue, by which I come from the North. I cross the avenue and enter diagonally by Eva Perón Square. Unfailingly, I look at the statue of Eva as I pass by. At the foot of the somehow extraterrestrial building of the National Library stands a large statue of John Paul II, before which I stop for a few moments. I do so, in fact, only to realize my subsequent misunderstanding of the small, greenish statue of Cortázar that does not look like Cortázar and which, as though that were not enough, is enclosed by a fence that anyone can jump over, that is, a useless fence that only makes the scene even worse. And then, with my already warmed up incomprehension, I yield to the small statue of Borges, located a few meters away, as green and uselessly fenced as that of Cortázar, but also hidden, lonely, looking towards Austria Street or, in the best of cases, towards nothingness that holds dreams, labyrinths, and infinite universes.

Strengthened by impotence, I feel that the possibility of changing those injustices is at stake at Reader's Square, so I take Agüero Street until I find it. I like Reader's Square. For a start, it sounds good: Reader's Square. It is small, with many benches, almost all with their front or back to the sun, depending on the time of day. On the longest of the walls, the one at the back, there is usually an open-air plastic art exhibition, a tradition that may not last over time, just as the statues of the former neighbors, Juan Domingo and Eva Perón, who were once sitting on one of the benches in the square, did not.

The square has three entrances. My favorite is the one on Agüero Street, maybe because it allows me to have an overall view from the comfort of my bicycle. Or maybe because it is the first one I find when I go up from Libertador Avenue, something that, as I said, is not true.

For reasons that I don't know and I didn't bother to find out, the square is fenced and has private security. Sometimes I think it is a part of the National Library's grounds and, therefore, the library security services extend, along with its rules, to the square, as if it were just another room in the main building. Other times it occurs to me it is due to the contiguity of the Paraguayan Embassy, which, like all embassies, requires minimal precautions, if only for a matter of forms. Perhaps the most perfected of my theories is

that security fundamentally exists to protect readers of authors like me and writings like mine. In any case, I do not like the fact that the Reader's Square has fences and private security.

I also like the square because it receives many readers, which, besides being convenient, is also consistent with its name. I don't think Reader's Square attracts them by its name, but rather by the inevitable influence produced by the extreme proximity of the National Library, almost by definition full of readers.

Those readers, its small size and its convenient location on my route make Reader's Square a more than appropriate place to present my books.

I must admit that I no longer venture into the square with the freshness and innocence of the past, when I was unaware that my intentions were at odds with the regulations, as the private security officer informed me the first time I was thrown out of the square. To this day, I can't help but wonder if those rules really exist.

It was no use explaining to the officer that I was not selling the books, but offering them for free to the readers with my usual kindness, warmth, and charisma, so that they would have the opportunity to read one—hopefully two—of my stories. Therefore, if the commercial transaction took place, it was exclusively upon the readers' almost supplicant request. Because they needed my literature to extend their *raison d'être* in that square with such a clear name and mission. And to avoid the certain pressure of having to move to other squares with less demanding names, such as Mitre Square or Uruguay Square. In short, I tried to explain to him that if the forbidden transaction occurred it was not because I sold the books, but because the readers bought it from me. In other words, in the worst-case scenario, it was them who had to be thrown out and not me, the only victim of that unpleasant misunderstanding.

My clever reasoning was of little use since there was no way to convince the officer of being flexible about his determination to exile me. I must admit, though, that he did listen to me with commendable patience. His argument was not so compelling and he just repeated several times, with a guilty voice, that "he was not authorized to allow me to stay", shifting the responsibility to some unknown and immaterial authority, while he looked at me with trembling eyes which admitted the injustice and were almost asking for my forgiveness.

No serious and decent rebellion is lowered to manifest itself in front of a private security officer who also guards a small square, a tiny square; a poor man who only tries to do his job well, or even less: to live an honest life and have a salary at the end of the month. I knew that I could sustain and win the debate with my smart reasons, but not with truths, so I declared that, even though we both knew that I was right, I would withdraw peacefully and in a civilized manner, with the mere and noble intention of not complicating his life.

Without effort or resentment, I kept my promise and headed for the next square on my elaborate and secret itinerary, while suspecting that something worthy was hidden behind all this. Kicked out of Reader's Square, how ironic.

After visiting the square on several occasions, this was the first time that I was thrown out. That meant that there were criteria of permanence and expulsion to be discovered unless that criterion was the patience of the officers which I had already exhausted. In other words, I would go back again and again, until I got to the bottom of this matter, until this minor and original conflict was worthy of entering the world of literature.

My next visit to Reader's Square was successful. The first positive omen was to identify an officer other than the one who had previously promoted my exile; a new officer, who perhaps had not the slightest idea that we were at odds, or of my relapse. Determined not to make any false moves, I tied my bike outside, instead of bringing it in and getting everyone's attention, as I had done until then. I discarded the gestural expressiveness, the firm tone of voice, the sumptuous steps. I made my way starkly, quietly, almost like a ghost that only wanted to visit a familiar old place for a few minutes and then leave.

Over time I extended and refined the details of my visits. I added the delicate gesture of not walking on the lawn, which made me aware of the poor design of the paths which didn't lead easily to all the corners of the square and pushed me to the green shortcut, a pressure that I resisted with remarkable stoicism and humility. I also tried to start my journey in the vicinity of the officers on duty, gradually moving away from their areas of concern while they were perhaps debating whether or not to intercept me. Moreover, I tried not to interact with the officers, without even looking at them, to spare them the always heavy responsibility of being aware. I would propose, and they would generally accept, a tacit agreement that would allow me to fulfill my mission in such a quick, stealthy and polite manner that they "would not even notice it".

The officers rotated frequently and it was the new ones who were more likely to "kindly ask me to leave the square". I used these incidents to try out new reactions. Sometimes, I would fake lack of understanding and would hurry to the point of trotting, with the intention of finishing my journey before the expulsion, even if that meant throwing the books to the readers in a rather brutal way, without presentations or explanations, yet with the priceless charm of an officer chasing me. On other occasions, I would answer them in English and claim a Romanian descent. Or I would clarify that I was a writer and that I was only following the unprovable steps of Bertrand Russell, Anton Chekhov, and Lucius Anaeus Seneca while pointing to the National Library building as if that proved the veracity of my words. Almost always, I wondered how I could manage to get readers to intervene in my defense, by rebelling and demanding the officers to let me stay in the square. Maybe I should write a story about Reader's Square, posing the problem, and give them the book opened on that page...

However, it happens that all problems come to an end. After weeks of work, these conflicts were draining away so gradually that I almost didn't notice. Little by little, I imposed myself by means of care, patience, and persistence, as stated in the manuals. Most of the officers and many of the readers now know me. Sometimes, they even greet

me or comment on a passage in a book that I lent them or they bought from me. I could say that I have succeeded. But I haven't. Success, if any, came much earlier. Or it is still to come.

# The Secrets

*For Sabri.*

I had to reveal my secret in a way as insignificant as unexpected.

The owner of the cabins asked one of us to register in the complex. The data required in the check-in form was little, however enough to expose the secret of whoever took over the task. Without showing a single sign of her total understanding of the situation and its consequences, she remained by my side and contemplated the scene, impassively.

I hesitated in vain for an imperceptible instant. I looked for reasons that would push me to avoid what I knew inevitable from the very beginning. Without looking at her or hinting at the defeat invading me, I took the pen that the owner's hand extended and assumed the forever difficult task of opening up, of making myself vulnerable. In doing so, I not only condemned myself to revealing my secret, but also protected hers, in a double gesture of make-believe chivalry with which I hoped, at least, to seduce her.

She was snow-white and civilized, like the land she came from, in almost everything distant to Cambodia, in almost everything distant to mine. In a simultaneous and indispensable manner, a dark drive inhabited her (and her land), which I had the privilege of meeting and sensing.

We both knew about the secrets, although each of us only knew their own. We had always known, from the first moment we met, just a day before, when our eyes stared for a while and I came close to talk to her openly, without excuses, as I invited her to walk along the lonely golden beach of M'Pay, on an early, dry, sunny morning, with the tiny Koh Koun island as the only reserved witness. We knew it that same morning, when I kissed her for the first time and she let herself go, crystalline and calm, like the warm waters of the sea that wrapped us. Also in the afternoon, when it was hard for us to take our separate ways. And at night, when shaken by a moon dawning on the horizon, we kissed naked in a black sea that shone white-greenish shimmers, to the rhythm of our unfinished love maneuvers, contained only by the healthiest of the fears. We knew it during the following day when we walked, unaware of it, toward the cabins, under a withering sun that seemed an adverse fate; when we boarded the small local boat that brought us to the shores of the magnificent Saracen beach and we were touched, incredulously, by the natural spectacle that opened ahead of us; and when, in ecstasy, we fell asleep on a white sand mattress, in the shade of a stoic tree that seemed to have always been there, expecting us.

Yes, all the time we knew about the secrets. And all the time we were careful not to mention them, perhaps to convince ourselves that they were not important, despite their silent presence, their constant and artificial absence that suggested the contrary; or

so that the knowledge of them wouldn't come between us; or perhaps, much simpler, because the secrets stimulated even further the already unstoppable attraction we felt for each other, just as the exotic distance of Koh Rong Samloem.

The secrets were not, however, indecipherable. We ourselves had guessed their existence as soon as we discovered each other, and we had suspected the silhouettes in which the mystery enclosed. The others too could perceive the secrets, but the necessary simplification of facts prevented them from interpreting them as only we could.

I leaned over the elementary document that would crush me in a couple of sighs. Rather than the act of falling, what surprised me the most was having to do so in this innocent way. I disguised the search for alternatives with a general reading of the paper. I couldn't find any, except lying without risks, which I discarded for not considering it to the level of my self-esteem. She decided to stay and, by that, force out the truth from me, instead of leaving the room with any excuse. I filled in my data with determination, like things must be done—in the wrong or not—once one has decided to do them, and I exposed myself to her clear eyes which, of course, noticed the revelation and brightened, although I never looked at them so as not to give myself away.

Once registered, we went to our cabin. It was just like all cabins, just like everything unimportant tends to be the same. It was on the sand, a few steps from a sea that sang to the tune of the waves' coming and going, the musical background score which we had learned to get used to. The sunset had not yet come, but as we entered the first thing we saw was the irremediable night. After leaving our things, we went for a walk along the bay. We did it slowly and nonchalantly, as if we were the same persons from before, as if my unmasked secret had no consequences. More than once we stopped to kiss with determination, with certainty, to establish clearly the border of our omissions. When we came back, at dinner, we looked into each other's eyes with the silent help of the candles that lit the small tables along the beach. Driven by improvisation, just like happiness favors, we got rid of our last coins there.

Encouraged by the heat, by the immediacy and by the certainty of being in front of (or inside of) an indelible memory, we submerged ourselves again in the night of the sea and got lost in the magical labyrinth of salty kisses. Maybe because the double secret seemed excessive to me, maybe because it couldn't be in any other way, I finally told her what we already knew:

“Now you know my secret.”

“Yes,” she said, with serene manner. There was nothing to add and she did not. We looked at each other without speaking for several minutes which fixed the moment in the future, as if with red-hot iron.

“Do you want to know mine?” She decided, in the end, not to leave me alone.

“I don't know,” I answered, and it was true.

Again, the stare. Again, the silence. With her legs, she embraced my waist, took my neck between her hands and brought her mouth close to my ear where, with a whisper, she spilled her secret. It was brief and unmistakable like a number.



We stayed very close to one another, protecting ourselves from the extraordinary of the moment, suspecting all of that might turn into pain some tomorrow.

“I’m cold, let’s go out,” she said, and extended her warm hand which rescued us from the sea and guided us to the privacy of our cabin.

From our souls, now without the crossed secrets, nakedness extended to our bodies and we loved each other for the first time, freely, craving, but without any fears, under the whitish protection of a humble veil that, nevertheless, nourished the idea of fantasy, of illusion. Her young body, her smooth skin and her shy love heightened in the faint lunar beams that filtered into the hut, just like the resonance of the sea and the jungle. Her mouth, usually accustomed to smiling, adopted this time the contours of pleasure when bordering with pain. Each of the flavors of the skin, each unconditional yielding, actually everything, proved insufficient to quench our instinctive desire for eternity. Dawn brought night to our impossible and plunged us into another dream.

We slept little. When we woke up, reality found us exhausted, hungry and penniless. Filled with the unforgettable, we declined the obligatory view from the Old Lighthouse. The paradise that surrounded us, but also our own recent one, provided the energy we needed for a return that promised to be long and uncertain.

Holding hands, still clinging to the unrepeatable, we left behind the whitest beach, the happiness and the secrets. We walked several hours without speaking, since words transcended us as they had had before. The sun reigned in the bluest heights, it was pure energy. Fire, like our complicit gaze, like our secret.

#### The Other Deserter of Destiny

Destiny, by definition, is written and determines what happens to our lives. As with religion, the little margin we have is limited to believing or not in this idea. Whether we look at it in a relative or absolute way, it seems undeniable that this issue deserves some attention, at least for a few minutes.

*We lived in a damp city, at that time cornered by a sharp winter that appeared to succeed in becoming eternal. Everything seemed to be drawn in shades of white, against a background that was always black. We walked in silence, with our heads buried in the necks of our coats and our hands in our pockets, rather by the resignation we carried inside, in our chest, than by the cold. As we always did, we stopped to reflect on the bridge, from where the thick fog did not allow us to see the river. We talked about the present and the future. But above all, we spent our time regretting what had been prepared for us.*

Award-winning anthropologist and humanist Ivana Arsán has no hesitation in distrusting the idea of destiny, defining it together with fate as “simple philosophical and even existentialist explanations of the future”. The shared category doesn’t keep her from defining destiny and fate as “twinned opposites, the two sides of the same coin: the future”. They both represent “the impossibility of human beings to tolerate uncertainty”. In this way, “in the mind of each human being destiny creates the idea of security and acts as a guide, or inexorable, indisputable and supra-human path”. Just before finishing

her suspicious cigar and even without us asking, Arsán goes back to the subject of fate and without hesitation claims that even this is based on logic; this logic that we do not know, that has not been discovered due to its inherent complexity. At this point, Arsán unwittingly agrees with the legendary Doctor Sanguinetti, an engineer author of the famous Formula of Success, who states with a hint of terror that “fate is not really that hazardous”.

*Life had played a mean trick on us, and what was written for us was a long way from our dreams, always expendable, always postponed. What terrible sin had we committed, perhaps in some past lifetime, to deserve this miserable existence that tasted of punishment? We would not tolerate for another minute to carry the crosses of others, or of other pasts, or of other desires that were not our own.*

The renowned and harsh contemporary philosopher Germano Don Caldani, who usually receives us in a shabby bar, is in the same line of thought as Arsán and Sanguinetti. To find him there is also a part of destiny, part of the future we can predict. A white drink decorates his right hand, where he will rest his gaze throughout the talk, during which he will provide us with his always enthralling definitions. When questioned about destiny, he replies almost angrily: “I don’t believe in destiny and I do not rely on anything to support it. Believing or not is a decision and not believing seems less comfortable, less miserable. I strongly dislike the idea that a superior being dictates the paths along which my life will unfold. It’s true, there are believers in these easy ideas, that make life more bearable and free us from the responsibility of what we are going to do. And more importantly, of what we are going to be”. Perhaps affected by his gambling addiction, he adds some probabilistic definitions: “However, I do believe in the existence of an order of all things, and, as an old saying goes, chaos is an undiscovered order. The reality is that any situation could be predicted if we had enough information”.

*My old companion, a childhood friend, had the courage to finally propose the inescapable, what we already knew in our hearts. Turning his eyes at where the horizon should be, he announced to me that he would desert destiny. And by doing so, he pushed me to a transcendent crossroads with no return, as it always happens when we face those who decide to be true to themselves. If it was true that I wanted to surrender to The Truth, this was the opportunity to do it. Would I leave my friend alone? Would it leave myself alone?*

Destiny exists. And not only that: it is indisputably written. However, we are not condemned to follow its paragraphs literally, just as a theatre actor is not compelled to follow the script, no matter how well written. Indeed, the actor does not usually alter the words of the script, but this happens not out of impossibility, but rather out of prudence. He follows a script which he may not like, and then the play ends without shocks or surprises. The same thing happens when we abandon ourselves to the flow of a calm river allowing it to drag us to its mouth. That’s what destiny is: letting go, not doing. Life by omission. And just as the actor knows how the piece will end, we can glimpse

into our destiny if we project our present into the future. I can see my destiny with striking and painful clarity, not only in my overwhelmed mind, but everywhere, every day, with my own eyes.

*We would desert destiny. Heresy would be punished with harshness, with such exemplary harshness that future defectors would think it twice. The eventual punishment, however, would hardly be worse than the heavy chains of that which is established. The paranoia of a free man is always preferable to the resignation of a prisoner. And to have destiny behind us, lurking, is better than having it on our backs, spurring on us. From that moment, my friend became known as The Deserter of Destiny.*

The astrologer María Mercedes Herrera declares that “although from a strictly professional point of view I subscribe to the existence of destiny, of course determined in the stars and decipherable because of my abilities, I personally lack any further precision on the subject”. She further notes that “the discussion (and therefore this writing) is not important, since it is impossible to prove any of the theories. How can we know if the decision to listen to my opinion is the result of our freedom or the inexorable consequence of our destiny?”. What she can assure is that “it is the losers that tend to believe in destiny, to foist their own faults on it, while it is the winners who tend to discredit it, to take credit for themselves, even when that is not the case”.

*A few years would pass before Destiny took it upon itself to irrevocably corner my old friend The Deserter. Perhaps his humanity was much more limited than his ambitions and, after all, it was not possible to escape something so definitive. In the confusion of our escape, we had parted ways long ago and I only heard it was a closed, misty night, like the first night, when Destiny besieged him in a narrow dead-end street. Once again, I had been left alone. Coldness is a sad quality of those of us who live on the run and it is what allows us to overcome such painful losses as this one. Destiny is now after me, but I will not allow myself to be defeated. Nor to disappoint the few who still believe in me, to whom I owe myself. Those who, in an overstatement, call me The Other Deserter of Destiny.*

# Train to Zurich

*For Guido.*

I would say we expected something, a certain normality or boredom, because when we opened the compartment door we were surprised. First by the music, which sounded very high and seemed Balkan to me —after going through this story in my memory dozens of times, I ended up concluding that it must have been gypsy music, conceived in Hungary or in some other Eastern Europe corner. Second, because the ones responsible for the music were two young women, attractive enough, in tight clothes, with delineated eyes, very black ones, those used to getting up always. For a moment, I felt like being in a suburban Buenos Aires train. Before entering and after a first hello, I saw my good friend Gino, pop up from behind my shoulder.

The compartment was one out of the many that composed the train coach. Coaches were numerous, too, exceeding the roofed area of the station. The day was fading away. It must have been seven more than six in the evening, but mostly it was late. We had arrived at our train just in time, literally running. With Gino, we played by ear, except when it came to punctuality. Partly because of that, my friend was “all one was told about Buenos Aires”, in the words of a Swiss passenger on the same train, whom we were to meet a few hours later.

The train was departing from the magnificent Keleti station, the most important of the greatest railway stations in Budapest, the city where the arbitrariness of my dreams usually takes me back. There had been no time—as is always the case with wrong priorities—to enjoy its eclectic architecture. The huge halls, separated by large wooden doors, were guarded by solid pink marble columns and, almost always, by Karoly Lotz's frescoes.

The final destination was Zurich, located about a thousand kilometers from there.

We went inside the compartment and greeted the two women with a smile more suggestive than necessary, shaking our hands as we introduced ourselves in English. The greeting, restrained, sought to balance the disorderly desire to explore our new traveling companions with the civilized remoteness that people prefer when greeting for the first time. The women responded with moderate enthusiasm, perhaps because they did not understand a word we said, as apparently they spoke only a language that was incomprehensible to our ears, probably Hungarian.

The compartment had six beds. We checked that the assigned numbers were correct and sorted out our luggage. Meanwhile, the women did not turn down the music, which I am not sure bothered me, but did catch my attention. “Weird they should not turn the music down...”, I told Gino after chatting for a while. “Yes”, he answered.

My comment was almost a provocation for Gino, who took one of the women by the arm and, pointing at the music device, asked her vaguely about the origin of that music. Apologetically, they put down the volume immediately while they seemed to excuse themselves. Gino omitted clarifying further and sought to know their names instead: Dika and Malina. He let them know we were from Argentina and some basic related information, such as the fact that we spoke Spanish. The effort toward the intentions managed to extend the conversation, something effective understanding would have never achieved. Dika, the least attractive and maybe because of that the most determined, contributed with some key words in English that helped unleash some knotted conversations, not to say nonexistent.

Shortly after the train started up, a third woman joined our compartment. Her name was Rozi and she knew the other two. After making herself comfortable in bed, she joined our will-intended dialogue and, without much effort, snatched from Malina the title of the most attractive in the group.

When the initial conversation effort ran out and the comfort of each one's own language finally prevailed, Gino and I decided to go out into the hall. We looked out the window, it was already night. We guessed the cold and the blackness of late autumn settled in the invisible Hungarian plain, which our train was going through without too much haste. When we paid attention to the corridor, as narrow as two persons passing by, it was impossible for us to remain indifferent. Other passengers had also left their compartments, perhaps to stretch their legs, perhaps to refresh their dreams in the darkness of the window; or to recall a hell they were leaving behind, or to imagine one that was coming. We did not know. "Dude, why are there so many girls in the corridor?" I asked Gino.

The bursting-in of the train-guard postponed the suspicion that was beginning to grow already, and sent us back to the compartment, where we searched for our tickets and passports. The guard, who like almost everything on the train seemed Hungarian, took our documentation and examined it thoroughly, with a remarkable ability for not getting bored. When he came to a conclusion, he announced in hardworking English that the tickets were invalid, because we had not completed the date of usage. He therefore had to retain the documentation until we paid a fine of sky-rocketing price. It was useless to explain to him a thousand times that we did not know the procedure and that, until that moment, guards were the ones who had always filled out the date on tickets. The argument extended for more than an hour. Dika, out of experience or fun, encouraged us not to give in. The guard, exhausted, decided to close the controversy by threatening to get us off the train at the next stop, whose name was unrememberable but meant essentially the very icy center of Hungarian nothingness. With all argumentative instances depleted, we told him very well, we would pay the piercing fine, but after an hour of arguing with us he knew very well that we were not lying, that we were from Argentina and we didn't have money to waste, as surely neither he or his children. To close it, we told him that he would carry that guilt for times to come, giving a decisively

emotional closure to our final argument. Then, for the first time, the words of the guard diverged from his gaze, and he informed us that he was truly sorry but the rules were the rules, so he would go for the receipts and return to collect the fine.

While we waited for the guard who would never return, we realized that we caught the attention of all passengers in the corridor; or rather, of women passengers, since almost all of them were women, and young. Gino looked at me, then refocused on the corridor, and threw a visual rope whose end was anchored in the eyes of one of the girls, Lumi. He adjusted that imaginary rope and pulled it till he got to be standing very close to her. Then he discovered that Lumi's gaze—that is, Lumi—was hard, tough and bold.

They ended up facing each other, one breath away distance, love sparks flying around them. Gino spoke to her in Spanish and Lumi answered him in her own language, both of them with striking decisiveness. The connection flowed and they seemed to understand each other, despite the incompatible languages, or perhaps thanks to them. He took out from his pocket a little guide of Budapest. Among other resources, it offered about thirty phrases in Hungarian, including some that challenged the tourist to try their luck in the difficult art of Magyar seduction. He showed Lumi the palm of his hand, asking her for patience, while reading the guide in silence. The entire corridor, now turned into a kind of football stand, observed expectantly. The six passengers in the nearest compartment had already gone to bed, but they did not hesitate to open their door and lean out from there. Almost like a silence, the sound of the train moving on the rails and sleepers had occupied everything. Long before being ready, Gino began to shoot words in Hungarian with the help of his little guide, while the women in the corridor burst out cheering and clapping. Lumi laughed too, alternating with impenetrable comments to the women who seconded her. The public show of intercultural courtship lasted several minutes. Lumi did not retreat, not even an inch, and Gino could not get any closer, so he attempted a caress on her arm or hair, while trying unsuccessfully to take her hand.

What followed—which, at this point, could be anything—was interrupted by the appearance of a woman as young as the others, but very different and very angry. She was blond, with her hair tightly stretched back and tied in a pigtail adjusted above the line of ears. Almost shouting, she ordered the girls to retire to their compartments. With reluctance, they obeyed her. I could see the disappointed eyes of Lumi, who granted one last look of recognition to Gino, told him the name of a hotel and left with her head down, almost dragging her feet, until disappearing at the end of the corridor. Gino had his back to me, but I didn't have to see his eyes to know that his disappointment was even greater.

Not happy enough with the liberation of the corridor, the blond woman confronted Gino and ordered him in perfect English to stop talking to the girls, as if anyone could be in a position to enter through the window and intimidate a true *porteño*. Gino glanced at me and then, in the purest Argentine tone asked her “who the fuck are you?” with all

the sentimental help he was able to gather in his hands and body. The blond woman charged again with her preaching while Gino transformed himself into a whole inability to accept made of gestures: he shook his head, took his face in his hands, bit his lips, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Look, woman, I have only one mother and she is in Liniers, so get out, vanish, go”, he ordered back, while stretching his arm pointing to the end of the corridor. It was impossible to know if the blond woman had understood anything, but not that she left screaming some unpleasant things in German.

The corridor had been left deserted. I approached Gino and it was little we could comment on what had happened as one of the passengers who had witnessed the show from his bed, got up to talk with us. He introduced himself as Rapha and was happy, smiling. As most Swiss people, he could speak Spanish and several other languages. He looked at Gino for a few seconds, dazzled, as if he were facing a legend that suddenly turned real and became reachable to him. “You're all I was told about Buenos Aires”, he confessed in tears almost. He won our affection easily and we talked with him for almost an hour, until a passenger of impatient sleep asked us for silence. We said goodbye with a hug and went to our compartment.

Dika, Malina and Rozi were awake, talking, or maybe waiting. They looked at us in a new way, which I didn't fully understand. Without too many detours, Dika tried to tell us something with the help of her hands. She pointed at everyone and then hit the top of one fist against the palm of the other hand. She was proposing group sex to us. I looked at Gino. Acting my part without any innocence, I told Dika that we thought it was an excellent idea, I took off my shirt, and tried to advance on her. She stopped me with the tip of her index finger on my chest and made it clear to me, gesturing, that few things in life are free. I looked back at Gino. “No, no... We're not going to pay... In any case, you should pay us...”, I counterattacked in English, with a grin, as I slowly put my shirt back on and Dika, maybe disappointedly, tried to reel back the negotiation by means of more signs, perhaps offering me a large discount. My stubbornness made her search for Gino, who was smiling next to me. “No, no... We are Latin Lovers... We can do without money, but we will not pay...”, he confirmed in English, too. Dika looked at her companions and there was a brief and incomprehensible deliberation. Once they agreed, Rozi turned off the light.

It was the Swiss police that woke us the next morning. Nothing that happened during the night had distracted me from sleeping hugged to my backpack. The train was stopped at the border and the Swiss officers were checking passports. Everything was fine in our compartment, but there was a stir coming from the platform. As the delay was getting longer, we went to the hall with Gino to look out the window. There were half a dozen Swiss officers, three guards, about twenty girls, and the forever angry blond woman. The main dialogue was between a Swiss officer and the guard who had forgotten or forgiven us the night before. The gesture inexpressiveness of the men prevented us from guessing if they agreed or not, although remembering our guard's last look, and judging by the simple opposition to the Swiss officer, I presumed that they didn't. After several minutes of contemplating the operation, it became clear to us that

the twenty or so girls didn't meet the necessary conditions to cross the border into Switzerland. It seemed incredible to me that people could get on that train during the night without having the minimum security of being able to cross the border. My questions kept multiplying. The conversation of the men was fueled by the recurrent intervention of other officers, the calls through the radios and the moody blond woman. Sunk in silence, I was uncertain whether I wished for the girls to cross the border or not. I looked at Gino, he didn't know either.

Finally, the girls couldn't continue the trip and we saw them disappear slowly as the train continued its way to Zurich, from that moment on Swiss territory. Dika, Malina and Rozi had returned to bed after the passport-check and slept peacefully, oblivious to the conflict in the border, as if it had nothing to do with them, or as if it were part of the normality of their trips. Not to wake them up, with Gino we had breakfast in silence, trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle that now, from the present, seems to present itself so clearly.

We reached Zurich with mixed feelings. We said goodbye to our room-mates with a kiss that tasted like abandonment, like impotence. We left the station fast, as if escaping. We walked with determination, more to get away from there than to reach our apartment, located in one of the many homogeneous buildings that populated Hardstrasse Street.

The day was long, insubstantial and a little sad, like a waiting. Maybe naively, that same night we went in search of the hotel, whose name had been Lumi's farewell. It wasn't difficult to find it, but they did not know any Lumi, or any Hungarian girl, or anyone. The endless story of the train had ended, at least until today. Literature is, sometimes, a way to resist endings.

With the desirable adventure of Lumi buried behind us, our resignation was to visit Zurich in the recommended, reasonable way. We walked through its gray, neat streets, perfectly maintained, which somehow always led to the clear waters of the Limago River. We visited the peaceful churches of Saint Peter and Fraumünster, whose translation had never been fully resolved. We savored the famous chocolate and admired the efficiency of the transport system. We contemplated from the distant viewpoint of Ütliberg how the beautiful landscape of lakes and gentle hills embraced the city.

Zurich presented itself to us in a kind, silent, civilized manner. It couldn't hide from us —however— its most secretive and primitive side: a black, brutal, beast-like hunger for Dikas, Malinas, Rozis and Lumis.



## Mysterious Janitor

The janitors of Buenos Aires—each one of them—hide a secret, dark and dangerous, just like all secrets. We can easily notice them, when we walk past the door and see them, inside or outside, standing or sitting, “distracted” or looking into our eyes, almost always settling into the many different manners of idleness. As if someone could be there, settling into idleness for years, just to supervise the entrance of a building.

A janitor is not just a man who is paid to open the door for us, to smile at us with warmth and to make us feel a little safer upon entering. Or to perform some maintenance in exchange for a tip, almost always insufficient. The janitor is a means, and not an end, for something more profound, the choice of a higher and inexorable destiny. He recognizes himself as an executing arm although it is certain that he does not know this destiny accurately, as happens to all those who have the blessing (or misfortune) of knowing they are called to achieve something important. Proud, he is aware of his own gravity, even though he sometimes wonders what his path is, what in God’s name it is. But with the same caution with which day by day he unfolds his waiting, he chooses to be silent and covers himself with a mantle of humility that preserves him.

When in the morning, very early, he goes out to wash up the sidewalk, he does not do it just for the sake of a contract, aesthetics or hygiene, nor for the simple pleasure of wasting water, but he sets the stage for the revolution to come and feel at home, welcome. After all, the least a new era deserves is a clean, crystal-clear entrance that smells of chrysanthemums or, at least, lavender.

He does not look out into the street to see how the weather has changed, nor to inspect the source of a violent noise that may have been blaring nearby, like a siren. He does not do this to deceive time and shorten the day, that is equal to all the previous ones, but moved by his impatience to begin to fulfill the task that The Absolute has entrusted to him. With his gaze lost in the horizon, not very far in the land of buildings, it is safe to bet he wonders if that day is The Day, if the wait is finally over. His gaze is filled with fear when he discovers us watching him and he surely wonders if we suspect the truth or, much worse, if we have discovered it. Those moments of perplexity, of hesitation, reveal his often downplayed human nature. Suddenly, perhaps, a gust of wind that manages to slip through the monstrous constructions hits him in the face and blows his hair out, shattering that solid, reliable image, and then everything and everyone is filled with doubts. But this does not disturb him or prevent him from staying there, steady, waiting.

The innocence of his appearance is pure illusion. When we sense boredom in his hardened face, we are wrong. Reading the same morning paper over and over again is not a mere distraction, nor is it completing the same old crosswords on the last page.

Neither is the small TV that shows football matches and their reviews, especially of the team the janitor claims to support. Maybe this entertainment is just for us. And we make the same mistake by believing that he is only killing time when he seems unable to stay away from his phone.

Sometimes he gives in to impatience and can't contain the urge to share a confession or a suspicion with his colleague next door, who also goes outside, smokes a cigarette, looks at the sky and almost in a pleading tone asks "when, when". And then they look at each other, they understand each other and they come closer, to pat each other, to tell each other "no news, my old friend", and above all, to cheer each other up. "Let's not give up, my friend, it's already too late to look back".

It is not gossip what he handles with his strong and calloused hands, but hints, clues of The Coming. The janitor, not always without excess, manages this information with zeal and even with passion. He checks it, compares it, and, above all, studies it, so that no signal goes unnoticed, so that the materialization of The Plan is not exposed to any setback or any undesirable distraction.

Exhausted from being alert, he often gives in to sleep. This is far from meaning abandonment or incapacity. Sometimes, simply, sleeping saves us from a nightmare, from a life with too many responsibilities. Despite the pressures, the janitor is a brave, tenacious man, and will keep his vigil until the end, even if The Day does not come, as so many generations of janitors have done before.

Because it is very easy to judge the janitor from the comfort of a laid-back and material life, where pleasures are smooth as silk and sweet as honey. Because it is so easy, in short, to ignore that the janitors also break down at night, cry, and bleed out in uncertainty, in unfounded faith.

However, and this is what matters, The Day is coming. For reasons that are not relevant, I know the secret. I would unveil it, but to do so would be to claim victory too early.

## Julián, The Writer

Julián knows, in his deepest self, that he is a writer. Maybe he is not aware that he knows it, but he does, because you do not have to be aware of things to know them. He knows it when he can identify the bookstores from a distance or when he finds time to turn around and visit them, to walk unhurriedly through their narrow corridors full of old books, to stop and go through them one by one, looking for an idea, an inspiration or a paragraph that could change his life. Or when he buys a book thinking more about the author or the bookstore than about himself; or when he decides to gift one, giving in to the gut feeling that it is the best possible present. When he listens carefully to the writers he admires and considers them lucky. Even when he realizes that he disagrees, he imagines and he thinks in the form of stories and when he suspects that happiness has the shape of a warm, wooded room with a library, a table, a good chair and light, lots of light. He knows it, in short, when he needs to understand, realize and share himself, and sits down in front of a blank page, even if it hurts, even if the words do not come out, despite the anxiety that devours him from inside.

Yes, he knows it. But for some reason, he does not see it. Perhaps he considers that it is not possible to be a writer, as it is not possible to be an astronaut. A writer, after all, is not a person, but a concept, an idea. One of the necessary parts of a book, like the title. A name to be written on the cover and inside the book, enlarged with a photo and a biography. Writers, in the end, do not exist. They are abstractions, like their productions, and a normal person cannot be an abstraction (as if he were a normal person). Being a writer belongs to another category of existence, to a life different from his, inaccessible. Then, as always, reality shows him what he'd rather not see. He meets other writers, who are as flesh and blood as he is. Imperfect, fragile, full of problems and conflicts. And one day that seems to be just like the others, everything changes without warning and, in an inexplicable way, in a pure and clear way ... he sees it.

And when he sees it, he does not accept it. Because he might love literature, books, the moving capacity of thoughts and feelings put in words on paper. And it is also possible that writers are human beings, who doubt and break down. But he does not believe all that is enough to immerse himself in his own nature and become a driving force of literature, someone whom others will read. He considers it is impossible to leave behind the gray and opaque version of himself just to become a writer, that is, he himself in colors. He doesn't imagine himself confronting the depths of his soul, nor his obscurities, nor the patient task of transforming all this into words or of gathering the courage to bring them to light. More precisely, he doesn't imagine his name on the cover of a book, let alone thousands of them, or readers full of illusion caressing and smelling those pages. But finally, he shuts off that foreign inability to dream and wonders, "why not? ... why not?"

And when he accepts it, he doesn't believe in his capabilities. Because not everyone, like him, is capable of standing out among thousands, among millions, as if that defined what a writer is, or, even more, what a good writer is. He thinks of Borges, Hesse, Wilde, and so many others, and he falls apart because he knows they are unattainable. But he can also perceive that he doesn't have to be them, like them, or like anyone else. He has other things to say, with other words, with other silences, with other despair. He just needs to be true to himself. And with that, perhaps and if that really matters, he will succeed in touching a handful of people, who will become important. He acknowledges that most of the acclaimed writers bore him to death, to the point of being unable to read another page. There must be a mistake in the world of literature or, regarded in another way, an opportunity. He finds joy in that disappointment, in that dense and deep faith that challenges him to do better. And just as he feels and accepts without excuses that he will never be good at music, cooking, fixing a house, or, indeed, at almost anything, he also feels and admits fairly that he has capabilities for a few things. Not even that many, only two or three. And writing is one of them. A gift through which he can justify his existence, contribute to the world, serve others. Because a person can't be bad at everything. And he is bad enough at everything else.

And when he finally believes in his own capabilities, he feels that it is too late. Lost time is as essential as it is unrecoverable. If he ever had an opportunity, he has wasted it. The die is cast and it is not worth starting over (as if he had the possibility of going backward, as he had arrived somewhere). Everything he could have learned, artistically grown or, in general, experienced, is gone forever (as if it could be otherwise, as if what he actually lived had no value). He now believes in his capabilities, but also considers them unable to do without that postponed and drained time that could have made the necessary difference. He does not believe that turning to literature is the next step and not a new beginning. He prefers to concentrate on what he has not had, on his alleged mistakes and other comforting excuses for abandonment and resignation. He is already too old, it is better to live in peace, as it has been until now (as if that were living in peace). On the threshold of capitulation, he goes over the great authors of history who started very young: Rimbaud, Kipling, García Márquez. But his sense of balance (or his inner fire that refuses to be put down) also brings him to the late ones, to those who started much later: Cervantes, Twain, Defoe. It is not, after all, a matter of time, but of acceptance and surrender. The limits do not lie in his reality, but in the fragile reasoning of his fears.

And when he realizes that it is not too late, he is afraid of exposing himself. He fears incomprehension, criticism, rejection. Who is he, then, to become a writer? Who is he to expose his ideas, his feelings, his fears, in such a strange, primitive, boring way? Who is he to raise his head, lean out for freedom, not to betray himself? He fears, above all, that he will not live up to expectations, starting with his own (as if remaining in the stillness of mediocrity was better, as if by surrendering to fear he could find satisfaction).

And once he has defeated the great ghosts of his fears, there is still a trifle that stops him: he thinks he needs a publisher. It overwhelms him to imagine the task of getting one and he feels discouraged because it is a project in itself, a complete waste of time, a bureaucratic hell. And he hates bureaucracy. And even if he does not know it, he hates it because he is a writer, not a bureaucrat. Then he feels discouraged once again and believes that he will never get a publisher. He trusts his work, but he doesn't trust publishers. Or, perhaps, he is still too afraid of rejection. Or failure (as if his life were a success, as if not trying would save him from an outcome). Someone who tries to help him brings him a self-published book. He opens it and the first page of the book hits him: «To those who do». He does not yet feel part of that universe. The blow is true to its nature and it comes to him, hurts him, but it also awakens him and forces him to see things differently. Fate becomes inescapable, once again (as always, even if we choose to ignore it), and he can clearly see that if there is something that a true writer does not need, if there is something that life does not need, it is a publisher.

And when he discards the publisher, he believes that even if he writes, he will never have a book. Because he has no idea how a book is made, how to make a layout or a design. He has never printed anything, not even a pamphlet. He has never dealt with printers, has never seen their equipment, or commissioned a printing project (which adds to those tasks and makes them seem extraordinary). He has never sold anything, let alone his art, which he considers a dreadful idea. How could he sell his anguish, his sleepless hours, his heart? Then he understands his mistake. It is not his art that is for sale, but a simple copy, an essential sample that allows him to open up to the world and exercise the noble task of sharing.

And when he thinks he can, then it happens. And not only does he know he is a writer, but he actually is. And not only can he imagine himself writing every day, but he wakes up in the morning and faces the depths of his soul, his darkness, the patient task of transforming all that into words, while nurturing courage and temperance to bring them out into the open. And of course, he doubts and has to cope with frustration, but he persists and the lines flow, slowly and laboriously. And he not only imagines his name on a cover, but he sees it with his own eyes on the book that he holds in his hands. And he no longer just imagines his readers full of excitement caressing and smelling the pages but has them right in front of him. And without ever having been able to imagine it, they look him in the eyes and, with deep emotion, they express their gratitude.

# Tragedy For Everyone

*The difference between Argentina and England is that in England an Oxford professor does not know who Lady Di is. And if he does, he does not know her misfortune. And if he does, he does not care. And if he cares, he keeps it to himself.*  
—Guillermo Jaim Etcheverry, in his book *The Educational Tragedy*

The guy next to me wouldn't stop talking. He had started to lecture me about half an hour ago. He did so with strong emphasis as if he were saying fundamental truths that would change the destiny of the country if they were revealed to me. At the height of his passion, he would even spit a little. I would ask him to calm down, while I watched as the droplets of his saliva fell on my pants and were absorbed with speed by the worn but thirsty jean fabric. Of course, he did not care in the least about my opinion. When it was time to get off the bus, I said goodbye, eluded the hug he tried to give me and went to the back door. The guy kept talking to me, as he turned to me like a sunflower to stay focused. The doors opened, I got off and even from the street I could hear his tireless voice trying to round up the idea of his speech.

From that same street, I was able to see how the bus continued before a lady finished getting off, which she finally did but on her head. She got up dripping water and swearing, which surprised me because she seemed so distinguished. When I went to help her I understood her irritation better, since the alleged water had not only ruined her delicate lilac dress but gave off an unmistakable rotten smell. Before I continued my way, I lied with sympathy about the seriousness of those intense brown spots that had come to stay, at least, for the rest of the day.

I looked for the stop of the next bus I had to take. I found it and set out to wait, God only knew how long. Yes, that's life when you're free enough. Or when you have no money, which undoubtedly was my case. Luckily, I was prepared, so I pulled out the thickest and oldest among the books I was carrying. It dealt with mathematical analysis and it was about two hundred years old. I started to read it and while I was doing so — that is, while I was trying to decipher it — the girl who was waiting next to me asked me if I studied engineering. She was right. I asked her if she had noticed it because of the book, but she said, “no, because of your looks, your face ... everything”. I ended the dialogue, as I was afraid to go too deep into the details. After thirty minutes of waiting, already quite fed up, I decided to walk. A street child stopped me to ask for a spare coin. I told him I didn't have one, the honest truth, but I offered him an apple I had. He rejected it without hesitation and left. He wasn't doing that bad after all.

I arrived at the hospital, which was public, therefore opening the possibility of several more paragraphs for this story. There was a kind of waiting line, even though the attention system was based on taking out a number. I took one while trying to

understand the impatience of the people crowding into the counter area. I moved away a little and chose an uncomfortable plastic chair that was standing alone against a rather deteriorated wall. Not too far, there was also an inexplicable little table, almost a small desk, which I brought over to rest the book. I made myself comfortable as much as the chair and my six feet allowed, and I sank into reading another of the books I was carrying, which dealt with the eternal decadence of Argentine education. I was so absorbed in the book that I got annoyed when a lady interrupted me by pulling my T-shirt. «Excuse me, do you work here?». I stared at her and wanted to ask her whether she noticed that I was reading some book, without any purpose, scruffy and in a bad mood. At that moment I understood her confusion and decided to answer, “No, I don’t work there. I am just waiting.”

By the way, I had gone to the hospital to visit uncle Armando, who had suffered his sixth heart attack. Poor uncle Armando.

After a long time of reading, I paused to rest my eyes. I looked at the dozens of people waiting nearby. It wasn’t very hot, but some insisted it was and they fanned themselves with their hands. They looked impatient, tired, fed up. “So many people that have nothing to do!”, I thought. As a professional indulgence, I quickly estimated the number of people who were there wasting their time and multiplied it by the number of hospitals, town halls, banks and other places where people must wait like poor wretches until I got lost in the calculation. If all these people were respected, even if they rebelled or studied while waiting, or all at once, we would have a much better country.

Dozens of minutes passed and passed until it became dark and the natural light eventually abandoned me. Its replacement, lamplights, was highly unsatisfactory, and since I didn’t want to wear glasses in the future (much less going to the eye doctor, to optics, etc.), I stopped reading. I gave in to the enemy and approached the TV set that was on the end, near a door that squealed like a pig every time someone opened it. A congresswoman was being interviewed, and she said, “I needed a deep transformation in my life, that’s why I decided to change the color of my hair, now it is copper-colored, a hue that fascinates me”. I laughed bitterly, with a lump in my throat, as I bit my lower lip. Next to me, almost prostrated, a very fat lady agreed in a loud voice that the copper hue was much better. Now I had no doubt: this country was going to hell. With the help of my vocabulary and everything.

Finally, it was my turn. “I want to see Armando Guerrero, please”, I told the receptionist, who was drinking *mate* and, by her looks, I’ll bet her name was Norma. “He’s my uncle”, I clarified, which was absolutely unnecessary. She completely ignored me, while she looked at a rather crumpled spreadsheet that had many annotations and some drawings on the margins. “He’s gone”, she finally informed me and took a bite of a delicious croissant with *dulce de leche*, while sprinkling impalpable sugar on the spreadsheet. “Well, it was about time”, I said to myself, while watching Norma chew with devotion. He had endured five heart attacks, no less. And his life had been pretty good, with a passion for barbecue and football. And wine. Perhaps noticing my dismay

and my vacant gaze, and only once she finished eating the croissant, Norma told me that my uncle had gone “home”. I sighed with relief and, despite everything, I smiled.

I got home too late, just to eat. The pessimists would say that I lost the whole day at the hospital. On the contrary, I would say that it had been an afternoon of revealing experiences.

Someday I would write a story about them. And uncle Armando was alive. No doubt, it had been a great day.



## A Miserable Adventure

The morning was sunny and cool. Everything was serene, or at least that is how I remember it today. I took the train at the station that was closest to my house. My usual route ended at the terminal station, but that day I got off at an intermediate stop that connected with the subway, just to do something different. This change more than fulfilled its purpose, almost to the point of exaggeration.

I hadn't ridden the subway in years and to be honest I wasn't too happy to use it again. Not only because I prefer trains (due to windows, light and no stairs), but also because the novelty hindered my routine. But this was exactly the idea: to look for some discomfort. With the concentration required by new, or forgotten things, I bought my card, swiped it at the turnstile and went through. I thought about the irony of mechanic stairs going downwards, while I let myself be transported, peacefully, like a bourgeois. I was lost in these sterile thoughts when the action began.

The subway had already arrived while the sluggish stairs seemed not to realize that fact. Addicted to challenges, I decided that I would arrive in time despite the stairs, despite everything.

Running after the train had always been one of my favorite pastimes. It was also a humble urban training. At the station near my house, the race would start from the street and it included crossing the square, climbing stairs, crossing the bridge, going downstairs, climbing stairs to the platform and jumping inside the train. At another station, where I used to arrive with a friend, the challenge was similar, but it included an initial run of about a hundred meters and the crowning of a winner. Of course, the race involved risk and even irresponsibility. But come on, we have to add a little emotion, even if it is useless and artificial, into the monotony of modern life, which is not overflowing with usefulness or truth either.

The race would not be any different in the case of the subway, it was just a matter of depth. I hurried down the stairs, jumping. The doorbell rang and the doors began to close; I wouldn't get there in time. Even so, I tried and, without thinking, I threw myself into the car. The doors closed on me and I was stuck between them, halfway through. I was one step away from success. And death, although I still didn't know that. I concluded, from my experience with trains, that the doors would reopen at any moment. I soon discovered that I was wrong.

Not only did the doors not automatically reopen, but neither did with the desperate push of my hands. I tried to pry the doors with my arms but it was no use, much less the complete indifference of all the passengers. I looked at them: they watched me fascinated but motionless. Instinctively, I decided which side I wanted to be on. With more skill than strength, I managed to unlock the body by pulling it out. Rotating movements, almost like a dance, allowed me to release the knee first and the ankle later.

Only my right foot, with its resemblance to a female figure, was trapped now, at waist level, between the two implacable doors that insisted on closing completely. I felt a little guilty that my reckless behavior would delay the other passengers, surely eager to get to their job. We would have to wait until someone came to open those automatic doors that only knew how to close. Once again, my predictions failed, as they almost always do.

No one or nothing reopened the doors. The subway released its brakes and this time not only I saw it sliding on its rails but also felt it in my own body. It moved slightly backward and then forwards. I'm not sure why, but I didn't lose heart. Unusually calm, I got rid of the ballast of my backpack to move around unhindered. To try to save myself. My limited engineering student strength was useless, reopening the doors proved impossible. My stuck foot was about to travel, with my leg but without me, towards the center of the city. In a split second, I envisioned my bleak future, on crutches or in a wheelchair, maybe helping or—why not—extorting drivers, with the help of an orange cloth. In the case of survival, of course.

Like reality, the doors were pressing with determination. With all the effort that the situation required and with the car in motion, I managed to remove the foot from the sneaker which did not even move a bit. At least my leg was safe. I would not die or extort motorists after all!

Without much time to celebrate, I took the sneaker with both hands and pulled. The subway was dragging me forward as it gained speed while I tried to resist it by pushing my bare foot and my other sneaker onto the dirty, slippery floor of the platform. The play of forces drove my torso forward until I ended up lying face down, and I had no choice but to let go of my prey. I was as scattered as I was defeated, several meters away from my backpack, watching as my sneaker abandoned me, maybe forever. The scene reminded me of my last girlfriend.

At least I'm not dead, I thought. I sat down and looked both ways, a little dazed and bewildered. I knew that I would never wear boots or tight shoes again, although fortunately I didn't do it and I was not planning to do so. I also knew that when I got old and cranky, many unhappy people in boots and tight shoes would hear this story. To be honest, everyone would hear this story. Unless, of course, I made my life really interesting and had better things to tell.

I got up off the floor. Because I was quite self-conscious, the first thing I did was to check if someone was witnessing the scene. Optimistically, I considered myself lucky since it was only all the passengers on the opposite platform; with the subway cars in between, maybe they hadn't even seen how I was being dragged for a sneaker. The passengers on my platform, as well as those inside the subway, had seen everything, but they had already left, so I didn't care. Still, I imagined them looking at the sneaker all the way, the door still half-open, laughing but afraid to touch it, as if witnessing the dead arm of an exterminator. What could they have done when they got to the next station and saw the doors open? Scream maybe?

I shook myself slyly, suggesting through my body language that nothing had happened and that there was nothing to see. They could go back to their phones now. I walked limping to the backpack and noticed how ridiculous I looked with only one sneaker, so I took off the one I was still wearing and put it away, and that made me feel more comfortable and symmetrical. With no time to waste (an obvious exaggeration), I concentrated on my next challenge, somewhat more humble than saving my life: recovering the lost sneaker.

I decided to go to the closest company representative, often referred to as “the ticket officer”. My story awakened his zombie state. Reflexively, he looked unwillingly at my feet—which backed up my words without flaws—laughed as if he were not used to it and then apologized. He sent me to talk to his colleagues, who were “up there”; I had to ask for more details, since I did not live in that underworld and I didn’t know its nooks and crannies. When I found them, they reacted the same way, but after the laughter they started a frantic operation to recover my sneaker.

I sat next to them and watched how the calls kept coming. After a while, the attractive young woman who was leading the operation came up to me, put a hand on my shoulder and with a determined voice told me, “We found it, it’s two stations away, safe and sound”. Invaded by emotion, I pursed my lips and lowered my head. Then, almost broken, I looked into her eyes and hugged her as much as I could.

I walked barefoot to the platform where I had just been defeated. Like every day, dozens of people who didn’t know what had happened were waiting for the subway. They looked to the side from which the next train would come as if to hasten its arrival. Many of them noticed my bare feet, those on the platform and inside the subway; with the insistence that reflects boredom, they pointed at me with conspiratorial gestures and exchanged mischievous smiles. I just pretended not to notice anything.

I used the trip to reflect. I began by acknowledging my foolishness, especially in trusting the subway’s security system. It was incredible how the door-locking mechanism could take a person’s leg or life, without anyone noticing. But most surprising of all was the apathy and alienation of the passengers who had not lifted a finger to help me, except for the anonymous person who had rescued the traveling sneaker two stations away. Once again, amusement had defeated solidarity. By the way, how had the sneaker managed to travel not one, but two stations? What had happened at the intermediate station, when the doors opened?

I got off at the appropriate station and went in search of the guard, as the leader of the operation had recommended. I imagined the poor man telling me he knew nothing and he had no idea what I was talking about. Then I would grab him by his lapels and push him against the wall and would shake him fiercely and scream for him to confess where my sneaker was. Luckily, the lapel scene was not necessary. As the guard saw me approaching, he carried out the series of reflex actions that were customary by now: he looked at my feet, smiled and apologized for doing so. One more person that would have a good story to tell at the table at night. He asked me to follow him into a small

room and, once there, he handed me the precious sneaker. Then he patted me on the back and wished me luck.

I put the sneaker on and, not without disappointment, felt I was back to normal. Just like another person, as if nothing had happened, I continued my trip to college. The adventure was about to end.

It was late when I entered the large wooden room where the algebra class was about to end. Everyone looked at me reluctantly, except the teacher who did so with disapproval. But no one saw that I had been reborn, that I was the man who had just faced death, much less, the man who had recovered his sneaker. I also looked at them with disdain, for not recognizing me, but as I walked up the stairs to my seat I realized that I didn't see them either. I didn't see their hopes or their frustrations, which still didn't prevent them from sitting there, all alike, trying to understand something of what was growing on that hellish blackboard. Suddenly, everything (the street, the subway, the classroom.) seemed like an enormous fiction to me, so obvious and yet so inevitable.

I sat next to my dear friend Germán and comfortably blended in with that surface. Fifteen minutes later the class ended and he, feigning interest, asked me about my delay. I sighed remembering my odyssey and, visibly annoyed, I answered bluntly, "Do not worry, my friend, as Dolina would say (1), it was only a miserable adventure." (2)

Editor's notes (that is, also I):

1. "Let's ask our acquaintances to relate the most curious facts they have experienced. The results will be between boring and pathetic. Someone was locked in an elevator for an hour. Another one claims to have won a vase in a kermesse. A third person got a palindromic number on a ticket. It's all about miserable adventures. The Greeks thought that things happened only so that men could tell a story later. If this is true, the future of our conversations is bleak. What will we tell our grandchildren? That we once saw an accident? That a siphon burst?" Alejandro Dolina, in his "Instructions for seeking adventure".

2. Some of the people present at the place claim that the protagonist never said such words and instead told the complete and detailed story of what happened.

# I am also Messi

*I was fortunate to meet Leonardo Pérez several years ago, which were few at the time and will soon be many. The meeting took place while we were playing an 8v8 soccer tournament on one of the thousands of dirt fields that are found in Buenos Aires suburbs. He was one of the stars of that little anonymous tournament, where we players paid to participate, wore our shirt with pride and thoroughly prepared every match during the week. His story, recreated and perfected by me, is as follows:*

My name is Leonardo Pérez and I am a complete stranger. This doesn't bother me at all, I see no problem with that, but it does make me wonder about fame, about how much of what belongs to strangers lies within those who stand out. And how much of what belongs to them lies within us. Because I am also Lionel Messi. No, I don't mean that I can play like Messi, I'm not even close to that. I just believe that you don't have to be someone, or like someone, to be part of them.

I may have only two things in common with Messi: being left footed and having shared with him the Newell's junior team, during the 1998 and 1999 tournaments. That team was known as *La Máquina '87*. We were twelve years old and I was just a forgettable left-back. On the other hand, my mission in that team was unforgettable: none other than stopping Messi during training. That goal, as simple as it was ambitious, grew in me until it became a reason for something far beyond a mere sporting matter.

The clarity of that mission brought a kind of tranquillity and satisfaction to my life that I had never experienced before. Suddenly, everything was in its place in a very natural way and aspects unrelated to Messi became secondary. I lost interest in my family, my school and even my friends beyond the usual. At times I felt selfish, but later I understood that the full commitment of my being would end up leaving something in others as well. After all, my determination to stop Messi would benefit my team and its fans.

My father, who is also Messi, knew from the start that I could never play like Lionel, something that neither my teammates nor the other players in the tournament could do. But he also knew that, with his help, I might be able to hold Lionel back. Very soon, my obsession to achieve this also became my father's, turning into our shared passion. My father gave himself completely to his vocation as a coach and devoted every free minute after work to help me. As he had always done, he kept accompanying me to each one of the training sessions, but he also organized individual sessions, in which we both talked and practiced based on the analyses he had carried out. He devoted himself to systematically studying Messi, watching videos that he managed to gather or film with his own camera. He also studied the position of the left wing, watching videos for hours. Finally, he tried to talk to the coaches in Rosario who were

within his reach to benefit from their experience. Just like me, my father was beaming, motivated, happy.

My mother, who somehow is also Messi, surely felt left out, but her generosity allowed her to find her own happiness in ours and, even without completely understanding our obstinacy, she helped us as much as she could with the selfless warmth of her company.

My father realized that it was not possible to stop Messi in an isolated, individual way, so he also added to his analysis the players around me, that is, the goalkeeper, the middle forward, the midfielder and the left midfielder, in any of their variants. He understood that character can (and should) help to fill technical gaps and urged me to become a de facto captain in that defensive sector of the field, incorporating my teammates into our system through the persuasive power of example. To achieve this, I had to play a loyal and noble game, respecting teammates and rivals, and, above all, I should never give up.

My teammates at that time, who are also Messi, joined me in my game, more for lack of alternatives than for conviction or desire. With patience, didactics, and determination, I poured on them the game proposal that my father had conceived. Match after match, we improved our ability to control a disoriented Messi, who was gradually being overcome by frustration.

Our coach, who is also Messi, noticed very soon the world-class duel that had been brewing in that anonymous corner of Rosario, between Messi and the five left-back defenders led by me. With wise perception, he decided not to hinder the unfolding of that harsh and silent battle which was obvious to any spectator with some soccer sensibility. A confrontation that raised sportsmanship a little more each match. Messi also understood this but could not find a way to break that stubborn defense, determined not to let him deploy his game. And he endured his helplessness in silence and solitude, as always.

That's how we managed to overshadow him completely, almost without letting him breathe. That did not prevent the fact — actually, it emphasized it — that during the official matches he exploded and became ruthless, as did our austere but insurmountable defense. Messi's impressive results in those matches left in the background his failure in the training sessions. The coach decided to uphold those two sides of the phenomenon that produced so many results in the leaderboards. The great opponents in the training sessions became a formidable combination during the official matches.

This tension came to an end when Messi asked the coach, openly and frankly, to play on his left side during training. The coach, with reluctance but understanding the situation, accepted the request of the player who never asked for anything and was always ready to give. The change of position allowed him to regain the same brilliance in the training sessions as he had achieved in official matches, during which he continued to play as a right wing, his favorite position, from which he could hook in and look for the relentless shot of his left leg.

The new situation flowed smoothly and little by little everything, including success, became predictable. As long expected, we won the championship. My feelings were contradictory; on the one hand, the deep satisfaction of knowing I had won the hidden counterpoint with Messi and the theoretical happiness of having won the championship with him; on the other, the sadness of being left without that purpose, without that fire that would grow in my chest every morning.

Once we won the championship, the team began to dismember, as is often the case with Argentine teams that win. And Messi left for Spain to play for Barcelona.

Without a Messi to beat, my game began to decline until it became completely gray. Influenced by me, my father also lost his enthusiasm, as the new rivals did not demand strategies, studies, or videos. After all, as poets say, the moon needs the sun to shine. My desire to study at the university, combined with a persistent injury to my left knee, led me to drop out professional soccer six years later.

Today I watch Messi on television, in the National Team, in the World Cup, and I have the satisfaction of feeling that I am also looking at myself; that I am a real part, most of all a necessary part, of his victories and his defeats. When Messi manages to break down a defense, I feel he does so because he once had to break down ours. And if he can't do it, it is because we did not push him hard enough. Because everything we do, we also do for others. All of us who have ever played soccer in Argentina are also Messi. Because neither Messi, nor Maradona, nor Distéfano, nor any of the giants in any field fall from the sky.

# How to Choose a Gift

Giving is one of the most beautiful things in life. However, choosing a gift is not a trivial matter. And not because it is a complex activity, but rather because of our ignorance about its nature, its goals and its means, that is, because we know nothing about gifts. Rarely do we seriously ask ourselves why we make a gift, which is not surprising: we do not question our lives, let alone do so for a gift.

But then, why do we make a gift? What are we looking for with this strange tradition?

As in all fields, there are many opinions about it, but only two of them stand out. These two positions bring together the great majorities and are, in fact, false.

## *Focused on the recipient*

The first position holds that we should choose gifts that are pleasing to the recipient. A simplicity, almost like washing hands of it. The reasoning is the following: Pepi wants this object; I give it to Pepi; therefore Pepi loves me.

This approach has several problems. Perhaps the greatest of them is the belief that we know what Pepi wants when chances are he does not even know it himself. This crumbles all subsequent reasoning and leaves us defenseless, in the most absolute solitude of criteria. But that's not all.

A gift guided by others' wishes contains a complete renunciation to surprise, a basic part of a good gift and, also, of a life worth living. Of course, it's not a question of appearing before the recipient with absurd, insane gifts that actually surprise, but also terrify; the idea is to include in the choice itself the message that we had thought of the other beyond conventions.

If we restrict ourselves to what the other wants or has asked for, then we become a forgettable source of extra income, a simple record in the credit column. And few things in the universe are sadder than being a number in the credit column. In the eyes of the others, we have only saved them an expense already foreseen, as would have been the case of one hundred pesos found around the corner.

Along this line also are the timid gifts that are delivered along with the phrase "it can be changed". Wrong. When it comes to choosing a gift, it is essential to burn your bridges. If it can be changed, then the gift is not unique, it is interchangeable, it is not significant. It makes no difference. Of course, it is not acceptable to hide behind clothes sizes and that kind of mishaps that we should have anticipated much earlier. Because if there is one thing that the phrase in question gives away is that we have not dealt with the issue enough and, ultimately, that we don't care. Therefore, to emphasize this idea, alternative phrases are preferable, such as a moderate "can't be changed". Or a bolder



“there is no chance to change it”, accompanied by a solemn expression and the actual burning of the bag/ticket.

The extreme case of this perspective of the world consists of gifting money. Studies by prestigious universities have shown that this is the most efficient way to make a gift. And I say, in addition, that it is the worst of all. After all, we are showing affection and not optimizing a factory.

Let’s be honest, nobody can love us simply because we give them a product or, worse, some money (or a bank transfer receipt). And Pepi will never remember us for that, not only because of everything we have just explained but also because the gift lacks elements that represent us and place us in his emotional retina.

### *Focused on the giver*

The previous reasoning opens the way to the second position. In an almost opposite approach, it states that the gift must be unequivocally identified with the giver, otherwise it becomes mere merchandise. Therefore, it doesn’t matter that Rolo lost his legs in that fateful accident, these shoes represent me so there they go.

This approach solves the problem of identification, however, it does not take into account the obvious case that Rolo will never have the opportunity to remember us since he can hardly benefit from our shoes, unless he exhibits them in the living room library.

It’s also well known that the gift gives satisfaction not only to the recipient but also to the giver. That’s why, when giving, we feel satisfaction and often incur expenses that we wouldn’t even consider for ourselves. However, some boundaries must not be crossed. The pleasure of giving is limited to the very act of giving and it does not include the personal use of the gifts we give to others, that is, it is important not to abuse the noble custom of giving gifts. For example, it would be truly disgraceful to use the shoes that we have given to Rolo.

### *Focused on the relationship*

What do we do then? Do we need to panic, lose control and unleash tragedy? Fortunately for all of us, the answer is no. The solution, of course, does not involve the already analyzed extremes of giving Pepi what he wants or giving Rolo shoes. Neither the opposite extremes. No. The solution, as almost always, can be found in the synthesis of the two available positions.

It is not about focusing the gift on the giver or the recipient, but on the special and unique bond that connects them: their relationship. The idea is to immerse oneself in the common history and look for the key moments that made our souls meet. Have we learned something together? Have we achieved anything by working side by side? Have we overcome any difficulties thanks to our solidarity? In those moments we may find the connections we are looking for and from there we will manage to find the essence of what binds us together and, then, the gift we are looking for. Therefore, the ultimate

purpose of the gift should be to strengthen that relationship taking into account its particularities.

In this line of thought, an excellent idea to enhance our gift would be to do it with our own hands. A craft, a painting or a song of one's own would go to the heart of the matter. It is highly recommended to have some skill in the chosen art to make the gift, otherwise, instead of strengthening the relationship, we will degrade it.

Finally, I would like to clarify that my ideas about gifts should not influence you when you make me one. The only goal of my strict analysis on the subject is the search for the truth and not the evaluation of the gifts that I receive. In fact, when it comes to gifts, I have always preferred the undervalued imperfections of money.

# A Relaxed Spring Love

*Now that we kiss so slowly...  
—Joaquín Sabina*

We had known each other for a long time, although that meant very little when it came to love. Our story was that of a handful of sparks which couldn't shape a relationship that could be named. Perhaps each one of those sparks had a name, but it was so ephemeral and so different from the others that, looked at from a distance, they all looked like an undefined haze.

Long pauses of rest, adventure, or true love separated our encounters which approached and moved away in time like two crossed helicoids. And in each disagreement, our lives risked diverging forever, once and for all. But they didn't. We had the strange habit of thinking about the other, even (or perhaps, especially) at a distance, although for different reasons. She always sought my friendship, the one thing I wasn't willing to give her, ever. Instead, I wanted to have something deep with her, anything, but not a friendship.

At each of the crossroads that destiny had in store for us, we approached each other slowly and suspiciously, tentatively, delicately looking for ways to blend, something that almost never happened. Then, aware that we did not speak the same language and that there wasn't a path for both of us, we abandoned ourselves naturally without complaints or grudges, until next time, when our aversion to endings led us to a new reunion.

The months went by and, almost forgotten, the encounter came, by heart, as the seasons come. We examined our words, gestures, and gaze to understand whether something had changed during all that time apart and if something significant would happen or, on the contrary, we should postpone everything once again.

She welcomed me to her house not wearing many clothes, as usual. She had lost weight, enough for me to mention it to her, but kept her blond and athletic beauty. She was stressed out, though in the recovery phase. The cause of her stress was a frustrated love story with remarkable similarities to my own. And not just out of frustration. The situation presented itself as an opportunity to rediscover ourselves from a new perspective.

She perceived me as more open and carefree, but she didn't relate it to my disinterest nor she knew that I was there more out of tradition than desire. Exhausted by my last relationship, I didn't have the energy for a love battle. I told her so and I went a step further: I decided to share everything about my own disappointment, the simple remembrance of which plunged me into visible anguish. I did it without reserve and, for once, it was she who had to listen to me. I scattered on her chest my words full of pain.

She reached up and caressed with her hands the still bleeding intimate wounds of my hopeless heart.

We had been on the couch the whole time, but by the end of my story she was much closer, almost over me. Our sentimental connection had been reborn and brought us closer to the golden lightning that had once been part of our fragmented past. All of which, by virtue of her unpredictable love, meant nothing.

As if she sensed my invocation of her unexpected turns, she told me that very soon she would return to her country, Canada, after several years of living in Buenos Aires. She wanted to return to “try her luck” although, just in case, she wouldn’t dismantle her Buenos Aires life, made of furniture and documentation. A life she had always said she despised, but which she had never decided to abandon completely. As if persisting in a hell that wasn’t even her own could be a better alternative. As usual, she completely ignored me when I told her that she would leave forever, because no one tries their luck in their own land. Even more, she would surely find a gentle and reasonable Canadian who would save her forever from the nightmares of the Rio de la Plata love.

Deep down she knew it too and nostalgia took hold of her eyes which got wet without giving way. Her sorrow allowed me to embrace her tenderly, without ulterior motives, as she said she preferred. She perceived this with her extraordinary sensitivity and thanked me without words, sheltering herself even more next to me. The embrace extended, oblivious, until I felt that the friendly spirit had gone too far.

— It seems like a great time to put aside this autumnal demonstration of friendship and revive our old ideal of a “springtime love”—I said with a knowing smile, in a long-awaited lunge that honored our story.

— Your old ideal of “springtime love”—she corrected me in a tone that invited me to move forward, while playing with me, hitting my ribs.

— It’s true. But this year I have here—I put a hand on my chest and looked at her—a new, improved version...

She looked at me with her very blue eyes that enhanced the transparency of her innocent soul, so predisposed to love when it was pure. I caressed the closing of her eyes and told her the details of everything I imagined for the next three months, in a messy enthusiasm that was far from being a plan.

I also closed my eyes. I lost the notion of time and of her presence while I shared out loud the adventures that were awaiting us. Focused on the details of some dream that I visualized with special thoroughness, I was startled to feel her lips moistening my mouth, perhaps asking for a little silence. She moved away for a moment, looked at me deeply and kissed me again, slowly and passionately, unhurriedly, in a fusion that grew until it took up the whole night.

During the weeks that followed, reality managed to exceed the limits of what I had imagined. Spring, always beautiful in Buenos Aires, became our main ally, with its bright greens, lively jacarandas, and unripe heat. An ideal setting for carefree love in which we immersed ourselves without any strings.

With our bikes we went to dozens of new places, many of which even I didn't know. Starting from some general ideas, the number of possible visits multiplied until it exceeded what the threshold of summer would allow us. Improvisation suited us well and we let the traffic lights or the density of traffic lead us. Nothing mattered too much. The trips took the place of what was transcendent and the stops became mere circumstances.

The spontaneity of the itineraries outlined a vivid portrait of our pleasures. Her love for painting and my obsession with what is unrestricted came together in street art as our vague guide when wandering around the city. We turned to the search and contemplation of the many paintings that enriched it, with their feast of colors and ideas. Most of the time we would go out in the afternoon and have a snack in some noteworthy bar, where the resistance to time proved possible. We would sit sideways and, amidst laughter, joke around in each other's ear. Towards the end of spring (and of everything), with the shadow of summer looming over us, the night used to surprise us, so we sought shelter (and especially food) in some of the endearing Buenos Aires taverns, those old warehouses that had ended up becoming restaurants.

The immutable end prolonged a present that had become customary. We moved free and light, untethered. For the first time in many years, my time slowed down and I had the impression that death was moving away. The hours faded out while days (and nights) stretched with the delicacy of the imperceptible. Our room without clocks also became a room with no time. Making love became a break, a conversation for no apparent reason, a non-expectation. There was no determining tomorrow, except for the liberating certainty of the ultimate end. With arrogance, we had decided to postpone the future.

But the end came and it was not less hard for having foreseen it. We arrogantly believed that happiness could be stripped of its other inseparable half: sadness. We were naive, we pretended to love without suffering. And we had already loved each other too much when she left, forever, to Canada.

# The end of scientific names

*I have a really wonderful proof for this claim, but this margin is too narrow to hold it.*

*—Pierre de Fermat*

When I attended the South American Bird Fair (San Martin de los Andes, 2010), the most important gathering of birdwatchers in the Southern hemisphere, I never imagined that my intervention from the public would initiate the end of scientific names. Or that is what I believe and I expect everyone to believe, by abusing the always limited information available. Nor did I imagine that today, seven years later, I would decide to push that end by using literature.

During the months that followed, my intervention from that day became the Universal Species Identification System (USIS). A system that, in all this time, didn't reach any birdwatching guide, any biology book, or anything, despite the support received from the highest ornithological authorities of Argentina and Brazil. A lot less, of course, achieved international reach, especially since the fathers of birdwatching, the English—in the words of Latin American ornithologists—would never accept, much less adopt, a paradigm shift from the Southern hemisphere.

I must admit, though, that I did very little to make any of that happen. To be more precise, I did almost nothing. The reason is very simple: the topic didn't interest me enough to get me moving and comply with the formal steps that science demands. The mere idea of pursuing biologists or doing scientific work on the subject gives me an uncontrollable feeling of demotivation and boredom, no doubt due to my lack of scientific vocation.

Now that I'm a writer, that's how I've decided to take the USIS to the realm of literature. Perhaps it is literature that drives it rather than scientific research, networks of influence, or fierce persistence. Paths that, besides annoying me, are overcrowded.

It is necessary, then, to recreate the events that took place during that fair. As usual, many details have already escaped my memory, but I will make an effort to remember them. Or, at least, to invent them.

I do remember, for example, that I went to San Martin de los Andes from Buenos Aires by bus, on a journey that lasted more than twenty hours. Unfortunately, it was not the passion for birds that had taken me so far, but the dull responsibility of being in charge of the digital broadcasting of the event. And, especially, the convenience of having been invited. I must emphasize that the excellent organization, as well as the warm and personal treatment, added up to the Patagonian beauty and the privilege of sharing the event with close friends.

If there is one community of sweet, friendly, and gentle people, it's the birdwatchers. A wise mix of biologists, ornithologists, and amateurs, generally with free time, love for nature and material possibilities to travel. A combination so tender, so devoid of darkness, that even generates suspicion. Do these people (and all people) have a shadowy, forbidden side? Why can't I even catch a glimpse of it in them? Do they deliberately hide it? Will they burst at any moment?

My questions didn't stop the start of the fair and the events on the agenda began to become a reality. I read the program and one of the discussion lectures of the following day caught my attention since it seemed relevant to the scope of my professional training, Information Engineering. I decided that I would attend.

I arrived at the event a few minutes earlier, without precise feelings. The room was large and overflowing with people. The birdwatching community was really interested in the issue or perhaps they lacked better alternatives. When the discussion lecture began, the problem was clearly posed by the highest ornithological authority in Brazil.

Despite my general limitations and my fragile memory, I will try to describe the problem in the simplest way possible, counting that taxonomic biologists will be willing to forgive me if it is necessary.

When a bird species is changed in the genus, there is a conflict between the old species name and the new genus. As a conceptual reference, a family groups genera and a genus groups species.

The official name of a species is given by a scientific name. For example, the scientific name of the pigeon is *Columba livia*. Roughly, the same happens with all living beings, from a fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*) to a human being (*Homo sapiens*).

A scientific name is made up of two parts. The second, called the specific epithet, is relatively arbitrary and defines the specificity of the species. The first, called genus, can be shared by one or more species that have certain characteristics in common; for example, the genus of the pigeon (*Columba livia*) is *Columba* and is shared by some thirty-four species. This first part is where problems are centralized.

When a species is changed in genus, perhaps due to a new discovery, there is a conflict between the old name (anchored in the genus) and its new genus. Let's suppose, to be brutal, that we discovered that pigeons are, after all, winged rats. If we were to simply move the pigeon (*Columba livia*) to the new genus (*Rattus*), we would have a semantic contradiction, since the first part of its name, *Columba*, would have no relation whatsoever with the new genus, *Rattus*. What ornithologists would do in this case is to change the scientific name of the species to something like *Rattus livia*.

Once the name change is officialized, all the books, reports, and documents talking about this species will become outdated, leading to many micro-problems, confusions, and semantic conflicts. The question, then, was how to resolve this issue.

After years of studying Information Science (that is, Computing), a possible solution to the problem became evident to me from the very first moment. Driven by the

common misconception that others can see things as you do, I assumed that the public would quickly see it too. The debate became intense, long, and, in my eyes, colorful. People participated enthusiastically, proposing the most extravagant ideas. When I finally realized that the debate was going to be a long one, I went to get myself a drink and some delicious cookies.

It was only towards the end, when the debate was too stuck and the solution I had in mind didn't even show signs of appearing, I raised my hand to make my contribution.

—Hello everyone, my name is Javier. I've been listening to the speeches very carefully. I found some of them extremely... original, although wrong. The truth is that I am here by chance. I don't know anything about birds, or birdwatching, or biology. Maybe that's what allows me to clearly visualize the problem and a possible solution. Sadly, I'm a Computer Engineer. The problem is a typical case of "identity problem"; let me tell you what this means. All identity codes, such as a national identity document, must necessarily comply with two principles: not to repeat themselves and not to change. Whether we have repeated codes or whether they have the possibility of changing, it would be very difficult for us to meet the objective of identification. The scientific name, no matter how old and beloved it may be, doesn't comply with them, more specifically with that of not changing. Why not? Because when a species is genus-changed, this also leads to the change of name, which violates the principle of not changing. I want to be very clear on this point: if during the first year of the Faculty of Engineering, faced with the problem of defining an identity code for the species, I'd propose something like the scientific name, it would automatically be evaluated with a zero and, besides, I would be defamed with justice for choosing the dead Latin language for my code. The most universal and practical way to avoid this problem is not to use dead Latin for the identification code, neither English, nor large tables, nor computer systems, as some suggested, but numbers. Successful and correct identification codes are based on numbers, such as national identity cards, eventually combined with meaningless letters, such as license plates. The fact that the numbers and letters of the identity code have no meaning is important to avoid conflicts in the event of changes of category, as is the situation with the genus in the case of species. In short, the solution would be to replace scientific names with numeric or alphanumeric codes without meaning. The scientific name may have meant an advance two hundred and fifty years ago, but sometimes the value of a tradition is not enough to sustain a mistake that generates problems.

By the end of my speech, the murmurs were getting louder and had become notorious. I had to raise my voice to finish and when I did, the restrained feelings of the audience burst. Half the audience exploded into applause, as they turned to look at me in a smiling, approving way. The other half booed me and showed me their annoyed, red faces, while shouting things I didn't understand or I don't remember, raising their palms or their index fingers. "Traitor!", shouted someone from far behind; that I do remember.

When the crowd calmed down, a man in his forties spoke. He had a beard, long hair, and an undeniably romantic heart. He was flaring and pointed at me as he spoke.



—Those of us who love birds will not allow someone like you to come and turn nature into cold numbers. Birds are not a product!

As so often in history, the half that had not understood a thing roared with satisfaction at the beautiful words of The Beard and accompanied them noisily with applause and exclamations of support. The other half just laughed and commented on the situation. I took the floor once more.

—Don't worry, I'm not here to convince you of anything. I was simply sitting here listening and since the problem was not solved, it seemed a good idea to share my proposed solution. Nor do I intend to turn birds into products, which I couldn't do even if I wanted to. Just as I do not call you by your ID number, I don't propose that we call the birds by their identification code, nor that when we go out to watch birds we say, "Look, my dear friend, there's an 18 flying"; although some may do so, as they do now with scientific names. The solution will not change the current experience of birdwatching, or the love for birds, but will provide an identification code without the problems that you were describing. Its use can be limited to formal or scientific aspects, without the need to disturb fans who, by the way, are already very disturbed by being exposed to dead Latin. And most importantly, I am not a biologist or a birdwatcher, nor do I want to be —there was a new boo—... what I mean is that I have no particular interest in this solution that, whether you like it or not, solves the problem raised. You can do whatever you want with my solution.

A new tumult took over the room and, in fact, closed the event, which had already extended far beyond schedule. People stopped and approached me, both to congratulate me and to repudiate me. I was surprised by the repercussions of my intervention.

Among the people who approached me at the end of the event was the organizer of the fair, who invited me to present my proposed solution at the fair the following year. I found no reason to decline the invitation, so once again I let myself be dragged into events and I agreed.

Indeed, the following year I presented my solution at the fair, on that occasion in the front of the room before a much less crowded and interested audience. The most remarkable thing was the participation of one of the highest ornithological authorities in Colombia, whose greatest contribution was to make fun of me and my proposal throughout the presentation, without even trying to understand what I was saying. As I had become used to doing, I remarked that I had no special interest in imposing my proposal and that if I wanted to talk about ridiculous ideas, we could go deeper into the use of dead Latin for an identification code.

This is how the second of my fairs passed almost unnoticed for the USIS, its vitality fading away until today, when it is one step away from oblivion. A destiny perhaps impossible, since what is inevitable cannot be extinguished.

The end of the scientific names began that day, in San Martin de los Andes, but it is still far from ending. Only time will tell if Literature can achieve what Information Science, with its reasons, has not been able to do.

# Dear Julia

Dear Julia,

I read your story with great curiosity and attention. It's been quite a while since I read anything written by a nine-year-old. Possibly the last time I did that was when your dad was still young, fit, and had ideals. My God, it was ages ago!

First of all, I congratulate you on the initiative of writing, which is one of the ways of thinking. Why thinking? To understand. And why understanding? To act. I hope you never lose spontaneity to do so, nor the freshness of your ideas or the freedom to share them. The world needs inspiration, needs perspective, and there will always be someone eager to hear yours.

The truth is that the photos I took of your sheets, to read them later, didn't come out well and I found it difficult to understand some words, but the general concept was clear. That is, after all, what's important. Much more worrying would have been the opposite case, quite usual these days.

I congratulate you, then, for not letting the essence of your story be contaminated by secondary discussions, unnecessary details, or, even worse, personal bitterness. Not only because they would distract readers from main issues, but also because they would question the consistency, depth, and credibility of your words.

It is also important to highlight your coherence—which you surely inherited from your mother—in the story, structure, and ideas. Ideas that you can present in a subtle and friendly way, which is very good since clarity does not necessarily have to translate into brutality. Authenticity, wit, and beauty are almost always much more powerful vehicles to penetrate the soul of others.

I found interesting ideas in your story and I found it very positive that you organize them by chapters. This helps the reader understand them better and also to come back to them later. Many writers boast that they do not think of their readers when they develop their work. I believe that if you have something to say, then you should make sure that it is understood.

Of course, thinking about readers does not mean altering your ideas, but looking for ways to share them as clearly, naturally and genuinely as possible. It is not about pleasing them, but about helping them to see what you are trying to tell them.

I really liked some ideas such as "the reindeer were chatting excitedly", which led me to imagine a group of outgoing and screaming reindeer laughing loudly. I also liked chapter four, which is only six words long, because if there is one thing we don't need in this world, that would be endless chapters.

Your young, direct, and unprejudiced style was like a refreshing future blowing over a present full of clichés, detours, and affectation. It makes me very happy that your

personal effort has managed to overcome the usually inevitable guiding principle of the paternal genes.

I take this opportunity to suggest that you ask your dad to buy you a decent notebook instead of giving you blank health cards, possibly stolen from the clinic. Although those ill-gotten cards can be a good idea to work on a draft, a notebook is a much more consistent way to present the final version of your story. If he doesn't agree to make this small investment—which would not surprise me—don't hesitate to tell me and I'll give you one myself.

Another idea that you can experiment with is to type the story into the computer, to get better clarity of reading by others and to play adjusting the wording with greater ease. Since your dad knew something about computers in a distant past, when he had no other choice but to make a living doing something useful, I'm sure he can teach you how to use the word processor. If that is asking too much, you can suggest the basic note editor. With the text converted to the computer, you will also be able to share it via email or publish it on a blog so that other people can read it.

I'm also glad that you love to read. I think it is a very good habit and I hope you keep doing it, although without exaggeration, since it is not about turning reading into entertainment (unless you are perfectly clear about it), in a way of keeping from thinking, but in a source of ideas and perspectives to complement your own. Especially if you want to continue writing. In that case—it's almost obvious—I think it is important that you spend more time writing than reading. And before writing, more time to reflect and develop your own ideas.

I could go on commenting on your writing, on writing and literature, but usually, less is more.

I send you a kiss and I wish you all the best.

Juanma

# The Master

*“Remains undisturbed sitting in the fishing boat,  
no matter how violent the waves and winds.”*  
—Chinese proverb

Everything had become a meter in that place. And the electronic board of the subway signaled that there was still a minute left before the next train arrived, an eternity for many of those who were there. Shanghai was enormous, twice the size of Buenos Aires. As I only had a few days, the subway was the best way to get around. As always, it was advisable to stay away from the crowds and take the subway out of the rush hour, when travel became as impossible as in any other big city, despite the frenzied frequency that the system offered.

I felt empty, overwhelmed, and out of place, although I didn't quite know why. I looked around the platform as the minute passed and I reluctantly glanced at the sea of advertising that flooded all the vertical surfaces. The Chinese, especially young people, smiled and posed with an endless variety of products from world-famous brands. The real Chinese that surrounded me, on the other hand, seemed immune and were immersed in their phones. I wondered what was Chinese about it all, besides the passengers and the writing of the ads.

The train arrived and everyone got on it with me, by memory, while looking at their phones. The subway was surprisingly modern and efficient, as were the trains, the stations, and, in short, the entire infrastructure, which was first-world class, as the intense pace of life it was serving. The best evidence of how China was transforming at great speed.

At any train station it was possible to see Chinese and global executives speaking English on the phone as they passed poor peasants, possibly from the West, dragging bags of grain or similar loads. The contrast was striking, both in real life and in statistics. Inequality had taken over China. Or, to be fair, it had only increased, in addition to fitting into a general situation that in material terms had improved for almost everyone.

It was remarkable to see how the Chinese state was at the head of its population, like a locomotive, and dragged them forward towards progress, if that was progress indeed. Not only for the quality of the services it offered the citizens, but also for the civic education campaigns implemented for their proper use. For example, there were constant reminders not to smoke or spit inside the trains.

It was probably around ten in the morning so I could find a place to sit down without any trouble. The Chinese on board were still glued to their phones, watching videos, playing games, or chatting. I looked at them carefully, trying to discover what

was behind those concentrated faces and what would be the miracle that could interrupt them. They were in another world, far away from me.

My first panning was interrupted by the curious gaze of the passenger sitting right in front of me. I studied him for a second, slyly. He was in his fifties, although it was difficult to guess the age of the Asians. There was something decidedly different about him, but I could not identify what it was. He was dressed normally and had a small book in his right hand. It was not the first time that a Chinese had looked at me with interest, even with friendliness, I would say. Besides this passenger, no one else caught my attention, except for a girl as attractive as inaccessible: she had headphones, looked at her phone, probably didn't speak English and, above all, showed no interest in me.

I looked at the subway map, it showed a monstrous network of stations. It was amazing to think that a few years before none of that existed. The insistent eyes of the passenger seated in front of me interrupted me again with their concerns, their dissatisfactions. Couldn't he travel peacefully, without having to look at me? I chose to smile at him and that pleased him because he brightened his smile. I held his gaze for a second and then continued inspecting the absent Chinese people who filled the subway.

The third time I discovered him looking at me I couldn't ignore him anymore, so I said "hello," in Spanish. He smiled again and greeted me back, in Chinese, I figured, because we were in China and everyone looked Chinese. What he said to me, however, was too long to be a simple "hello". He almost certainly said something like this:

—Hello, you finally greeted me. I've been watching you since you came in. You seem to find all this very peculiar. What is it that grabs your attention so much?

—Well ... the truth is that you really didn't give me many alternatives— I spoke to him with a reproachful tone, protected by the inscrutability of my Spanish—. Sometimes people don't understand me. And especially the Chinese. So I think well before starting a conversation, even though I've begun to accept that sometimes understanding is secondary. Maybe this is one of those cases. You seem more outgoing and observant than the others. To answer your question, I was thinking about the subway, it's very fast and silent. Almost the opposite of the slow and noisy subway in Buenos Aires.

—Well, it doesn't matter how slow you go, as long as you don't stop. We are in too much of a hurry going nowhere. I accept, though, the "silent" part—he laughed—. Silence is a true friend that never betrays. My name is Kong, I come from the state of Lu, not far from Beijing—he said, as he stretched out his hand to shake mine. I liked his words, although it was clear that Kong had no idea about our subway.

—I'm Juanma, from Argentina. Many know my country by Messi, the soccer player—I told him to save time, since in China, in general, nobody had other references nor the least idea about Argentina.—To be honest, I was thinking more about the passengers than about the benefits of the Shanghai subway. I am impressed by how hyper-connected they all are—I pointed to them with my head and my eyes. Kong looked at me with real attention and, following my gesture, he did the same with the others.

—It's true, we have an obsession with technology. It's a useful tool until it becomes an addiction. But the problem is the addiction, not the tool. What is the void we seek to fill with this addiction? I'm not opposed to these devices as a source of entertainment during the trip, but I prefer other activities such as conversation, reflection, or reading. It's not easy to travel together with our conscience for two hours every day. However, the real problem comes later, when we get home and have the same behavior with our family and friends. Our homes are at risk of disintegrating in isolation. And our society is a true reflection of what takes place in our homes.

—Well, I believe this happens all over the world.

—Then the problem is even bigger. More than the entertainment that technology provides, I am concerned with its deeper meaning: a means and a symbol of consumption. A wrong goal—he said this calmly as if describing reality, without annoyance or complaints. —We have turned consumption into our new favorite activity and that's why shopping centers multiply. Our work and even our dreams have a product at the end of the road. Human beings should devote to the understanding of who they are, what their mission is, what is right, and strive to make it happen. And they should not devote to the understanding of what to buy or sell. The truth is not about comfort, but about virtue.

Kong had reached the very depths of the matter in an incredibly short time. And yet he had done so with admirable naturalness, without exaggeration. Patiently, he waited for my answer.

—Yes, I could see the consumerist fever you are describing ... the city is bursting with shops, banks, and fast-food chains. Yesterday I was reading an article about the progress of the consumption in China that impressed me. It was about Bachelors' Day, the most important e-commerce day in China, and how the date was strategically placed between China's National Day and the Chinese New Year, a period during which sales tended to decline. The choice obviously had nothing to do with any celebration of bachelorhood.

—For sure. I'm not very informed about these phenomena, but I've heard that Bachelors' Day has grown tremendously and spread to neighboring countries, so don't be surprised if you have it in your country in a few years —Kong paused as if to refocus his speech and get out of this particular subject that obviously made him uncomfortable. —Since you mention it, and beyond e-commerce, what happens with single people in China is very particular. The "one-child policy" has brought a lot of tragedy to millions of Chinese people. First, to the women who were cruelly rejected. And then to the "extra" men. Currently, these single men tend to fall into depression or move to neighboring countries where they have a better chance of finding a wife. Right now, the "one-child policy" is changing, like so many other things. The economy has been doubling every eight years for the past five decades, a radical change for hundreds of millions of people. This real revolution has been made possible not only by material progress but also by our docility to accept what is imposed on us from the highest level of political power, a social meekness that has been cultivated for decades, paradoxically to be used in the opposite direction. It seems that capitalism advances in all societies,

but here it flows unbound, with all its strength, without counterbalances such as history, culture, or religion. We lost our culture many years ago, we have forgotten our past. A mistake is much worse than a reality worthy of regret. We should not confuse our rich and ancient past with something primitive and old-fashioned, lacking in value, which stands in contrast to Western culture. Our cultures could enrich each other without losing their own essence.

—That makes a lot of sense. Unfortunately, I see a lot of influence from the worst of the West: materialism, individualism, superficiality. A real waste, considering all the good that the West has to offer. These days, I learned something surprising, related to the teaching of the English language. There is a great demand for teachers and many foreigners come to live in China to fill these jobs. They are paid very well, although only under certain conditions. You have to be white and from an Anglo-Saxon country to get the maximum payment, because that's what the parents of the students want and expect. Also you are white and from another country, as long as you get along with the language or forge documentation, as young Russians or Italians do. But if you have African, Asian or Latin physical traits, even if you were born in an Anglo-Saxon country and English is your first language, then you only get a quarter to half of the maximum payment, if they hire you. And if you are a Chinese teaching English, no matter how good you are, then you earn even less, perhaps a tenth of the maximum.

—Incredible, I didn't know that was happening.

—I have another story to tell you. It happened only two days ago in Suzhou, a city near Shanghai, famous for its historic center, its canals, and its traditional Chinese gardens. My friend was not at home when I arrived and, a bit by chance, I ended up at the house of his neighbor, whom I didn't know. He smoked inside the house and had a big white dog. He was very kind, he served me water and even tried to communicate with some success using an application on his phone that translated our spoken conversation. Only when my friend arrived and helped to translate, we managed to have a more fluent conversation. After some basic talking, I asked some very soft questions about politics, but I didn't get transparent answers. They both looked uncomfortable and answered ambiguously, sometimes in the form of new questions. I decided to change the subject and among other things, I asked the neighbor what his favorite Chinese gardens were so I could visit them in the coming days. He replied that he didn't like Chinese gardens. They bored him and he had never, in his whole life, visited even one of the more than fifty gardens in the city. Shocked, I asked him then what he recommended. Without hesitation, he replied that I should visit the new shopping center in a building of surprising modernity. Recently opened, it housed the largest shopping center in the city and one of the largest in China. When I looked at my friend, he returned a neutral, empty look. I was the one who didn't understand. I thanked the neighbor for his recommendation and suggested to my friend that we should return home since it was time to prepare dinner.

I remained silent and looked at Kong in amazement. He understood me. He lowered his head, denying gently as if trying to understand. The Chinese in the subway

were watching me but looked away when I looked into their eyes. After a few seconds of reflection, Kong raised his head and continued.

—I must admit, sadly, that these cases don't surprise me. I know many of them, even among very close people. Novelty has taken the place of what is important and we have accepted that happiness has the shape of modernity. Especially when the present is compared with the recent past, marked by need and deprivation: the times of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, of hunger, of ration coupons, of water reuse at the very best. I hope that we revalue our traditions when the excesses of the present become a new component of normality. Material improvements don't have to come into conflict with our culture, ideas, and customs. However, to save me the trouble, I don't want to hope too much.

—It seems that these improvements are too specific to be ignored. At least, for many of those who now live better.

—It is true, many times the most fortunate of us lock ourselves into a vision that prioritizes our personal conflicts and needs, or theories, or the long term. But for millions of people, the poorest, life has improved in a very tangible way. Now they can eat better, dress better, live in a bigger and cleaner place. It's hard to object to this result. I myself have suffered poverty during my childhood when my father died and my family was left in a very delicate situation. That tough experience helped me to understand that, for most poor people, age-old culture or political freedom are too abstract concepts.

—Does something similar happen with political freedom? Is relative economic freedom lived as general freedom?

—That's right. Political freedom has seldom existed in China, at least in Western terms, and when it did it was more out of isolation than out of vocation or culture. Perhaps it is correct to say that the conception of political freedom has always been different here. Poverty is the greatest of tyrants and that is why there is peace in China today. Where there is satisfaction there are no revolutions. But sooner or later, when the satisfaction stops spreading, we will have problems. Unless the government decides to move towards a greater distribution of political power, as it has done with the economy, which would require a kind of wisdom that I don't know if we possess. We only need to study the past to understand why this won't happen easily.

Kong spoke serenely and also knew how to listen, which accentuated the strength of his speech. He spun his words with patience and wisdom from my words. The people around us were becoming more and more interested in our conversation and especially in his responses. They looked at him with increasing attention and even put their phones away. The feeling of being in front of someone out of the ordinary led me to become more interested in the personal aspects of his life.

—And who are you, what do you do? —I asked him straight out. Kong was a little surprised by the turn in the conversation I proposed, or maybe by the directness of my question.

—Let's say I'm an intellectual. Now I am traveling and offering meetings to reflect on the conflicts between traditional Chinese culture and modern China. There are still people who are interested in these issues —he said with almost imperceptible irony. As



he answered me, I studied carefully his appearance trying to understand his whole persona.

—What are you reading? —I pointed to his book. He picked it up and showed it to me, the cover had only Chinese characters.

—It is a classic of Chinese literature. A simple and profound book, like life. Life is very simple, but we almost always insist on complicating it. And it's difficult to find oneself when one is distracted. China has the answers to its questions within itself —his tone had a trace of distress or resignation. Kong spiced up the wisdom of his words with feelings and that gave him a thrilling magnetism.

—You always have a good answer ... —I tried to cheer him up.

—I'm very far from that. I only try to make clear those few answers I have. To be honest, I have more questions than answers.

It had been almost an hour and we were about to arrive at the station where I had to get off. It saddened me to interrupt this conversation that had left me wanting more. I thought about asking Kong for his contact, but I knew it was not his style. I gave up on the idea to extend my trip to follow him since I had committed myself to friends and I didn't want to let them down. I explained all this to him and asked one last question.

—How do I get to know the real China?

—The real China is within everyone's reach, it rests silently in the treasures of our past, in the words of the ancient sages of our culture. But only through the exercise of that wisdom it is possible to get to know it.

The answer seemed conclusive, natural, true. I assimilated it for a few seconds and then held my hand out to say goodbye. I went to the door and while waiting for the subway to stop, I saw how Kong continued the conversation with the people around him. When I got off, I stood on a platform that was the same as all the platforms, including the one I had got on. But I had a different take on it now.

I went out to the street and there, too, things began to look different. As I looked at the cars, the dozens of buildings under construction, the frantic movement in all directions, as the noise invaded my head and I breathed the smoke and dust, I realized that I would not be able to know the place that was before my eyes.

I met my friends and we went to a museum and then to a temple, both full of Chinese tourists who kept taking pictures of every detail, every corner. They even asked to take pictures with me, which I agreed to without any problem, more out of indifference than of politeness. As I smiled for those pictures doomed to disappear, my mind was far away. I finally realized that I just wanted to go home.

When I got there, I went straight to my computer. I connected the VPN to avoid the restrictions of the Chinese government and typed "classics of Chinese literature" in the search engine. The classics of poetry, history, rites, springs and autumns, music, emerged uncontrollably. The Confucian and Taoist books. The great Classic Chinese Novels. It wasn't hard to realize how far I was from understanding the land that stretched out, almost infinite in time and space, under my feet.



# Final Notes

## **You can help me a lot if you:**

- Write to tell me with blunt honesty what you thought of the book. Undoubtedly, both positive and negative reviews will help me improve in the future.
- Contribute with donations to my literary work and its future financing (see the book's first page).
- Pass the book around.
- Share your favorite stories, quotes or pictures in the social media. You can find the stories in my blog.
- Write a review in platforms like GoodReads.
- Get me in contact with some publishing house who could be interested in my books.
- Help me by translating some short stories to your native language.

## **Other books I wrote:**

- *Punto Rosalía*
- *Esto no va a ser fácil*
- *Sucesión de despertares en una ciudad desconocida*
- *Libro del futuro*
- *La maldad imperceptible* (selection)

All of them can be downloaded (for free) at my website [www.jmguerrera.com.ar](http://www.jmguerrera.com.ar)

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whose foot, standing in the shade, holds it constant and patient.”*  
—Rabindranath Tagore

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## Brief Biography

*“...there is no nakedness more genuine and terrible than artistic expression —if authentic— since every work of art is an autobiography, not in the literal sense of the word, but in the deepest, most serious one: a Van Gogh tree is Van Gogh himself; it is his own, naked soul among us.”*  
—Ernesto Sábato

If Sábato is right, you will get to know me more by reading the stories in this book than by the few lines that follow. Still, I will write them, as my most committed advisors have insisted me to do by saying “cut the crap with Sábato and Van Gogh, people wanna know the facts”.

I have always written, ever since I learned how to, somewhat in 1989. I started publishing a lot later, let's say when I was eighteen. I first did it very informally, with humble photocopies, then in a local district newspaper, and later on a couple of blogs. Between 2016 and 2020, I self-published the Spanish editions of *Punto Rosalía*, *Una aventura miserable*, *Esto no va ser fácil*, *Sucesión de despertares en una ciudad desconocida* and *Libro del futuro*.

I never took part in any writing workshops, which may explain the results in this book, whatever they may be. Not that I am against them, much on the contrary, but whenever I have time for literature, I prefer to devote it to writing or reading.

I am not against editing with a publishing house, but the effort of finding one is a project in itself, a burdensome one, not too related to literature most of the time. Fortunately —or by determination— there are alternative roads.

A long time ago, when I published through photocopies, I used to take part in literary contests. I don't do that anymore for a number of reasons: the tedious processes involved in participating and my instinctive, unjustified distrust to juries.

For this reason —or because I am not that good— I haven't won any awards or acknowledgements of any sort. This is of no importance to me, but is sometimes mentioned in biographies.

I don't make a living out of literature. That facilitates the writing and publishing with huge freedom, without any conditions.

So, finally, here are the facts. I was born in the district of Palermo, Buenos Aires City, but grew up in the suburbs, in my neighborhood, San Andrés. There, I attended Colegio Agustiniano (elementary and high school), Tres de Febrero Club (where I got certified as Life-Guard), the public Library Diego Pombo and the community association Vecinos de San Andrés. Later, I got a Bachelor's Degree in Informatics Engineering at the University of Buenos Aires. In parallel, I read the first year at the Political Science Major of the same university. After graduating, I funded two small

companies with my friend Mariano: Glidea and Drupal Soul. In the last years, I have been able to travel a lot, mainly to Latin America, Europe, Asia and North America.

Last and most important, I am extremely happy of being able to write, publish and share this book with you.

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