



The Mysterious Treasure of Rome



Juan Moisés de la Serna

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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Serna J.

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If somebody had told me, I would not have believed it. If somebody had told me, I would not have believed it. Who could have told me that a last-minute trip could end up becoming my greatest adventure, and that thanks to that trip I would be able to save the life of the person who would later be my wife for thirty happy years? My memory sometimes plays tricks on me and I find it difficult to remember places or dates. That is why I am going to tell the facts as accurately as possible, so that this text serves me as a diary. In my life, as I suppose in everybody's, I have had many good and happy moments and also difficult and sad ones, but none as prominent as what happened to me that week, that shaped so much my way of thinking, and my future.

Содержание

Prologue	6
CHAPTER 1. THE DESIRED JOURNEY	7
CHAPTER 2. THE FIRST SURPRISE	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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Translated by Eduardo Jiménez López

Editorial Tektime

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“The Mysterious Treasure of Rome”

Written by Juan Moisés De la Serna

Translated by Eduardo Jiménez López

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Prologue

If somebody had told me, I would not have believed it. Who could have told me that a last-minute trip could end up becoming my greatest adventure, and that thanks to that trip I would be able to save the life of the person who later on would be my wife for thirty happy years? Sometimes my memory plays tricks on me, and I find it difficult to remember places or dates. That is why I am going to tell the facts as accurately as possible, so that this text serves me as a diary.

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Dedicated to my parents

CHAPTER 1. THE DESIRED JOURNEY

If somebody had told me, I would not have believed it. Who could have told me that a last-minute trip could end up becoming my greatest adventure, and that thanks to that trip I would be able to save the life of the person who later on would be my wife for thirty happy years? Sometimes my memory plays tricks on me, and I find it difficult to remember places or dates. That is why I am going to tell the facts as accurately as possible, so that this text serves me as a diary.

In my life, as I suppose in everybody's, I have had many good and happy moments and also difficult and sad ones, but none as important as what happened to me that week, that shaped so much my way of thinking and my future.

Long time ago a friend of mine convinced me to leave my memoirs in writing, but it is not until these last days that I have decided to do so. Maybe I had not done it before out of laziness, or maybe because I believed that I still had many years ahead of me, but now it is different...

No one has told me how to do it and I am not sure everything will work out well. I may even fail to include many details. I could also confuse the names, but my mind is clear about the events that happened to me.

Since I just turned eighty, I now realize that much of the emotions lived those days were probably and largely the result of my inexperience and ignorance, which is something I have gradually learned and understood after my subsequent explorations and travels.

My room, full of photos and souvenirs such as statues and miniature monuments, and carpets embroidered with local themes, always brings me back to some of the many places where I have lived.

If you were to ask me where I come from, I would not be able to answer precisely. Looking at my passport I see the place and day when I saw the light for the first time, but then... I have lived in so many cities and continents, sometimes staying for three months, sometimes for years. Everywhere I have done my best to team up and help, as much as I had been able to.

That is why along all those years I have been found worthy of a couple of medals and some other recognitions, although for me the best thanks for my work is what I have seen day after day in the faces of my students, in the happiness in their faces that equally reflected illusion, desires and hope.

My dear students...!, they have always been my great source of inspiration, although on several occasions, as I have told you, I think they have not totally believed what I was telling them, but from them I have learned more than what they may have been able to get out of me.

Well, I am deviating, everything at its time, because I do not intend to tell my whole life, but only to record, almost as a manifesto, what undoubtedly was the most intense and important period of all the years that I have lived.

It was early morning, on a summer day...no, perhaps it was spring!, now I remember that one of my fellow travelers was still affected, not to say intoxicated, after the recent celebration of what they now call the Spring Break, that gathered so many young people on campus.

Although not all of us were students, we certainly knew how to party, with music and dances, sharing and partaking with friends a moment of recreation, away from the pressure of the studies and the restriction of the classes.

There was even someone who had brought something to snack on, prepared by his mother, lucky him!, he could still enjoy the delicacies of the family kitchen and not like most of us who were forced to eat on campus those flavorless dishes, which tasted like hospital food.

Campus food, despite being well cooked or stewed, was always tasteless and every day it tasted the same, even though they changed the menu to feed us well, with a proper nutritional balance suited for our constant physical and intellectual activity. However, no matter how much variety they tried, they cooked it without that shred of love and affection that our mothers added, which is the secret seasonings of any great cook.

However, not everyone had the same fun. The crazier fellows downed their beers as if they were drinking water from the fountain, beer they had brought in those barrels, even knowing that was forbidden.

The rest of us, a little more aware that we had classes in the afternoon, limited ourselves to enjoy the moment, without indulging in excesses.

At the end, I had to take to his room one of our companions who had drunk too much. All of them had a strong stench of beer. They would not have been able to make it to their rooms, since their legs could not even stand their own weight.

Even more, when they tried to walk on their own, they would stagger for a few short steps until they suddenly fell down. Then, they sat on the floor, as babies learning to walk, without being able to advance more than a couple of feet.

That while they repeatedly babbled, once and again, saying they had to return to their rooms. It was as if the guilt had taken hold of their minds, and they could not see that they could not walk any further. It was impossible to reason with them, to convince them to remain seated until the dizziness was over, and they could undertake the almost impossible mission to return by themselves to their rooms.

A disgraceful view for some great athletes, which some of them were, to see how they now were unable to stand up for more than a few minutes.

Some of us had to help taking them to their rooms to rest what was left of the night, knowing that the next day they were going to find themselves sick and with a severe headache, but it was their share for their excesses.

The morning had dawned radiant. I do not remember such a sunny one and it was barely six. However, I was so excited that I needed to get up and start to do something, but I already had it all set up.

The many years of discipline in this academy had made me a very responsible man, righteous in my thoughts, tidy and foresighted, so much so that my suitcase had been already prepared for almost a week.

As far as the clothes I was going to wear, some boys had suggested we all go dressed the same way, perhaps the same type of clothing or wearing something of the same color. Most of us disliked the idea, already tired of wearing daily uniforms, and now having to wear another uniform on this trip.

I took only a pair of trousers, a few shirts, a vest, socks and underwear, which filled most of my suitcase, along with the country's travel guide and a notebook to write down the most important events of each day.

This is precisely the notebook I am now looking at, to remind me of the most outstanding events of the trip. This because for a long time now I do not trust my memory any more, from the day when I happened to be in the middle of a street calmly walking, and I stopped and found myself standing still for a moment with a blank mind.

That day I tried to remember where I was going, what I was going to do, and the most worrying thing was that I did not know where I was coming from. I did not know where I lived, everything around me seemed strange and new, and if I had ever been before on that street, it did not look familiar to me at all.

I was very nervous looking all over the place. I saw people passing by with no worries, like a mother running while she pushed a stroller with her baby inside, who was peacefully resting, dressed in pink with a large lace of the same color on his head.

Then there was this man walking a dog on a leash, carrying a rolled-up newspaper under his arm. Maybe he had gone out precisely to do that! To buy a newspaper. But, where would the store be, and what was the newspaper he normally read?

My breathing went faster as time passed by with no answer, looking all over, trying to stop people that quietly passed by, to ask them if they knew me of anything, or if they could help me get home.

Cars came and went on the nearby road until one of them stopped and without leaving the car, the man on the passenger's seat asked me in the kindest of tones,

— Do you have a problem?

I did not know what to answer, I did not even know why they had stopped, probably they knew me from somewhere, maybe they were my neighbors, my friends or my family... maybe they even were my own children, and I just could not remember.

I moved around to turn my back on him, embarrassed by the situation. I felt so useless and bewildered that I began to tremble with despair, looking everywhere, knowing that they had asked me a direct question, but I did not know the answer, I did not know... not even what my name was.

— Don't worry, sir, let us help you, the first thing we have to know is your name and if you live nearby, — the man insisted as he got out of the car and made his way towards me. I saw he had a round shape, and he was sporting a striking blue shirt with trousers of the same color.

I still was suspicious of him, because although in a reassuring tone, he was coming closer and closer with too much assurance, and I did not remember him from anywhere or anything. For me it was like the first time I had seen him, and that even though I tried to remember him, but...with no success.

— Don't worry, I am a cop, — he said as he put on that peculiar hat that I quickly recognized, — Do you carry on some ID with you? Maybe in your wallet!

Although I was pleased I had recognized his profession, I was unable to utter any sound. I felt like I had a carrot stuck in my throat, with extreme dryness in my mouth, and I could not say a single word.

However, even if I had not had these difficulties in expressing myself, I would not have known what to say, because I could not focus. While my breathing sped up by the confusion of the moment. I could barely hear what was happening around me. I listened to him as if he were far away, as if he were not close to me at all.

— Look in your back pocket, — the little man insisted in an almost fatherly way. He had a short neck barely separating his head from the rest of his body, while he gently put a hand on my shoulder.

— Back pocket? — I answered through my teeth with almost no sound, while I started to recover thanks to that little pat on my shoulder, which I took as a great show of affection. It was just like what I felt when first my children hugged me, or later on did so my grandchildren.

Deeply breathing and somehow distressed by the situation, I put my still trembling hand in my back pocket and, to my surprise, I felt something hard. I took it out and there was what the police officer had said, a wallet with a photo ID of someone. I assumed it was me, and that was probably the reason why I was carrying it.

Those were hard days for me. Doctors ordered me to rest and eat lots of nuts, a few hundred grams a day. Every time I could I changed to hazelnuts that I liked more. Good thing there were nurses that took good care of me every day, until I could take care of myself again. Only that it was never as it was before.

After that, both when at home or on the street I wore a pendant that had a button. I pressed it when I had some trouble, or simply when I did not know where I was or how to get back home. When I pressed it, if on the street I only had to wait a few minutes for someone to come over to help me.

If I was at home, the TV would turn on and a nice young lady would ask me what I needed. Although those cares seemed unnecessary to me, it is true that they saved me out of more than one tight corner.

Unlike the way I felt when I was younger, waking up every day was for me a source of joy, knowing that I could still do something good for other people, because although I have been retired for a long time, I had not stopped doing what I think I was born for, which is to do well to others.

I already fulfilled my ambitious dreams to search for a social position, for the respect of others and for the possession of enough money to spend a comfortable old age. However, now I only have vague and banal memory of all this.

So much time wasted in these trivial details, so much life without living, worrying and preparing for the future. And when the future arrived it turned out it had no sense. It was an empty existence I could only fill out little by little. That I did thanks to what was my great love, that started in my teens and I had it until it was over. If I had pursued a real estate career, I would now have many properties. If I had been a banker, I would now have lots of money, but even though I was only dedicated to helping others... I felt tremendously fortunate for it.

Well, I continue with my story..., let's see..., I was talking about the Spring Break party.... No, I already told that. It was... the next day.

At about seven o'clock we all went down to have breakfast. Well, those of us who could wake up, because there were some who, after going to bed drunk, they were still sleeping it off.

At ten, we were on the bus to the airport. There were about forty of us, from all the faculties, that had decided to go on this trip.

To do that we had to raise the money we needed, selling blouses or newspapers, and all kinds of desserts to go with the food, and of course we held a copycat charade party, where all of us going on this trip were supposed to sing like a different fashionable singer, whether individually or in groups.

The idea was not to do it flawlessly. It was only to amuse ourselves and entertain this dedicated audience, which sang along all the songs, so our performances were much easier.

The costumes we used were not too good. We did not spend much time preparing them, as our exams were close, but that did not prevent us from having a great time for a couple of hours. There was even a fellow from the audience, who took the stage between two performances, and he improvised a song with equal success as the rest.

That day they talked of nothing else in the faculty. Everybody down the halls congratulated us as heroes heading to a glorious epic that would remain in the annals of history.

Some joked about our being irresponsible, going on a trip just before the final exams, not even knowing if we would finish our studies that year or not. However, none of us cared, hoping that, as we expected, it would be a memorable adventure, which it was so, at least in my case.

Once on the bus we discussed what we thought we were going to find. We talked from a more cultural and historical point of view, describing the places that only had touristic interest. Finally, we arrived to the most frivolous subject that finally was the central one for the rest of the way to the airport: the girls.

We all had an idealized image of those precious creatures, but one's opinion differed from that of another. There were as many opinions as people in the bus, and even if we had asked the driver, for sure he would have illustrated us with another entirely new view.

The only one who seemed to have a precise idea of the reality of our destination was the head of the trip's organization. He had spent several summers in that country, although in the south, on the beaches, and now we were heading to the center of the country. In that very long country there were numerous places to visit, each one having its own features.

From the southern vineyards, with its beaches and that smoky mountain always about to burst, to the fashion city of the north with one of the most recognized soccer teams in the world. One could pass through many towns and cities that had centuries-old traditions, some of them that had marked the course of the country's history. In the case of others, they had their own architecture or an exceptionally beautiful landscape.

Rome, our final destination. For this, we had set aside Paris, Amsterdam or Madrid as candidate cities that also stood out for having one of the following two characteristics, a certain outstanding tradition and culture, and a friendly and youthful atmosphere.

Although they could have included many other cities in the list, the truth was that there were only these four possible choices, and among them Rome was chosen. None of us but one had been in the city, while for the others there were several who had been in one or another.

Back then we did not know very well what we were going to face. They had arranged everything as a group trip, the transfers, the stay, and even the food, and we only had to bring along a few lire, the local currency, to buy some souvenirs.

For that, before leaving we exchanged a small amount in the bank, although we preferred to do so at the arrival airport, because we thought the currency exchange would be more favorable in the destination country.

It was one of those things that we young people thought, that making a little money, saving the most on a few little things we could tomorrow start a large company.

Now that I remember, some of my fellow students later on became senior executives of major companies, even one of them was director of the I.M.F. (International Monetary Fund), a position that none of us dreamed of reaching, despite the influence, power, and money of some of our parents. However, of those rash and ambitious young people, what is left now?

From time to time some of us fellow graduates would meet to remember the number of decades since we graduated, but there is not a single one left of those with whom I had more contact.

The years have got all of them, despite the great fortunes that some of them managed to amass, or the many surgeries more than one had, to change a spleen, the liver or even the heart, trying to remedy the excesses of their youth, trying to cheat death. However, death eventually comes to all of us, I do not know why it has not come to me, perhaps I still have something to do, but I do not know what.

Well, now that I remember, I had a friend who after spending his fortune on donations to research centers, asking them to find for him a cure for that terrible disease that is old age, all he got was a lonely and cold six-by-two foot coffin, in an experimental center, where they keep his cryogenized body.

There he is, inert as if in a deep sleep, hoping that after a number of years, perhaps a few decades, technology advances so much that they would manage to bring him back to a much-desired very long life.

Personally, and after having survived so many and so many, I now understand that only a few years would have been enough... if I only had realized what was really important.

So much time wasted searching and desiring, not knowing the true value of every moment. I have often thought that if I had a second chance, I would change a lot of what I have done. Not that I regret something, because I have a clear conscience, but I would do it differently and even in a different sequence.

So many memories, so many experiences, and now all is left is a bunch of photos in an old album dumped in some drawer, or some of them framed and hanging on the wall, waiting for someone to come and ask me about them.

I have never been very good telling stories, because my hurry always advised me to get to the point, forgetting the details. Now, however, even if I wanted, those details no longer exist, only the photos and some notes. The rest is as if behind a thick morning mist, which conceals the landscape.

That gives me a strange feeling, sometimes of admiration and others of helplessness, knowing there are treasures behind this mist. One is certain they are there, but unreachable to me.

My wife, she was indeed exceptional remembering even the smallest details of any trip, meeting or conversation. It was amazing how clearly she could tell them. It was as if she had them in front of her to describe them.

I am still amazed remembering how she was able to recognize people she had not seen for years, and how just by seeing them she knew exactly who they were, and what she was talking with them the last time they had met.

A prodigious memory that allowed her to learn about any subject by just looking at it once.

She said that was because she had a photographic memory. I laughed telling her there was no camera, not even the more modern ones, that could record as many images as she did.

Ah, my wife! I do not think there was on the face of earth somebody as special as her. It is a shame she had to leave so soon, when we still had so much to share, so many trips to take... it seems that it was yesterday when I first met her, and instead now...

How strange memory is! It remembers everything when it wants to and some time after that only the void remains. If I only could keep my memories for a moment...! What is the point of all that I have lived if I cannot remember anything? At least my legacy will remain in my students.

Thanks to them and to their children, everything I ever knew will be available for future generations. I would be truly satisfied if at least one of them could apply what I have taught them, and that this could improve his life.

Well, again I digress...; fortunately I have here in front of me the diary of my trip, to remind me where I was. Let's see, what did I write in my diary for that day?

"April 23rd, 1953. Today we left at ten, and went to Paris to change planes to Rome. Upon arrival a bus took us to the hotel. A charming establishment of small rooms and somewhat hard beds, but with incredible views and an exceptional location in the tourist area. First day of the adventure, sharing a room with Arthur, who snores so much that I could not sleep."

That is what I wrote down in my notes, along with a drawing of the sign on the hotel's doorstep, the coat of arms of the owner's family.

Well, I do not remember too well what happened, but what is clear is that none of us spent the night at the hotel, because we wanted to tour the city and see what was not in the books.

At the end, after much walking, we had to return to the hotel discouraged and extremely tired after a boring and fruitless night. We spent the night wandering through those dark and dimly lit alleys, with a constant dimness broken only every now and then by some small streetlamp which seemed about to turn off.

And all that walking for nothing. We could not find our intended spot, where we were assured we could find a party ambiance any time of the year.

Maybe we took the wrong street, we turned at the wrong corner, or we went in the wrong direction at some plaza, and that took us away from our destination. No matter what it was, none of us was too upset, because in any event it was a real experience to be able to see the city with other colors, favored by a beautiful and bright full moon, reflecting on the walls the crooked shadows of the statues and ornaments of these medieval houses.

Our broken dreams of that night did not discourage us to take the next morning a tour of the city center, for which we had the help of a guide provided by the embassy.

He was an older man, of strong build and with a certain bohemian air, in the way he behaved and in the colorful handkerchief he carried on his neck, bent outwards.

As far as I could remember it was the first time I saw a man wearing a handkerchief as a piece of clothing. I had only seen girls using one to cover their heads when it was too windy, so that their hair did not get too unruly.

This man was at the same time our tourist guide and he kept an eye on us. He was told to take good care of us, to prevent us from getting in trouble while we were at the city.

I think, however, that was not entirely necessary because we were all conscious of the political situation of the moment, how delicate our presence in the city was, due to its international consequence. So, we all tried to stick to the approved plan, but unfortunately everything got out of hand when we had the first serious incident of the trip.

Despite many warnings saying our presence in that place might raise mistrusts and suspicions among the people, we had not seen a single offensive gesture toward us. In addition to that, we did not expect that to affect us too much, because we were only coming for a few days to see everything, and we were following a plan. However, an incident with one of our classmates, who was robbed of the little money he was carrying, caused the group to disorganize and fall apart.

Some of our classmates, including the one affected by theft, began to chase the robber, not so much because of the amount of money stolen, but because of the rage of what had happened. In addition to this, after the thief stole the money he turned towards us and started to laugh meters away, showing with scorn the money he had taken. However, no matter how we tried to catch him, all attempts were in vain.

It was not that he ran too fast, only that he knew every corner and all the ins and outs of those alleys. Also, out of nowhere a couple of his accomplices came out and got in the way, making it difficult to our classmates to run after the thief, becoming then impossible to catch him.

On the other hand, I think that those that were running after the thief had no clear idea what they would do once they caught him and had the money back. They were just reacting as a bloodhound instinctively searching its prey.

That caused an unpleasant sensation in the group, breaking the harmony we had had until then.

Some decided to go back to the hotel to call the embassy, tell them what had happened so far, and ask them for further instructions of what to do. A few pressed our guide to call the police, the carabinieri. He refused, moving his head. It seemed that what had happened was more normal than what they had told us.

The few of us that had nothing to do with the situation decided to continue with the tour, knowing that we did not have too many days before the end of our stay, and that the loss affected more the pride of that young man, who had seen his privacy violated with that theft. We then thought there was no reason for us to stop our cultural activities to tour the most interesting sights of the city.

When he saw all this confusion, the guide showed those of us who wanted to continue the tour which way to go, and at what time we should be back for lunch. He then went back to the hotel with those who wanted to report the case to the embassy.

Some of our classmates changed their minds. Although quite upset by why the guide had not called the local authorities, they decided to continue the tour with the rest of us.

Those of us that stayed were less than half of the original group. Some of us waited for those who had ran after the thief, to tell them where we were supposed to meet the rest of our classmates, and so be together before going back for lunch.

Then for us it was a real adventure. We were in a country where we ignored the language, and everywhere we looked the local culture was totally unknown to us.

Since we had already toured with the guide the most important sights, the Colosseum and the Forum, now we were heading to haphazardly see some of the many downtown churches that are throughout, like dewdrops in a countryside, waiting to be discovered by the visitors.

Those visits of a religious nature did not make much sense to me, since long time ago I had abandoned my beliefs. For that reason I found no real meaning to enter to every single church to look at altarpieces painted centuries ago, or to admire a statue or an icon, no matter how remarkable, how ancient or how very well-made it was.

However, to my surprise, the churches not only had architecture and religious relics. They also had many other elements, archaeological remains or items belonging to popular culture no matter their origin, since they had become places of refuge for artistic pieces, even with no religious significance.

An example was the visit to the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Outside the church there is this a great archaeological marble piece of a carved wheel with the image of an old man with scrambled hairs and a tangled beard. The image has an unsettling look and a big open mouth.

First we were kind of puzzled looking at those that were in line before us, until to our bewilderment one of us dared to put his hand inside the mouth and nothing happened. After that, we all did it likewise with equal result, not fully understanding the meaning of that, or its purpose.

Later at the hotel, the guide would explain to us that this was called the Mouth of Truth. If after putting the right hand into the opening the person did not tell the truth, he or she would lose their hand.

After that, we continued roaming around the city, amazed by the number of artistic and cultural treasures that had survived over the years.

I had heard about the medieval castles, those sumptuous and grandiose buildings, fortifications built to save the possessions of kings and feudal lords, together with the dwellers of the surrounding villages. Being there, however, was like actually living in a medieval city, where the same architecture remained in its streets, fountains and plazas.

No matter where we looked at, whether to a balcony or to a door lintel, we were impressed by the majesty of the details that had been carved, sculpted or painted, memories of an earlier glorious artistic era. Furthermore, as we found out later, the promotion of these arts was kept alive at local schools, which were considered one of the most prestigious in the world, a good place to live in, if you loved history.

But I was more pragmatic. I preferred the technology with all its advantages. The wide and straight avenues, where you could move with your vehicle from one place to another in a short time, without having to walk up and down the cobbled streets.

A different way to see and consider life. I preferred big cities, where it was easier to access all the services in minutes. I had never thought that anyone could live in such a particular place.

Getting up in the morning and seeing all that, seemed quite unheard of and disconcerting to me. I could not imagine living there as a young man, for me it would be like permanently living in a museum, knowing that everything that I touched was hundreds of years old.

Although as far as the people, the differences with us were not that many. Some of them, however, looked at us with faces that showed surprise and mistrust, which made us feel foreign there, almost as an occupying force

Maybe it was just a perception; maybe it was because our clothes were different from what you would usually see around there.

No matter what it was, with the chagrin we experienced with the theft we had in the morning, we were careful not to get into any other disagreement or similar issue, now that we were a smaller group.

Perhaps our journey had been a bit too rushed, taking into account the socio-political circumstances of that time, but it was a sign of goodwill from our academy, a sign of cooperation and exchange.

I do not know if any group of Italian students were scheduled to visit our country. I guess that would be the proper thing to do, but I did not have that information.

Maybe it was part of a policy of openness with the rest of the world, I do not know. What was clear to me was that I had never visited this country, and that this was a great opportunity to do it, so I did not want anything or anyone to spoil the trip for me.

If the classmate whose wallet had been stolen had told me how much money he had missing, I myself would have given him that amount, to be able to continue our excursion with peace of mind.

I cannot imagine what other valuables he could be carrying in his wallet, because as far as documents, we left them all at the embassy. To move around the city they gave us a card with our data, the address of the hotel where we were staying and the embassy's phone number. Despite being in the middle of an early spring, it was quite hot, we were not used to such high temperatures for this time of year, and we found it difficult to find water fountains to drink.

And those we found we were not sure they had water that was safe to drink, even though people drank from them without any concern. We, out of prudence, preferred only to refresh our hands and

head, for a fountain that had been operating for so many hundreds of years could not be as clean as we wanted.

Perhaps it was the contrast, but those people seemed quite unassuming to us, away from the big cities filled with the smoke of nearby factories, to which we were used by now. On the other hand, probably they thought the same about us, when they realized we were amazed at things they saw on a daily basis.

We liked so much what we saw, that some of my classmates started to draw what they saw in their notebooks, so as not to forget anything, sketching silhouettes, more or less well rendered, of the most significant and important buildings. On the other hand, others seemed to be more at ease writing, and they stopped on every street attempting to describe in a few paragraphs the wonders we were seeing. Only a few of our colleagues were taking pictures with their cameras.

Incidentally, I do not know how they could pass the cameras through customs. Before leaving, we received very detailed instructions to take no technology out the country. Probably when they dropped the name of their parents, that weighed more than any written rule.

So, occasionally they asked us to stop to take pictures of the whole group with one of those buildings in the back.

Maybe as far as travelling I was not as expert as others, because I had only brought my notebook, where I intended to collect every day what was most remarkable, without trying to capture in those few lines the admiration that the city produced on me at every turn.

One of the aspects I found most curious, in contrast with what I knew, was the way women dressed. Older ones used a black scarf or handkerchief on their heads and they dressed in black. Younger ones dressed with discreet colors but sported scarves of striking colors.

I was used to see women in my country with make-up, large flared skirts, and short sleeves showing their arms, and only some of them wearing a scarf as a decorative detail.

It also seemed to me there was a clear difference between the sexes as to what they could or could not do. That way the men strutted down the streets with clothes that looked were their best galas, except those at work that wore a simple shirt because of the prevailing heat. Now, in an attitude somewhat funny for us, men seemed to be the ones in charge, whereas women, in a modest and shy way, seemed to try to be totally unnoticed, as if they had nothing to prove or to contribute.

That seemed quite surprising to me, it was as if everyone had become stuck in time. The way they dressed, I mean, because I do not think there was a religious reason, as it happens with the Quakers, a community that had isolated themselves from the rest of the world, keeping their culture and not wanting to progress, showing this in the way they dressed, not very different from what we were seeing now.

Well, those were my impressions at the time. Later on I would be able to understand that culture. It was all the result of my inexperience, since as my classmates that had traveled in Europe told me, on each country there were totally different traditions and dressing codes.

Even the way men and women treated each other was quite different depending on the country where one went. They told me about the liveliness of French women, who exhibited their charm without much modesty, so they did not wait the man to go after them, but they chose the one they found most gracious.

Even in places with a common culture and language as ours, they still seemed to keep rather peculiar traditions. That way, unlike what it happened in our country for some time, women there had not managed to have enough level of economic and political independence. This even happened in England, where the first movements to obtain voting rights for women started. That is, that women could vote to choose their representatives and thereby had a recognized series of rights equal to men. Apart from the political considerations, however, many women still did not work, except in minor areas or at home.

Those comparisons kept astonishing me, perhaps this part of the world was evolving more slowly than I thought.

At least in my country there was an important effort to share its culture with the rest, and we had integrated in our society those migrants who had recently come from all countries of Europe, political refugees, immigrants, or just relatives, which that way were reunited.

Quite a few had come fleeing political systems they did not accept, others looking for better living conditions and job opportunities. All of them had been welcomed, regardless of sex, race or religion.

Before long, they embraced the culture of the country without losing their own, so it was difficult to differentiate them at schools or at their jobs.

Perhaps what was most noticeable was the color of their skin or some of their features, but since there were already so many who had been in the country for generations, this was no sign of any special condition.

What they did keep as a sign of their identity were their practices and ceremonies, like when they were getting married or when they said goodbye to loved ones who had passed away. I had gone to their funerals more than once, first out of curiosity, and later out of friendship.

CHAPTER 2. THE FIRST SURPRISE

We walked through those ancient streets, many of them cobbled, for what it was supposed to be a short visit, but there were endless and countless tourist sights, at least that is how they looked to the rest of the group, who got excited every time we turned a corner and discovered an outstanding old building.

To me, so many visits to historic buildings seemed endless, so I was a little exhausted and tired, perhaps because I had been walking all morning from one place to another. Maybe it was due to the heat and the change of hour, because it was still night in my country and here it was close to noon, or maybe because I had not had enough sleep because of our failed exploration of the city's nightlife. Maybe it was a combination of both.

Besides, everything we saw had been here for hundreds of years, and for sure it would remain like that for many more.

That is why I did not understand the need of the rest of the group to go to every single place that seemed remarkable to them, documenting it with photographs or in their notebooks, as if they were the first discoverers of some ancient ruins.

I sat by a stone fountain, in the middle of a square, waiting for my classmates to leave a church they were in. I was absent-minded, looking at the bottom of a pond formed by the water falling from the fountain, when a little girl approached me.

By how tall she was, I do not think she was more than six or seven. She had a white dress and a yellow scarf on her head, and with a broad smile she offered me a flower of great white petals.

After receiving that precious and delicate object in my hands, and not knowing the reason for that gift, I wanted to pay her, taking some coins out of my wallet and showing them to her so she would receive them. However, she shook her head, told me something that I did not understand, and raising her right hand as a goodbye gesture, turned and ran away.

I did not know what to do with that little wonder, and I put it on my lapel. In other occasions I would not have done it, since I knew flowers as a decoration were only used at weddings or other social events, and that they were more an ornament for women.

When I looked up after placing the flower, I saw the girl walking away through one of the many alleys that led to this square. Sincerely I was somewhat disoriented with this rather chaotic urban distribution. I was used to big cities, where from the main streets, of larger size, parted the rest of the smaller secondary streets. However, here the size of the road was not an indication of anything, since from any of them could emerge another and later another one of different size, and of these other new avenues and roads.

In addition to that, the few indications that had the names of the places where we went were written in that strange language, which despite sharing a similar alphabet was quite enigmatic to me.

Perhaps if I had paid a little more attention to the classes of ancient languages, during which my teacher wasted so much effort trying to instill in me the love of classical culture. However, since that subject did not count too much for the final grades, I did not consider it with much interest. That now prevented me from being able to make the most of this trip, not only because the city was full of inscriptions on doors, lintels and on other archaeological remains, in the ancient and already forgotten Latin language, but because the language spoken by the citizens here, the Italians, was a derivation or evolution of it.

In addition to that, the guide the embassy had assigned us served as our translator, talking to the merchants and sellers who approached the group to try to sell us something, or when we wanted to enter some private building to look at the architectural or historical remains in those villas.

By the way, it was not clear to me how art was related to the city. It seemed that ancient benefactors, the patrons of arts of the time, paid generously to the artists to produce their work. That way they made the city a cultural center of reference.

Although in my country we certainly had some patrons that donated part of their wealth to young talents, their generosity was not enough to obtain benefits decade after decade, as an incentive to new generations.

In addition, the government itself provided through various mechanisms, direct aids or scholarships to those that stood out from the rest, but these aids did not focus exclusively on artists. They rather tried to reward those who best performed on a given specialty, so that they would continue to train and progress.

Besides, the government rewarded with financial help young promises in science, research, the arts, and even sports, so they could dedicate their time to them, without having to worry about a job to pay for their studies.

Fortunately for me, I was among those lucky young people, who had scholarships from their government, and on whom depended the progress and future of our country. This government's scholarship allowed me to study in the same center as others, without having to have a father with a high political office or a great fortune, like some of my fellow travelers had, or without having a remarkable and outstanding sports career that others had as well.

My specialty, on which I had stood out, was mathematics. Since I was a child, I loved to discover the relationship elements had in nature, or guess events before they happened, or predict the behavior of animals and people.

Of all of this I had no idea, but when I started to study mathematics I understood this was the language of the future, since I could use it to put forward theories about present and upcoming events, I could understand the associations of sets and their behavior, and apply this to ordinary life.

Perhaps it was somehow presumptuous, as some professor had discussed with me, to try to find some logic in the world around us, not taking into account instinctive behaviors. Likewise, some of my fellow classmates criticized me as arrogant, since as far as them they preferred to trust on something as intangible as good or bad luck. In my case, however, I was sure that behind every fact and every behavior there was a formula that could explain it.

I then specialized myself in economic theories, with which I was able to predict the behavior of governments with respect to their domestic and foreign trade.

The main theory I had supported was that the population would expand or contract based on the availability of food. So, it was not so much about having a good or bad harvest in the fields, but about the ease or difficulty of the interchange through commerce.

I then reread history from that hypothesis, and I could explain why some peoples were doomed to their disappearance because they did not have a raw material to offer to the neighbor country. Therefore, they were not able to trade with anything other people needed.

Some of my professors, when I had to defend my thesis, accused me of forcing reality to fit my mathematical model, but I was sure they said that only due to skepticism on their part.

If I could know all the economic variables of a certain population, or at least the most important ones, I could predict without too many errors how many years of subsistence they would have, and whether these people would become dominant or dominated.

Therefore, if a given population, who cultivated and generated raw materials, did not have around them others who converted and manufactured them, they had no chance of growth. It was for me a perfect symbiosis, beneficial to both, where the producer survived thanks to the manufacture of raw materials.

It is true that this led to a rather significant economic difference. Once a product was manufactured, the original producers had to pay more than ten times more for the raw material they

had extracted from the land. However, if we talk exclusively about survival, both populations managed to survive.

Perhaps my theories had impressed a few, but it was most noteworthy when applied in other fields. Some had suggested me to present a variation, to try to guess how countries would behave from a weapons point of view.

Although my initial economic idea was more predictable, because people are no longer governed only by the quantity of weapons they have, but by their quality and logistical capacity, elements that in my equations were difficult to assess and to evaluate.

Being distracted while engaged in these thoughts, I suddenly heard somebody scream. It came from the place where the little girl, who had given me the flower, had gone.

I looked everywhere and no one seemed to pay attention to that scream. It went for a few seconds and then it was silenced by the noisy coming and going of people on the street.

I stood still for a moment and a strange thought came to my mind. Maybe the little girl was in danger. A chill went up from my spine to my neck, and suddenly I started running toward the street where I had last seen her, since nobody seemed to care about the scream for help that I had heard.

I then left my fellow travelers without even telling them anything, as I did not yet know where I was going. I ran very fast a few hundred feet almost without breathing, until I stopped all of a sudden at the end of the street, that now branched in two.

I looked everywhere anxiously and surprised. Just a little while ago I had heard the little girl and now I could see her nowhere. No chance she could have run so much in such a short time, as I had done it. That meant that by now I should be seeing her. However, different from the crowded square I had just left, here I could see no one.

It would have been very useful to ask any bystander if they had seen a little girl pass by, but finding no one, I did not know what to do. I could go down one street or the other, but how far? for how long was I going to continue my search?

Although I did not know the little girl at all, to think she might be in danger was worrying me, to say the least, and I did not want to get back, but on the other hand, it seemed useless to keep running aimlessly through these streets.

The only way she could have disappeared was if somebody was carrying her in his arms. I saw no other possibility, since she could not have gone that far on foot.

I came back quite unhappy and worried, disappointed that I could not help her, short of breath due to the effort, when I saw that half way down the street to the right, there was a small door that I had not seen when I passed by running.

I nervously walked down the street again from the very beginning to see if there were any more doors, but I found no other one, "is it possible that they took her this way?" I wondered in front of the little door that was just only a bit higher than my chest.

I put my hands on that old wooden door, swollen by moisture, and I pushed to see if it gave way, because it had no knocker or latch. After a few attempts, the door gave in and it opened with a shocking squeak, like old bikes do when they are rusty after a long time with no use.

I stopped in front of that dark opening, not sure if I would get in or not, because for sure it was a private property where nobody had invited me to come in. Besides, it was very unlikely the little girl had gone in there, because in that case I would have heard that peculiar sound..... Unless the door was already open when they grabbed her.

I stuck my head in to see what was behind this swollen old wooden door. All I could see was a deep and vast darkness, with an intense smell of moisture, more typical of places near the sea, where the moisture in the air drenches the walls, corroding them and forming a sort of saltpeter that peels and cracks them.

I stood there enduring the stench, waiting until my eyes got used to the darkness, trying to locate some object inside, and at the same time trying to hear some noise, no matter how small, but

it was of no use. There was no sound at all. I could only hear my breathing, and all I could see was an absolute darkness. I then assumed the door probably led to a closed, cold and damp room.

But what could that be? Maybe an old groceries warehouse or the abandoned cellar of some house.

With great care and announcing my presence in case there was somebody inside that sinister place, I decided to come in.

I left the door open to avoid bumping into any object, but it did not do much good because that black darkness turned into a thick gloom, where my shadow was cast as a sinuous and ghostly silhouette on the background wall.

After almost falling down three descending steps I had not noticed, I recovered, and trying not to bump into anything, I walked very slowly until I came across a wall.

There were probably less than six feet from the door to the end of that gloomy room, and there seemed to be no other access, a dead end.

There was no way the girl could have gone in there. And if she did it was not out of her own will. Where could she be? I ran out of ideas, so I continued doing what I had been doing so far, exploring that little room as if I were clutching at straws.

I continued feeling with my hands every inch of that room, until I found a slit in the wall. It was the frame of another door, which I touched next.

Its rough and moist touch was very similar to the one I had to push in to gain access to this gloomy room.

I slid my hand down its front trying to feel the knob to open it, but I could not find it. I just found a hole at the height of my belly button, which I guess would be the keyhole.

I pushed hard as I had done with the front door, but it did not move. Since it did not give in, I thought maybe it would open up towards me, so I tried to pull it, sticking my fingers as I could into that tiny thing of a lock, but all my effort was for nothing, because it did not open in that direction either.

I crouched down to the opening of the door, to see if I could at least see something through it, and the only thing I could see, quite partially, was a square courtyard, similar to a cloister, surrounded by columns set up like bars of a jail cell.

They seemed to guard and protect a number of large paintings that hung on the walls. Nothing helped to me identify the place, for stately homes like this I had already seen several that morning. However, I did not see the girl nor any other person I could ask for help to move that heavy door. I had to resign myself to my crushing failure. Knowing I could no longer do anything for that little girl and that my companions, once they finished their visit to the church where I left them would be looking for me, I went back to the square with the fountain in the center, from where I had left.

I still was uneasy for the little girl who just a moment ago, before she disappeared, had given me that delicate flower, but I was not even sure that something had happened to her.

I went back to where my teammates were already waiting for me, looking for me around. After reassuring them I was OK, and asking them how their visit was, we went to the next street, and soon a new building to visit appeared before our eyes.

Again I stayed outside, this time sheltered under the shade of a balcony so that I would not get too much sun.

Being there, somewhat calmer, having recovered from the earlier emotions, I remembered I had lived something similar before, a very awkward situation of my past, which I thought it was by then forgotten, diluted by the passage of years, but now remembered as if I were living it again at that very moment.

That time I should have done something, but out of fear or of cowardice I did nothing. Not sure if she would have been saved if it had been only me.

I mean my sister, when we were little, I still was not seven years old and she was only about five.

It happened on a hot day like today, at the swimming pool of the base, to which we belonged because our father was in the military. We had both left at noon, when we knew there would be no one there, because the adults at that time would be sleeping, and we seized the opportunity to take a bath.

Our parents had gone out to make one of those visits to which we were so used, due to the constant social activity of our mother, sometimes against the strict and regulated life of our father, but this is how she had overcome his constant absences, when he was assigned for months to different operations.

It had started as a form of entertainment, and it had gradually taken up longer and longer, until it had become an important part of her life.

At the beginning it was just a way to amuse herself. She started going once a week to an innocuous painting course, then twice a week, then ... until she set up one of the rooms of our house to be her studio. From there, becoming a professional was just a matter of time and lots of practice, because she had the essentials, a great skill with the brushes and a good eye for details.

Her teachers, proud of her work, encouraged her to start having exhibitions for the base staff personnel, but little by little that went further.

Some time after, she started a tour of several neighboring military bases, which invited her knowing her talent and her skill with the brushes. Then it came her public life, to call it so, since she was invited from different cities to take part in exhibitions, both collective and individual, to show her work.

In addition to that, the army supported her, since she improved their image among the general population, showing that life in a military base did not have to be necessarily boring and dull. That the women of the military did not have to give up their expectations and their lives, and they could develop them, just like the rest of the population.

Before long, that family changed its identity. From being the family of my father, a renowned captain, decorated in various conflicts and respected by all who had served under him, it became the family of my mother. It was a family known throughout the country. She was the pioneer, and in many cases a role model of progress for women, in and out of the military, so much that several prime-time shows invited her for interviews.

At the beginning that was quite a joy for all of us, because we saw our mother was happy, but after a while it turned out to be somewhat awkward as far as the economics.

My mother began to have her long-awaited financial independence, with her own income. This allowed her to buy a number of objects and vehicles not really fitting for military personnel or for their families.

My father insisted that she should restrain herself, that she could spend what she earned in any other matters, that she should not be notorious in the base for her financial expenses. My mother would not listen to him, tired, she said, of living like the rest of the base, when she knew she could have greater comforts.

In addition to that, she constantly traveled for several days to museums and exhibitions, or to show her work. She was even preparing to sponsor the creation of a foundation for young artists, for which she spent several months touring different institutions, to give scholarships to those accepted by the foundation.

All this meant that we often were at home alone, under the care of the mother of a friend, but it was not the same as having our own family.

No one seemed willing to leave part of their life to spend more time with us, so I had to become a little bit responsible for my sister, and I saw her back and forth from the base to the school.

Although of course, that activity was not too difficult, because transportation from the house to our school was on the base bus, but on that particular afternoon, my friend's mother had not yet arrived. I do not know why she had not called or anything.

So we came back from school and ate the two of us alone. After that, and since it was a day of scorching heat we decided to go to the pool.

This one was located close to where we lived, so we only had to go through the yard of a couple of houses and there it was.

When we arrived to the pool, I did not know what to do since usually there was a lifeguard and a rescuer nearby, in case something happened, but there was none around.

Maybe there was not still the time and the pool was not yet open, but we wanted to open the season, taking our first swim.

Perhaps there were still a few days before the official opening. Anyway, then it would always be full, especially with those big boys who seemed to love to have the pool all for themselves.

I was still watching all over, trying to figure out which will be the shallower side where we had been last year, when I saw my sister suddenly plunging herself in, doing the bomb, as she had seen me do so many times, but after she went in, she did not come out.

I stared intently at the bottom of the pool how it went back to its static calm, until there was not a single wave caused by the plunging of my sister, but she still did not come out of the bottom.

I put my head into the water and did something my mother had forbidden me to do, open my eyes under the water, to see if I could find her, because she did not pop up. Until finally, someone behind me jumped in, moving again that huge mass of water, separating it when coming in, and then pulling my sister out of in his arms.

Coming out of the water, he handed her for me to take her, while he left. For his clothes, he was a soldier, quite young, and wet from head to toe.

He had had no time to take off any clothing before diving into the water, and even his shoes were dripping.

My sister lay motionless in my arms, with her white face, breathless, all wet. All I did was look at her not knowing what to do or what to say. I waited for her to react and to get up, wishing that was just a joke that she was playing on me and nothing else, but she did not react.

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