

Frank Iodice

Brief Dialogue on Happiness

*The capacity to question oneself, according to the flower farmer,
was the beginning of any revolution...*

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More information is available on my blog *frankiodice.it*
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Introduction

I would like to thank the ex-President José Pepe Mujica, for letting me use excerpts from his public speeches, as well as from our conversation, which occurred in a bar in Montevideo on April 2014.

This story was created for young minds. My first purpose was to show them the importance of being free in the hope to be, one day, people and politicians better than us. For adults, I turn to an ancient rule that has existed since the time when books began to exist. In other words, every page hides numerous meanings. Any reader, any critic, can interpret them as he wishes, because, in the end, in both literature and in our lives, only those who wants to understand will understand.

It was hard to keep for me to keep all the stories from arising while I went on with the faithful narration of this speech, half real and half not, as I planned to do before leaving for Uruguay. However, due to the illness I suffer, a rare form of obstinacy that constantly forces me to finish what I have started, I could not do it any another way.

f.i. May 2014

*To Ignacio and Matéo López,
Young men from Barrio Bella Italia.*

I

The flower farmer was back after many years, which was quite common during South American military dictatorships.

He walked into a bar behind Plaza Independencia. The line of low houses smelled of plants and soap, the inner courtyards lit with the blue light reflecting off the painted wall of *azulejos*. It was Sunday, he had crossed twenty blocks alongside Avenida 18 de Julio from the Library to the square. The library's high gate was closed; there was just a statue of Socrates on the last step, which he had forgotten about.

The bar was quiet when the old man asked, "*Che!* Do I bother you if I sit down for a drink? I see you are already set for dinner."

"If you bother me, I'll let you know," the boy behind the counter answered.

This was a way of being friendly in the south. *Che*, was the word they used to ask for attention, sort of a code to connect one another, and *'Ta*, they all answered with the same poor joy in their eyes.

We don't care about the flower farmer's name, or how old he was. Throughout this reading, we will not care about many things. "Grapamiel, and a big coffee, cold if possible."

"We don't have any cold coffee," he was told, so the flower farmer ordered again, "Bring me a hot one, I will wait until that cools down."

That day his hands showed a strange awareness; they were independent and reactive hands. As he pulled them out of the jacket's broken pockets, he realized that they were skinny. They had carried out the same movements for years; there was no reason to stop now. However, he saw them, motionless, and only when they moved did he feel the responsibility that placed them near the table. Those hands had no age, they were old only in the eyes of others, those who love to see an end to things in the useless hope of postponing their own end.

The boy behind the counter sang and whistled; he had curly hair falling on his neck giving the impression of being wet, but it was only the effect of the yellow bulbs' reflection. The waitresses took no interest in the flower farmer, as they would with a man. Rather, he reminded them of a child and inspired laughter and maternal desire, a timid joy thinking about such a mad possibility: giving birth to him and feeding him, holding him tight to their throbbing breasts. The flower farmer did not care about those smiles; he was concentrated on his hands. He had put them on a notebook that he brought with him.

He was born in that city, but all his life, he had worked in many other places, Salto, Artigas, even in Buenos Aires, and he had stayed in none of them more than a few years. He had served many masters, never seduced by promotions. Working was rewarding but his passion for life had been more so. He had

always been content with minimum wage. People called him a fool. "You will see," they had said. The flower farmer was tired of hearing, "you will see, you will see." He was at least ninety and all the things he had seen seemed now to be a play that he now carried inside himself. Perhaps he had described all in that book; perhaps even his name was in there. He kept his gaze low. In order to meet it, we would need to bend down and wait for him to raise his head, but we know that when someone is thinking of their own life, it could be hours before his eyes move away from the floor. Therefore, we will keep talking about him without describing this part of his body.

The boy behind the counter was devoting himself to his nose with the expertise of lovers or monkeys delousing one another and eating the bugs found in the head's fur. They can clean their whole body on their own except for the head, for which they need someone else. The flower farmer smiled, he drank another sip of the dirty coffee and remained in silence for a few more minutes. Since he had entered, the boy behind the counter had questioned him with his eyes to find out if, by any chance, he knew something about happiness.

II

The evening was windy, the breeze played around the wooden chairs between one customer and the next. The flower farmer sat alone in front of the entrance. He talked to his impatient hands on the notebook, he could not deceive them any longer. The boy behind the counter had noticed.

Near the table that the flower farmer occupied, there was a long unused white piano; behind his shoulders, the iron hooks for hats, which he never wore, neither hats nor ties; and there was a framed autographed picture of Zitarrosa, dedicated to the owner of the bar, an old narcissistic woman. Each time someone looked at that picture, the owner smiled.

"Nobody plays it anymore," the boy behind the counter said, "I don't know if it even works. Until last year, there were concerts every week, then they forgot it was there." He did not say this with the sacred nostalgia of old people; rather, he said it with the careless joy of his age, a story like many others. A bar is a full chest of unheard stories: you just need to sit and they come to your ear with no real effort. The flower farmer smiled again, he must have been thinking of his youth in those cities where he had lived, or of the revelries in the ancient taverns. His hair and his beard were shaved, as smooth as if he had come straight from the barbershop, he smelled of old *agua de colonia*.

The waitresses had the indigenous Indian face of Peruvian people and the sinuous *Porteñas'* body; they entertained themselves betting on the color his hair once was, although, for one who didn't even have a name, we can deduce that the body and its countless parts were other insignificant details. He inhaled strongly to check if the fake plants had any smell, then he closed his eyes and recalled the real ones seen during his travels. He had observed the world and human beings, then he stopped by the library, looking for them in the books, and when he found it closed he said to himself, "You can't even remember what day it is!"

The boy behind the counter waited, leaning his body weight on his hands, like all those who do the same job.

"I'm just back from a long journey," said the flower farmer without talking to anyone specifically, "I'm very tired, but if you are so tired after doing something, at least it means that you did it with all your passion."

"Or that someone forced you until it wore you down!" the boy behind the counter said, thinking about what he was doing at that moment.

A woman was looking for the toilet, everybody passed by the ancient piano but the toilet was not there. That was just a quiet corner, neither interesting nor useful to customers' bladders.

"There are many forms of tiredness," the flower farmer said. "In my case, we are talking about an uncommon form of physical sacrifice due to a

psychological fulfillment. When I was young, I ignored these mental pleasures, I ignored many things." With a hand, he held his head, which tended to slip out of his grasp. "After a certain age, people discover unknown parts of their body," he said. He did not want to talk about himself, but as he was not sure that anyone was listening to him, he continued, "When you grow old, you become a child again. It's like a new incomplete birth."

Customers sat on the other side of the room, near the high windows on the Mercado Central and the buildings under construction. At the tables for two they sat in eight to talk better and look each other in the eyes. At that time, few people used to eat alone. Solitude is a luxury that only rich countries can afford. These characters, at least we assume, did not know what that was.

The main course of the day was *Pechuga Rellena with Papas and Roquefort*. He smelt the melted cheese and the coffee's taste turned even worse. He ordered another one, no need to complain because in an empty bar his words would have been lost but in a bar like that, no. The boy behind the counter, whom from now on we can call the boy at the counter to ease the reading, threw the cloth on his shoulder and stepped up to him with a colder mug this time. The flower farmer's table was on a wooden dais, the same wood as in many houses. The great Alfredo Zitarrosa had performed there, wax in his hair and an impeccable tie. "*Chamarrita de los Milicos*," he sang, it was his forbidden song against the soldiers, the *milicos*, and so he sang it the strongest:

*"Un milico es un soldado,
Chamarrita de los milicos,
No se olviden que no son ricos..."*

That dais was in a poor state now, smelling of herbal liquors and Butiá spilled over half a century.

The flower farmer repeated again, "I am tired because this last journey was really hard."

"Where have you been?" asked the boy at the counter, who was not at the counter any more and can be just called the boy from now on. Before moving closer, the boy passed by the terrace and pulled up the curtains with routine speediness. His arms tied the handles like snakes before biting. The creaking of the iron merged with the noise of old cars racing past without stopping at the lights, continuing on the Rambla, as if they were running to the sea, entering the pink clouds over the horizon. He then glanced at the bar: the two waitresses had sweet dolls' voices, they were laughing as they hadn't much to do in that moment and could tell lots of funny stories to one another. Meanwhile, he sat at the corner with the flower farmer, the old client with cold coffee and Grapamiel, silent up to now. Regular customers called them by name, "Laurita," "Rosario," they shouted happily.

"Why did you cut your hair and your moustache that way?" the boy asked.

"I did it because I lost hope."

"Hope for what? For love or for life maybe?"

"No, no," answered the flower farmer, "the hope that they would keep growing. That's all."

We will now discover that the flower farmer had already been there, many years before, though he did not expect to be recognized. He glanced up and looked at the fading light. Along the Rambla, people walked with their unleashed dogs, free dogs on the red bricks. The clouds hid a weak sun, which we must have heard about thousands of times in narrations like this, so we will not describe it once again.

"How long have you been away?"

"Almost thirteen years," the flower farmer said.

"And what have you been doing so long?"

"Learning to talk with ants, looking for company in the solitude."

"Ants can speak?!"

"Of course they can. They shout even. And they always tell the truth; they have no reason to lie."

"So there are no lying ants?"

"No," answered the flower grower, "man is a social animal, like dogs. Solitude is the worst disease to us."

"Worse than death?" the boy asked.

"Even than death, more so if we believe in the soul and eternal life."

He smiled while saying this, therefore the boy did not know if he was joking. For a flower farmer, he seemed to have many secrets, but what is really a secret?, he asked himself. He did not realize he had said it loud.

The flower farmer patted the notebook and said, "Secrets make men and women full with a past, rather than men and women empty."

The chairs creaked, a sign that both were getting settled. Light passing through the dark shutters left the piano's corner in a delicate motionlessness. Neither minded.

"Tell me about the time you spent alone, this travel learning how to talk with ants."

"Time is a precious thing," said the flower farmer, "I wouldn't waste it chatting with an old guy."

"I'd still like to know," the boy insisted. He leaned again on his slim and hairless arms, like he did at the counter since he had started that job.

His mother had found it for him, as he had the bad habit of losing his way to school. He knew that one day he would speak like that old man was doing with him, a dose of mystery in his eyes, so natural as to seem necessary. However, the boy would soon learn that mystery is not necessary for all of us, but for everyone in different measure.

The flower farmer's eyes avoided those of the young waitresses, he left them laughing at him. Their smiles lifted the atmosphere. Laurita was a lean girl, she had braces and smiled as little as possible. While serving water, she always kept a hand behind her back, as the owner had taught her while checking her work and smiles from the register. Rosario was fatter and more confident, she had dark skin and hair, healthy teeth, and she wore low-cut blouses, which

revealed abundant breasts like those of many girls around the city. A generous city.

The boy did not understand why the old flower farmer refused to talk of his travels, of what he had done for such a long time. Perhaps, it had something to do with the secrets of full men and women. The past is the most important part of one's life, so he shut up and let the flower farmer speak first. After all, any subject would be good for him as long as it would keep him occupied during the dinner service. At his age, a quiet dinner was scarier than a bottomless hole.

"At this time, the customers don't need me," he said. He looked sad, though sad people can deceive those who are observing them, as we are doing now, we, rash readers, so joyful they just forget to smile.

The flower farmer was not listening to him, he was still thinking about his hands and of their will, he quite enjoyed thinking of them, by now this is clear to us.

"Take off your jacket," said the boy, "or you will be cold when you go outside." He said this with the unmotivated tact of strangers, which always seems to be a kind yet fake concern.

"I haven't been cold in many years. Don't worry," the flower farmer said. He had drunk Grapamiel in that bar long before the boy worked there, with his wife, for example, the companion who had stayed by his side and pursued his same ideas. An idea can turn into an ideal if you are not the only one believing it but also a woman like my wife, he thought, so mad to stay with me this long!

"You are thinking out loud like me," said the boy, "and you are talking about time again."

"You are right, the time of our life is the only thing we can't buy," the flower farmer said.

The boy would have liked to repeat this to customers at the counter while drying the glasses or scrubbing the rough floor, any one of those daily activities that enter our unconscious movements. He would have repeated it, as if he had thought it himself, rather than a rheumatic and hairless old man. This time, he thought loud and said, "Maybe I will learn how to speak about time as this guy is doing now. But what will I learn from?"

"You will learn from failures and pain."

"But why this?! I want success, money. I want to open a bar on the square, under Salvo's arcades!" When talking about his bar, the boy stared into the void, that space where one looks for dreams.

The flower farmer pulled up the lapel of his jacket, the only one he had and wore every day. It was cold, it's true, but he couldn't go home to his wife yet so they could warm each other up under their cheap blankets. He had to remember his name first, his past and other details that the man she had married and followed was made of. For now, he was just a stupid old man chatting about time.

When he was young, he didn't know that his life would deprive him of certain joys that everyone expects at some point. One had been paternity: the flower farmer had no sons, however, he did not want to talk about this, and nor did the boy ask for more details. "Have you read many books while you were

away?" he asked instead. He had carefully observed the object laying on the table and he had convinced himself that a man who loves an old notebook that way must love or have loved reading too.

The flower farmer raised his head, as if there were bars at the windows and he was looking for a glimmer of light not to suffocate. "I read what I was allowed to."

"It must have been hard," the boy said.

"A little. Especially if you cannot tell anyone what you have read after turning the last page. What is that smile after finishing a book for, if you cannot offer it to the person you love?"

"Why to nobody?"

The flower farmer fell silent again.

"Anyway," the boy went on, "I don't believe in pain. My people live with it so well as to not recognize it anymore. And you can't say that we won't learn as you did just because we didn't live under a dictatorship!"

"You don't need a dictatorship to be acquainted with pain," said the flower farmer, "we all own a good dose that we bring inside with us."

Dust had gathered on the piano since last time somebody had touched it, like a beautiful woman left to grow old in an empty room. The flower farmer gazed at it with the sorrow of his age, the feeling of those who become children again and start to travel back to the womb they came from.

"You want to know why time is important to understand pain," he asked.

"Of course, I do!" the boy answered.

"You need time to do what you like. If you do what you like, you will be happy. It's something easy. Nevertheless, nobody does it."

It sounded like an ancient idea reviving itself. The boy felt alive again and forgot about the job at the counter and his duties. Is everything I want to do really to work, work and make money, he asked himself, being careful to keep his mouth shut this time. His instinct pushed him to hide something. What would happen if we all thought as this old man does? Who would work in our place? His words, the flower farmer's ones, were beautiful, "if you do what you like you will be happy," and at the same time they seemed dangerous. But dangerous for whom, he asked again to himself.

Seeing that the boy was paying attention to his words, - we would see the same, if we observed the clamped mouth and the blind eyes of somebody who is thinking intensely, - filled him with a paternal joy. If he had had tears still, he would have been even touched. The ability to question oneself, according to the flower farmer, was the beginning of every revolution. And he had seen many, enough to understand that, without them, no one could be human or call themselves so. For him, there was a huge difference between a warrior's life and any other life, like those offered to him during his time working away. The flower farmer had grown old to his ideas; it was hard even to try to change any of them. His existence - he knew now - was founded on the desire to be different from others. He had always gone in the opposite direction, not to feeling superior, not at all, rather because doing what others do, he said, is boring! Therefore, he had often made his decisions listening to a little voice

inside him, without any fear of being wrong. There is always a remedy for mistakes. The flower farmer believed in good faith, our only intransigence, he used to say; almost everything else is negotiable. Maybe it is right: human beings are unique.

The boy meditated on his own uniqueness. What did he have that was so different than other bartenders did? The same liquors, bottles even in the same positions as in any bar; rums and whiskeys on the lower shelves; herbal liquors and high branded wines, Concha y Toro, Don Pascual, Irurtia, Stagnari Viejo, on the upper ones. I would be better off looking somewhere else, he thought.

III

Debate. According to him, this was the way to talk about what one doesn't know, in other words, to pour the right words out before knowing the real meaning. Questioning himself in the mirror had never worked. The flower farmer believed in debate, aware that the conclusion would be the hardest part because they did not know what they were going to talk about. If a conversation is based on the research of knowledge, then at this point, what matters is the discovery. In the name of this love, it seemed, their words were swelling like the chests of those graceful birds that fly from one branch to another without ever getting tired.

It doesn't matter, for the present narration, to know the name of the city where the two characters meet. Nor does it matter, for the same reason, where the flower farmer had been for so long. A man is important in the here and now; his actions have made him the man he is, but as we already said, these secrets don't concern us.

The customers on the other side of the room had empty plates in front of them, they were misled by the flower farmer's jacket: he must be a politician, they thought. Maybe he is preparing a speech to which people would listen carefully to discover the secret of happiness. Even hearing that word, they had had the impression that happiness did exist and they just had to find their way to it. So then, what is happiness?, the inattentive waitresses asked themselves without looking at the piano. Maybe a fish swimming at a certain unreachable depth, or a rare bird, hidden in those fake plants, that nobody could snatch. Let's imagine for a moment a sparrow entering the bar, flying over the curtains, along the walls like a scared bull in the arena, and then jumping up trying to grab it!

Concerning politics, then, the flower farmer said just one phrase, quite clear to the customers, who finally took their eyes off the chicken breast or what remained of it, a phrase that we will now report entirely.

"Politics has to do with the *Polis*. What this means is that with politics people should fight for a better life." The boy, leaning on his hands, his shoulders hollowed under the thin gasping skin, was listening with discreet zeal. "However," the flower farmer continued, "living better doesn't mean having more things; it means being happier instead! Rarely do material goods bring happiness."

The boy asked, "It would be nice if what you are saying were possible!"

"You are afraid of not knowing what we are talking about," said the flower farmer, "and because of this fear you prefer to pretend. We all can pretend if we want."

"I'd rather say it's a matter of liberty," the boy replied seriously, "you must admit that both you and I are not completely free."

His objections were natural. After a whole life spent listening to his mother, who had never had the time to be happy, now somebody was talking about free time and happiness! The boy had been following his mother's advice since he had left school. She had found that job for him, and she was the one who did the laundry every week. Whoever does your laundry is more convincing than people talking about your happiness are.

"Speaking of freedom," said the flower farmer, "you will need it if you want to live as a full man; though, to be free you will need time too." Again a problem of time, it seemed. The flower farmer went on "If you deal with useless things - he pointed at the sunglasses on his head and at the golden watch - you will lose time."

"But why?" the boy asked.

"Because you waste money to buy things, and when you buy you are not buying with money, rather with the time of your life that you spent working to get money!" Then he added something transcendent, which was more related to himself, judging by how he lowered his voice as though looking for an intimacy normally denied among people meeting in a bar. "The only thing you can't buy in this world is your life's time."

The boy remained in silence.

"I would like one more, the last, I need to wake up from this hibernation," said the flower farmer, "even if it tastes like a sewer, I will fill it with sugar." Laurita, without smiling, brought a new coffee.

How long had it taken the boy to realize that the reason he had sat at that table beside the piano was an incomplete research of a father he had never had? And what about the old flower farmer? Was he aware of that research? Was it the response to his questions, to his motionless hands or to whatever he guarded jealously in that notebook?

The city was in a bad mood. There were people passing in front of the bar, plodding along the street up to the center without raising their eyes from the sidewalks. What had happened to the children who ran behind the carts, many with no cloths under their school smocks? Or to the lovers who, with their vague delusions, had been useful for filling up the silences and the empty shop windows? Those shops were just holes in the buildings now. Listening to the old man's words, the boy seemed to understand those silences and that absence of colors.

We don't know if the boy usually wore sunglasses inside the bar, as insecure people do when they are afraid to be caught by the sun and leave them on their head, or if he had just taken them off before sitting. The boy was not so disposed to tell his business. He belonged to the enigmatic generation, young mysterious people who did not talk to each other and, if they did, did not keep up the conversation for long. He did not love chatting around a table in the afternoon with his friends. He'd rather stay at home sleeping on the couch watching television. However, the flower farmer would not judge him because he belonged to another generation, and he wasn't in the habit of judging people before looking deeply at himself. So then the situation was favorable to

listening to the rest of the questions, some congruent with his own, other less so.

The boy thought with nostalgia of his television, of the hours spent in front of the screen and asked himself, "In that mirror I can find all the answers – it is a sort of magic – but where are the questions?" Another glance at the closed notebook on the table. The dirty glasses smelled of the street. The flower farmer's hands remained still. The veins in the wood ran to the table's border where, like all things on earth, they died, and the light's glare lent them an uncertain dignity at each fall. Objects, unlike us, can be born and die thousands of times. This is the reason why in many narrations like this people end up describing them instead of human beings.

"If I learn how to ask questions before looking for the answers, I will probably know what I am passionate about."

"*Claro! Claro!*" a customer shouted, not answering to him, but it seemed to him as if conversations in a bar always mixed in together. The flower farmer caught these words. We don't know if they reached him or he just perceived them. Anyway, he said something that we repeat now.

"Nobody can teach you what you have in there." He lifted a hand from the table. The boy had an abrupt reaction of self-defense. With a finger, the flower farmer pointed at his head. "You can ask yourself fruitful questions," he said, "it is forged in your bones so deep that you can't even be aware of it. Learn to see the world with curiosity, which is contagious."

"What's the alternative?"

"The alternative is to let someone else think for you, and that knowledge will be stored somewhere, which could be accessible to everybody, but wouldn't be your head any longer." Observing his empty glass with tender regret, he then said, "There is an ancient proverb that says, "Don't give fish to children but teach them how to fish". Do you understand now what we are talking about?"

"I think so." The boy nodded. They had been talking for a while, and the reason was not so clear to him. Nevertheless, he could not even dream about going back to work before finding out what was in that notebook.

The counter's mirror reflected the street and people's feet. The wall in front of the door was dark, however there was a certain light. That's strange, the flower grower thought, and he thought of many other things to be honest, but he did not breath a word to the boy, who had only just begun to ask the right questions.

IV

Sewer-tasting coffees and Grapamiel had loosened his mouth. The flower farmer was now recalling the many details necessary to go back home to his wife after many years of silence.

He thought of his wife. They were not married, neither for the Church nor under any contract, but, as we know from this reading, they used to call each other husband and wife. It was a sort of game going on for forty years. They had met during the university's insurrections against the government, long before joining the Movement. They had shot together on the hills and around Barrio Sud streets.

One day, they had witnessed their friend's murder, Professor Acostillada, on the corner of Calle San José and Durazno. Somebody had emptied the cylinder into him while people flew to the ground with a motion that at times became disgustingly mechanical and, as the deafening shots' noise was ending, she had twisted her head a little and said to him, "Go and check what happened!"

"Let's wait a bit more," the flower farmer had replied, a young revolutionist at that time, with black curly hair, the tough skin of those raised on the streets throwing stones at the police. At the back of the Cathedral, leaves danced without any restraint among the fallen bodies.

Professor Acostillada and his wife were going to mass. It was Sunday morning but the bells hadn't rung. In those years if at holy mass time you heard no bells ringing, it probably meant that the soldiers were hidden up there. He had noticed it too late to save their friend's life; neither he nor his wife could have avoided it. And they had not cried, there was never time for that.

His wife was younger than him. She was just a young girl when she joined the Movement thanks to a priest. The priest was a friend of her Architecture professor, who was looking for some smart people to complete a refurbishment project in his church, and that's how he got his hands on the flower farmer's wife. She had an ungovernable soul. She became interested in the priest's political activities and ended up supporting them.

"This is my sacristy - he used to cry to those youths stepping closer with the curiosity and the hunger of people unaware of other alternatives to the insurrections - mass will be on Sunday, but if you guys want to talk about politics come on in!"

He was a tall man with gray hair and a strong firm body. The flower farmer's wife had trusted him from the first moment and learned all she had to about the two Uruguayan political parties, the white and the colored, while *milicos* who patrolled the streets believed that she was taking an innocent theology class.

Around the bars there were rumors about her, that she had had plastic surgery during the guerrilla movement, and that for that reason, she had burnt

all previous pictures that showed her real face. Nobody could explain why, but apparently, many did this to hide their identity, both to hide and to forget. Anyway, in the city whose name is still unknown to us, rumors were plenty and we can't let ourselves be vulnerable to believing them, thus, we won't report more.

They had fed their love with potatoes and gunshots. Now they carried inside a good dose of both, useful to never stop fighting and never starve.

We would like to know more, but a couple's secrets are not for everyone, yet it seems curious to realize now that, as the flower farmer was thinking of his wife, the boy thought of his mother and her advice. The boy's mother was a complaisant woman; she spoke when necessary and kept her eyes half-closed if she heard airplanes passing overhead. The women in their lives, during that brief encounter, were there beside them.

V

The flower grower didn't have many teeth. He used to play touching them with his tongue and he always lost count. That movement of his lips, when they didn't find what they were looking for, was odd, and it made him seem vulnerable. The boy glanced at his calm arms and tensed his own to keep them calm, otherwise full of a wasted energy, as happened behind the bar, searching the peace denied to those who work.

On Sunday, people generally enjoyed the day off, however, they didn't know exactly how to spend it. Therefore, many ended up in that bar, if they were lucky they would run into others free on the same day and have a chat with them. An old man, who was standing with a Malta-beer in his hand, and whom we will call the standing old man to distinguish him from the one sitting, turned to the corner and asked shy Laurita, "The politician's still here? I bet he's lookin' for more votes!"

Laurita did not answer, she couldn't talk about politics, nor about votes of any kind. A man in an undershirt answered instead. He held a kid by the hand - a kid whose face looked like it had never been cleaned. - This man said, "Politicians have never talked about happiness in their life!" It was true. The boy said the same, "Why does nobody talk about happiness?"

"Nor about solitude," the flower farmer added.

"Who said anything about solitude?" asked the standing old man, as if the question was a defense against solitude itself, instead of a way of spending the day.

"We did," said the flower farmer, "but don't mind me, this is just the chatter of a tired old man and a boy who doesn't like studying that much." Their chairs creaked again, the sound of ships held by tired ropes. The flower farmer went on, "Solitude is the worst scourge in big cities, worse than locusts."

"Come on, locusts, who's ever seen 'em?!" protested the others.

"Maybe he's a philosopher," the standing old man said, "one who says somethin' and thinks somethin' else."

Laurita and Rosario were tired of serving the drinks at the bar, but everybody had to do his own work, or the perfect chain would break.

The flower farmer had done many jobs before losing his hair and his teeth, also in bars like that, so he knew the reason for their irritation and he could interpret those smiles and sighs. The boy composed himself, embarrassed, but he didn't move yet.

They continued to look outside: the afternoon light that we haven't described, sad walkers, children not able to see past their own little hands. His words could be the beginning of a peaceful and silent revolution, thought the boy. This man has been a warrior and he keeps showing a romantic rebel soul.

After all, words are the stones with which to build sturdy buildings! But what does a revolution really mean?, he asked himself again. Big changes happen when somebody rises up. Literature, like this notebook, is born from one pure revolutionary act and this is as true as history is true, he said to himself.

The flower farmer stretched a leg, at that age he couldn't stay too long in the same position. That movement was the first step home.

"You smoke?"

"Thanks, even though I shouldn't. The jail doctor forbade that," the flower farmer said quietly.

"So this is where you have been so long! You got caught by *milicos*..."

The flower farmer smiled and smoked. As he inhaled the second puff, he closed his eyes and dreamt of something private for a while.

That gesture reminded the boy of his mother, at home, listening to the airplanes. They lived near the old terminal, Carrasco Nord, a cement block of flats that in summer were like frying pans, yellow grass burned by the sun, flights from Argentina landing there, their little apartment full of unbreathable dust and infinite noise. The boy's room had no windows, apart from a glass frame over the door, through which the early morning's rays entered and fell onto the shining dust floating in the air, trembling at every take-off and landing.

"No addiction is recommended except love," said the flower farmer smiling again with the cigarette in his lips, which, not having the resistance of teeth, were softer and sipped more smoke. Now one could see his eyes, clear and peaceful. He had lifted his face to speak and, using both his mouth and his eyes, he saved half the words.

"What are you looking at?"

"At the people," he said, "counting those walking with their heads up and those with their heads down, of which there are more than the former."

The flower farmer and the boy had similar ideas. Both had an art critic's eye: people seemed to move in a futurist picture, many legs and many arms. What was important to them? Where did they go in such a hurry, jealous of their mate? There were those who worked even on Sunday, the world could not leave them at home with their families, so their families had learned to have lunch alone every day.

"Years ago," said the flower farmer to his listeners or to the piano, "my comrades fought to work eight hours per day, then they realized that working wasn't everything and a new battle began to reduce work to six hours per day."

"I work six hours too!" said the boy, who was thinking of the airplanes and woke up at the word *work*. "It's true, but it's not enough, people have lots of bills to pay, so they have two or three jobs working more than ever!"

The flower farmer smiled once more. We are sure now, that his smiles had the value of approval and the strength of opposition. Years of solitude had been useful for learning how to speak with a smile!

"They work more because they want a new car," he said then, "with seats that are comfortably generous, they hug you, they massage your neck and you feel less alone."

The boy's new motorbike was right in front of the bar. It had cost, as the saying goes, many double shifts, but he didn't breathe a word of this.

"So," concluded the flower farmer, "are they are driving cars or are the cars riding them? They will realize this after years of paying bills and mortgages, they will be old and rheumatic like me and their lives will have slipped away."

A few faces nodded, in either challenge or agreement.

The boy's mother would not have agreed with him. Work had always been sacred to her, the more the better. The boy was confused, the old man's vision seemed to be romantic or idealist. In real life, there are bills and mortgages too; the old man had to admit this. However, they could avoid many of those expenses, a new car, a new fridge and ten pairs of shoes... It wasn't about going back to the stone-age, the flower famer referred to that disease of humans, a need to have things. There were other possible visions: the real poor are not those who have little, but those who desire more and more. Others had said that before he did, the ancient philosophers, Epicurus, Seneca, even Aymaras in their spiritual language. Those words made sense to the boy; after all, he had read something before leaving school. He too could smile without speaking now.

They both thought of their country, a small country but rich enough with natural resources to survive; just over three million inhabitants, half of whom lived in the capital city, and thirteen million cows among the best in the world; eight, ten million wonderful sheep; an exporter of food, dairy products and meat; ninety per cent cultivatable ground... Rio de la Plata filled their eyes; it was clean from the coast down to the mouth. The currents were old friends of the city.

We could talk about solidarity, that form of magic that makes us think we feel what others feel, but no one can be certain of this. The only thing we know as we move to the mouth of the river is that in cities like theirs, in the so-called industrial cities, the main system for survival is competition, cruel competition.

"How far can our brotherhood go?" the flower farmer questioned. "Men won't be able to control the forces they created, rather these will control us, and our life. But we weren't born just to develop, so to speak, rather to be happy! Because life is short, it runs away and if we let it go working and working and consuming."

"Wait a second! You speak as if we were immune to happiness!" the boy interrupted him. "You talk about the places where you disappeared while I was slaving behind that counter. You know that people here have no choice, they are not allowed to do what they want. Did you see the Barrio where I live? There's no sewer there, we need to empty the latrines in front of our houses. Children play on the shit from rich neighborhoods, which is dumped directly from their cars. The garbage bags fly every day from the cars racing by: they come and throw them on us; this isn't brotherhood. I don't know how to name the misery of my city. It stinks, no matter what you call it."

The counter was empty, as if nobody had ever worked there, yet many had spent hours on it as the boy did, taming it like a wild brown horse.

The flower farmer understood his disappointment. It had always been so, since the time of ancient philosophers which perhaps had influenced him as he expressed himself in the same way. His words were transcendent but he couldn't realize it because he was concentrating on something else: he had been looking for a long time for somebody to talk with and who answered him. The boy had his whole life ahead of him, and even if he wasn't convinced of the old man's vision, it wasn't so bad because, as he had already said, his was not the only vision, just one of many.

The walls were dark and shiny now, the flooring too; it squeaked under the lightest weight, and was made of wooden slats. The owner's wife, who was also the owner, was a big noisy woman; she was trying to sweep the dust from the floor, a daily activity like mopping the tables covered with crumbs or washing the glasses that remained dirty like all objects that after many years have their own color, no longer the one they had at their creation.

From the palms trees around the Mercado Central, parrots squabbled with pigeons competing for the best nests. They kept dogs and horses up at all hours, and some of their cries covered those of children imprisoned behind the wooden bars one block north, where there was a school.

Over their head hung a lightbulb so weak that it seemed to be off. It moved as light bulbs do, without moving really, when someone opened the kitchen door with their feet as their hands were full of glasses.

Laurita and Rosario were decently dressed and worked quickly, for the bar had a good reputation around the port area. It was known as the bar with the modestly dressed and efficient waitresses, unlike others, of a different order, where waitresses were scantily dressed and differently fast. The white piano's corner wasn't lit well as few customers sat there. They preferred to stay near the counter, they wanted to be heard and waited on quickly. People are often hungry for attention.

That light bulb had been on for one thousand hours, just forty days. It was about to die because for each thing there is a previewed end. The boy couldn't know this, but the subject of their conversation had something to do with a simple bulb. What would happen if bulbs didn't die? What would the factories produce? Every day, millions of light bulbs are produced with an established, even programmed end. Maybe employees would work less, they would stay at home with their families on Sunday. The boy asked himself, "Is this our destiny? Development, technology, so-called progress, cannot go against happiness; they must be in favor of it and of love as the main thing in the world, love for relationships, for childcare, for friends, for simple things at the end." He thought this and other questions to himself, but he said nothing.

"We gave up old intangible divinities and we fill in the time with money, which gives us the illusion of happiness. It would seem that we were born to consume, to have, and as soon as we had everything one can have, we want more. We want to own things, animals, and people even. This is madness!, the boy said to himself. What is the price of this? No more time to dedicate to your family, to your friends? We replace forests with cement; from walking, we turn

sedentary; we cure insomnia with pills and solitude with electronics. And are we happy?"

He shivered. Then he had a vision that we will report in its entirety.

A man looks out from his office, in a big city. He is just a man at the window. He gets by between holding companies and a daily routine. His office is just like any other, some have air-conditioning, in some others employee struggle to breathe because the fans never work properly. He dreams of holidays in Europe, he dreams of paying all his debts. And one day his heart stop beating. However, other soldiers will be ready to serve the market.

Maybe this is the time to start thinking about happiness; maybe the old man is right, and if he is right, we would all be better men.

The boy had to say that he had never asked himself so many questions. They smoked a whole packet of Nevada, which were the lightest and cheapest cigarettes. After a certain number of them, the smoke entering your lungs is the lesser of two evils; there are many other evils to endure.

"You miss your wife?" asked the boy.

"I do. I won't delay leaving; tonight, we will sleep embraced, as she likes."

"Your wife is a wise woman, isn't she?"

"Every woman is wise," answered the flower farmer, "even the wicked ones! My wife is mad, like me, she pursued the dream of freedom and paid for not having surrendered to a common life of luxuries and habits. Instead we chose moderation over opulence, and the freshness of the countryside to the neurosis of the city center."

"Where do you live?" asked the boy.

"In our *chacra*, in Rincón del Cerro."

"You never considered moving to a flat? It would be more comfortable for"

"For an old geezer?!"

The boy, embarrassed, didn't know what to say. Being old, to him, was a merit and not a fault. The flower farmer knew that.

"We have been living in this *chacra* for over thirty years. Why should we move now?" he went on. "We have dogs and chickens. We grow flowers, as my mother did.

The light bulb again danced its silent waltz over their heads. The flower farmer forgot what he was saying because, the memory of his wife was so strong, it covered all other thoughts, like a fresh early morning fog ascending the highest buildings and painting the half-open windows with an intense blue. He dreamt for a while of his modest house, the flowers, the neighbors' car he had repaired a thousand times. This is how we own cars, when we get our hands on their wombs and we transplant their organs, giving them a new life. If he showed his hands to the boy, they would reveal perhaps the marks of that passion for motors or new lives.

The boy imagined recovering the Volkswagen given away to buy his motorbike. That car had belonged to his father; he had left it before he disappeared. Maybe he was dead; maybe he had just left, as many people do. If he had repaired it, he thought, maybe his father would be less dead or less far away.

VI

The father of the boy was a journalist. He remembered his father but not well enough to be sure that the feelings hidden behind those memories were true. He retained confused scenes of his childhood. Perhaps, he had met people that looked like the old man and said nice things about happiness, nevertheless, the only words familiar to him amid the chaotic mixture of fiction and reality that we call memory, were those behind a closed office door in a building at the corner of Ituzaingó and Cerrito, near the port.

We need to explain, to comprehend his memories, that in a country of three million people, half of whom live in the capital, everybody knows each other's secrets. If one walks always along the same street and meets the same person, he is unavoidably living a part of this person's life. Afterward, when one day they suddenly stop coming across one another, their thoughts return to being private, like a sort of sorrow for a person who smiled at you every day from the opposite sidewalk. If during the military dictatorship, you didn't see the same person at the same corner, thought the boy now, it might mean that soldiers had caught him for some reason and were torturing him. And so, at that moment the torture became yours as well. In the Seventies, all went in, for a long time or just for one day, they were political hostages, anarchists, rebels or fanatics, they all were crazy and had no other choice. Dictatorships do make people crazy.

Behind the door, which was in his mind, was the *Diario Español*, his father's newsroom, but the shouts he was trembling for were not those of his father. The director was insulting him and shouting, "You are not here to give your opinion. Condemnations are affairs for rebellious girls; they don't concern you if you have not specifically been requested to look into it. Here you write only what you are ordered and within this newspaper's schedule. If you don't want to go back to your farming!"

"I'm sorry sir if I took this liberty," - this was the little voice of his father - "I will finish by eight o'clock as planned and I will overlook the disappearances and reports of rape."

It couldn't be his father's voice! For a child who was used to a different tone, it was hard to accept it. He could have considered the corridor; the door was right behind high shutters that creaked just from looking at them. He tried not to touch the wooden flooring, keeping his feet hanging on the seat of the chair as children do. The flowered curtains smelled of fried fish and shaded his new sandals. It couldn't be his father's voice! He seemed to be crying waiting for absolution or release, two acts during which you should not lower your eyes, because you find them both in people's eyes and not on the floor.

When he was three and his father hadn't disappeared yet, they used to go around in a red race car. He drove and his father pulled the car with a rope, for he felt much safer. Green hills surrounded the Barrio, they were in bloom and hid the tons of garbage stuck out there and covered by soil. They walked on the road, as there was no footpath. The only smells he remembered were those of the factories at the end of the street, the Pangiorno bread factory and a big pharmaceutical laboratory whose name he had never understood. The bread's smell mixed with the drugs' smell and became unbearable. Behind old grids used to fence the gardens were families playing on the yellow grass. Hounds trying to make love, but, as happens, their heights were too different.

So now, what else was under that memory? Other than what we are imagining, there was the smell described by the boy, the smell of melted plastic in the sun, the paradoxical misery in those black streams on the side of the street, where children were playing, like he did, without shoes, rolling on the ground with dogs.

VII

“Are you thinking about your father?” asked the flower farmer.

“How do you know that?” he was answered.

“You have the eyes of one thinking of his father.” He pointed at them with a finger. “There is pride and shame in your eyes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you will be a man better than him. You have his strength, it’s clear, so much that you will need in order not to commit his same mistakes.”

This man could be ninety, wondered the boy. He was lean and weak. He played with his few remaining teeth and dreamt of his wife at home, as if he had left her the day before. Due to a particular fear of not loving someone again of not being loved as before, he was now talking about happiness with a boy he just met. Giving up thirteen years of his life for the dictatorship had been the price of remaining free, but now he was just an old man in fear of not being loved.

“At what time do you close?”

“Late. Sometimes we don’t close at all.”

“So we have all the time we want!”

Each time that one of them said that word, he felt his voice trembling like a strong unreal noise. That word made them happy in the end, and, in the light of what was told, we could comprehend why.

The flower farmer said, “Life has been extraordinarily generous to me giving me countless fulfilments, much more than I could ever expect and almost all undeserved...” He stroked his forehead and went on, “Before coming to this place, I was going to the library, I had forgotten today it was closed. I forget too many things lately, but I’m not senile!, not yet! It’s about thoughts.”

“Which thoughts?” the boy asked.

“Thoughts I wanted to solve in the library, finding the books I read a few years ago.”

“When you were in jail?”

“Far worse! When I was held in a well, and they didn’t let me eat or read anything. After six months, I got a book.”

“And which one you choose?”

“Ah! I didn’t chose myself,” said the flower farmer, “they chose for me, throwing down what they found! Science and Philosophy books.”

In that period, he developed his passion for Seneca’s theories about happiness. Seneca had been one of the major Stoics; he had said that happiness is not a human condition, but rather our biggest passion. He had been the first to say that; after him, many other philosophers shared his words. All of them must have died happy.

"It was long time ago, I don't remember that much," went on the flower farmer, "not even the title of those books. But the few words I remember still help me with solving my questions. If I think of the books I might have read!"

"You can still do it," said the boy, "instead of staying here muttering."

"Not with these eyes. Look." He raised his gaze, firm this time, and the boy recognized his ancient lost joys there. "Is this why we need eyes of old people," the boy asked himself, "to remember our joyful childhood?" He stared at him with curious respect.

"With these eyes," repeated the flower farmer, "I can just dream about what I have already read and be content with that. As Seneca said, a life loyal to its nature is a happy life."

"Have you been loyal to your nature?" asked the boy.

"Never, in any circumstances have I made compromises because life taught me to love what I have. One day life will teach you the same."

When an old man starts with these phrases like "one day you will see" or "life taught me" a boy understands that it's time to go. Nobody likes sermons, including us. However, we foresee the rest of their conversation and we know that it's not about sermons, otherwise we would not go on reporting it on the following pages.

VIII

“I am not talking like those know-it-all minstrels,” went on the flower farmer, “but looking for a sense, since only ignorant people believe in a solid and definitive truth, while truth is instead provisional and gelatinous, and has to be hunted from place to place. Pity the one who embarks upon this research alone!”

The boy found in that glance, though tired and liquid, a juvenile hunger for knowledge that the flower farmer had never lost. When he asked him, “How did you learn to search?” the old man answered, “People end up looking for something because, without it, they were not at ease. We learn when something itches. It is a contagious itching.”

From the kitchen wafted the noise and smell of frying. The waitresses’ voices went in dry and came out oil soaked. The dirty echo was common in the southern bars. Girls smiled and their smiles got oil soaked too. What do we need to be happy?, went on wondering the boy, and, as one list of necessary things doesn’t exist but numerous lists for each of us, he didn’t find a precise answer.

The boy had an undefined beard, and he wore a sand colored shirt with rolled up sleeves, as bartenders do for practicality and to showcase their strong forearms, with two pockets for the corkscrew, pens, order slips and other treasures he guarded. Below his open neckline was a t-shirt the same color as his eyes, the light blue of the sea during a flat slow crossing, free eyes that had seen misery, and few hairs on the chest. One day, he too would have long hair on his body, a bushy moustache to hide his emotions now revealed by his lips, an unkind rough voice for the customers, and a belly like those of the old people sitting on the terrace. There were plastic chairs outside; wood was too precious to be wasted under those salt gusts and sudden rainfalls.

The flower farmer thought of his wife. Last time he had seen her, in their *chacra*, she was drinking boiling Mate as she liked and stroking her tummy. This is the way people have Mate. The *bombilla* looks for the *Hierba Mate* while stirring submerging the dry herb and discarding the steeped one.

Before the old - at that time young - flower farmer disappeared for thirteen years, they had made love with all they had inside as when two human beings dream so intensely of the same thing that only an unjust God can interfere and withhold it from them. His wife waited the necessary time, then realized that her child had never existed inside her, but only in the dreams she had in common with him. She was a silent person, she chatted only when necessary. The real silent ones, however, are those who even while talking a lot do not say anything!

In some of the windows' reflections, the boy saw the little clouds moving slowly above the high buildings of 18 de Julio. Their breath, taking the clouds' rhythm, became more pleasant. The long Avenida was uphill, the traffic lights worked according to the sense people gave to them, whether favoring humans or cars. Since at that time there weren't so many cars or people, the harried ones crossed first.

That boy, anyway, possessed the elegance of tall men. He enjoyed walking the city streets when nobody was around, and he could hear the sound of his sandals, at night for example, or early in the morning when birds howl in place of wolves.

He had old sandals; the dirty jeans accentuated his leanness. Golden watch and dirty jeans: the contradictions of his generation. When he was cold, he tried not to tremble. Cold had taught him to fight.

The flower farmer felt younger recalling his own fights. Is this the aim of memories?, he thought. Gums hurt, making war with teeth and losing most of the time. A woman stood up with a full belly, she had a flowered dress and red shoes. "Luckily red shoes still exist!" the boy said joking. The flower farmer, as always, smiled. He mostly smiled with his eyes, but his whole face got brighter. It doesn't matter what memory exists for, he thought at last.

What the flower farmer did not understand was why that boy gave the impression of being two different people, the first with open summer sandals and the second with a new motorbike and a golden watch, as if two unknown individuals were in conflict inside the same body. In his eyes, there weren't yet big troubles; they were wild and gentle. In the brief moments when the flower farmer met those eyes, he saw the young rebel he had been and the wonderful woman he had loved. His wife had rescued him from a catastrophic existence like any life spent alone. "A woman can be a life rescuer," he said alone. "Together, time has a bigger significance," he went on saying to himself. "Otherwise what would I have done for so long!" Her voice, when she called him, was the voice of a child looking for her daddy. He liked when she woke up and called him by name. At the thought of this absent family, the flower farmer gave a glimmer of a smile and the boy, unprepared, didn't understand the reason. The flower farmer was about to commit the easiest mistake one makes with memories: to confuse them with the present. It was not yet that bad, he knew he was just an old man and those were just memories. His wife's voice; the hope she would call him on that summer day to tell him she was pregnant; and eventually the sleepy resignation over the years.

The customers' chatter forming the background of their conversation had intervals of high or low volume, as if it was a single person's voice. The boy didn't care how many people were talking: words fly away, many of them had passed by the bar and all had left him emotionless until that encounter.

IX

“*Che!* I can take you home. There’s the owner’s car,” said the boy, “Zitarrosa himself has been in!”

“I bet you think I’m drunk,” he was answered, “for a bit of Grapamiel?!”

“Of course not! I told you because we could go on talking outside without interruptions. My shift here’s over.”

The boy took him by the arm, he was attentive, the flower farmer did not expect it. They went out and nobody paid any mind. That door could open when the wind came in or when people went out. As long as they paid the bill, it was the same to the owner.

Crossing the threshold, their figures could be confused with the curtains, volatile as the material, passing, materials this world is made of, cotton, wood, cement, people. They both thought of the useless and full life they had talked of. The flower farmer recalled the period he had fallen in love, in those long humid southern winters, at night. Sleeping we fall in love? While we talked half sleepy, I realized I wasn’t lonely any more?

The boy hadn’t felt those feelings yet. He had slept with Cecilia Varela, a dancer, in her soft bed under the mosquito net, or with some customers, young tourists, Spanish, Italians, French.

A recent rain had washed away the menu written with chalk at the entrance. The wooden flower boxes were full of those rains; the flower farmer had seen them all, one by one, torrential rains falling over his country without warning, and they had never astonished him.

Downhill was the Rio de la Plata, its brown water was not unclean, but rather, full of life, it shook whatever was inside, it was the brightest water both had ever seen, it shook one’s soul. From the gardens of Plaza España, came the smell of sweat which was soaking the city, sheets of blue metal keeping the old building company. And from the third floor of a structure under construction, a Chilean workman raised the hands covering his big belly and cried, “*Pilar, Pilar, mi amor!*” Two floors below, his coworkers roasted the *parrilla* for lunch, *churrasco* and bread, and smiled at him and at love.

In the general silence of the immensity of the ocean and the Latin-American wind, just the creaking of a seesaw could be heard from the back of the Ancap gas station. A child let it move up and down passively, without smiling, and looked at them with a glance of a cynically curious adult. The smell of gasoline was carried away by the wind.

“I missed this sky and the impetuous sea,” said the flower farmer, “they are wild, they can make you feel the space around you and you are no longer safe as you felt in those little European bays. Down here, you know, people’s voices are sharp to drown out the nothingness around them, that empty space we

learn to fill up to become full men and women. And when at night the sun goes down – the flower farmer pointed to infinity – over our heads appears a blanket of pink clouds falling to the horizon, where never-seen birds are singing, growing deeper and mysterious.”

A National Police van passed in front of them with the siren on; sirens rang out at any time, night and day, sometimes they seemed to be fabricated, children games or neighbors’ loud televisions. It gave them a fright, as happens when somebody is walking in his own world and is called back to this one with force. Even the flower farmer hadn’t enough experience to mix different worlds.

They went to the bus stop, they wanted to take the bus to the outskirts. “Ours is the 127,” said the flower farmer. However, after many years in jail, the number might have changed. He didn’t accept the lift in the car, because, he said, “cars reeked of plastic smell and at his age any odor is accentuated by his sharp cats’ senses.”

The firm and light boy’s voice, for example, reached his ear as if it first passed through an empty refrigerator. And the noise of the sea, transforming into a river two blocks down, never left his mind. His hearing was insane, like that of many old people, but he had other methods of hearing a noise directly from his brain, without filtering through the ears.

And so, they were walking around and we wonder where they would go, together, two guys who just met in a bar to talk about happiness! The city didn’t like that word, each time they said it they were drowned out by the traffic noise and the urban wind, that unnatural wind born at shop corners.

People argued while smiling along the street above Barrio Palermo, they shouted in their dialect to sell various items, used dresses, broken second hand phones, and hairless dolls. Their own happiness was not at all the one we are talking about on these pages.

In front of a bar, somebody was dancing the tango. Music spread out along the sidewalks, behind the glass doors, like wind that enters everywhere. Behind them, water kept falling on the rusty padlocks of the fountain, the legend of Ponte Vecchio in Florence, the legend of lovers, the same all around the world. From the Avenida came the buses and some old cars. A few drops still survived after the rain which fell all through the night, the noise like full buckets slammed against the houses’ doors and the bell-shaped glass ceiling. The dancers performed on the terrace. The wooden flooring would have creaked without the tango, but the tango, as you know, erases all noises, it is overpowering and makes you drop any other activity. Her name was Cecilia Varela – careful readers might already know her –, she wore a red satin skirt, it couldn’t hide the perfect form that women from that city had, perfect even in their human imperfection, black hair worn up in Flamenco style and a green blouse holding her hard little breasts so as not to let them fly away like doves. So, she was a dove trainer. The boy had the clean eyes of good people and wore a French bonnet, but, as we are not interested into him now, we won’t provide more details.

The boy studied Cecilia's movements and was tempted to leave the flower farmer and go to her. He gritted his teeth, he wanted to be her only partner. Seeing her in the arms of someone else was the worst thing that could ever happen at this moment.

Bystanders stopped and waiters dressed as women in tight green skirts stopped serving, standing motionless with their trays in their hands. The couple pretended to touch each other, repeating precise movements learned by living on the streets. They looked at each other without their eyes and they touched each other without their hands: that was the boy's impression, whilst walking with the old man. From the tables came the sweet smell of the hot *jamon y manzana* sandwiches. Astonishment is like melted sugar: once solid, it can't become liquid again.

Malnourished horses' hoofs and carts full of plastic and bottles dragged with an ignoble conviction. Their owners were called *seleccionadores*, they didn't wear shirts and sat on old objects for seats, buckets, boxes, even toilet bowls. At each trash can they shout, "*Dale vo!*" to stop the mules and rummage through the rubbish.

Whole urban areas were built by metal sheets and bricks. Mules and men lived there. Children ate Mate and sugar to fill their stomachs. Roads and squares made of metal sheets, that burned in summer like slabs on the fire and froze in winter. Children couldn't move in the morning as they woke up freezing and only around midday the sun warmed them, and they could finally go out and play. Few of them could write, sometimes they couldn't even speak. To fend for themselves they used fists and bites. Humidity from the low ceilings turned into cold drops overnight and fell on their beds all day long, so in the evening they had to lay down in the wet sheets that never dried in time. In summer, in those same beds they melted in their own sweat, as the temperature reached one hundred degrees.

In the places where the old man had disappeared, thought the boy, do people hear about this side of the city? Or do they talk about the same old Artigas' statue and *parrillas* for tourists in the port market? Are people aware of these girls' regularly harassed and pregnant most of the time, mothers of two or three kids by different men and not even twenty?! A country of free people that accept no compromises, but a country of women existing only when giving birth, pregnancy after pregnancy. And as soon as the older kid starts walking alone, they want another, and one more, because, without this, they would just be anonymous wanderers. A city of hypocrites and rapists, *ex-milicos*, trained in Panama by the French Army, pampered by the Intelligence, Secret Services, they were generally experts in torture, untouchables after the *Dos Diablos* laws. Today at the supermarket they run into the same women they tortured during the dictatorship. "And here I am talking about happiness!" said the boy to himself again.

As he looked at his timeless people, running after Mate and Milonga, the flower farmer said, "They are sons of sorrow, heirs of the refined Spanish language and the dangerous negotiation skills of Italians. Migrant generations have populated our country, which today is a free country."

"It is, thanks to those who fought, like you," the boy said.

"At my age," answered the flower farmer, "I don't even remember if I fought for freedom or for that rebellious gene some people come into world with."

It was too late now for whatever they might complain about. At this point in our lives we stop any more questions and come to grips with what we have in our hands, as the flower farmer was now saying at the corner of Andes and 18 de Julio. To Rincón del Cerro, they had to take two buses, it was ten miles away from the center. When buses of this city stop to pick up people or let them off, they don't do that as is usual, rather, they seem to throw out a poor guy who didn't pay the ticket or a vagrant looking for food – and for that, he would be in the wrong city.

Two girls came up quickly behind them. They were poor and moved like princesses waiting for at a ball. The poorer the girls were the more beautiful they were, waxworks, *Rioplatenses* magic the whole world envied. It was a rule nobody disobeyed. Their bodies slipped with badly contained passion in those cheap dresses from the marketplace. They were so elegant that they didn't need any modern trinkets, those dishonest women use to deceive men and mirrors. Any rags would have brought justice to them. They both smiled at the old man and at the boy too, out of respect in the first case and for other reasons, which we are not interested in, in the latter.

"*Arriba!*" cried the driver.

The bus was full, people from everywhere. It shook them along all the way up to the terminal, Paso de l' Arena, where men smelled of that bitter taste of Mate and cigarettes, together with young perfect angelic women who only had the fault to live in the wrong country.

An old man got up, he was burnt by farm work, where no one could fight against the sun as we who can afford so many cosmetic whims or last fashion accessories. He had with him a full box of sweets, sorted by color. "*Buenos días señores, vendo barritas de chocolate,*" he cried, "*cantidad y calidad, barritas de vanilla y chocolate señores!*"

Many had a thermos with the hot water and the Mate ampule under their arm. A woman offered some to the flower farmer who refused.

"You don't like Mate?!"

"Of course I do," he said, "but I don't go around stealing it from others."

The boy had the impression that everyone there, including him, lived in his own miserable world. He thought he wouldn't have realized how deep their misery was, if he didn't try to witness it so closely. Misery is a kind of richness for the poor: he could just live it, but not report about it to those who wouldn't have understood. His life was not a joke nor a story to tell for fun. It was rather a continuous equilibrium among marvelous limits that had shown him the value of every little thing.

Along the road, they saw children from the Barrio playing soccer with a Coke can. They had the eyes of adults and didn't smile while kicking hard to score against the wall.

Faces on the seats looked like each other, they had characteristics in common, as happens in little suburbs, where genetics has no imagination and we all end

up feeling like sort of distant relatives. Joyful voices and sad faces were the symbols the boy would have used to describe his people. He understood himself observing them. Other girls sat next to them, dirty hair, men's boots, kids taking kids in their arms. These hid a calm and unquestionable joy for life. Life was another rule that all of them respected.

"Do you want a smoke?" asked the flower farmer to the boy this time. He kept his hands on the seatback in front of him, he didn't look outside as he knew everything by heart. They smoked another Nevada, the last one. The curtains were worn-out. On the radio, they talked about politics: when you talk about politics on the radio, you need to adjust your voice deeper; politicians are experts in changing their voices to feel like real men. Nonetheless, people didn't care about how natural they sounded if they could help them get something to eat!

The boy smoked and thought of his mother; of the old bar furniture, they had used to furnish their flat; of the green fridge thrown out to buy a new one. "The old fridge still worked!" he said. He thought of the white walls at home. When he was a child, they seemed too tall, but now even the ceiling was lower. He recalled everything from his childhood, even the constant sensation of waking up and not understanding the dream that just ended. In his recent dreams, instead, there was mostly Cecilia Varela, he dreamed of her at the Wilson Ferreira marketplace selling ham and *empanadas*. When she wrote down with a pen the total on the same paper used to roll up the meat, she moved her head from one side to another as if she was listening to a tango written for another woman. In her face a tired melody sang quietly. The boy had been jealous even of the slicer machine, as it seemed that she danced with that. Cecilia had the sad eyes of poverty. People were rich at the time of the events we are reporting, but it wasn't about money. Girls like her grew up seeking refuge in their dreams only, where they could still be kids. Outside dreams, anything could happen, as songs from the dictatorship report. Nursery rhymes at siesta time,

*"Al botón de la botonera chim pum fuera
A los que encerraron a los pájaros
A todos los que nunca sonrieron
A los que mataron mariposas
Negándonos el pan y hasta las rosas..."*

Maybe he missed Cecilia, but he wasn't so sure. It was a strange kind of nostalgia that he didn't feel in his chest, as happens to real lovers who double over themselves in their bed shouting and crying; rather, he felt it in his head, as if it were a thought and not a feeling. The boy *thought* about nostalgia and he wondered why he didn't feel it in his stomach. Through the windows, all the while, the road was getting darker.

X

As they arrived, the boy saw his people's poverty. A woman sold broken car parts and trike wheels. How many one-wheeled children were trying to ride around the block? And the same green parrots seen in Parque Rodó were caged now in tiny crates and sold for a few pesos. They cried and rolled over each other as if they were liquid. Once again, he wondered why that man lived up there. Anyone in his situation would have moved to the center, where one could find plenty of places for an old couple with a decent pension. There were supermarkets, medical centers, clubs for ex-politicians, the Ferias at Tristán Narvaja every Sunday, galleries with shops and hairdressers for his lady, everything within reach.

There weren't many stops other than theirs. White dust came from a demolished house on the other side of the street and reached their noses as the door creaked open. Out of the school at the corner, teachers and their students came out excited. The driver, as usual, greeted them whilst counting the twenty pesos' bills and arranging them in his can. It was the last stop, everyone out. Slowly, the flower farmer stepped down with one foot because the other one, he said, was not good any longer. The boy helped him from the bus and followed him a few meters to ask a last question. He hadn't realized that he was the one who had more questions. Nevertheless, he was not ashamed of it. Shame had no bright colors; it was a normal condition amid many others.

Bystanders observed them, not as tourists in the center did. Tourists' stares have no meanings. Now, instead, there was no doubt about the feeling of people watching them. "*Buen día vecino!*," mister Barel shouted from the sidewalk. Mister Barel, *el Toro*, was the owner of Bar del Rancho, where the old rebel used to dine when he was a young rebel. "*Buen día!*," answered the flower farmer. He gave him a kiss on the cheek, as usual. Then he realized something: if that summer day his wife had called and given him the announcement they were waiting for, they would have had a son of the boy's age. He said nothing and kept that thought to himself. These pages are full of untold speeches: both characters apparently had some problems with honesty. One of the girls who had made the same trip hugged the old man and whispered in his ear something that the boy couldn't hear. The flower farmer blushed but didn't get upset, he was used to this. He turned to greet the boy and put a hand on his shoulder, it was a hot and weightless hand.

"What's your name?" asked him finally.

"José Mujica," answered the boy, raising his chin twice, once for the name and once for the surname.

"*Che!* Pepe sounds much better," said the flower farmer.

"*Ta!* Pepe is how people call me," answered the boy smiling.

"I think I left my notebook in the bar."

"Do you want me to go and get it?"

"Never mind. I need to go, my wife is waiting for me," he said, "I'll give it to you. Good luck old boy!"

He put his hands in the pockets – one was a fake pocket since it was broken – and set out along the empty road. At first it seemed he wouldn't stay on his feet, because of the slippery mud on the path. Snow for the poor, thought the flower farmer. The boy looked at him, going on without any hesitation, between the silent Cerro's fields, which took him few minutes as that road seemed not to have an end, straight up for a kilometer and then he was swallowed by infinity. The boy looked back to his city, which was somewhere in that desolate windless valley and smiled because there were no more buses to the center.

(Café Bacacay, Montevideo, April 2014)

Sources

José Pepe Mujica, *Conference with Academics*, Montevideo-Uruguay, April 2009; *Discourse to the United Nations*, Rio de Janeiro, June 2012; *Discourse to the United Nations*, New York, September 2013; and our brief dialogue at the Bar Santa Catalina, Montevideo, April 2014.