

Fatima

The Final Secret



Juan Moisés de la Serna

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Fatima: The Final Secret

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Serna J.

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The sun had not even risen when I heard the alarm, half-asleep I stretched out my arm and with an accurate whack, I turned it off and the ringing stopped. I decided to go back to sleep after turning around in bed, remembering that we were on vacation. Why would the alarm have sounded? Surely it was a mistake. Wrapping myself up to the head, I let myself drift back into that blissful early morning doze.

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Juan Moisés de la Serna

Translated by Daniel J. Ruddy

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“Fatima: The Final Secret”

Written by Juan Moisés de la Serna

Translated by Daniel J. Ruddy

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Foreword

The sun had not even risen when I heard the alarm, half-asleep I stretched out my arm and with an accurate whack, I turned it off and the ringing stopped. I decided to go back to sleep after turning around in bed, remembering that we were on vacation.

Why would the alarm have sounded? Surely it was a mistake. Wrapping myself up to the head, I let myself drift back into that blissful early morning doze.

Dedicated to my parents

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CHAPTER 1.

The sun had not even risen when I heard the alarm, half-asleep I stretched out my arm and with an accurate whack, I turned it off and the ringing stopped. I decided to go back to sleep after turning around in bed, remembering that we were on vacation.

Why would the alarm have sounded? Surely it was a mistake. Wrapping myself up to the head, I let myself drift back into that blissful early morning doze.

Vacation, a magic word, I did not have to go to class. Everything had gone by so fast this year, in a way that no other year ever had. Before I knew it, the academic year was over. It seemed like it was just yesterday that I was getting up, when I nervously went in to see which tutors would teach me this year and eager to meet my coursemates, some of whom I hadn't seen all summer, because they had left. That being said, I had also spent a few days with my family in Sanxenxo, where my grandparents had taken it upon themselves for years to rent a cottage for everyone.

This summer, Dad said that our days at the beach had to be cut short, a colleague from the office had come down with something and he had to cover for him, and of course he was not planning to be alone at home, who would make him dinner? And who would prepare his clothes?

Everyone at the beach understood. Who wanted to be at the beach anyway? We still remembered that last year we could not enjoy any more than two or three days, the rest were rainy and the weather was terrible. It was so bad that we could hardly go out onto the street, so no one protested at the prospect for this year, because we would have a better time at home anyway. At least if the weather was bad, or a friend came to visit or we went to their house, it meant that the time was not as boring as it had been there.

The twins, being of the same age, always entertained themselves, they never got bored, but I didn't have any friends around here, even though I think it's been five years that we've been coming here to the same beach, "La Praia de Silgar," in Sanxenxo, in the province of Pontevedra.

"A mellor Praia de Galicia," or "The best beach in Galicia," according to my grandparents in their thick Galician tongue.

There were always lots of girls, so my two sisters had friends to have fun with, but there were never any boys my age, which is why I was always the one who stayed with Mom, Dad and my grandparents, bored, never knowing what to do.

"Let's have a little game of chess," my father would say when he saw me there.

It was a game that he liked a great deal, and I think he had taught me since I was a child so that he could have someone to play with. Of course, to play with him, I had one condition, "That he had to let me win at least once," which he almost always did in the first game.

I would be encouraged, and put all my effort into seeing if I could do it again, and we would play a few more rounds, but I would not repeat my luck again, and despite my efforts I would lose one game after another.

"I'm not playing anymore, it's very boring to always lose, you cheat me," I would say angrily.

"Manu, you already know how to play well. If you want to strive and beat me, you don't have to move so fast, you have to stop to think about the next step, and consider what consequences the move you're about to make might have," he told me very seriously.

"Come on, what are you saying? Dad, it's just a game, why do you want me to think so much about it?" I answered, already annoyed.

I would get up at that point and it would be over. He already knew that there was no way I would continue and he would leave me until the next time he would see me wander around bored

"Right! Shall we play another little game?" he would say trying to keep me somewhat entertained.

Grandma and Mom would go for a walk on the beach, with their feet in the water, whenever the waves let them. Grandma said that it was very good for the circulation, that she noticed how her varicose veins would stop giving her grief when she did it. I had no idea how they could handle that cold water.

Grandpa was the brave one in the family, because there were days when he was the only one who dared to get in there. After taking a little dip, as he called it, he would take a few quick runs up and down to dry himself off when he got out, and then he would sit on his blanket, that old blanket that Grandma had given him just for the beach, which he brought, “So as not to be soiled with sand,” as he put it. He spread his blanket across the sand under the shadow of the canopy over his head, which had managed to create some decent shade, and which sometimes also sheltered us from a good downpour, those which fall in the summer without any warning.

It consisted of four poles of about five feet in length, and a large square tarpaulin with some ropes. When we got there, we all helped him assemble it. We used the “Canopy,” which was his name for it, to eat peacefully in the shade, so as not to get sunburned. I didn’t really understand why we were going to the beach to get some sun and then having to get underneath the canopy, but I admit that it was great for the twins, and for the little one, since they could quietly have their nap under there.

Grandpa would read his newspaper, as he did every day. He said that, although he was on vacation, he had to be informed of the news that was making its way around the world. When he saw me there bored, not knowing what to do, nor with whom to spend time, sitting alone trying to entertain myself playing with the sand, he would watch me as he used to do, lowering his head a little and peering at me over his glasses. Looking serious he called to me.

“Manu, can you come here for a moment? I need you, can you help me?”

I went to see what he wanted and he took me by the arm so that I would bend down and he would make me sit next to him on the blanket. He would tell me softly so that no one would hear him:

“Come on Manu, let’s see if you can beat your father this time, and you can become the champion.”

Looking at that cold water, which I did not want to get into, I reluctantly got up, shook off the sand that had stuck to my legs and lazily went over to my father’s side. I spoke to him so quietly that he could barely hear me:

“Well, what do you think about playing a little? But you know, you have to let me win.”

“Whaaat? I can’t hear you, speak up, what did you say?” said my father.

“How about we play? If you’d like,” I repeated louder.

“Son, I’m going to see if you ever let the boy win,” Grandpa told my father when he heard me.

I was glad that Grandpa supported me:

“Did you hear that Dad? Let’s see if you listen to your father. What can I say, just as you tell me that I have to obey you, because you’re my father, you also have to do it, because you’re his son,” and without further ado we started to play.

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I jumped out of bed, how could I have forgotten? I ran down the hallway, thank goodness there was no one in the bathroom. I got into the bathtub, but since I was half-asleep, I almost fell. After a quick shower, now a little more alert, I returned to my bedroom thinking that I didn’t have time for breakfast. I would be late, and as it was the first day, it would not go down well if I was the last to show up, what would the others think?

I saw the clothes placed there on the chair and I put them on in a rush. Thank goodness I had gotten them ready last night before going to bed, thinking that it would be the most convenient way to prepare. I’d never been in such a situation before and I was sure that if I hadn’t prepared, I would not have found anything appropriate to wear with all the scrambling around this morning and I would have screwed it up.

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Sitting quietly, waiting for that hot cup of coffee that I had left on the table to cool down, the memories of that distant day came to mind in droves, as if they wanted to come out all at once. How long ago all that was, and how many things had happened since then.

Looking absentmindedly at the coffee again, I let myself be carried away by those thoughts that flowed into my mind, the time that had passed since those days, when the only thing I thought about, like all my peers, was the weekend and how much fun it would be, without any other worries. It was good to study yes, but that was not very important at that time, because as a kid, studies are only part of the games.

Finally, I went to high school, and things changed. I had to take everything more seriously.

“Manu this is different, you can’t treat it like a game, you have to study hard to pass. Here they don’t give grades away, and if you have to re-take any subject in September, you’ll spend all summer studying, punished without going out,” my father told me very seriously that day.

I knew my father, and I knew that when he said something, he meant it, so I made it my purpose to never miss a class and to behave myself. With that, I thought I would be fighting half the battle and with a little more effort, I would have the school year completed successfully. That was preferable to killing myself studying.

Of course, such actions performed as a young man so as not to lift a finger are so thoughtless. How ignorant I was that the better prepared you are, the easier it will be to move forward in life.

“You can’t get lost time back.” I never really knew what that meant, but my grandfather was convinced that sayings contained truths and he used them all the time.

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I took the cup of coffee; it was cool enough not to burn me. I had to get on with the task that had been imposed upon me, it was essential that I pick up the paper trail. Slowly, I took a sip while looking at the table, at that note that I had received in such a strange way. I mean I was used to strange things, but I had never had an envelope slid under my door before, who could it have been?

I had to verify the information, I couldn’t trust anything or anyone. From experience, I had already figured out that someone, I’m not sure who, was determined to get me to drop all of this and let it go, and what was happening in reality was that I was becoming increasingly interested in it. I had to get to the bottom of the matter and discover the truth.

Walking briskly, I went over to the library, it had just opened. I had watched from the place where I was sitting drinking my coffee, indeed I had chosen that location for that reason. From there, I had a perfect view of the door to the place where I could find the long-awaited answer. Why with as many libraries as there might be, would they have chosen this one?

As I am very curious, I was sure that at some point I would have the answer to that question, but right now it was not essential. Finding the document was the important thing, but now I was realizing:

How would the anonymous author of the sealed letter know that I was looking for that document? How strange! I didn’t think I had mentioned it to anyone, all this seemed too coincidental.

I left the heavy door of the library behind me, but not before admiring it first. What a piece of work it was! What an artist it was who had constructed it! Even with the time that must have passed since then, everyone could admire the beautiful figures that were created by the hands of the craftsman. People might not know who he was, but his work was visible, within the reach of all eyes. Would he have thought at the time he was creating it about the amount of people who would admire it and about the amount of time that his work would endure? Would he have thought about how many things that enormous door would lock behind it? The door of a library, where so much wisdom is stored. How important it is, and we pass through it, almost without realizing it.

I arrived at the counter, where a friendly lady asked me what I wanted to see. Still contemplating the craftsman of that amazing door, I didn’t notice her when she said, “Good morning,” nor did I hear the question that she had asked me when she saw me arrive.

“What a piece of work!” I said absent-mindedly, without realizing that someone was listening to me.

“What did you say? What do you mean?” she said with a look of surprise.

“Sorry, I was thinking about something else. May I consult a book?” I asked, returning to the matter that had brought me there.

“That’s what I’m here for, to provide the desired information to those who need it,” she responded with a smile. “If you tell me what it’s about and if we have it, I can tell you where it is.”

“Well, the thing is, I don’t know. I’m looking for something, where could I find it?” I said a little quieter, as if I were ashamed, because she was listening to me when I said it, and she saw how awkwardly I was expressing myself, the nerves that I felt wouldn’t even let me speak properly.

“If you can give me a hint, I’m sure I can help you,” she said smiling.

“The Secrets of Fatima,” I said promptly, looking at the floor without daring to look at her.

“It’s on my nightstand,” she answered immediately without stopping to think.

I was amazed by her response, I looked her up and down, trying to analyze her. “What a way to get my attention!” I thought.

No, she didn’t seem like one of those girls who like to be noticed, she had the appearance of a serious person, at least from the way she dressed. She wore a gray pleated skirt and a sweater that was also gray, but of a darker shade, with her hair pulled back in a bun. She wore no makeup, which gave the impression that she was a formal and educated person. I didn’t understand why she had given me that answer, which I considered so strange and inappropriate.

I opened my mouth to tell her that I was serious, but she did not let me say another word as she continued.

“It’s one of my favorite books and since I first got it, I’ve read it so many times that I know it by heart, but nobody has ever asked for it here in the library, well because I know that anyone who is interested in the subject, goes and buys it in a bookstore,” she was saying quite seriously. I was still surprised by her response, and I was still staring at her.

“But, the secrets? Secrets? Not the ones that are in the public domain,” I said softly.

“Wait, there are more secrets? Well that’s got my attention,” she said in a curious tone, leaning her head in closer to me, in order to speak more quietly.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” I answered also quietly, not wanting anyone to hear me.

“Come, I’ll show you everything we have on the subject, to see if there’s anything that will help you in your task,” she answered suddenly, her voice conveying her great enthusiasm.

Leaving her work station and walking at a brisk pace, so much so that I had trouble following her, we passed through the corridors of the library, until we reached one of the most distant and lonely corridors. It was clear that it was seldom visited. She stopped in her tracks, and turning to me she said:

“Here is all the material that we have about Fatima, but if you like, when we close the library I can show you a bookstore that I know well, where you might also find something on the subject that may interest you.” She was telling me this while she gestured toward the bookshelves with her hand, where I saw several books, which I supposed would provide me with information about what interested me.

I was surprised by the way she was talking to me, I wasn’t sure if I had heard her properly that she wanted to accompany me, and puzzled, I asked her:

“Why don’t you give me the address and I’ll go myself after looking at what you have here?”

“As I said, it’s a topic that has interested me for a long time and I know where the materials are, on what bookshelf, and if you were to go alone, I’m sure you wouldn’t find it. Well, if you don’t mind me coming with you, of course,” she added.

As she seemed very judicious to me, we agreed that I would see everything that was around here, and when it was time to go, we would meet by the exit.

She agreed and left with a spring in her step, back to her work station, and to open that door, which she had closed with a firm push in order to come with me to show me where the material was that I might find interesting.

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That day, I had put on some pants, the oldest I had, and my green plaid shirt, the one I hadn't worn for a long time and which was so worn that my mother would not let me go out in it. With the sleeves rolled up, I went to meet my companions, well, they would be my companions from today, because I had been assigned to work with them when I told them I would like to help with something.

The academic year had already finished and we were on vacation and since I had nothing fun lined up this summer, I wanted to do something different.

One day I'd heard a group of students, in the college quadrangle, who had commented on what they had done last summer, and as it seemed strange to me, I stopped to find out more. I thought I had heard that they had worked as bricklayers, it could not be true, surely I was wrong, so I asked them about it.

"Yes, what's so strange? We've been fixing the house of some folk who needed someone to lend a hand," answered one of the girls who was in that group.

She told me in a normal voice, as if the others also knew what she was talking about, but it seemed very strange to me, I thought she was making fun of me.

"Wait, what are you telling me?" I interrupted, "You? A bricklayer? What about your nails?"

"Well it was during the summer, I didn't have to come to class, so I didn't need to have them, I didn't need them long or painted, so I cut them. We do the work with care, we're professionals after all," she replied with a chuckle.

"Professionals of what?" I asked her intrigued, because I saw that the others were watching, and they didn't laugh at what she was telling me.

"Hey, if you came here to mock us, you can get lost, we take this seriously," said the guy next to her, and they all stared at me.

"But yeah, tell me some more, you have to admit that what I'm hearing is pretty unusual," I told them so they could inform me about what I'd heard when I was passing them by.

"Look, if you want to know more, come this afternoon, we have to get going now or we'll be late for class."

And with that, the group disbanded, but before they disappeared, I shouted:

"What time? Where can I find you? I really do want to know more."

"Here at five, be on time!" one of them said as he turned away.

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What incredible memories! One day I have to make a compilation of everything, because although I'm not very old and I have an excellent memory, who knows when it will start to fail me, or what things might happen to me. Although I don't believe that my life interests anyone, even if out of curiosity, one day I'm going to write down everything that has happened to me. I'll try to do it accurately, without so many flights of fancy, just as I'm remembering it now. The unfortunate thing is that I'm always so busy that I have no idea when I'll be able to actually do it, but yes, I am determined and I will do it at some point.

Browsing through the material that I had taken down to the table, time flew past and I was startled when I noticed a tap on my shoulder. It was her, the librarian.

"It's closing time. If you want, I'll show you the place we were talking about earlier," she said with a soft voice and a smile on her face.

"What was that?" I asked absently.

I didn't know what she was talking about, time had passed, I was reading so much information that reality, the place, the circumstances, had passed into the background, and at that moment I had forgotten what we had talked about or what she was referring to.

“Leave something for tomorrow, it’s not going anywhere,” she said as she turned around and started off down the long corridor.

Closing the book that I had in my hands, and taking the others from the table, I returned them to their places on the bookshelf and followed her. Seeing that she was moving faster than me, I had to pick up the pace. What a way to walk, I thought. Of course she will have to pass through these corridors many times a day and that will have given her that agility.

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It was an important day. I was so nervous! I don’t think I’d ever felt so nervous. The others told me not to worry, that everything would be very simple, but I found that strange to say the least. How would it be done? What would I have to do? What task would they assign to me? I hadn’t considered how difficult it might be until now, when I was going to meet those who would be my companions during this stage of my life, which was now so novel and at the same time so strange: a summer spent working.

I was a university student who was used to having everything done for me. At home, Mom had always taken care to make sure that everything was clean and ready. I had never even considered that one day I would have to do it myself, so I had never bothered to learn, not even how to wash my socks, much less how to sew them if they ever developed any holes. That was normal in my house, and I think the same thing should happen in all homes. The boys didn’t help with anything, well, sometimes to set the table, if my sister Carmen was busy.

But on that day, when I left home to go to the Student Residences, I didn’t think about all the work that I now had to do for myself. I had to make an effort to be clean, since my clothes piled up in the laundry hamper, without me knowing how to put on the washing machine, even though they wanted to show me at home.

My older sister tried hard to tell me over and over that everything was simple, you just had to hit that button. Yes, of course, but what about the detergent? When should you use it? And how much? The washing machine was women’s work, that much was clear, only they understood it.

There are some things that are very difficult to understand compared to how simple they were at home. Going into the closet, everything was in its place, clean and ironed, just waiting for me to reach in and take it. I don’t know about other mothers, but mine always had everything under control, nothing I needed to go to class or to go play with friends was ever dirty or wrinkled. I had left things unrecognizable when I returned home after of an afternoon of games, but she took care of it. She never explained to me how she did it, it seems that mother’s days last longer. Maybe they have more time, because it’s ridiculous how much they have to do.

How I’ve missed her stews since I left home, especially her superb “Caldo Gallego,” or “Galician broth,” which sings to you on cold winter days, how she gets my shirts ready with their starched collars and even polishes my shoes. How could she have removed the mud that I left my things covered in when I returned from my games?

The truth is that I never thought about it, she must know everything, where would she have learned it? As far as I know, an electrician has never come to my house to fix an outlet, not that I can remember, and me with my fixation on pulling the cord without giving it a thought. I pulled them out of the wall, tore the whole plug right off, as she said to me:

“Manu again? Son, please be careful.”

But when I needed it again, it was fixed. If only she was at home, there was no doubt who had bothered to fix what I was damaging, and who always covered my books? Of course it was her.

“Mom, this is broken,” I would tell her, “can you fix it for me?”

There she was with her smile saying:

“Go get it, it’s alright.”

“Mom, I’m having trouble with this, can you help me because I have to finish it?”

“Let’s see! Look, this is how it’s done,” she would tell me and stop whatever she was doing to show me.

“Mom, this one, or the other?” and she would help me as if I were the only person in the world. Of course, now that I think about it, she did the same for my brothers and sisters, and I think to myself, how many hands did she have? How could she spare time for everyone? On top of this, she painted. I really don’t know when she found time for it.

Sometimes in the morning, I saw that she had, there in the corner where she didn’t want anyone to touch anything. I would contemplate one of those paintings that she had created. Such color! Where would she get them from? I always asked myself. Why did I never see her painting them? I only ever heard her, when I was little, say:

“Manu, don’t touch, that’s been freshly painted.”

She would tell me in a serious tone, the one she used when she said something important and that all children know so well. We did our best to obey, fully aware that she wasn’t joking.

But if I’d just gotten out of bed, did she do it while everyone else slept? I got the answer when I got a little older. It was actually when we were all asleep and the house had already fallen silent. When she had finished the multitude of tasks, when she had prepared the clothes that we all had to wear the next day, she started painting. She said it helped her to rest and be fresh the next morning.

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We went out onto the street, she closed the door firmly, then she locked up. I was surprised that such an ancient and huge door had such a small key, and looking I noticed that the lock, the opening that served as the lock in ancient times, was now just an ornament, because of its size. The key that would have been used must have been very large, surely those iron keys that weighed so much could certainly not be carried in that small bag, where I saw that the librarian kept the key.

She headed confidently toward one of the side streets. She moved so fast, just as I had seen her move through the corridors of the library and it was difficult for me to keep pace with her. Although I tried, I had no choice but to say:

“Please Miss, a little more slowly or I can’t follow you, you’re going very fast.”

She looked me up and down as if she wanted to take an X-ray and muttered:

“Hmmm! What kind of young man are you! Tired after such a pace, really? Surely you prefer to be sitting for hours, without realizing that your body needs to move to make you feel good and so that the passage of the years will not be noticed in the bones,” she replied as she slowed down slightly.

“Yes,” I mumbled softly, but in reality, what had I answered? That I had spent the day sitting or that my bones were already beginning to claim my attention? In my younger days, I would play sports practically every day, now I had to take a pill some days to be able to withstand the pain, especially in the knees, which I think wasn’t due to a lack of walking, but rather the endless hours I spent sitting.

She was right, what she had said was correct. I forced myself to follow her without protesting again, when I suddenly thought that I had been sitting the whole time, looking for information in those books that I’d taken from the shelves that she had indicated, but from there I could see her back at her work station, where I had noticed that there was nowhere for her to sit. She’d been standing the entire the time.

“What strength!” I thought. “I would not have endured it. Well,” I reasoned as an excuse, “she’ll be used to it; a specific result of the years she’s been doing this kind of work.”

Since I was distracted by my thoughts, and as she continued on in silence, I hadn’t realized where we were, nor the streets we’d passed. That usually happens when you’re driving, if you’re alone you have to pay attention to everything to get to the place you want to go, but if someone next to you is giving you directions, when you arrive, you realize that if you had to go back, you wouldn’t know where to go, since you didn’t pay attention to where you had come from, you had only relied on the person who was guiding you and following their instructions. That was what had happened to me and I almost missed the place, when I heard:

“Here it is! We’ve arrived. Now you’ll see how to find what you’re looking for. I think it’s the place where they have the most material on that subject in all of Santiago.”

She’d stopped, and I hadn’t heard, but when I did, I quickly stopped and looked at the window. It was a very old bookstore. She went in right away, and before I could reach her, she was already greeting an old man who was seated and who I took to be the owner. When I got close to them, I heard the man as he got up from his seat and greeted her.

“Hello Pilar, how long has it been without seeing you? I thought you’d forgotten the address of this place, or have you been so busy that you’ve not had time to come visit an old friend?”

She said to him softly in apology:

“I’m sorry, I don’t get much spare time as you know, but you’re right, it’s been too long since the last time and it shouldn’t have been so. How is everything?”

“Good! As always! As for my ailments, you know..., fine! So what brings you here today? I see you’re in good company,” said the man, whom I could see as he winked at her while he said it.

“Sorry! Sorry!” she said as she turned to me. “Let me introduce you to...,” and looking at me she said:

“How scatterbrained of me! I don’t even know your name.”

“As scatterbrained as ever, you haven’t changed a bit,” the old bookseller said and laughed. “I remember that first time we met, the shy curious girl who needed to ask something, but her shame kept her from even speaking. How I asked you to write it down for me so I could find out, because your words came out so broken that there was no way to understand you. Do you remember what you wrote?” the old man asked leaning into her ear.

“No,” she replied, a little surprised by the unexpected question.

“Well I do, I haven’t forgotten it, despite all the time that’s gone by. You wrote on that paper in big letters, so I could read it properly, ‘Everything you have about the Virgin and the Apparitions of Fatima.’ Yep, that’s right, that’s what she wrote for me on that piece of paper,” the man said looking at me. “I, a communist recognized by everyone, let out a huge laugh that was heard throughout the store, and you tearfully asked me for forgiveness. I still don’t know why, because you hadn’t done anything to offend me.”

“Well, let’s get back to today, as I’m an old man, I live more and more in the past and in my memories, which are certainly more fun than daily life, where nothing different ever happens. Every day is the same, nobody comes in here and I spend the morning with the duster, going over the old books so that the dust doesn’t accumulate too much. It can’t be left even for a single day, and in the afternoon sitting in the doorway enjoying a coffee and taking a little sun, if the sun has deigned to visit us that day, and if not, I drink my coffee sitting by the heater so that these old bones don’t protest too much, if that’s even possible. And how are things in your life?” he asked her suddenly, as if he were just realizing that she was still there.

“Pilar, you didn’t get married, right? Do you still have that little gray kitten that gave you such good company, and that kept ruining that cushion you were so fond of?”

“That was a hundred years ago, how can you remember all that?” she asked laughing.

“Come on, you’re exaggerating!” he answered. “Yes, it’s true that the years have indeed passed. You had pretty brown braids back then, and now I see some gray hair in there, which you surely haven’t colored yourself,” he said quietly.

“No, they’re natural,” she replied with a sad smile, “how time flies!”

“Okay, okay, let’s leave this melancholy behind... and you told me you had come with this young man... but I haven’t let you tell me why,” he added, looking at me.

“Well, it’s almost the same as that first time,” she responded, “to learn everything you have about ‘The Apparitions of Fatima,’ which seems to be something that interests him, and as you know, that’s my area. I was very happy that someone had reminded me of this, and I told him that I would help him find that information, some of which I’m sure he can find around here somewhere.”

“Young man,” the old man said suddenly, “are you a believer?”

Surprised by his question, I answered him haltingly:

“No, but does that matter?”

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It was a subject that was very clear in my mind and that I had discussed for a long time with family and friends, but when I arrived at University, the belief that you can be a good person without believing in anything became stronger, and that was my philosophy of life.

It was hard for my mother to understand, because she had always been very involved within the parish and had tried to get the five of us to continue with those religious beliefs and practices.

“Let the kids find their own way, they’re honest and good people, and they’ll learn their beliefs over time and make their own decisions,” said my father.

He always accompanied her to mass, but he didn’t get involved in anything else, leaving us with freedom and decision-making power, which my mother told him was not good for our future.

One day, knocking on the door of my room, asking for permission to come in, my older sister Carmen told me she’d been talking with Don Ignacio, the priest at our parish, who had known us since we were little, who had baptized us and with whom we had made our First Holy Communion.

“What happened if you didn’t believe in anything?” That was the question she told me she had asked. “What you had to do was look for answers, those that would convince you and don’t let yourself be swayed by the impositions of others.” That was the response that the priest had given her, and Carmen added, “But I didn’t say anything to him about you, I made it out as though it was a doubt that I was having.”

I thought about it for a few days, and those words from the priest helped me to have a talk with my mother, because the subject had caused some friction between us from time to time.

One day I was able to catch her alone at home, a rare thing! It was a rainy afternoon. I had organized to go out with friends for a game of soccer, but the rain was so intense that they told me on the phone that they had suspended it. My father was traveling; he had needed to go to Madrid for work. Carmen, my older sister, had gone with him, because she wanted to see some friends who lived there. She knew them from the beach at Sanxenxo and they had invited her on several occasions to visit the capital.

She had taken advantage of my father’s trip, and that way “He didn’t have to go alone,” as she put it, of course to justify them allowing her to go. I say that, but the truth is my father was grateful to have some company in the car, so he could chat with someone and the trip would not be so boring.

The twins had an important exam, so even though it was raining when it was time to go, they couldn’t stay at home, and Chelito, the little one, was in bed with the flu, and was sleeping after having taken her medicine.

“Mom, we have to talk,” I said, facing her, taking advantage of the fact that everything was quiet at home.

I still remember her face, as if I were seeing it in front of me now, her pretty brown eyes looked at me with interrogation, penetrating, wanting to guess what I wanted to say to her, like so many times before. I don’t know how she did it, but before I opened my mouth, she was already giving me answers for whatever it was I wanted to ask.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick? Have you caught the flu from Chelito? Have you been suspended?” she asked nervously, with such speed that before finishing a question, she already had the next one on the tip of her tongue and she wouldn’t let me say a word.

“No, wait, wait, let’s sit down for a little bit and chat,” I said taking her by the shoulders to reassure her a little.

“Well, before that I’ll prepare you a glass of warm milk, so you can energize your body,” she told me and before I could respond, she had already gone into the kitchen in two strides and put the

pot on the stove with milk. She waited a little while for it to warm up, brought it to me, and told me while she handed it to me, “Take it warm, I’ve thrown in a little honey, just the way you like it.”

With the glass in my hands, feeling the warmth of the milk comfort me on that bleak afternoon, and being sat on the sofa next to her, which was strange in itself because the sofa was always full to watch the television and she normally had to sit on a chair, we now had the entire thing just for the two of us.

I don’t remember the last time we had a moment alone, she was always doing something.

“Well, tell me, you have me on tenterhooks,” she told me, “what do you want to talk about?”

I tried to find the words. I would use gentler words, so that she would not misinterpret them and they would not hurt her. I started by asking:

“Mom, do you love me?”

“Oh son, what a question, do you doubt it?” she asked, looking at me with great surprise.

“No,” I answered resoundingly, “listen to me, it’s very important,” I said.

“It already seems that way to me, you’re kidding me, right?” she said more calmly, with a smile.

“No Mom, I’m being serious.”

“Me too,” she said.

“Do you think I love you?” I asked her, looking her straight in the eye to see her expression.

“Well of course, I’ve never doubted it, but you’re acting strangely today. Tell me what’s wrong with you, you’re starting to worry me,” she said shifting restlessly on the sofa.

“Mom, I’m an atheist,” I said after taking a long drink from the glass of milk as if to draw strength from it and tell her what it was that was so difficult for me, because I felt it was now or never.

“Whaaat? What do you mean? Don’t talk nonsense,” she said very seriously.

“Look, Mom, I’m not going to go to church anymore...,” and I started to explain... but I couldn’t add anything further, she wasn’t listening anymore.

“Son, I’m sure you have a fever, go to bed right now, I’m going to get the thermometer that I left on the nightstand in Chelito’s room where I put it earlier.”

Jumping up, she got up from the sofa, as if launched by an invisible spring, and boldly moved down the hallway without giving me time to react.

“Come back, we have to talk, I’m not ill, calm down,” I was saying walking behind her, trying to convince her and continue the conversation.

But turning a deaf ear, she kept moving forward, almost forcing me to run to catch up to her. I reached her when she already had her hand resting on the door handle of the room where my little sister slept peacefully. Putting a finger to my mouth I said:

“Shhhhhh! You’ll wake her up,” and I added quietly, “now that it seems the fever has gone down and she can rest easy, after the bad night has passed, don’t go waking her up by making noise.”

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What would I see? Why was she screaming like that? We were all woken up and frightened and we went to her room. Mom had arrived first and was already comforting her. Asleep, Chelito cried inconsolably, and between screams said things we didn’t understand.

“Calm down little one, you’re not alone, I’m here with you and nothing is going to happen to you,” Mom was saying from there beside the bed, while she was gently stroking her head.

It seemed that Chelito was not listening, until Carlitos came running in and lying on the bed, hugged her and said:

“Here I am to defend you, don’t be afraid, I won’t leave you alone.”

At that moment she woke up and was surprised to see everyone around her bed, and in her feverish eyes I could see how confused she was, but she couldn’t say a word, all she could do was stare at us, from one to the next.

“It’s okay, it’s over now, you see? You’re not alone, we’re with you little one, don’t be scared, nothing’s going to happen to you,” Mom was saying to her, while she hugged her and gave her an affectionate kiss.

“Why don’t you call the doctor Mom?” I asked worried about what was happening, because I didn’t understand it, it was the first time I’d saw my little sister that way.

“But son, am I going to bother him at this hour for a cold? I’ve been through this situation many times before,” she answered more calmly.

“But Mom,” I protested, “it’s not even like Dad’s here to take her to the hospital if we need to,” I insisted, “and what if she gets worse, what will we do with her?”

“That’s not going to happen, calm yourself and don’t be a child, you’re already a man, and now that Dad’s not here you’re the man of the house, look at how Carlitos has managed to face the situation.”

“Yes, but it’s woken her up and I don’t know if she’ll be alright,” I said a little embarrassed.

At that moment, Tono came into the room with a glass of water, and told Chelito:

“Take it, this will help the fear pass, for sure.”

We all laughed, this pair of twins certainly never failed to surprise us. The situation changed, and despite her fever, Chelito was calmer, so Mom sent us all to bed.

“Go back to sleep, you know that tomorrow’s exam is important, and Dad doesn’t want to hear any excuses about why you didn’t pass it,” she said to the twins.

“But it’s easy Mom,” said Tono, the most unruly of the two.

“Yes, easy, it will be for you because you’re a nerd,” Carlitos said.

“Get outta here! Mom, he called me a nerd when he doesn’t stop studying even on vacation,” protested Tono getting cranky because he did not like being called that one bit.

It made us smile once again, and my mother, already adopting a more serious tone of voice, told us:

“Right, off to bed all of you, I’m staying here. I don’t need to hear any more talk, you have to rest so that the night passes quickly, go to bed without complaining.”

Down the hall, on the way to our rooms, I told the twins:

“Well done guys, you should always protect your sisters.”

“Yeah, but Carmen is already very big and she doesn’t need us,” Tono protested.

“Look, she thinks she doesn’t need you, but women always need a man by their side to defend them and protect them, and who better than a brother? Don’t listen to her when she says she’s the biggest and doesn’t need anyone. Surely she’s a little jealous of you guys, not having a sister her age to talk to about things, because Chelito is too little to give her advice. What happens to me is I get bored when I’m not sleepy, and you’re lucky enough to be able to chat quietly until you fall asleep. When I hear you, it makes me want to take my mattress and come here into this room with you guys.”

“Are you also afraid about what’s happening with Chelito tonight?” Tono asked softly.

“No,” I said with a smile. “Come on, let’s get some sleep, the time for talking is over. Mom is going to really get angry and she’ll punish us for not obeying her. Besides now that Dad isn’t here, we have to behave better so that Mom is happy with us.”

Closing their bedroom door, I went into my own room, that place they allocated to me, saying that I was already big and had to sleep alone because I was almost a man. I still didn’t understand, Carmen and Chelito shared a room, although tonight Carmen was on a trip with my father, so her bed was empty. Well, now Mom would sleep in it, but I had to go to sleep in that tiny room where the bed barely fit, to make room for the twins. That didn’t matter much, but I felt lonely sometimes and I didn’t like that.

“Why doesn’t he close the door?” Dad would ask. “It’s like he’s afraid of how old he is,” but no, it was only because I wanted to hear others talk, the twins had more fun from their bunk beds

than I did. I knew that there was no room for my bed in that room, but there are reasons that children just don't understand, and this was one of them.

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As time passed quickly, there was plenty of room in the house before we knew it. Carmen started University, and of course, like all her friends, she left home, "It was modern," as my father put it. Even though Mom was opposed to it, she had no choice but to give in, on the condition that she had to come home every Sunday, and she wasn't going to accept any excuses.

"If you miss one Sunday, it'll be harder for you to come back," my father told her, "so, even if you're ill or if you have to study here, I want to see you. Well, if you get ill, then come whatever day it is. That way we can take care of you; just because you leave doesn't mean you stop being a member of the family, nor that we're going to stop loving you the same way."

My sister promised very seriously to come home every Sunday and said that we should also call her if anything ever happened and we needed her, that she was not going to stop being our daughter and sister just because she didn't sleep at home.

She was two years my senior, and that was how those two years passed. As I said, the time flew by, and I think it was my good grades that decided my future.

When Carmen left, I asked myself a question, although I didn't share it with anyone. I also wanted to go and live away from home, but I knew it was impossible, that Dad had a secure job and that his salary was good, at least that was what he told us. I never knew how many pesetas he earned, but it would never allow him to have two independent children, since he still had three others at home with their own needs, so I told myself, "If I push myself and I get a scholarship, I'm sure he won't oppose what I ask him." That's how the last two school years passed. In addition to attending class like I was part of the furniture, as I had done for a long time, just to listen and take notes, I started to take on extra work and the teachers noticed the change in me straight away, because some of them made comments to me about it in jest.

"It seems that you were asleep before and you've finally woken up and you've begun to take an interest in the classes and as the saying goes, 'Better late than never,' at least that way you'll leave a little more prepared."

I had finished sixth in my class, with the best grades for that year. Even the teachers had congratulated me. That made the final examination easy for me to take, and in truth I was quite pleased with myself. When I'd suggested it, I had succeeded. The pre-university course, the "Preu," was very easy for me and that also raised my morale. Everyone in my circle was very afraid of failing at such an important point in our student lives, but none of us had any problems.

It was Carmen, and her example, that made me change. Since she had lived away from home, when she came by, she seemed like someone else, more mature, more interesting. She always had something different to tell us, she shared her ideas with my parents, something that was unheard of before. She seemed like a different person altogether.

My father used to say that, if he had known, he would have sent her away from home earlier. It was a joke of course, just tongue in cheek, because being the eldest, she was "His little girl." Well, Chelito too, being the youngest, she was "His little one." Everyone could see that the girls were his favorites, although that didn't stop him from being demanding with them like he was with us. They didn't get any bad grades, of course they never brought them to him if they did, but whenever they had an exam, he managed to help them out and explain things to them properly until they understood. That said, he also helped the three of us, I can't complain about that, it was always very important to him for all of us to study, and that "we worked toward a good future for ourselves," as he used to tell us, even though we were small and we didn't know what those words meant.

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Upon entering that place, where there were so many books all over the place, in an order that I'm sure the gentleman knew, but which at first glance just seemed like they were all over the place, with

books piled up everywhere, I remembered once when I was little, when I went to my grandparents' house and they were cleaning. I think it was because there had been a leak and the builders had to fix it, and then paint the room. I was so young that I still hadn't started school and neither the twins nor the little one had been born.

My mother took me to my grandparents' house, because she had to "help Grandma with all that clutter," as she put it. Well, that was what came to mind now, because it was the only time I'd seen so many bits and pieces accumulated, there were boxes everywhere.

What struck me the most though was that my grandfather's books, which were always so well positioned in their place, were now in heaps on the floor, yes, on the floor. How could that be? And there were so many of them..., so many, why would he want so many? Would he have read them all? Well, I don't know if I had that thought at the time, or if it had come to me later, when I was a little older.

Every time I entered his office I would ask:

"Grandpa, have you read all these books? All of them? Every one?" There were books almost as far up as the ceiling and I was sure he couldn't even reach up there.

"Yes, young Manu, and many more," he replied cheerfully, "and I'm sure you'll do so too when you're older, because I'm going to let you read all of them if you want to."

I was elated just looking at them, such colors, so thick, so many of them, and all placed there on their shelves. What patience he must have had to be able to have everything in order. He never let me touch them when I wanted to take one to see the pictures.

"Little one," he told me, "that's not to be touched. When you're older, if you behave yourself, I'll let you see them."

Now, looking distractedly at all these piles in front of me, I thought about how difficult it must have been for my grandfather to place his books on the shelves again, and to leave them all in place following that cleaning of the room. Yet my grandfather continued with his order and his readings, which years later he shared with Carmen, who was interested in the same subject, because she studied law just as he did.

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The owner of the bookstore had moved slowly, because he could barely walk. He assisted himself with an old cane, and still talking to us, he moved between the tables full of stacks of books to one in particular. With a trembling hand he pulled out two or three books from a stack and told me:

"Here is everything you need young man, but I have to warn you about something." Using a mysterious voice, he asked me softly, his piercing eyes fixed on mine, "So, if you're not a believer, what are you?"

"I'm an atheist," I said very quietly, fearing his reaction, because I didn't know how else I could answer.

"But, a real atheist? Or one of those who's just saying so because it's fashionable?" he asked me.

"A real one, what do you think? That it's like a sweater that I can put on or take off when it gets stained?" I said a little seriously, because his observation had not gone down too well with me.

"Alright, an atheist. You won't like hearing this, but I don't believe you are," he said seriously.

"I really am, I'm not deceiving you," I told him softly, although I don't know why we were talking quietly, only the librarian was there and she could hear us anyway.

"Look young man, an atheist as I understand it, is someone who doesn't want to know anything about anything," he said very seriously, "and even less so when it comes to these matters. I'm not fooled, I'm already too old and I've seen many things, I can identify those people as soon as they open their mouths."

"Yes, you're not wrong sir," I said, "but we're not all the same, I'm not searching for anything else, only the answers, scientific ones if possible, to some events that happened in one place, nothing more."

As the conversation appeared very tense, the librarian, Pilar, as I had heard her being called earlier, subtly asked:

“Do you have anything new that would interest me?”

“I always have something new, you know that, you’re the one who doesn’t want to visit me.”

While they went on talking, I took a look at the books he had suggested to me. There were several, and I said to myself: “Why so many on the same topic? I think one will be enough.” Of course I didn’t realize that the subject was important enough to warrant so much being written about it, and I wasn’t aware that I was delving deeper and deeper into it.

Pilar approached me, because the old man had gone to the door as the postman had arrived and from there we heard him say:

“Hello, did you bring me something today?” he asked in a jolly tone.

“Some document or other, it’s in here somewhere,” the postman answered.

“It’s a good thing that at least someone remembers I exist, because if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t talk to anyone for days on end,” the old man told the postman from the doorway of the bookstore.

“That being said, I see you have lots of company today. I’ll leave you to it, it seems that everyone’s decided to write today and I have a lot of work to be getting on with,” said the postman leaving.

When he was alone, the gentleman slowly approached us again, while Pilar had begun to leaf through one of the books piled up in front of us.

“I don’t know this one,” she said surprised, “when did it arrive?”

“Exactly, I told you I had new material,” the man answered smiling, “because it’s been here, waiting for you to remember... yes, I think a few months back.”

I took a look at the book she had in her hands, it was in English, and it surprised me that she knew it, given how difficult it was. That language was my torment, French had been easy, but one day my father asked me:

“Son, why don’t you study English?” just like that when he came into the house.

“What for? I’m never going to England,” I said with wide eyes.

“Well, you don’t know that, and it’s always good to learn new things,” he replied.

“But Dad, I already have enough to deal with in my study books,” I protested to get out of it, “and I don’t have much spare time, do you really want to complicate my life further?”

“Look, no more talk, I’ve seen an academy where they’re going to start teaching classes in that language and I thought it was interesting. I’ve been thinking about it on the way home and I think it would be good for you,” he responded, answering the question definitively in that way he did when he didn’t want to continue talking about something.

My grandparents were eating at our house that day, and my grandfather intervened immediately, agreeing with my father saying:

“These boys never want to make any effort, with the beauty of studying and a language is always interesting.”

“Grandpa,” said Chelito, “beauty, beauty, sometimes it’s very difficult and boring what you have to read, and then there’s all the work they give you, why is it needed? I don’t get it.”

“Listen child, I’m sure that, even though you don’t understand it right now, when you grow up you’ll understand, and you’ll thank your parents who have made you study.”

“But why don’t you study as a grown-up? That’s when you need it,” she insisted.

“Look, what would you think if your Mom only gave you food when you were older? How would you grow?” Grandpa asked her.

“But it’s not the same Grandpa, otherwise I would get very hungry and I would surely even die,” said Chelito very seriously.

“Well, it’s the same thing with your studies, you have to start them when you’re young and build upon them as you grow up. Look, young Manu,” he said looking at me.

“Grandpa, I’m older now, please call me Manuel,” I said, half angrily.

“But why do you want me to call you that? Then what do you have to call me?” he said in a surprised tone.

Everyone at the table laughed and he went on.

“Okay Manuel, because you’re so old you have to learn new things, so I think what your father says is right. English is interesting, I would have loved to have learned it, because sometimes I couldn’t read a book because I didn’t know it, and I had to settle for not knowing the content.”

Tono, who had been eating quietly, which is rare for him, but since today there was a Russian salad, which was his favorite dish, said to Grandma, as he did whenever she made it:

“Nana, you’re the best cook in the world.”

Since it made Mom look a bit sad whenever he said such things, he would always thoughtfully say:

“Well, you too Mom, don’t get upset, you do other things well, you know that.”

“There can only be one who’s the best, who is it?” they asked him in jest.

“It depends on what food you make Mom,” he said softly, “when you make lentils they don’t turn out very well, admit it.”

It was true that he’d never liked them, and whenever she prepared them, he had to force himself to eat them, because Mom said that he couldn’t leave them; his body needed iron and that’s what lentils were full of.

“I’m not a nail Mom, why do I want iron?” he would protest so he wouldn’t have to eat them.

“Look Tono, you have to eat everything, your body needs it,” she answered and neither his protests nor his grumbles would work. He ended up eating the lentils like the rest of us.

“And what about you Nana, because you don’t study it, you always say that ‘You can never know too much,’ because even if you have so many books, surely one more won’t matter,” Tono, who had stopped chewing, was saying.

When he heard it, Grandpa took stock for a moment, looking at him.

“Be quiet and keep eating, this does not involve you,” my father said.

But it seems that he had made a good point, because my grandfather, although he had already turned 70, started studying English after that, and with all the enthusiasm of a little kid. When I went to his house, or when he came to ours, he was always speaking to me in English, as he said, “For practice.”

The rest of the family found it amusing to hear us speaking something they didn’t understand. Chelito sat on Grandpa’s knees and asked him, “What are you saying? How do you say hello? And bread? And cookies? And cat?”

“Girl, leave your Grandpa in peace, you’re pestering him,” Grandma scolded her.

He ran his hand through my sister’s hair, saying:

“Little one, know that that’s a good thing.”

I know that my grandfather spent long hours studying, because as my grandmother used to tell me, “He was not a young man anymore and it was hard for him to remember those difficult words.”

That suited him though, because he had a vision, to be able to talk to me with the new words he had learned and thus to make me apply myself more, because I had to know them in order to respond to the phrases he was directing toward me when we saw each other, either at his house, when I went to visit them or on Sundays, when they came to eat at ours.

By so doing, I was putting in more and more effort, because I’ve never liked losing, and being told something that I didn’t understand bothered me. So what we started doing was giving ourselves a task with ten new words, which we both wrote down on a scrap of paper, and the next time we saw

each other, we had to have made a sentence with each word. That little trick has served me well in life. Those small daily tasks have forced me to strive every day, and to get more out of what I've had to do.

CHAPTER 2.

Lots of memories come to mind when I'm nervous, it must be an internal mechanism, something I've always had to relieve the tension of the moment. The same thing used to happen to me when I had an exam. During the first few moments, when I would be sitting with the paper in front of me, I would recall, for example, those games with my siblings on the street on sunny days, or that game with the new toy I had just unwrapped on the morning of the feast of the Epiphany. Those memories would relax me so much that I could then take the exam calmly. It was as if my mind would transport me to some other pleasant place and there it would tell me, "You see? There's no problem, everything is fine."

I was doing the same thing now, recalling those long ago moments, seated here waiting to enter the room where I had to present the book, the book that had caused me so much hardship to write, until I'd finally finished it. Years of research, going through a thousand and one ups and downs to find those answers I needed. So many incomprehensible situations, which could only be navigated by those who had enough interest in knowing the truth. So many stumbling blocks, and even those moments of danger that I had to get through to deliver myself from certain death. Oh man! I just can't believe it myself, why someone could want to maintain the status quo, for everything to remain hidden, what incentives do they have? Above all though, who are they?

To my mind, who would get me into that mess? I had a quiet student life, without any problems and with almost no responsibilities. Well, a normal student life, going to class, having a good time on vacation, studying a little, my sports and stuff like that. The outdoor activities were only possible weather permitting, because the rain where I'm from only affords us a few days to enjoy. I think that was what made me decide to change my interests, so that at least I was doing something to distract myself, something different, and then as time went by I also saw that it served a purpose.

Of course, what started as a game, as a young university student, became increasingly serious. Such a long time ago, that first day when we went to that place they assigned us, with our faces painted with surprise over what we were going to start, something unknown at the time, but that we were about to discover. I remember we were commenting on the street:

"We can try it, and if we don't like it or it's too boring, we can leave it and we won't come back tomorrow. We can say we're not well."

Our "Expert colleague," as we called him, because he had been doing it last year, and it was he who was in charge, who took us to the place and who would teach us everything that we had to do, told us:

"You won't know what to say, you'll be hooked on this, and when vacation is over and everything is finished, you'll miss it. That's what's happened to all of us, and I'm sure it'll happen to you too."

"Well, that may be the case for you, but I'm pretty sure I'll get annoyed on the first nice day we get and I won't come to work," I answered laughing, and added softly, "I'll go off and play soccer as always."

"We'll see," he said, "give it time and then we'll talk."

"Tell us, where are you taking us?" we asked him several times, but he wouldn't tell us anything other than:

"Have some patience, we're almost there," and we continued walking in silence.

We left the streets of Santiago behind, and surprised by our departure, we asked him again, but nothing, he insisted on not clarifying where he was taking us.

Following our guide in single file, we directed our steps along a lonely path. We continued on toward the place that only that colleague knew. Coming out of a bend, we saw some ruins in the distance of what must once have been a house, but now it was already half-crumbled.

"Here it is, we've arrived, let's see how you behave," Simón told us with a broad smile.

“You’re kidding,” we said in surprise, “what are we going to do with those ruins, rebuild something?”

“Of course, otherwise why else do you think we’d come here? We’ll try to repair this place as best we can, so it doesn’t collapse and they can spend the winter here without getting wet.”

He was saying this to us very seriously and we all stared first at him and then at what was left of that building.

“Wait, what are you saying? If we don’t have a clue what we’re doing, what are you expecting from us?” we’d stopped to tell him, because we were astonished.

“Well, that’s what I’m here for, to show you whatever you need,” he said smiling to reassure us. “You’ll see how nice we leave it. Have a little faith. Come on, let’s continue.”

Just as we were arriving at the place, a very old lady, all dressed in black, came out from the half-crumbled ruins of the house, and seeing our companion, she threw her arms around him.

“Son, what a joy, I thought it was a joke when you told us the other day that you would come with friends of yours to lend a hand,” and she started crying.

“Don’t worry Mam, everything will be fine, you’ll see how beautiful we leave the house, and Sir? How is he today?” and without waiting for a reply, he went inside the house.

“Thank you boys, we can’t pay you, but God will surely do that, He knows how much we need these repairs,” the old woman was telling us, standing there in front of her door.

Wiping the tears from her face with the corner of her apron, she turned around and said:

“Come in, come in.”

She went into the house, and we all followed.

“I can’t offer you anything,” she said, and there was concern in her tone of voice.

“Don’t worry, we’ve had a good breakfast before coming, besides, we’re here to help you,” I said putting my hand on her shoulder trying to reassure her.

I looked at those half-crumbling walls and thought, “How can there be people living in these conditions? Is there not a more decent place where they can be moved to?”

As if reading my thoughts, she answered me with a tone of deep sadness:

“No son, there is nothing we can do, only hold on while the body endures, between these four walls, and thanks be to God that we have them. Others are worse off than we are and don’t even have a roof to shelter under when it rains or when the cold comes.”

I looked up at it and then I stared at the ceiling, or rather, the place where it should be, because now the sky was visible through parts of it, and other parts only consisted of very old planks, which in their better days would have held something that now no longer exists, possibly some kind of roofing tile.

Addressing the youth who was closest, she asked:

“Where are you going to start? How can I help you? Tell me what I have to do.”

“Nana, take it easy and you’ll see how nicely we leave everything,” said Jorge with a smile, “you just get on with your things, as if we weren’t here. We’ll try not to disturb you too much.”

I didn’t know how he could say that, I mean, what could we do there? Where would we get the material we needed? And most surprisingly, having never done it before, how would we students place a single brick without it falling on us?

Well, we only had to wait a short time to see the results, which at that moment seemed so difficult to achieve.

We were there all summer. I think it was the best spent vacation time of my entire life. Working, with calloused hands, hauling earth, bricks, cement and the material that we were accumulating and using piece by piece until we rebuilt that little house with our own hands.

When we saw it finished, none of us could believe it. We had put all our enthusiasm into it, and we were truly proud of what we’d achieved.

It seemed that as the work progressed, it was taking years off the two people who lived there. They helped us with the eagerness of a pair of youngsters. We had to reprimand them so they wouldn't carry so much. They apologized to us, telling us that they couldn't stand by idle, watching us rebuild their beloved little house. A house that, back in their day, they had built themselves, so many years ago that they almost couldn't remember how many, but that the passage of time had been responsible for ruining, one little flaw at a time.

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It was Sunday, the last day of vacation, and we wanted to gather all our friends together to say goodbye. Classes would begin tomorrow and each of us had to dedicate ourselves to our own path, so it would be difficult for us to see each other again, since each of us studied different things. As it was raining that morning, it was not possible to go out, so resigned, I looked for something to do. In the end, I dedicated the morning to fixing those bookshelves I had and the notes that had accumulated on the drawers and I said to myself: "I'm going to clean up to make room for the new materials for the new academic year that will start soon."

How quickly time had gone by, it seemed like only yesterday when I came home saying:

"Family, I'm finished."

"But you're so thin, what's happened to you?" my mother asked as she gave me a hug.

"You know buddy, eating during exam time doesn't take up much time," my father said smiling, "now it's up to you to regain your strength."

And giving me a hug, he asked me:

"What about your grades? Do we have any surprises?"

"In any case, let him get some rest, he'll tell us everything," she protested.

"Relax, I passed everything," I answered my father smiling.

"Passed?" he asked me. "Only passed?"

"No, relax Dad, I didn't lose the scholarship," I said to him in a satisfied tone.

He gave a strong sigh of relief and said:

"Son, you know how important it is that they keep giving it to you."

"Yes, calm down, everything went well. Well, I'd say better than well," I added smiling.

"I'm so proud of you," he said softly.

Chelito came out of her room just then and running, she pounced on me and wrapping her arms around my neck, said:

"Brother, I really wanted you to come home. This way we can be two against two, because the twins are always messing with me. Now they're in for it," she said, laughing happily.

I kissed her, and smiling, said:

"Yes, now they'll see, we'll beat them, together they won't be able to win."

"Manu, you haven't changed a bit," Mom said, "you're still a big kid."

Smiling as he went into the sitting room, I heard Dad say:

"That's good, better to stay that way for a long time."

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It was the last week of work. The group of bricklayers, as we liked to call each other, had to finish everything, summer was ending fast. As for our summer vacation, it was almost over as well, and we were going to take advantage of the last few days to enjoy, as someone put it, "a well-deserved rest."

We approached the little house, the one we were so proud of, it was indeed our work. Even though we only came at first to try to patch up the roof a little, we ended up tiling it and fixing those holes that had been letting the rain water easily pass through since who knows when. Then, seeing that we were doing so well, we continued, and continued. We fixed the walls, we also put in a new floor in the room where they slept, which had only been cement and some of it was in a very bad state.

At the place where we bought the materials, the owner told us:

“I have some tiles piled up over there, they’re uneven, the ones that have been left over, do you want them? I can give them to you for a good price.”

A little sad, we answered that we would like to buy them, but we didn’t have money to pay for them. We told him that if he gave them to us, then the place would be left empty, and that way we would be doing him a favor, he would have the whole area cleared so he could put whatever he wanted there.

The man thought about it for a moment and said:

“Boys, you’ve been cheating me all summer, always asking me for this broken but still useful tile, those bricks that are neglected and flaking, and that’s how you cleared me up. I have to acknowledge that, and I also know that you work for free. Look, alright, I’ll give you the tiles, and this time I’ll even take them to where you tell me, so that later you don’t tell me that I don’t treat you well.”

We were very happy loading them onto that three-wheeled scooter that he had. Old and rickety though it was, it served him very well to distribute the construction material to those who bought it. He took them to the place where we indicated. When he saw what we had done, he was pleasantly surprised.

“You boys have done this on your own?” the man asked us, “I don’t believe it.”

“Of course, with your material and also with those tips you’ve been giving us,” we answered him.

“Guys, if you want to work on this...” he began to say, but we would not let him continue.

“Nooo!” we all told him, “for vacation is enough, the school year begins soon and we’ll have to dedicate our time to hitting the books, we’ve got a lot of subjects to get on with.”

Both the owners of the house, as well as the man who had brought those tiles for us, laughed with us. He said goodbye and left in his vehicle, which, even though it was very old, still did its job well.

We put in the floor of that little bedroom with those tiles, which were a variety of colors. We tried to make a picture with them, and it stuck with us when the old lady said:

“Beautiful, I would never have thought we’d have such an elegant bedroom.”

“What if we look for a bed?” it occurred to me to say to my companions. Those four wooden posts that held up the straw mattress were already severely compromised by woodworms, and one of these days they would break and they would end up on the floor.

As it seemed like a good idea to them as well, we began the task. We had to find something very cheap, something that we could afford, although we still didn’t know how. We were all broke, as they say, and we’d been taking everything we could from what little they gave each of us from our own homes. Although they weren’t much, those reales, “For expenses,” as my mother put it, enabled us to afford the material that we needed.

Determined to complete that last task, so necessary for that elderly couple, we went to the store where they sold furniture, but there was no way. Everything was very expensive and we were just students. We didn’t have a single peseta, although each of us had already agreed to ask our families for an advance from the monthly payment, to be able to pay for it if we found something that we could afford.

With this, we were in luck once again. One of them, Antonio, did as we had agreed, and asked for this advance from his grandmother, who used to give it to him, as she told him, “For tobacco,” because he was now a man, and men are known to have their expenses. When he asked for the advance, she had wondered why he asked her for so much money at once, because she couldn’t give it to him at the time.

“Go on, tell me why you want it, is it because you’ve gotten yourself into some kind of trouble? What do you need so much money for?” she asked him when she saw that he had been disappointed by her refusal.

He didn't want to tell her, but you know how grandmothers are, when they want something, they get it. He told her a little about what we were doing. She was surprised, because she had her grandson pegged for a party animal, and that had her a little worried, and every once in a while she would say:

"Young Antonio, now that you're on vacation, why don't you come home for a while? I'm all by myself here, and I'll make you the donuts you love so much."

To which he always answered:

"Grammy, I'm going out with my friends."

And he didn't give her any further explanation, he just left and went days without seeing her.

She was a little sad, but he did not want to tell anyone in his family what we were doing, so he spent the summer saying he was going out with friends, without saying anything else, without giving any explanation about where he went and what he did. We even had to leave him some pants, some old shoes and a shirt so that they wouldn't notice anything unusual in his house. He was always very careful when picking things up so that he didn't get calluses, in case anyone in his family saw them.

What he told his grandmother resulted in us having a new bed and many more things. We could never have imagined it, and all because what her grandson had done during the summer had brought her such joy, she said she wanted to meet those people.

Antonio didn't want to say where he was, nor give her any more information. He left almost without saying goodbye to her, because he thought he'd screwed up, and we were going to be angry about it.

When we met the next day and he told us, we told him:

"Well, I think the parties concerned have to make that decision," and we all decided to ask the elderly couple, but we also told Antonio: "You should have taken advantage of the situation, you've been foolish."

That was how we arrived at the newly rebuilt house and the couple were surprised because we were scolding Antonio and they asked us what was wrong.

Antonio told them what had happened and that his grandmother wanted to meet them. We also had to tell them about our plans to find them a bed.

"But boys, it's not like you haven't done enough already. Don't bother yourselves any further, and above all don't bother your families, who have had to spend the whole summer not being able to enjoy being with you all," they told us in protest, surprised by what we were telling them.

"And what do I tell my Grammy now?" Antonio asked.

They looked at each other and the old man, taking the lead, replied:

"It's not a problem for us," he said to Antonio, "but tell her what it's really like. We wouldn't want her shoes to be stained with mud."

Everyone laughed at that remark and Antonio said:

"Papa, that doesn't matter."

"It does," he said very seriously, "don't laugh, I have my reasons for saying that."

"Sorry," we said in unison, embarrassed.

"It's alright, but I want you to understand that there are people who have never walked these roads, and you already know what they're like, that's why it's better to warn them before they get here."

"Don't worry about that," Antonio said, "my grandmother is one of those folk who like to go hiking, going up into the mountains 'to take the air,' as she puts it, and spending all day in the countryside."

"Well, if she doesn't mind, we're happy for her to come," the woman said.

"Let her come if she wishes," added the old man, not really convinced.

Antonio told them more calmly:

"Well, next Sunday I'll let her know."

"What? Next Sunday?" I asked him. "Today, this can't wait."

"Whaaat?" he said in surprise. "What's the hurry? How am I going to do that?"

“Look, if she comes and sees the situation, and she helps us, well, better for it to be as soon as possible, right?”

“What would I say? What excuse would I use?” Antonio asked, worried about the step he had to take.

“Look,” I said, “didn’t you tell us that you left almost without saying goodbye? That you didn’t want to say anything else? Well, you go and tell her that you’ve thought about it and that it seemed to you that the way you left was wrong, you’re going to ask for her forgiveness. I think that would please her, don’t you think?”

“Well, I’m sure she’d like that,” he said, although it was obvious that he wasn’t very convinced.

“And at the same time you tell her that a friend of yours likes donuts a whole lot. Let’s see if she makes you an extra one and you can bring it to me,” I whispered quietly, but everyone heard, which prompted unanimous laughter:

“You’re a greedy guy,” they told me, “you’ve always got eating on your mind.”

“That’s a good thing,” said the old lady, “eat now while you can. Over the years you lose your appetite, or even worse your teeth and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Come on, leave this for now,” said the husband, “let’s get to work, there’s not much time left and surely you’ll want to get away from us boring old folk.”

“Whaaat?” we all said, “but it’s been the best summer we’ve ever had.”

“You’re such jokers,” said the old lady, “you’re just saying that so we don’t feel bad. Think of all the fun you could have had with your friends, or with some girl.”

“Girls?” we said. “As if! None of them want to pay us any attention, they go out with boys in their final year, or with those who’ve already graduated, they don’t even look at us.”

With that the chat was over, we had to work, we still had something to do.

The following day, we were in for a surprise. Antonio had left early the previous afternoon because between all of us we ended up convincing him to spend some more time with his grandmother, and we encouraged him to arrive smiling and to be nice.

He went to her house, and happened to catch her as she was about to leave. She had arranged to meet a friend for a hot cocoa and to take a walk. When she saw him arrive, she said:

“Young Antonio, son, I wasn’t expecting to see you, is anything wrong?”

He told her what he had prepared, he was going to apologize for the rude way he had left.

“Ah youth, I already know, don’t you worry. Come on, since you’re here, come with me and we’ll chat a little bit. You can clarify everything you told me, I’ve been turning it over in my mind and I just don’t understand. Tell me where you’re going with your friends, it’s not true is it? Is it that you’ve got a girlfriend and you don’t want to tell me?” his grandmother asked him as they walked.

“No Grammy, really, I’m with them all the time, I’d never lie to you,” he answered, “I’ve already told you what we’ve done this summer, it’s all true, I can assure you.”

She was coaxing it out as only grandmothers know how to do, and before he knew it he was telling her everything about our secret. Well it’s not like it’s a bad thing, but as he told us later, he told her everything, or almost everything we’d done, because he didn’t know how to stop.

Distracted by their conversation, they arrived at the coffee shop where she had arranged to meet her friend. They saw from the door that she was already sitting waiting inside, because she had arrived earlier.

Leaving her there, Antonio tried to say goodbye by giving her a kiss, but his grandmother, taking him by the arm, said:

“Now, don’t you want a little cocoa? I’m sure you’ll enjoy it, warm like you’ve always liked it, and you can take it with you if you’re in a hurry, I won’t keep you any longer than necessary.”

“Well, if I’m not bothering you,” Antonio answered, “but then I have to go.”

“Son, how could you bother us?” said the friend who had been listening to him, “Let the young girls get jealous when they see us two old women accompanied by such a handsome young man,” and the three of them laughed.

When they had their cups of steaming hot cocoa, staring at her across the table, as if thinking aloud, Antonio said:

“How lucky some of us are.”

“Why?” said his grandmother curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Because you can afford these little treats,” he replied.

“Treats?” said his grandmother’s friend. “Son, this is just a hot cocoa to invigorate the body, and some days it even serves as dinner, and that way we don’t have to make anything at home.”

“Yes,” he said, “but it’s just that others can’t afford it, whether it’s this or anything like it, even if they’re dying of cold, or of hunger.”

Now in a serious tone, his grandmother told him:

“Listen son, I’m going to tell my friend what you’ve told me, I think she needs to know, to see if we can do something.”

“No Grammy, no please,” he protested, “I’ve only told you for you, you can’t tell anyone.”

“Yes, please let me, you can tell me not to continue, to stop, whenever you want, but I think I should do it.”

And before he could convince her not to say anything, she began to tell her friend about everything, or almost everything, that her grandson had confided to her.

To his surprise, looking at him, her friend said:

“Son, tomorrow we’re going to see the situation those people are in, to see how we can help them out.”

“What for?” he asked, with a very serious tone, because all of this was going down very badly with him.

“Well, what else? To help them in whatever way we can,” the lady replied.

When he was telling us earlier that day, the elderly couple said:

“They’re going to come here? But we don’t have anything to give them.”

“Nana, Papa, that’s not why they’re coming,” I told them and they relaxed a little.

Then, when we saw them appear mid-morning, we were all shaking. “What would happen?” I wondered.

It was a very interesting visit. Antonio’s grandmother and her friend told us that they’d had some trouble getting there, that they had almost lost their way, but hey, they made it in the end. What’s more, they did not come empty-handed, they brought some donuts that tasted heavenly to all of us, and the elderly couple brought them some food.

After resting for a little while, sitting there on those logs that we were also quite used to by that point, they told us to leave them alone with the elderly couple. We went off to finish doing four things that we still had to finish, so we let them talk quietly.

They had come to help and boy did they help. They provided them with a new bed and a new mattress. Well, it was all second-hand, but it was almost new. In addition, they looked to see what else those people needed, and as a result they brought them some chairs and clothes, especially coats, some blankets and I think some kitchen utensil too.

They told us that they belonged to an organization that helped the needy, and through them they were also provided with food, which they brought for them once a week, even though we almost lost contact with them, because upon starting the academic year we had to dedicate ourselves to our student assignments.

We tried to help those people as much as we could that summer, and even if a million years passed, I don’t think any of us “Bricklayers” will ever forget that wonderful experience. There were other summers, yes, but that was the first, at least for me.

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One day, we were resting, sitting on some logs that were there at the door of the house, and the old man began to talk to us while we ate those sandwiches that we had brought from our homes, and that we enjoyed so much, given how tired we were.

He sat with us and as if he were thinking aloud, he suddenly told us that he had been a soldier in his youth.

“Really? Where? In the civil war?” we asked curiously.

“No boys,” he said, “I’m very old.”

“Then where?” we asked again.

“In the Cuban war,” he answered quietly.

“Whaaat?” we all said in surprise. “But that was a long time ago.”

“Yep, I told you, I’m very old,” he answered and he remained very thoughtful, no doubt remembering those times.

Our curiosity wouldn’t leave him to his thoughts and we immediately asked him:

“Then you’ve crossed the sea? Tell us, tell us.”

“Sure, twice,” he told us, “one way, and fortunately back again, because others who were less fortunate than I was went over there and stayed there forever, they never returned.”

“And tell us, what was that like?” we all insisted with curiosity.

“Very pretty,” he said, “well, the place, not the war. It was always sunny, although sometimes we were so hot that we could hardly stay on our feet.”

He was telling us, but you could tell he was reliving it in the meantime.

“Such exaggeration!” said Jorge and immediately added: “Sorry.”

“No son, when it’s so hot, the body becomes dehydrated, and we didn’t have water, well, not even food. Also, bear in mind that we weren’t accustomed to that kind of heat, to the kind of high temperatures they had over there,” he said with a sadness in his eyes.

“Then why did you tell us before that all of that was pretty?” he asked.

“Well, because it didn’t rain like it does here.” Ending the talk, he was starting to get up and we said to him with curiosity:

“More, more, don’t leave us hanging.” Now that he had started, he had to tell us more things.

“Well, there’s nothing more, we had to retreat,” he told us.

“How did they win the war?” we asked him curiously.

“Wait, don’t you study those things? Then what do they teach you in school? That we went on to win it? We lost it, but I didn’t stay until the end. I had more luck. I was wounded and being on the right no longer served them, well, that’s what I think anyway. The fact is that they brought us all back a few months before the end of the war on a ship full of sick people. Well, there were sick and wounded people, and none of us were needed there anymore. Actually, we were a nuisance. A ship came from Havana to Spain to bring more soldiers and instead of making the crossing empty, it came full of those who would be useless in battle, who only ate what little food they had there, or at least that’s what we thought. They didn’t tell us that, but there are things you don’t need to be told to know.”

He suddenly fell silent; it was plain to see how he remembered those painful times. We were all silent, expectant. He took a breath, and continued talking.

“Here, the most serious cases were allocated to different hospitals. Of course, just the ones who made it back, because some fell by the wayside.”

The old man was silent and looking at the ground with deep sadness. He continued, saying:

“Both family and friends.”

“Family? Did you also have a relative with you?” Antonio asked curiously.

“Yes, we’d gone as three cousins. We wanted to leave the town so we enlisted, thinking that it would be easier, that there would be no danger. Yes, it was a war, we knew that, but nobody told

us that there were other worse things there,” he was telling us all, but when he got to this point, we became aware of the upset tone in his voice.

“What worse things?” I asked, surprised. “What could be worse than a bullet?”

“Well, diseases, you can’t protect yourself against those, and those struck us more than bullets and decimated us without warning. One of my cousins died of a fever within a few days and the other came back on the boat with me also sick, but he didn’t make it, he succumbed on the journey. So out of the three of us who left, I’m the only one who can tell you about it.”

“And what did they do with those who didn’t make it?” Simón asked without being able to contain himself.

“Well son, what do you think they did? They tossed them overboard for fish food,” he said quietly and his eyes filled with tears.

“Whaaat?” we said. “No way! And nobody protested?”

“But how were they going to transport them with the time it took to get back?” and he stopped talking for a while.

Surely he was remembering all that he had experienced on that terrible voyage.

We remained silent so he would continue, but his wife who had approached him to listen to him said:

“Yes, but thanks to that we met one another. As the saying goes, ‘Every cloud has a silver lining.’ Come on, stop remembering the sad stuff, which doesn’t do you any good.”

“Really?” we asked curious. “But surely there’s more, come on, tell us, tell us.”

Also sat on another log and seeing us sitting there, she began to tell us:

“I was helping out in a hospital. At first I swept and scrubbed the floor, but one day they didn’t have enough hands to tend to all the soldiers that had arrived, and a doctor told me:

‘Young lady, drop that broom and come here right now, I need you, run.’”

“Surprised, I looked around me, thinking he was talking to someone else, but when I didn’t see anyone else, I went over, and before I knew it, he took my hand and put it on a bloody rag, applying pressure to stop the blood flowing from a wound.”

“When I saw the blood I almost fainted, but the wounded man lying there, looking at me and smiling, said:

‘Thank you pretty girl,’ and it was he who then passed out.”

“I was all scared and I told the doctor:

‘He died.’”

“No, stay here, he’s not going anywhere, press hard.”

“How is he going to go anywhere if he just died?” I asked the doctor, because I hadn’t understood what he’d meant.”

“‘He only fainted from the pain,’ the doctor said, smiling, ‘but right now I’ll stitch up that scratch and you’ll see, in two or three days you’ll be walking around out there together.’”

“I noticed how my whole face turned red with embarrassment, and I said quietly:

‘What are you saying?’”

“‘You’re both young, are you not? If I were a few years younger, I would also ask you if you’d like to take a walk with me, but I don’t think it’s appropriate anymore. We have a lot of work to do here.’”

“None of this seemed serious to me and I tried to leave. When I made a gesture to remove my hand from the rag, the doctor pushed my hand down hard on the wound saying:

‘Be careful, if you don’t keep pressing down, he could bleed out. Press down hard, he doesn’t feel it.’”

“Alright, I’m not telling you any more. That wounded soldier is this husband of mine, and that doctor seemed to be a fortune teller; he was right. As for the soldier, after the stitches they gave him; go on, show them.”

“What did you say dear?” the husband asked in surprise, not expecting his wife’s request.

“Yes, yes,” we said with curiosity. Faced with our insistence, he couldn’t refuse us.

He rolled up his sleeve as far as he could and we saw a large scar. It started near the elbow and ran up his arm, disappearing under the sleeve of his shirt, which hid the other end.

As the old lady had stopped talking, Simón, who was the most curious, asked:

“And you got married? You have to tell us what happened next, you can’t leave us hanging like that.”

“Of course, what do you think? Well, it wasn’t immediately because he returned home and we had to wait a bit,” she said looking lovingly at her husband, “but we finally managed.”

“Where are you from?” Simón asked again.

“I’m from Extremadura, from a very small village in the province of Badajoz called Azuaga. I worked there as a boy in the lead mines, like the rest of the town. I don’t know if you know, but they’re the only lead mines in the whole of Spain.”

“Well, there are loads of mines in Spain, almost everywhere,” Jorge told him.

“Yes, but lead mines? Surely not,” he insisted. “They’re only to be found in my town. One day I got tired and I enlisted, like many others, so I could leave all that behind, get out of that town and see the world. We agreed, two of my cousins and myself, and we didn’t say a word about it to our families, so they wouldn’t oppose it. After we’d enlisted, when it was too late to back out, they found out, and I can assure you that none of us would have gone anywhere if not for the fact that everything had already been set in motion. That’s how we embarked on the adventure. We’ve always done so in my town; we have a forefather from the town who went with Christopher Columbus to discover the Americas. We wanted to do something similar, go see the world, leave the place where we were. Yes, we were happy to be with our families, but there was no future there. You know what small towns are like, things just didn’t work out as we thought they would, the kind of stuff that young folk worry about! What were we gonna do?”

After stopping to rest a little, looking at the ground and remembering those distant times, he continued telling us about those snippets from his life, that he had kept so deep inside and that he almost certainly had never entrusted to anyone before.

“When I left that hospital where we met,” the old man was saying, “I had to go home to my town. I had to recover from all that. I was, as they say, ‘Like a toothpick,’ and I hadn’t an ounce of strength. Besides, I didn’t have a place to stay here, so even though I really didn’t enjoy leaving this woman, I had to, it was the best way. I only held out there for a few months though, and when I thought I’d sufficiently recovered, I told my family:

‘I’m going to look for my Galician girl,’ and there was no way they could stop me, so I came to this part of the country.”

“First, I looked for a job. I couldn’t approach the person I loved and tell her ‘I’m an invalid.’”

“I found one right away, because when you’re not fussy, you’re not put off by anything. With all that out of the way, I searched for her and eventually we got married; end of story.”

“Then came the civil war and our life took a turn, but hey, everyone had to adjust to the circumstances and we can’t complain.”

“We’ve always been together, that’s what we wanted and although God has not wanted to bless us with children, we’re very happy.”

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Others came after that first summer, but everything changed when I finished my studies. It’s still funny though when they ask me:

“Why did you get so involved in a task that only those who were engaged in church activities all day did? Those whose ideas led them to give more of themselves to the needy, as a way to follow their doctrine, those who listened in the sermons, those who never raised their voices, or got involved with anyone for fear of committing a sin, as the priests said.”

It's not that I have anything against a person being good, I just refuse to accept that you can only be good by being, as they say, "a good Catholic," because that was the normal way to think of these issues surrounding morality coming from a family like mine, and with Carmen, my older sister, living in a convent.

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Yes, it was an unexpected decision, being a brilliant lawyer, the top of her class, with a successful practice in La Coruña and as modern as she seemed. That Sunday, after meeting everyone and having made us all sit down, she stood there very serious in front of us, announcing without sidestepping that she had something to tell us.

"Dad, Mom, I'm going to live in a convent," she said without blinking.

"Whaaat?" exclaimed my father, unable to contain himself. "What about your job? And the practice? What are you going to do with all of it? How can you just abandon it?"

Of course my mother, who at that moment began to weep with joy, getting up and hugging Carmen, said:

"My darling daughter, I knew it. I've sensed it since you were a child, but you persisted in studying law and I didn't want to discourage you," she said as she kissed her excitedly.

"Sorry Carmen! Could you say that again please?" said my father very seriously.

"Dad, I've made up my mind. I've been there several times, to the convent, to see how life there was. It's not just a whim, I know that's what I want. It's not a joke, or anything like that, I'll be shutting down the practice, I've already let the owners of the property know that I'm leaving it empty, so there's no problem there. If you want any of the furniture or books that are there, you can take them, and if not, I'll see what I can do about them."

My father, who hadn't yet absorbed the news, said:

"But love, given what it's cost us to put it all together and now you're going to throw it all away? What if it turns out that it was just a whim after all, and you decide to go back to your work? What will you do? Will you buy everything again?"

"Dad," Carmen said, "I've given it a lot of thought, and you know better than anyone else that I don't take things lightly, that I think about decisions a great deal before making them, and it's already decided. The last commitments I had have already been concluded and I've not picked up any more cases. As for the expense you put into helping me set it all up, don't worry, I have the money saved. Since I started earning it, I've spent almost nothing, so I can return it all to you, and you can invest it in any other need that might come up."

"Carmen," my father said a little more calmly, "it's not money I want to talk about, we were happy to spend it to set up the practice. We're not talking about that right now. I'm telling you, if what you want is to leave that job because it's not what you expected or there's some other reason, fair enough, close it all and take some time to think about which direction you want your life to take. Go out, meet people, maybe you'll even find some young man you like and you can start a family, but think about it calmly and don't rush into anything, because everything in your life has always gone in such a rush."

He stopped for a moment to take a breath and continued:

"Studying and studying, that was always the only thing that interested you. I don't remember if you've ever gone to any parties with your friends, those that I know so well from the endless hours that you've all spent studying to complete your course, but I also remember how on vacation, they would call you up to go out and you would make excuses, 'I have to revise'. 'But we're done and you've got great grades,' they told you, and you wouldn't be persuaded. You'd spend the afternoon here at home, locked in your room among those huge legal tomes, saying you still had a little bit to get through."

"Well, that's in the past now," said Mom interrupting at that point, "and thanks to them she managed to finish at the top of her class, which helped her greatly when it came to setting up the

practice and finding her first clients, but now we're talking about something else, her life, not her career and I think that's more important."

"Darling, I think it's a good idea for you to spend a week at that convent you're talking about, that you live with them and that you know there are other things in the world, but I think the decision to stay there permanently is something you have to sleep on."

"Mom, I've already done that, do you think I haven't spent a lot of sleepless nights thinking about how to tell you? About what I can add when you try to dissuade me? I told the superior once that maybe I wasn't strong enough to act against your wishes and she replied that..."

"Wait, what are you saying? Who did you talk to about this before us?" my father asked interrupting what she was telling us.

"Dad, I just told the superior, I needed to talk to her and clarify things, and she said:

'Don't worry, you know you're not alone, follow the call, and from there you'll find the strength.'"

"What are you talking about?" asked my father. "What call? I don't understand anything today, and who is that woman?"

"Well, she's the superior of the place where I want to go," said my sister smiling and approaching him. She wanted to give him a kiss.

"No, don't try to flatter me, you're not going to convince me," he said, pulling his face back. "You, the best lawyer in La Coruña, the one that everyone wants to work with, you're going to throw everything away, I could never agree with that. In my opinion, it's a very unfortunate decision."

Turning his back, he left the room and locked himself in the bathroom for the rest of the afternoon, and even though we asked him to come out, he refused and said:

"Nope, I've had enough upsets for today."

It was only when Carmen had left, saying that it was getting late and that she couldn't stay any longer, that he came out and went to his bedroom.

I ran into him in the hallway when he left, I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye and I could see that his eyes were bloodshot. He had been crying, so he hadn't wanted to come out and his face was gloomy. I didn't say anything to him and I let him go into his bedroom, where he apparently went to bed and did not want to come out for dinner.

Our mother told us that when she went in to tell him that dinner was on the table, he had answered:

"I'm for dinner!"

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I haven't told you yet. My name is Manuel, I'm from Santiago de Compostela. My father is a civil servant in the Treasury Department, his father was a lawyer, I'm named after him.

I have four siblings; two brothers and two sisters. The oldest is Carmen, who's named after my maternal grandmother, and the youngest is Sagrario, after my paternal grandmother, but we all call her Chelito. My two brothers are twins, which always surprised family and friends, because there had never been any twins among anyone we knew. One is called Antonio, we affectionately call him "Tono," after one of my grandfathers, my mother's father, who passed away some time ago and we never met him. The other is Carlos, or "Carlitos" to the family, after my uncle, the only one we have, my mother's brother.

As a child I had always said I wanted to be a doctor, to heal the wounds of other kids, even though my family, and above all my grandfather, wanted me to be a lawyer like him.

"You'll help me when you're older and you finish your studies. I'm getting older and I need you to give me a hand in the office," he would say whenever he had the chance.

That couldn't be and he was disappointed, although never for long, because when he said that to me, Carmen would always respond:

"I'll help you Grandpa and you'll see, you just teach me what to do, and I'll do it well."

Although it wasn't really the norm for a woman to study law, she was clear when deciding and choosing a career. She never doubted it for a moment, and of course nobody in the family was surprised, although my mother protested saying:

"Girl, that way we're never going to get you married. Who's going to want to be weighed down by a little know-it-all who knows so many laws?"

But everyone had assumed that it was truly what she wanted to do, and they always supported her.

Our life was simple, all things considered. Before I was born, my parents and Carmen lived in my grandparents' house. Some houses were built; I think they said they were for civil servants. My father requested one, and he was lucky enough to be allocated one. It was a great delight for them, although my grandmother Sagrario wasn't very happy about it. She asked how she would see her granddaughter grow up if they took her away from her, that they didn't have to leave, that there was room for everyone in her house, which was indeed very large.

Those houses were a little outside the center of Santiago de Compostela, and of course my grandmother said:

"That's why they're so cheap, because no one can get there. That's just a field for animals, not for people to live in."

They were accustomed to always living in the heart of Santiago, right next to the cathedral, which of course has its advantages, but I've always wondered how they could sleep with the bells ringing every so often.

When I stayed in the house for the night every now and then, it seemed to me that they never stopped ringing. When I heard it I would think to myself, who cares what time it is in the middle of the night, when everyone is supposed to be asleep? Who was listening? Of course I don't think anyone would be listening for the first bell, but surely everyone would hear the bell after it. Just being in those rooms we would already be lying there with our eyes wide open and then the bells; at one, at two, at three... Yes, we already knew that every night has those hours, and no it wasn't necessary to remind us.

My grandmother found my protests amusing, but said:

"Young Manu, the bells are good company."

I never understood. I always wanted to tell her that they were really annoying and that they sounded awful.

Shortly after being in the new house, my parents had me, according to what I've been told, because as you would imagine, I was too small to remember. It was an excuse for a big party. My father invited all of his colleagues and my grandparents also came with a friend. It was unusual for a son to have his own house, rented yes, but to own it? That was unheard of. Where would a young man get the money to pay for it?

We've been a family like so many others, very close, but also like many other Galicians, we've had an emigrant; my uncle Carlos, my mother's only brother. He said one day that he was leaving and there was no way to convince him otherwise. That's what my mother told us, when any of us asked her about why he had left.

I have a memory from those happy years of my distant childhood. When I was little, "Evita Perón," at that time the wife of General Perón, who was the leader of Argentina, was going to come to Spain. At school they told us how after the war, she had insisted that meat be sent from her country to Spain, and it seems that thanks to that, many people were saved from starvation.

Because of their visit, they showed us where Argentina was, and I still remember those old pictures the teacher showed us. Depictions of gauchos with those big pants, mounted on their horses with their bolas in hand, those cords with the little ball at the end. Even though Don Juan, the teacher, explained to us how they used them, none of us could understand how they could hit their target from a running horse. What an aim they must have had.

He also showed us pictures of the Argentine pampas, those enormous plains without a single mountain, something that really fascinated all the children in my class, accustomed as we were to seeing mountains everywhere.

We could not imagine that there was a place without mountains and we told the teacher that surely someone had erased them from that picture.

What our teacher told us that day became etched on my memory, that it didn't matter what you believed in, that you just had to always be a good person and think about helping others.

How did those two things relate to each other? At first I didn't understand it, but I think it clicked in time.

That lady, being an artist, because I think she did theater, must not have been viewed very positively at that time by the Church, but in spite of that she persisted, and had helped to stave off famine for people so far from where she lived and so unknown to her.

I was remembering all of this now that I was so involved in the search for answers. Why are people compelled to perform a task, like helping others in a distant country? What would it matter to them? While others, who are nevertheless nearby, don't bat an eyelid when they see someone at the side of the road with a problem, and they continue on with their lives as if nothing happened.

They had always taught us at home to help, to listen and, above all, not to believe ourselves to be better than others.

I remember that very well, that's why on that long ago day when I told my mother that I was an atheist, I had also added when she had calmed down and I could continue talking:

"Mom, relax. I'll never forget what you've taught me since I was little, to be good to others, but I feel that having faith is something different. I have to experiment for myself, and see things from my own point of view. I don't know what I want, it's something, but I don't know what it is yet. There was a day when I was having a chat with Carmen about these matters," I went on telling my mother, "and she told me that she'd had a discussion with Don Ignacio (our parish priest) and he'd replied that the important thing was to be a good person, regardless of your beliefs. I think that answer is very wise, I've always liked that priest, but since that day, I tell you I've liked him more. That doesn't mean I'm going to go see him. I don't want to be his friend or anything like that, but I liked his answer, because it coincides with my way of thinking."

After waiting a few minutes to give her time to absorb what I'd said, I continued saying to my mother:

"Listen, one day at the university, some girls were talking. They were saying that when us boys left our parents' house, we forgot everything, and in order to make ourselves seem tough, we would say that we didn't believe. I interrupted them and told them that it wasn't like that. What happened was that there came a point in our lives when we raised issues that we didn't know how to respond to, and that led us to distance ourselves from everything we knew, to clarify our ideas."

"And how did they respond to you?" my mother asked me, and it seemed to me that she was interested in what I was saying.

"Nothing, they were silent, and they continued walking down the corridor, then they went into their class which was about to begin."

"And you, what's gotten into you that you're now leaving me with the idea that you're an atheist? To tell you the truth, it sounds like you're a communist, a Russian, or I don't know what. Of course, call it what you will, I don't like it at all, I don't think it's a good thing," she was saying a little angrily.

"Mom, they're completely different things. A Russian is like a Spaniard, a Spaniard was born in Spain and that's why he's Spanish, and a Russian was born in Russia and that's why he's Russian. If I had been born in France, I would be French, and so on for all of us just because of the place where they were born."

"Why do they call them communists?" she asked interrupting me.

"Look, that's a different matter altogether, why are you Catholic?" I asked.

“What a nonsensical question, what else am I going to be?” she asked half irritated.

“Yes, you call yourself a Catholic,” I went on, “because you profess the Catholic Religion, you’ve been baptized and you go to Church.”

“And them? Why don’t they?” she asked with a certain tone of curiosity.

“Look, that’s why some people are labeled Communists, because just like here in Spain, there will be some people who aren’t Catholic...”

“But son,” she interrupted, “that’s impossible. Well, there will be some who have come on a journey from another country, but here we’re all Catholics.”

“Okay, you’re right,” I gave in to her so as not to get deeper into something that I saw was starting to bother her.

Turning around, I was going to cut the conversation short, as we began to hear Chelito calling. She had woken up and did not want to be alone, although we both noticed by her voice that the fever had gone down and she was feeling better, especially because we heard her say:

“Mom, Mom, aren’t you going to give me lunch today? I’m starving, have you forgotten that I haven’t had breakfast?”

Smiling, the two of us headed to her room, with what I’d said having settled that talk that I’d been delaying for a while for fear of how she would take it.

Now I had to tell my father, but he was more understanding, and now that Mom knew, I’m sure she would tell him as soon as he arrived, so it would make things simpler for me. It would also be made easier because Carmen would also be coming home with him, and I knew she was on my side, because we’d talked very seriously about it, in fact, it was she who told me:

“Tell him and don’t let more time pass, it’s best for everyone.”

I hadn’t yet decided to share it with my parents because, as I said to Carmen, I wasn’t ready, but she, who has always been very prudent, made me see that every day that passed with that secret would make it harder for me to tell them, and that’s what helped me to decide.

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Finally, it’s summer. The anticipated moment has arrived. We anxiously turned to our new work. The year has passed quickly, the days seemed to have wings and they flew away, well the day before an exam not so much, those were very difficult, “Endless,” you might call them.

This will be the last year I can devote to this for now. I have to start the University Militias next summer, which I am not looking forward to, but it is preferable to do it this way than to leave it and do military service when I finish studying.

“Son, it’s more comfortable, you don’t know what it’s like to be on sentry duty in the winter, out in the open all night,” my father used to say to me whenever I protested, because I didn’t want to do it.

“Don’t exaggerate Dad, nobody’s died of that,” I answered. I was still undecided and didn’t really know what I wanted to do, which made me a little uncomfortable.

“Listen Manu, military service is hard, any way you look at it and the University Militias have been made to measure for you. If only I could have landed such a sweet deal back in my day,” he said with a face of resignation.

“What are you talking about Dad?” and since I didn’t want to remind him of the hardships of the past, I tried to change the subject, but he continued.

“On top of that, I’m sure all your friends are going to do it, you won’t be left high and dry,” and he insisted that it was the best, and the most comfortable way.

What he’d said about not going alone had just convinced me, but I said:

“Well, I’ll decide when the time comes.”

When she heard us talking about it, Mom would intervene saying:

“Yes, that’s enough of that, I really don’t want you to go so far.”

“Sweetheart, the University Militias are held in the summer. If I’ve not been misinformed I think they’re from June 20th to September 15th. Think of it like going on vacation and that’s it, it’s

only a few days and then you're home again, and if you're lucky, you'll be taken to the 'El Robledo' camp, which is near the Palace of La Granja de San Ildefonso, in the province of Segovia, surrounded by pine groves called Valdesain."

"Where's Manu going? And how do you know that?" asked Chelito.

"Wherever they send him, like everyone else, but the son of a friend of mine from work was sent there and when he got home he said that they'd had a great time, that they went down to the town on weekends to dance and that they did marches or something through the pine forests, singing that little song that's become popular, called 'Margarita,' you know, young folk stuff, so I don't think it's going to be so bad."

And with that, the conversation was over, seeing that my mother was starting to pout. Cautiously, he approached her to give her a kiss and to calm her down.

"Yes, of course, everything is very easy for you," she told him. "You don't even realize that they're slowly growing up and we'll be more and more alone every day, and before we realize it, we'll be at home on our own, just you and me."

We all laughed and my father scolded us:

"Don't treat it like a joke when your mother is suffering."

And turning to her, he said:

"But honey, what are you saying? They're practically still babies, we still have to put up with them for a long time yet, you'll see how before you know it they'll all have completed their military service, or the militias as it's called now, that they'll go off and do whatever it is that they do and you'll have them back here again in no time."

"I'll ask them to let me do them here in Santiago, so I don't have to leave home," Tono said.

"Yes," said Carlitos, "and you can also ask them to let you do your duties lying on the sitting room sofa, so you're more comfortable."

My mother, seeing that we were all more relaxed, was more content.

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I'm anxious to see what they've assigned to us, the guy who acts as the coordinator told us that, like the last time, we did such a good job that this time it's going to be a bit more complicated, but we'll surely have a good time. During the year, I've gone to see the elderly couple on two occasions, on each of their name days, when we celebrate with all those named after a particular saint, and I took a little something special for them, something small. I saved a little of what they give me at home for my meager expenses, and I bought them two chocolate candies on both occasions, which I know they both liked very much.

I also met with some of my workmates there, and we had a fun time recalling the variety of incidents that happened to us while we fixed up their house.

The old man, Rafael, reminded us of the fresh novice faces we had on the first day, afraid that they wouldn't give us their approval, but how could they not agree with some people who were going to help them? He did not imagine for a second that those inexperienced students, who were surely doing what they were doing because someone would have punished them if they didn't, and who wouldn't return when they ran into their first difficulty and leave everything worse than it was before, if that were possible, would fix it up and leave it as they had when they were finished.

The old man apologized for having thought that about us, but that was indeed what he'd thought after seeing our faces. It was our hands, pretty much children's hands, with clean fingernails, hands that had never done anything. At best, they had held the enormous weight of a book, but how were they going to make cement? That was unthinkable and he was close to telling us to leave, that they were not a joke and they would not be putting up with anyone who came to mock their needs in their own home.

But he'd restrained himself and thought, "I'll give them one day, I'll watch them and see what they do, and when they leave, I'll tell them not to come back here again," but seeing how eagerly we

started and the interest we put into what we were doing, he was convinced that we were good people, and he gave us another day.

“Yes, because today, as there’s no trust, they’ll be behaving themselves, but let’s see who returns tomorrow. They’ll be destroyed from the effort and their muscles will be sore,” he told us he had thought.

And he continued, “Because when you left, I saw you were all so tired that I said:

‘When they fall into bed, these boys will tell themselves it’s over, that summer is for resting and having a good time,’ but I was wrong. The next day you arrived on time, I would even say early, and although I saw different hands on some of you, what I really noticed was on your faces, they were happy faces. That surprised me and I said to myself, ‘Rafael you were wrong, they’re committed.’”

We all laughed when we heard that, and then his wife Rosa, who was listening, said:

“So exaggerated! But I must admit that I was also fearful when I saw you arrive, four strong young people. What if they came to harm us?”

“Don Simón had already told us that you would come, but we didn’t expect you to be so old, you’re all so tall, and I was fearful all day.”

“If one of you were to push us, we’d go flying, because we’re very small next to you all,’ I thought, then I told myself, ‘but what are they going to want from us? We have nothing.’ What’s more, they would have done it when they arrived. Why would they have stayed here if that was the case? My fear began to subside, and when you left and Don Simón came to ask me how the day went...”

“Is that why you started to cry?” Simón interrupted her at that point.

“Aah! Are you Don Simón?” we asked surprised. “We hadn’t realized.”

“Nana,” said Simón, “I’ve already told you many times not to call me that, it makes me seem much older than I am.”

“Alright son, sorry. I couldn’t contain myself today, you saw that I’ve managed on the other days they were here, and at no point did I call you that,” she was saying.

He got up and approached her and giving her a hug he said:

“Yes, you did very well, relax.”

I suddenly remembered those ladies, Antonio’s grandmother and her friend, who gave them so many things and I asked them, “So do those ladies still visit you?”

“Of course, they never miss a week,” answered Rafael, “they bring us food and everything. We don’t have to worry anymore; we always have a hot meal on the table. Well, they don’t come themselves, two gentlemen come on their behalf. They have come again, but just to visit. They do always bring something with them, they don’t know how to come with empty hands, but they told us that their job is to take care of other things, and they’re always very busy and they were the ones who brought those two gentlemen to us that I told you about.”

“Two gentlemen?” I asked, surprised. “Who are they?”

“They told us they were from the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul and that they would help us in everything we needed, in fact, this winter I felt a little unwell and it coincided with the day they came, and without any fuss they took me to the doctor so he could see me.”

“Yes, they took him in their car and everything,” Rosa added.

“You see Papa, there are still people who care about you,” Jorge told them.

“Yes,” he said, lowering his head, “there are still good people, thanks be to God.”

As we didn’t want that day to be sad, we started to make jokes about the problem we had when we installed the tiles, that there was no way they would stay in their place. Thank goodness he was an expert and he was telling us the steps we had to take and I’m certain that if he hadn’t, we would still be doing it, and we wouldn’t have finished yet.

Then they told us that the first day it had started to rain, they were watching to see whether or not the roof would leak, but they saw with joy that everything was perfectly set, and not a single drop had come through, and they said:

“What good bricklayers who have fixed everything for us, they could earn good wages working like this.”

We all laughed at that comment:

“No Papa, that work is really hard, we aren’t the kind of people who like to work like that, because we know how difficult it is. I’m sure we’ll look for another simpler trade,” we told them.

We spent the rest of the afternoon with them, remembering all those hours of work spent there, and how they gradually came to see the effort we put in and to understand that young people could also be useful, and that we didn’t just think about partying, which was what they had thought at first.

CHAPTER 3.

It was a glorious day, the sun seemed to want to encourage us. We were looking forward to seeing the new place they had assigned to us. Even though we tried to form a team with the same people as last summer, we had a change, Antonio would not be with us this year. He had left Santiago de Compostela with his family, and they put another friend in his place. His name was Santiago, he told us, Santi to his friends. It was his first time, but surely within a few days he would be just as much of an expert as we were, because he was very excited.

These works are not performed during the academic year. Everyone is dedicated to their studies and because we're all from different courses, each of us has our own circle of friends, and when we have seen each other, we've only greeted each other, with warmth yes, we don't share so many ups and downs in vain. We were jokingly asking each other, "So, have the scratches healed? How about the calluses on your hands?" and other unimportant things along those lines.

We were a team of bricklayers on the way to the construction site. Well, we may have been saying that, but we knew that it would just be for the summer, then it would be back to the books. What we did get out of that experience was to realize that we had "The best job in the world," as I'd already heard from my grandfather countless times when I complained about everything I had to study, and that we didn't appreciate being seated and studying comfortably, whether it was cold or hot, no matter how hard it rained. That encouraged us to improve our grades. We were discussing it when we arrived at the new place, along the path that Simón was showing us.

We saw a child playing on the floor. When he saw us approaching, he got up and looking up at us as if we were giants, he said to us with his baby talk:

"Where you go? You play with me?"

"Leave the gentlemen be, little dear. Are you looking for something?" we heard a woman, who must have been his mother, say as she appeared just then through the doorway, probably after hearing her little one.

The four of us said in unison:

"Good morning, we've come..."

We all laughed at the coincidence and also with a smile she said:

"Ah, so you are the ones," and that was our formal introduction. "Come in, come in," she said as she turned around, disappearing inside the house.

We followed her and when we entered, we saw a sad, almost tearful man, on a rickety bed, who as he saw us enter, looked down with deep sadness and said:

"I don't know how we're going to be able to pay for it!"

We stood, not knowing what to do. Suddenly I reacted and said:

"But you don't have to pay us anything, haven't you been told?"

"But I, I can't even help," he said, embarrassed.

"Come on, you fool!" the woman said in a loving tone. "Don't worry, I'll help, and you'll see how good everything will be."

He returned her look full of love and said:

"Thank you sweetheart! I know."

"Well, where do we start the work?" asked Simón, who had been in charge of connecting with them a few days ago.

"My name is Encarnación, I'm here for whatever you need. Come! I'll show you everything," said the woman. "Honey, I'll leave you with the baby for a little bit, so we can talk quietly, otherwise he won't leave us be."

"Come to Dad, little one!" said the man to the little boy who was holding his mother's hand.

The woman led him to the side of the bed. The boy sat on the floor with a broken toy truck that he was dragging along in his hand. He started playing there straight away and he stayed quiet.

She took us to the other side of the house. Surrounding it, we saw a yard demarcated with some chicken wire and wooden sticks, and she told us:

“This is where we want to be, well, where we thought work could be done,” and she looked at us as if she was embarrassed and lowered her head.

“Don’t worry,” said Simón, “you’ll see how nice we’re going to leave it, and can we make use of all the land?” he asked, with the certainty of knowing what he wanted to do, although we had no idea what the two of them were talking about.

“Yes, whatever you want, no problem,” she answered.

“And what about the chickens? What are you going to do with them? They’re going to get in the way here,” Simón asked again.

“Well, they’re free range. They’re used to it and even though they’re not cooped up, they don’t go very far, they spend the day pecking around over there,” she added. “I’ll leave you be, I don’t want to leave the child for too long, he’s a little rascal and I want to know what he’s up to,” and off she went.

“Guys, we have a job! You’ve already seen everything that needs to be done,” Simón told us.

“And what is there to do?” we asked intrigued, because he had not put anything forward.

“Well, look here, we can build one room here,” he said quietly, as if waiting for us to protest.

“Why not two?” I asked.

“Would you be brave enough to build two?” Simón asked.

“It was an idea that came to me, I don’t know, all of a sudden,” and I asked the others.

“Sure, if we can build one, we can build two. I think it would be good, but first we have to make some plans and adapt them to the space we have,” Jorge told us. It seemed that he was on board with my idea.

“Yes, but what about the doors? Where could we put them? We’ve already seen that they only have that one room that they use for everything; sitting room, dining room and bedroom, where the bed is. With this space we can build two rooms, a larger one for the Mom and Dad and a smaller one for the little one,” Simón was telling us.

“The little one will grow up and he’ll need a place, and perhaps in time they’ll also have another one. This should really be taken into account, and if the room is too small, he wouldn’t really fit,” Santi told us, who until now had been very quiet, but we noticed from the tone of his voice how much he had embraced the idea.

“I don’t imagine they’d have another kid, you’ve already seen that he doesn’t seem to be very well, but if they did, they could put in some bunk beds.”

“My brothers sleep in them and they’re very practical, because there’s no need for any extra space in the room, they occupy the same floor space as a single bed.”

We all agreed and we decided that it was best to make only one connecting door, so as not to weaken the load-bearing wall too much and the two bedrooms would be connected.

Seeing that we’d all liked the idea, Simón opened a notebook that he’d been holding in his hand the whole time and we saw that he’d prepared some sketches. Then, with great skill, he plotted some lines, making a new sketch. When he finished, he showed it to us:

“What do you think?”

We all looked at it, and although we didn’t really understand much of what we were looking at, it seemed to us that it would turn out well, and we gave it our approval.

“Okay, we’ll tell them, let’s see if they agree,” Jorge said, “because their opinion is the one that matters, it’s their house and they have to live here.”

Happy with the idea, we went to tell them about it. When we went to knock on the door to enter, we heard that the man was sobbing and we didn’t think we should interrupt, but we heard:

“Yes, come in, come in.” As we’d all been talking, I’m sure they’d heard us as we approached.

“What’s wrong mister?” I asked him without thinking as soon as I saw him. I instantly regretted it, but it was too late.

“I don’t know how we’re going to be able to pay for it,” he answered tearfully.

“Look, honestly, we’ve told you before, this isn’t going to cost you anything, we’ll take care of everything,” said Jorge.

“But, that takes a lot of material and your labor on top of that, why would you do that?” the man went on, asking but still crying.

“Well!” said Simón, who was more confident with them. “We do it to stave off boredom during vacation time.”

“Really?” said the woman. “Such good-looking boys bored? You’ll get a girlfriend and then you’ll know when you start ‘Courting’ that time is precious, to spend it together.”

“Well, some of us have one already,” Santi said jumping up. “No one said we didn’t, but they’re very supportive, and they let us be free to do what we want.”

“Yes, of course and also, perhaps, she’s gone to the beach to spend her vacation with her parents, and she’s ditched you,” I told Santi who knew that this was what had happened to him.

“Shut up foghorn!” he said at once, and turned red.

“Alright, let’s change the subject,” said Simón. “I’ve brought some sketches that I’ve made, and I want you to take a look at them to see what you think, and if we can do it.”

“Son, we don’t know anything about all that, just do whatever you think is best,” the woman was saying somewhat nervously.

“Well, take a look at them to see if you like them,” and he took the notebook he had brought over to the bed.

We saw that the man didn’t take his hands out from under the sheet, that it was the woman who took it and showed it to him.

“The blue lines represent what’s standing now, and the red lines are what we can do in the yard, and those pencil marks, I just drew there behind, we’ve all agreed that if we expand this just a little, instead of one, you could have two extra rooms,” Simón was saying, excited about the idea.

The man could no longer contain himself and began to cry inconsolably, so we decided to go out and leave them in peace. I took the child in my arms and said:

“Let’s play! I can teach you a game that I’m sure you won’t know: Hide-and-Seek.”

Because he didn’t understand what I was talking about, the little one, looking at me with a face full of surprise, looked back:

“Dad, Dad,” he was screaming, but as soon as we had left the house, he immediately saw a hen, and he began to struggle in my arms, because he wanted to get down. The instant I put him down on the ground, he ran off after it.

The four of us stayed outside for a while, a little serious because of the situation. The woman came out with eyes red from crying, and said:

“Forgive him, he’s always been such a hard worker and he could never be still, and now he can’t bear anyone having to do things for him.”

Simón came forward and, resting a hand on her shoulder, said:

“It’s alright, just tell us where to start.”

She used her apron to wipe away some of the tears that had escaped from her eyes and ran down her cheeks, and then she said:

“This is everything we have, I can’t offer you anything else.” She showed us some tools, which were piled up in one corner and covered with an old sack.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find out everything we’ll need and bring it here ourselves,” Jorge said, taking a hoe in his hands. Lifting it into the air, he continued: “This works for me.”

“But I don’t know how we’re going to pay for it,” she said in a sad voice. “We barely have enough to eat, and the little one needs so much...”

“I think we can also solve that, you’ll see, trust us,” I said immediately.

She was staring at me and I saw that her eyes were once again filled with tears. Turning around she went into the house saying:

“What strange things these young men are saying!”

Out there alone and all in agreement, we said:

“We should start immediately so that this family eats every day. We have to, without fail, get in touch with those ladies who help the needy.”

Then we started to make a list of the materials we needed, the tools, and basically everything we thought we would need to get on with the work at hand.

“First of all, we have to take down that roof,” Santi said. “It’s in a very bad state and as soon as we begin to make a start here, I’m sure it’ll fall. That being said, you guys know more about this than I do,” and he added, “Sorry.”

We all agreed:

“But what do we do with the sick man’s bed in the meantime? It’ll take us several days” Jorge asked.

“We’ll deal with the problems as they arise. First of all, let’s remove the chicken wire from the yard and clean everything up to start with the foundations,” Simón suggested.

“Okay,” we said in unison, “let’s get the ball rolling.”

We headed to the back of the house. When the little one saw us, he came up behind us. We had to call on his mother to take him, because it wasn’t safe for him to be around where we had to work.

His mother, who, like all mothers, always had resources for every situation, brought out a big cardboard box, which had been flattened in a corner, reassembled it a little away from where we had to work, but from where the kid could see us properly, and she put the child inside it, and said:

“See, now you can watch those gentlemen playing from here inside your little house.”

He sat down quietly, and there he sat for I don’t know how long, watching us as we moved about from here to there doing things and he stayed so calm and quiet, so much so that at some point he must have gotten bored and fallen asleep. When we noticed, we called on his mother to take him and she told us:

“No, he’s all right here,” and with that she left, but came straight back with an old towel and covered him.

The box served as a crib, perhaps it was his crib, because we hadn’t seen one inside. None of us batted an eyelid at the time, but it seems that it did leave more than one of us a little concerned, because in the afternoon, when we finished the work, we commented on it on the way back.

“We’ll learn more about the things they need,” Simón said. “Now, the first order of business, we have to get a move on so that tomorrow we can begin to change these people’s lives, so that they don’t miss a meal. We have to make a move now to try to fix that.”

As we already had contacts, Jorge and Santi, who would pass closer to them, paid them a visit before going home. They explained the problems and the urgency of the case.

The lady who received them told them not to worry, that the next day they would go to the place and that they would see what their needs were themselves.

“And if you can, bring them some food!” Jorge told them, “they really need it.”

And that’s how it went. We were working again. We had already eaten the sandwiches that we’d brought for lunch, and today we all wanted to share them with the couple, but none of us remembered to bring any for the kid. The four of us had brought two sandwiches each without making any sort of agreement. When it was time to eat, we all took them out and gave them to the lady. Of course, since we had one extra per head, they got two each, but what about the little one? It was only at that point that we realized.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a smile, “he only takes porridge and then the breast, he’s still too small for sandwiches,” and thanking us for what we’d given her, she continued, “we already have enough food for today and tomorrow.”

“No, tomorrow we’ll bring you more,” I said promptly.

“No, there’s no need, with these we have enough, they’re very big and certainly very rich, thank you very much,” she said looking at us gratefully.

After resting a little, we’d gone back to continue with our digging, so we could finish the ditch where we would pour the cement for the wall, when we saw some confused ladies coming from the distance.

Simón, being the most alert, approached them and said:

“It’s over here, come, come.”

“We weren’t sure about the location, it’s a little complicated,” they said smiling.

“Madam, can you come out? You have a visitor,” I said, approaching the door of the house.

Without coming out, she said:

“Visitor? Surely not!” Lifting the curtain, she saw the two women who had already arrived and Simón behind them with some bags that he’d taken from their hands to help them.

“What can I do for you? Who are you?” she asked in surprise.

They introduced themselves and talked about why they’d come. We left them to it and continued with our task, because we set a goal for ourselves each day and we had to finish it, so we got back to the old grindstone as they say in construction slang. We finished the whole ditch that day, pleased and upbeat. We were even singing on the way home because of how happy we were.

We commented that they wouldn’t go hungry anymore, that was the first goal fulfilled, they would bring them food. Now we had to do our part so that they would be living in a decent place, and they wouldn’t get wet at the very least, because in this part of the country, with so many rainy days, that was very important, but as we told ourselves, that was our thing and we would leave it in fantastic condition, we were already experts after all.

How time flies. The summer passed and everything reached completion. The assignment was done and the two whitewashed rooms looked as though they’d been built by professionals. We even put in windows, well mini-windows, they might not have been very large, but they were big enough to let the light in and properly ventilate the place.

We did as we’d intended on that seemingly distant day at the start of the summer. The two rooms were connected, but there was no way of putting in doors, no matter how hard we tried, so one day when we were discussing it with the woman, she immediately told us:

“Don’t worry, they can be separated with a curtain and that’ll do very nicely.”

The ladies who came from time to time would tell us:

“Look, this’ll come in handy for you,” and they brought us a little something.

One of them appeared one day with a very beautiful painting, with views of the sea. When Encarnación saw it, she immediately asked us, “Why don’t we put it on the wall? That way it would make the place look more beautiful.”

On another occasion, they brought some blue curtains, which one of the ladies had been keeping in a drawer. She said that since she’d changed them for new ones, she wasn’t going to need them anymore and they were only getting in her way. She hadn’t wanted to throw them away because they were still good.

Those were the curtains that we subsequently put up to separate the two rooms and everything looked ten times better than we had ever imagined.

They also brought a vase, which, although it didn’t seem useful to us, Encarnación was very excited about. Santi immediately went around the field and picked some bunches of flowers and put them into that vase and in truth, what he created was pretty original.

One of the days that the ladies came, one of them brought a small picture frame.

“When the little one gets older, I’ll take a photograph and put it in here,” the mother said, thanking them.

Santi, who had inadvertently overheard her, having passed by at just that moment to get some water, told us. I instantly had an idea and I told them:

“Let’s give them a surprise, you’ll all see, let’s take that photograph ourselves and give it to them.”

“How?” Simón asked. “That really is beyond our abilities.”

“No, listen, my father has a device for that, I’ll try to get it from him,” I was telling him, but I was already questioning it as I heard myself say it, it would be very difficult. Surely he would tell me, without even thinking about it, that he wouldn’t dream of letting me take that device.

I was thinking about it for several days, but I just couldn’t decide upon the right moment, and one afternoon while we were returning Jorge asked me:

“What about that photo you talked to us about?”

I didn’t want to tell him that I hadn’t yet dared to ask my father for it and I answered:

“I’m on it,” and as I headed home afterwards, after having said goodbye to the others, I told myself: “If it doesn’t happen today, if he says no, well, at least I tried.”

I summoned up my courage and asked my father for the camera. Of course I had to tell him what it was for. He thought about it for a few moments. I was afraid that he would say no, so I insisted:

“Dad, they’d be very excited to have a photograph of their young son.”

“Yes, you’re right son, I’d also have liked to have one of you all when you were little and that way you would all have some to remember your childhood whenever you saw them, but Manu, you have to be careful not to damage it,” he said in an apprehensive tone, “these things are very fragile.”

Then, after giving me some instructions so that the photo would turn out well, he left it in my care. I handled it with the utmost care because I did not want anything to happen to it. My father would be so dismayed if anything did, he’d only acquired it recently and he took great care of it.

With that, we took a photo of the little one. We placed him in a seated position, sitting well-behaved on the floor next to a hen, which he tried to catch and I took it right at that moment. It came out pretty nice. When my father finished up the film and the photographs were developed, even the photographer where he’d taken the film congratulated him on the photo. He said:

“Look at that, it’s difficult to get a chicken to stand still, how did you manage it?”

“I don’t know,” said my father, “my son took it, and I don’t know the child.”

“Well, congratulate your son, he has a future as a photographer,” the man said.

He smiled and told me that he’d answered:

“Well, it’s the only photograph he’s ever taken in his life.”

I believe the gentleman told him:

“Not a chance, he’ll have done it before without you knowing.”

“No, because the photographs would be here, he doesn’t have another camera,” my father argued.

He had told me all of that, and I was telling the parents of the little boy while they stared enthralled at the photo, which had been put into that little picture frame that the wife had placed on some boxes in a corner. We had taken the frame from there a while ago, and she hadn’t noticed, we had put the photo inside and then the four of us gave it to them as a farewell gift.

The father, who was on the verge of tears, told us:

“It was a pleasure,” and we laughed, so as to keep him from tearing up.

“Let’s see if from now on, it can make you happy,” Simón told him. “You see how everything has been overcome. You have to have more confidence man; life is very beautiful.”

“Well, almost everything,” he said, looking sadly at the sheet that covered him.

“Yeah, but that’s not something we can help you with that,” Simón added very seriously.

“Yes, well we can’t complain,” the woman interrupted. “Thank you for everything, we’ll never forget you.”

We all said our goodbyes. We didn’t want to extend that moment that was difficult for all of us any further. So many hours spent there, so many memories that would safely stay with us forever.

When we were returning home, commenting on the incidents that had happened to us, we said:

“We spent so much time there and we never did find out what was wrong with him, why was he always covered?”

“I know why,” said Santi.

“Tell us, tell us!” we all asked him, eager to know.

“Well, he was a blacksmith, and one day he had an accident. Some chunks of iron fell on him because the wooden shelf they were sitting on collapsed. He was so unlucky that they injured both his arms. He took little notice, but it seems that the iron was rusty. The wounds it caused developed gangrene, so his arms had to be cut off.”

“Oh, is that why he was always covered up to his neck?” asked Jorge. “It did seem odd to me.”

“Come on you idiot! Didn’t you notice that the bedding was flat where his arms should have been?” asked Simón.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think much of it, I thought maybe it was his legs that were bad. Hey, and how come you know that?” he asked Santi looking at him.

“Listen, do you remember that day when we had to break down the wall that connected the new room to the old one? I overheard the woman when she worriedly said:

‘But honey, they’ll have to find out, they’ll help you, I surely can’t do it alone.’”

“No, please,’ I heard him say, crying. ‘Please help me on your own, please don’t let them see me like this.’”

“On impulse, I walked in and told them:

‘I’m here to help you for whatever you need.’”

“He was uncovered and I saw him lying there without his arms. The woman rushed to cover him right away, but when she saw that I’d seen him, she told me:

‘Please don’t tell the others, I couldn’t bear to see their faces full of pity, watching me,’ and two big tears ran down her cheeks.”

“Don’t worry,’ I said, ‘keep calm, now I can help you,’ and before anyone could protest, I was uncovering him, and helping him to get up.”

“I put him in a chair in that corner, where he could be sure that no rubble would fall from the wall when we made the hole, and I wrapped him up properly with a blanket so that he wouldn’t get cold, and also so that if you guys came in, you wouldn’t see.”

“The woman was watching me, it seemed that she couldn’t believe what was happening, I’d caught her off guard and all she could say was:

‘Thank you! Thank you! Are you okay, honey?’ She looked at him with such tenderness.”

“He was sobbing the entire time and I asked him:

‘Am I hurting you?’”

“He shook his head, because the words wouldn’t come out. He let me do this to him, and once he was sitting in that corner, he said softly:

‘Thank you son, God will bless you for it.’”

“I tried to smile to calm him down and said:

‘Come on, it was nothing.’ Then I grabbed the straw mattress and pulled it out so that it wouldn’t get in the way, and in turn so that the rubble from the wall wouldn’t fall onto it.”

“When I came outside, I went to tell you guys that we could start making the hole where we had planned, because it was in the same place where he had been lying on the other side, and I told you:

‘He’s already been moved from there, there’s no danger that anything will fall on him.’”

We worked more quickly that morning. Everything had to be completed so that he could go back to his place. The back room was almost finished, all we had to do was close up the hole through which we went in and out. After creating that connecting door, two of us dedicated ourselves to closing the hole and plastering everything properly and the other two to removing the debris.

The wife could not stay still and in her eagerness to help, was faster than we were. Surely it also came down to her nerves, but it made us take on more than we would have done had she not been helping, because we realized how much she was doing, which was a lot and we were not going to be doing less.

When everything had been cleaned up, we finished properly reviewing the new space we'd created, and we said satisfied:

"It's not too bad."

The husband, who had been tucked up quietly in that corner the entire time, told us:

"Not too bad? It's fantastic! You seem to be professionals, surely they wouldn't have done a better job."

Since we were lucky that day and it was very hot, the cement dried well, so we could put the mattress into their new bedroom at the end of the afternoon. They would sleep there that night, and we told them that we would take it out again tomorrow to finish up and whitewash the walls, and we left it at that.

Santi was still telling us his story and as we reached the point where we had to go our own separate ways and say goodbye, we asked him:

"What happened the next day? Why did you go early?"

"Don't you remember? When we were on the way home that afternoon, I said, 'I forgot my sweater, you guys just keep going,' and I ran back."

"Yes, and by the way you took a long time to come back," Jorge said, "we were waiting for you there in the countryside, we were exhausted and you didn't seem to be in any hurry."

"Well, that's because I'd thought, 'When we leave, he'll have to be put back into his bed,' and I had to find an excuse to help him without you guys knowing, so I left my sweater in a corner, how could I have forgotten it? That's why I told you that I was going back for it, and that's how I arrived just when Encarnación was about to lift him up so she could put him back onto the bed. I helped her to do it and then I went back to where you guys were waiting, but in the rush, I left again without the sweater and I had to go back to pick it up, that's why it took so long."

"And the next day?" Simón asked.

"See, as I knew that he wouldn't let himself be touched or seen by any of you, I said to myself, 'Surely his wife will have to do it before we arrive so he's already up by the time we get there,' so I came earlier, when there was barely any light in the sky, to help in any way I could. Sure enough, when I arrived, she was already getting ready to carry him, and she got a fright when I called out, she wasn't expecting anyone."

"What are you doing here at this early hour? The sun's barely up," she asked me as soon as he saw me, when she opened the door.

"I've come to help you,' I answered."

"You're an angel,' she said quietly."

"Please! That's just because you don't know me very well, ask my mother and you'll see. She's always telling me, 'Santi, you're a demon, you're always messing about.'"

"Well, that'll be at home, you don't behave like that here,' she added, smiling as I entered."

"I went in following her instructions and I found the man in the new bedroom already prepared because he'd heard me and the boy was asleep beside him."

"And what are we gonna do with this one?" I asked quietly so as not to wake him up."

"Don't worry, we can move him anywhere and he won't even notice,' his mother told me."

“I took the man out and put him in the same chair he’d been sitting in the day before. The wife was patiently feeding him breakfast, spoonful by spoonful into his mouth. As I didn’t want to disturb them, I went to leave, but she noticed and asked me:

“Where are you going? Stay here, it’s still chilly.”

“So I stayed there for a good while. Then I took out the mattress, so that it wouldn’t get in our way, and I did a little preparation for everything we needed to start the day’s work, and as soon as you guys arrived, you were surprised to see me there and I had to tell you that I’d been confused with the time and thought I was late and that you hadn’t waited for me, and that’s why I came to the house by myself. I saw that you looked at me with a weird expression, it seems that you didn’t believe me, but you didn’t have time to question me about it. It was just then that the boy came out and started to run after the hen and we all started laughing and you forgot about it. Now you know everything,” Santi told us, “there are no more mysteries. I’ve told you now because everything’s finished, and I don’t think they’d mind now.”

“We did leave everything really nice,” I told the others to change the subject, “and about the furniture you’re all asking me about? When I asked my mother to give me the crib, she nearly collapsed.”

“But son, I’m saving it for when you get married and you give me a little grandchild,” she’d told me very upset.

“What if I become a priest?” I answered.

“Stop that! Don’t mess around with that,” she said very seriously.

“No, I said that to you as a joke, but I’m serious about the crib. Please can you give it to me? It’s not doing anyone any good being kept here when there’s a little boy who could use it,” I said, trying to calm her down a little and get her to cave.

“No, the crib was yours, and it’ll be for my grandchildren when you have them,” she insisted.

“Mom, I know it was mine, well Carmen’s first, and after me, it was for the twins and finally Chelito, but look, that little boy I’m asking for has nowhere to sleep and he needs it now. If I get married and have children, and who knows if I will, I’d have to do very badly in my career and my new job to be unable to afford to buy a crib before I emigrate to America,” I was saying in a bid to convince her.

“Enough son, don’t say that, even in jest. Listen, your uncle left and didn’t want to come back here, and it’s not because of a lack of money, he has plenty as you know. Sometimes he’s even sent some to me, he says he doesn’t know what to give me, that money always comes in handy, and I say, he must have enough to spare.”

“Mom, money is never spare, but that shows that, even though he’s far away, he still remembers his beloved sister. Well, if I’m doing badly here with work, I’m leaving like him,” I said without thinking.

“No!” she said resoundingly.

“Well, I’m not leaving, but please give me the crib,” I begged.

“But you have to promise me that you’ll never emigrate,” she said, becoming very serious.

Also seriously, standing there in front of her, staring at her sitting in her chair, I said:

“Mom, I solemnly promise you that I’ll never emigrate to America.”

“Alright smooth talker, take the crib, but tell them to take good care of it,” she said, smiling.

“I’ll tell them what you’ve said. Ah Mom! Can I go to Germany at least?” I said very seriously.

She got up from the chair, and giving me a light smack on the head, said:

“No, not to Germany either. You stay here with me and give me grandchildren, and I won’t settle for one, that’s very boring.”

“I already know that,” I said, “I’ve envied the neighbors since I was little because there are seven of them, always playing and me here alone and bored. I still don’t know why whenever I asked you

to let me go to their house to play with them, you always gave me the same answer, ‘No son, there are enough of them, I don’t want you to bother them,’ as if they would’ve noticed one more.”

“Well,” she said, laughing, “then the twins came along, so don’t complain, all of sudden there was two of them. You looked at them and said, ‘Which of them do I play with?’ They were toys to you. Alright, when are you taking the crib?” she asked me more calmly.

“Well tomorrow, so you won’t change your mind,” and giving her a kiss, I was leaving when I heard her say:

“You see what you’re like? You always get what you want.”

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Summer was coming to an end, we were only one week away from starting classes again and returning to our routine, just enough time to get some rest and enjoy spending time with our families, but unexpected things can happen in just a few days. Tono came that morning crying:

“Mom! Mom!” he screamed as he climbed the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when I opened the door, because I’d been the first one to hear him, and I’d rushed to open it, to see what had happened.

“No! Not you! I don’t want to talk to you,” he told me very angrily.

I was surprised, but he ran into the kitchen where my mother was preparing food.

“Mom! Mom!” the child kept calling very upset.

“Angel, what’s wrong with you?” she asked in alarm.

He closed the kitchen door behind him so that I wouldn’t go in after him, because I was following him down the hallway, although as he had been closing the door to the house, he was running and he reached where Mom was before I did. I went to open the kitchen door, but he told me from inside:

“Go away! You’re to blame, I don’t want to see you ever again, it’s all your fault.”

I stopped in my tracks. “What had I done? I don’t think I’ve done anything,” I thought, “plus, if he was out on the street playing with his friends and I was at home; surely it would have been a fight with one of them and he was taking it out on me.”

I didn’t really hear what he was talking about, but I immediately heard my mother say:

“Of course, I knew this was going to create problems for us.”

Opening the door, she glared at me and angrily said:

“You see!”

I didn’t understand any of this and I asked:

“Wait, what’s going on? I didn’t do anything to him.”

“How have you not? Look at what’s happened to your brother, he hasn’t done anything and look,” my mother told me, and I still had no clue what she was talking about.

I looked at her, then I looked at him, and I still wasn’t getting it. “What a mess!” I said to myself. I couldn’t figure any of it out, so I asked:

“Okay, well, can either one of you please tell me what’s going on? What have I done that’s so serious? Because I don’t think I’ve done anything, and I can’t work out what’s happened to him. He was out playing on the street!”

Barging angrily past me, Tono said:

“I’m never talking to you ever again in my whole life,” and with that he left for his room, where I heard him locking the door with the key from the inside.

“Mom, please, tell me what’s wrong, what has he told you?” While I asked, I looked at her and I could see her getting angrier.

“Look, do you see what happens by being the way you are?” she said to me very seriously and then she fell silent.

“Me? And what is the way I am? Let’s see, now what on Earth do I have to do with whatever might have happened to the kid on the street?” I was asking her slowly, because I did not want her to get any more upset.

“Listen!” said my mother, when she had calmed down a little. “He told me that the children he was playing with told him he was going to hell.”

“And, what about it?” I asked. “What does that have to do with me?”

“What does it have to do with you? Well, I don’t know how they would have heard about your little thing,” she told me.

“But what is my little thing? Please explain it to me, I still have no idea what you’re talking about, it’ll just be kid stuff,” I said a little irritated, because she insisted on focusing the blame on me for something I didn’t understand.

“Look Manu, this has to change already, I can’t deal with this situation any longer either. Look, my Spiritual Advisor...”

“Who?” I asked a little confused. “Your whaaat?”

“My Spiritual Advisor,” she repeated.

“Wait, what’s that?” I asked again.

“Well, Don Ignacio, the priest, have you forgotten already?” she asked me. “You have to see how you’ve changed son.”

“Yes, the priest, but what you said before, I don’t know what an advisor is. And I haven’t changed at all, I’m still your son, the same as always.”

“Well, the Advisor is another matter, you don’t understand that.”

“Okay, what did that good gentleman tell you?” I said a little irked.

“Don’t call him that! It’s disrespectful,” she said angrily.

“But Mom..., I’m imagining that with him being a priest, that’s proper, is it not? So what should I call him then?” I asked a little more calmly, to see if she finally realized what I had said.

“Look, let’s get on with what we were talking about,” she said getting more and more angry.

“Yes, so he said something, but can you explain it to me just once? What did he say? What do I have to do with all of this? And what does it have to do with what happened to Tono?”

“Well son, you’re coming off like a fool, it’s very clear, it’s all the same thing.”

“But what is it?” I said impatiently, because the issue was becoming increasingly complicated.

“Be quiet and let me finish, and don’t interrupt me every two seconds. Your brother has been told by his friends that he’s going to hell, because he has a brother who’s an atheist.”

Opening my eyes wide, I said:

“Whaaat? Is that what this is all about? I don’t believe it.”

“Of course, I’ve talked about it several times with my Spiritual Advisor, and he has always advised patience, but I’ve had enough. Either you change, or I don’t know what I’m going to have to do with you!” she said staring firmly at me.

“But Mom... It’s not like it’s a dirty shirt that I can take off and put on a clean one.”

“Enough nonsense. I’m having a serious discussion with you, and you, as far as I know, have other shirts. I’d like to be able to take a hold of you and wash you like I do with dirty clothes, and rinse those ideas out of your head. We’d all be better off for it.”

“But Mom... Let’s see, what harm am I doing to anyone by thinking what I want to think? Everyone has their own life to live, the way I see it,” I told her trying to calm her down.

“But don’t you realize? Don’t you see what just happened to Tono?” she told me, her anger not abating and there was no way to change it.

Suddenly we heard Dad at the front door saying:

“Honey, I’m home now.”

Wiping her eyes, my mother said:

“When he finds out...!”

“But Mom..., I haven’t done anything wrong. Calm down!” At that moment, my father came into the kitchen and when he heard me say that he immediately asked:

“Honey, has something happened to you?”

“No,” she replied, approaching him to give him a kiss.

“So, why is Manu telling you to calm down?” he asked again.

She lowered her head and said:

“Go on, tell him! The sooner this is cleared up, the better.”

“Well, what’s all this about? Let’s here it Manu, tell me what’s going on,” my father asked impatiently.

I told him everything that had happened. Then, going out into the hall, he called Tono. From his room with the door closed, he asked:

“Is Manu there? Tell him to leave, I don’t want to talk to him.”

With an authoritative voice, my father said:

“Tono, come out here immediately. I want you to clarify one thing for me right now, and enough with this seclusion and childish nonsense.”

He came grumbling down the hall toward Dad and said:

“What do you want, Dad?”

He looked up, and told him what they’d said:

“I want you to explain one thing for me. Who told those children about your brother?”

“Me!” he answered quietly, “but I didn’t know it was bad.”

“Son, it’s not bad, it’s just a different way of thinking, everyone is allowed to think what they want, do you tell us everything you think?” he asked looking at him very seriously.

“No!” he said, trying not to look my father in the eye, “but the other kids told me...”

“Tono, the other kids can tell you what they want. Do you think Manu is bad?”

“No, at least he never hits me,” my brother replied.

“So are you not going to tell Manu that he has to change?” my mother then asked my father.

“Honey!” he said, “why don’t we eat and leave this for another time? I’m home and I’m quite tired, but I do want you to know Tono, that we love you all and that nothing’s going to happen to you because your brother thinks that way.”

He approached me more calmly and said:

“Alright, if Dad says that nothing will happen to me, then I’ll talk to you again,” and then he ran off.

That incident was over, but it seemed that a pending conversation with my father would be on the cards.

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“Manu,” he said one afternoon, “I want to have a chat with you today,” and we went for a walk to my grandparents’ house.

I was not clear on why he wanted me to go there, then it all became clear.

When he saw us come in through the door of his house, my grandfather said:

“Nice! I have company.”

“How so?” I asked him immediately when I went over to give him a kiss.

“Well, because your grandmother went to visit a friend who’s sick and I didn’t want to go, so I stayed here reading.”

“Grandpa, don’t you already know all your books by heart yet?” I asked.

“Don’t you believe that Manu, I can always pick one up and discover something new,” he told me very seriously.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” he asked my father, who was coming into the room just then. I had arrived before him, because I had run down the hallway.

“Well, I think it’s time for you to talk to your grandson,” he replied to his father.

I was very surprised to hear that, so I asked:

“About what?”

“First, I’m going to make you a coffee,” my grandfather said. I’m sure it’ll do you some good, the afternoon is a little chilly.

Then, the three of us sat there like three friends, it was barely noticeable that there was an age difference between us all, the three of us had always gotten along very well.

Grandpa started telling me that he was also like me:

“Oh good,” he said, “rather, it’s you who is like me, because I was born first and you were born after me.”

Well, he told me that he had also been an atheist, I was very surprised.

“But Gramps, I’ve seen you go to church on Sundays with Grandma,” I said without being able to restrain myself, even though I knew that he did not like to be interrupted. He always told us, “It’s bad manners to interrupt someone when they’re talking.”

He told me very seriously:

“Listen, if you’ll keep quiet and not interrupt me, you already know that I don’t like that, I’ll tell you about it, otherwise the one who’ll keep quiet will be me.”

“Sorry!” I offered, “I won’t interrupt you anymore,” so I listened to him for the entire time he was speaking, quiet and attentive to everything he told me.

He told me that, like many of his friends, he’d been an atheist in his youth, that he did not see eye to eye with the priests nor did he believe in what they were saying and that he was always fighting with those he knew in defense of his ideas, but something happened in his life that made him change.

I really wanted to interrupt him to ask him what it was, but I held back and sat there by his side listening.

“I met an angel,” he said suddenly.

I must have opened my eyes wide.

“Careful, they’re going to come out of their sockets,” he said with a smile. “Well, as I was saying, almost an angel, your grandmother.”

I took a deep breath.

“Yes, you don’t believe it, I know what you’re thinking, but she was straightening out my life, and making me see how wrong I was. She never gave me big sermons, or forced me into anything, she just set me an example, gave me understanding and affection, and that gradually made me reflect and see that my position was incorrect, that I had the wrong ideas and I changed them as things were becoming clearer in my mind.”

He paused in thought for a moment, and then continued.

“She changed me! It was like I was a sock and she had turned me inside out. I’m not saying I became sanctimonious or anything. No, that’s not me, but she made a new man out of me. I’ll never be able to thank her enough for that.”

“Do you love me Manu?” he asked me suddenly.

I was unsure of whether or not to answer him or if he would scold me for interrupting.

“Answer the question son!” said Dad, who was sitting there quietly beside me.

“Of course Grandpa! I don’t imagine you doubt that,” I told him softly so he wouldn’t get annoyed.

“Well, God loves you like that,” he said, looking me straight in the eye.

“Whaaat? If God doesn’t know me, how is he going to love me?” I said bewildered.

“How can that be? How do you know that?” my grandfather asked me.

“I don’t know, that’s what I’ve asked myself many times, if God really exists.”

“Of course He does son, and He’s like a patient Father who’s there looking after His children, even if they don’t realize it.”

He was telling me in a way that, I don't know... that was so sweet. I had never heard my grandfather speak that way before.

"But how do you know, Grandpa?" I asked curious.

"Look, the little one doesn't know if his father is next to the crib, but haven't you seen your father when Chelito was little? He would go over to put on her little baby clothes."

"Yes, of course, Dad would stand there and watch her, very quietly, I think so as not to wake her up."

"Well, imagine your father being nothing more than a man and taking care of his little daughter, and surely inside he was thinking and saying, 'Little one, be at peace, I'm here and nothing's going to happen to you.'"

"Yes, he'd say something like that, because I would approach slowly to see her and my father wouldn't see me because I was hidden behind him, but I would hear him saying things like that, and I would also say, 'And I'm going to take care of you too,' but I would say it very quietly so that Dad wouldn't realize I was there."

"You see? We all have feelings inside us that make us love others. Sometimes siblings, sometimes grandparents," he was telling me.

"Yes, and parents too," I said, interrupting him.

"Of course, parents too, because if God has created us in His own image, how is He not going to love us?" he asked me softly, as if he were reflecting upon it himself.

"But Grandpa..." I began to say.

"No, Manu, I want you to think about all of this, I don't want to convince you of anything, just to tell you that He loves you and cares for you, even if you don't know who He is, or where He is."

The conversation ended and my father said:

"Thanks Dad, I couldn't have done it that well, he wouldn't have listened to me."

"I know son! Children don't listen to their parents, that's a generational thing, it's no one's fault, but relax, the seed has been sown, it'll blossom in the spring."

"What are you talking about Grandpa?" I said, because I didn't understand anything. "What does a seed have to do with all that?"

"You pipe down, you want to know everything. This is between your father and me." He did not say any more and then exclaimed: "Here comes your grandmother!"

At that moment, we heard the key in the lock and I made my way quickly to the door. In truth, my intention was to hide and give her a scare, but when I got there I told myself, "No! It might be bad for her," and before she came in I said:

"Grandma, what are you doing outside your own house?"

She finished opening the door and said:

"What are you doing here? What a surprise!" I wrapped my arms around her neck and told her:

"I love you so much Nana!"

"Charmer!" she said smiling. "You've come to have a snack, right? Just give me a minute to change my shoes, and put on my slippers, my feet are frozen."

After a while, now that "she had gotten comfortable," as she put it, in her housecoat, which according to her was "warmer than her actual coat," she went into the kitchen and in no time at all, she brought me one of those delicious sandwiches that she used to make me on cold days. Then she brought me an omelet which she had "Stumbled across," as she liked to claim, with little chunks of chorizo through it, which were so delicious, and then she also brought me a glass of warm milk, and she asked me:

"What about your assignment? How is it going?"

"I haven't done it yet," I said jokingly.

"If I'd known that, I wouldn't have given you anything. You haven't earned it," she told me, turning very serious with an irritated face.

“Nana, I’m only joking,” I said, “of course I’ve done it all.”

“Don’t ever stop doing what your teacher tells you to,” she told me.

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I remember that first time I went to Fatima so long ago. I was overwhelmed by feelings; curiosity, fear, hope, what did I hope to find? What would that place that I thought I knew through my reading really be like?

I had searched everywhere, and I had read everything I’d found about the events that had taken place there, but I wanted to see it all with my own eyes.

I left Santiago de Compostela one morning at dawn. I had a long journey of over 400 kilometers in front of me. It was raining, and boy was it raining. “That rain was certainly not normal,” I was saying to myself, while the car’s windscreen wipers were moving ceaselessly from one side to the other.

I almost couldn’t believe it, I was driving. I had recently taken my driving test and gotten my license, and I still remember how the urge to drive started.

“Look, Manu, maybe you won’t ever need it, but that way, you’ll have it,” my friend told me on the day he suggested it to me.

He was very excited, he had gotten his license to help his father, who’d had an accident and couldn’t drive now because he had broken his leg in a fall and had had to get a cast. As he could not take time off work, his son had to take him there and bring him home every day in the car.

Santiago, the friend in question, encouraged me. He was the only person in my generation I knew who had a driving license.

Up to that point, it had only been something that our fathers did, and not even all of them, only those who needed it for their jobs like mine, who had to go to La Coruña or Madrid now and again, and they’d had to buy one for that reason. The truth is though that he didn’t really like driving, and the car spent the vast majority of its time sitting parked outside, next to the door of the house, getting wet.

“Manuel, the car spends so much time in the rain that someday it’ll start sprouting branches,” my mother would say to my father from time to time.

“Well, let’s see if a tomato plant grows and we can have tomatoes for salad,” he joked.

One Saturday afternoon, I went with Santiago for a drive as we didn’t have class, and he let me take the wheel so I could see that there was nothing to it. I started to like it and that made me decide to learn, out of curiosity more than anything else, to see how I would do.

When I had it “Mastered,” as Santi put it, I decided to tell my family, even though I was pretty certain they were going to say no, and ask me why I wanted to.

“Dad, I want to get a driver’s license,” I said one day when we were all sitting at the table.

“Are you going to buy a car?” Chelito asked immediately. “With what money? What do you want it for?”

“Hold on a minute,” said Mom, “what’s brought this on son? Why do you want a car? What you have to do is just think about your studies, that’s your most important business for now.”

“Mom, it’s to ride around with his girlfriend,” Tono immediately said mockingly.

“Quiet everyone,” said my father, “Manu, what did you say? I didn’t hear you properly.”

And before I could continue, my sister Carmen said:

“Well, I think you should do it. You never know what awaits you in life, and having it can’t hurt.”

My father, who always listened to Carmen because, as he said, “She was the wise one in the family,” asked her:

“Do you think it’s good to have it?”

“Sure Dad,” my sister laughed, “it’s hardly going to be a bad thing.”

Then with an angry tone, Mom said:

“So do I have no say on the matter? After all, I’m only the mother,” she said.

Carmen, who was sitting beside her, kissed her and said:

“Mom, if he’s told us it’s because he’s already decided, it’ll only be a matter of time before he does it.”

“I already know how to drive,” I said quietly.

“You see Mom, what did I tell you?” Carmen said to my mother, “I could tell.”

“But son, how can that be?” my father asked me. “You haven’t let me teach you.”

“Look Dad! I wanted to know if I would like it and if I was able to learn it, because at first it seemed really difficult. First of all, you wouldn’t believe how much of a struggle it was fitting my long legs into that small space.”

“Don’t grow so much,” Tono laughed, “look what happens.”

“Well, it’s not like I wanted to grow so much, but you, you’ll see, it’s already happening to you. As you keep eating you’ll grow to be as big as me, or bigger,” I answered.

“What are you saying? Wait, are you telling me that I have to stop eating? Because I’ll die in that case. You know what? I’m going to keep eating and if I grow, I can take it.” He fell silent and continued eating.

“Okay, stop fooling around and tell me, why have you made that decision? Don’t tell me it’s not strange, instead of studying. I see that you waste your time when you’re not at home,” my father was telling me, indeed quite angrily.

“Listen Dad! A friend has a driver’s license and now he helps his father by taking him to work, because he’s had a fall and broken his ankle and his leg is in a cast and he’s in no state to be driving, so my friend has had to get a driver’s license and take his father wherever he needs to go.”

“Uh-huh,” said my father, very seriously, “but I’ve not broken my leg, why do you need it? I believe when you can’t walk, you should stay at home to rest in your armchair, because this way the broken bone will fuse back together better.”

I was going to continue with my arguments, although I was not sure I could convince him, when Carmen interrupted me.

“Wait,” she said, “Dad, look, let him get it, but on one condition.”

“What condition?” said my father, looking at her with a stern look on his face.

“That he get better grades this year and never take the car without your permission,” she added.

“That’s all?” said my mother. “He would take the car whenever he wanted. Out of the question! I’m strongly against it. The car belongs to your father and only he touches it.”

“Hold on!” said my father. “Now that I’m thinking about it, I don’t think it’s a bad idea, that way when I’m old he can take me for long walks.”

“Dad!” said Chelito, “you don’t need a car to walk the streets.”

“Love, I didn’t exactly say through the streets, he can take me to La Coruña or sometimes to Sanxenxo, to the beach, when I’ve retired.”

“I see!” she said, “and why would you want to go to Sanxenxo alone without us?”

“Well, I’ll explain later,” said my father. “Look Manu, alright, I’ll let you get it, but you have to promise me you’ll always go slowly. I have three sons and I want to keep them for a long time.”

“What about us?” said Chelito.

“Well, you’re both daughters, are you not?” said my father with a smile, which I took as an indicator that the tension had passed, and I could breathe easy and start eating. I hadn’t eaten anything yet, not even a spoonful of that delicious food I had on my plate, which my mother had made and which smelled so good.

“I’ll foot the bill!” said my grandfather, who until that moment had been silent listening to us all.

“You?” said my grandmother in surprise, “with what expenses? Keep quiet you and get on with your dinner.”

“Well that’s going to cost a few pesetas,” my grandfather added.

I sat there not knowing what to say. The truth is that I hadn't thought about that, because I was only asking for permission, but I'd not decided to do it yet. I assumed they wouldn't give me their permission, at best they would say that I could get it in the future.

My mother, unable to contain herself anymore, spoke up, saying:

"Have you all lost your minds? The boy comes up with some nonsense, and now you all support him. What he has to do is focus on his studies, and drop all these unnecessary flights of fancy, because if he neglects them now, what will he ask for next? And of course if we give it to him, what happens to the others? What kind of an example is he setting for his brothers and sisters?"

"Don't get upset Mom," said Chelito, "I'm not going to ask you to let me drive, it's too difficult. I've watched Dad when he's doing it, and he has to keep looking at the road for the whole time, and doing things with his hands and his feet at the same time. He can't even talk so he won't be distracted, like he always tells us."

"Right!" said my father, "no more talk on the subject, you can get it, and you Dad, we'll talk about that. I don't think you should bear that expense; we'll see where we can get the money from."

My mother was going to protest again, but she looked at my father and continued eating, but with a scowl on her face, which made it clear that she did not agree.

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It was my first solo trip. I had already been on one trip behind the wheel with my father at my side. For the first one, we went to La Coruña. He had to do some paperwork and he wanted me to show him how I drove. He was very nervous, but he saw that I was good at driving defensively, well, for a rookie.

"Manu, I'm sure I'll get there quicker if I get out and continue on foot," he said at a certain point, trying to put on a forced smile, to disguise the tremendous nerves that were clearly plaguing him.

"Dad, I don't want to rush," I answered, because I wanted to conceal my fear that he didn't like how I was driving, and he wouldn't let me do it again.

"No, you're doing well, going like this we're sure to get there tomorrow, but it's better late than never," he answered, "we're not in a hurry."

"What if I pressed down on the gas pedal a little more?" I asked softly to see what he would say.

"Well, a little bit, yes," he answered me, although it was obvious by his voice that he was still nervous. I also looked at him out of the corner of my eye, and saw that he was clutching the seat so tightly, that I thought, "If he continues on like this, he's gonna break it for sure," but surely that gave him peace of mind and that's why he did it.

I was so careful on the gas pedal that it wasn't even perceptible. I was putting my foot down at times, but because my feet are so big, I was afraid that at some point, I would press on it too much and the car would go faster than it should.

"You have to be more relaxed," said my father, "you'll end up breaking the steering wheel with how tightly you're gripping it, and stop looking in the rear-view mirror all the time, don't you see that nobody is behind you?"

With my fear rising, I answered:

"But if I don't look, I won't know if anyone is following us, and I can't let them pass."

"Well, look at it from time to time," he added patiently.

When we were arriving in La Coruña, he told me:

"Pull into the curb, carefully and then stop, but first hit the turn signal. Never forget that little detail. That's how you warn whoever is behind you, so they can be mindful of your maneuver."

I did it and he got out of the car. I didn't know why, but he came around the vehicle to the door at my side. Opening it he said:

"Son, let me do it. I don't trust the streets of the city, it's more dangerous here, although I have to admit you're not doing badly at all."

I got out and changed my seat. That was my first big trip. I felt such fear! Such nerves! But I managed to take him and get there without any problems. That was the important thing. Of course I don't know how much my mother would be praying at home until she saw us appear, because she knew that I was going to be the one driving and she didn't trust me.

CHAPTER 4.

“How could my father have let me take that trip?” Remembering that long ago day, I still wonder to this day. He has always been very cautious and has never let us do anything that could be risky. Even if I had to hammer a nail into the wall, he would say:

“Give it here! I’ll do it, surely you’ll hit your finger with the hammer.”

“Honey!” said my mother whenever she would hear him, “if you don’t teach him, he’ll never know how to do anything.”

“He’ll learn when he’s a grown-up,” he said smiling.

“But Dad, when will I be a grown-up in your eyes? I’m taller than you, and I’m almost two meters tall,” I would say when I heard him say that I wasn’t old enough to do something yet.

“Well, the fact that you’re tall doesn’t mean that you’re a grown-up, that’s not the same thing,” he would answer me. The conversation would be over and he wouldn’t explain anything further to me.

“Gramps! When was my father a grown-up?” I once asked my grandfather.

“Ah, have we reached this point already? Seems to me that I’m the grown-up here,” he answered jokingly.

“Well, if Dad’s not old enough, I’m screwed. I’m never going to be grown-up,” I said.

“And why do you want to be a grown-up so badly?” my grandmother, who was there and who had been listening to us, asked me.

“Well, so I can do stuff without anyone telling me that I can’t, because I’m not old enough,” I answered very seriously.

“Ah, that’s why? Then, you’ll never be old enough. There will always be someone by your side to tell you that, even if it’s the youngest among us, like Chelito. Don’t you see how she talks to me sometimes? Telling me not to carry my bag, and she takes it from me, and then she scolds me as if I were a little girl.”

“Nana, she does that for your own good, so you don’t hurt yourself, but that doesn’t mean you’re not old enough,” I said to my grandmother.

“Are you calling me old?” she asked me, getting herself worked up.

“No, why would I call you that?” Since I did not like the way the conversation was going, I dropped it, but I did not agree that I could never be a grown-up. I was older than the twins and Chelito, why didn’t anyone want to acknowledge it?

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Now, driving on my own, sitting at the wheel, traveling kilometer after kilometer, I did feel older, but what had it brought to my life? I don’t think it brought me any gains, it had only brought me problems. Well, it’s not that I can complain, but, for example, when it was my father who was driving when we were going to the beach, him behind the wheel, my grandfather by his side and the rest of us behind them, my grandmother with Carmen in her lap, Mom with Chelito, me in between the two of them and the two twins in the back of the car, sitting there very quietly, we all had confidence in Dad to get us there and that there was no danger, and we would even fall asleep. Well not everyone, I don’t think Carmen ever did, but I’m not sure, because I certainly did, right from the start of the journey until I heard my mother say:

“Manu, wake up, we’re here.”

What good times those were! Now, despite being tired, falling asleep was not an option. Who would keep me awake? Ah! and more importantly, who would be driving? That’s when I remembered what my father had told me:

“Manu, as soon as you notice that you’re getting tired, stop and get out to stretch your legs, don’t fall asleep at the wheel.”

“Dad!” I replied, “I’m not a little kid who falls asleep anywhere.”

“Listen son! Things are different in the car, with the gentle noise of the engine you can get drowsy and fall asleep without even realizing it.”

“Don’t worry Dad, I’ll be very careful,” I said and he smiled at me, I knew he would.

“Look, I’ve made you a map with the route you have to take,” my father said, showing me a piece of paper he had placed on the table.

“You what now?” I asked. “I already know where I have to go, relax.”

“No! Listen to me, because the journey is so long, I’ve marked where you need stop, so that both you and the car can get some rest,” he insisted.

“The car also gets tired?” asked Carlitos, who was listening very closely to what Dad was telling me, sitting there beside him.

“Yes son!” Dad answered, looking at him. “The car is a machine that has its own needs and if it’s not taken care of, it breaks down and it’s no longer good for anything.”

“Yes, you have to give it gas,” said my brother.

“What? Do you think I don’t know that?” I replied quickly.

“Yes, but on top of gas, there are lots of other things that you have to do to look after it; the mechanics, making sure that everything is good to go, that the air in the tires is alright and so on. You can’t just do whatever you want and you have to rest the engine, because if you don’t, it might overheat,” said my father very seriously. “You, Manu, follow these instructions and you’ll see that you won’t have any problems on your journey.”

“I will Dad, don’t worry, I’ll take good care of it, you’ll see.” “I don’t want to disappoint you, you know that, and if I don’t do it well, I know you won’t let me take the car again.”

“Hmm! That’s why you’d do it? No son, you have to do it for your own safety, so that nothing happens to you. You have to be aware that you’re putting your life in your hands and you can end it, and the lives of others on the road, with a single mistake.”

“Dad, calm yourself, everything will be fine, trust me!” I told him.

“If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t leave you with it. Do you think I want anything to happen to you? No son, never.”

Now that I was thinking about this, I was realizing that I had just passed the signpost for one of the points that my father had indicated to me. I searched for a place to park and stopped there. We had to rest, both the car and I. I would take the opportunity to go for a short walk to stretch my legs and to eat a sandwich that my mother had prepared for me. Fortunately, it had been a while since the rain had stopped falling.

I looked at the papers my father had prepared for me. I hadn’t realized when he gave them to me what was written down at the side. It read: “First stop, Padrón. Think about whether you want to continue son. I’m sure you’re tired, if you turn around now, we’ll say nothing more about it, give it some proper thought son.”

I smiled. I saw that my father thought it was just an impulse, and that I would get tired quickly. I think he still hadn’t realized how stubborn I am when I set out to do something. I had thought out this trip very, very carefully and what it meant, and before deciding to take it, I had been thinking about all of the downsides. When I made the decision, it was already firm and I was not going to back down, so I ate the sandwich and I prepared to continue on with the next stretch of road in one go. I’ll see if I can get to Pontevedra, but my back was already telling me that I’d been sitting for a long time already, so I told myself: “Stick at it and don’t complain, there’s still a long way to go.”

Back on the road, the day was glorious, the countryside was green, and I was becoming increasingly confident behind the wheel. In the distance, I saw people working the fields and I thought, “How can they endure hours and hours like that under the sun or in the rain? I complain about my work as a student, I really don’t appreciate how lucky I am,” and I sent thanks to my parents in a thought, because if they had decided differently for me, now I would be..., I don’t know, working somewhere, in a factory, at sea on a fishing boat, or maybe in the field, for all I know.

I don't know, but I don't imagine it was easy for them to decide that I should study. Yes, I know my father had done it, but with five children, the simplest thing for him to have done would have been to say, "Manu we need one more salary in this house, there are many mouths to feed," but instead, he had said, "Study, so that in the future you can raise your own family with a higher standard of living, without problems, having a good job."

I don't understand much of what they tell me at times, I think because I don't think too much about "Grown-up things," as I call them, but now in the solitude of the car, where I had to make all the decisions, nobody could help me. I had to take a route that was not very good in some sections, but that forced me to be attentive, and if something unexpected happened, I had to make my own decision, I couldn't check with anyone. I felt older, but I think deep down I wasn't prepared to live a more grown-up life yet, everything was very complicated.

The car suddenly started making a weird noise. I didn't take much notice at first, but after a while I started to worry about it.

"What could have happened to it? If he were here, Dad would know what was wrong right away," I told myself. I stopped at the roadside for a short time, and I went down to take a look at the wheels to see if there were any flat tires. I didn't see anything unusual and I got back into the car and continued along the road. The noise continued and I was getting nervous. I opened the window a little more to see what it was, and listened carefully. The noise had stopped, surely not, what could it have been?

I closed the window again, and still the sound was gone. Suddenly I realized, the window had been open just a tiny bit. I opened it just a fraction and the noise started again. What a relief! I'd finally located where that wretched and annoying sound had come from, it was the glass window vibrating when it wasn't fully closed, so I calmed down and continued on the way to my destination, it was still a long way away.

When I was passing through Pontevedra, already having decided that I was going to continue on to Fatima, I still knew that I had a lot of open road ahead of me, but for me, getting as far as I had was already a joy in itself. I felt that I would be able to make it, I was already feeling more confident. I even started to go a little more swiftly, stepping on the gas a little more because before it felt like I was in competition with a turtle. Some of the trees by the side of the road had passed so slowly that I'm almost certain I wouldn't have passed them any faster if I'd been walking.

"Manu, you'll never arrive at this rate, it's one thing to drive with caution and another to go so slowly that it's going to be night time by the time you reach customs and you'll find it closed," I thought at one point.

My legs hurt, I couldn't go any further, but I wanted to reach the point that my father had indicated. He had calculated the route and divided it into stages, so that I could rest every so often and he had warned me, saying:

"Every time you stop, look at the little fuel needle. You should never neglect it, if you don't give the car a drink, it'll leave you stranded and you won't be able to continue."

I made it an obsession. I looked and looked at the little needle, and since I didn't see it change, I wondered, "What if it's broken and it leaves me high and dry in the middle of nowhere? Even though I have some names here, I don't know how far I am from any town."

Finally, I saw a sign that filled me with joy: "Spanish Border." Why would it say that? Everyone passing this way on this side of the border already knows they're on Spanish soil, it's obvious that it's the border of Spain. At last I had reached it, I was about to enter Portugal. I assumed that they would also announce that we were at the "Border of Portugal" on their side, and I thought, "What now? Nothing Manu, just go ahead." When I handed my papers to the border guard, he looked at me and asked me if I was going alone.

As the question surprised me, I must have had a strange expression on my face or something, because he immediately asked me:

“Is der someting wrong frien?”

But since I didn’t understand him very well, I had to ask him to repeat himself, and I asked him:

“Where are you from? You’re not Galician are you?”

He laughed and told me he was Andalusian:

“No, not Galician.”

“From where?” I asked, out of courtesy, aware of how many hours they spend there alone.

“From a real’ small town called Roquetas del Mar in da province of Almeria,” he replied.

I tried to remember, because at that moment I couldn’t quite recall where it was, but it seemed to me that it was in the South so I said:

“You’re kind of far from home.”

“Der’s a funny side to what dey command,” he said in his peculiar accent.

“And what’s that?” I asked him.

“Well, for dat reason, sendin’ me to the other side of the country, der’s nowhere funder away, what dya tink?” he said looking annoyed.

“You’ll not be able to see your family often then,” I said, because I didn’t know what else I could talk to him about.

“What are ye sayin’ man? I’ve been here for two years witout bein’ able to go down, what dya tink ‘o’ dat?”

“What do you mean by go down?” I asked surprised. I wasn’t really getting any of what he was saying.

“Well, jus’ dat, if we’re up here, my land will be down der, come on, I tell ya!”

“I still couldn’t quite understand him with that strange accent, but looking like a prankster, he laughed, and repeated:

“Up and down, it soun’s loike a game for chilren. So, wher are ye goin’? Is it that you’re not satisfoid wit’ Spain and yer off to anoder country? Surely ye don’ know my part of Spain,” he said to me. He seemed to want to keep talking.

“No, you’re right,” I replied.

“Well before ye get goin’ somewhere else, maybe you should get to know our own place. Look, I’m not one for showin’ off, but there ain’t nothin’ like my Andalusia.”

And he kept talking and talking. Uncertain about how to get out of this, my gut was telling me, “He’s not going to tire of this and let me continue on my way.”

And he went on saying to me:

“Why dontya take the cer and make for Andalusia? You’ll see such lan’scapes and places that they don’ have der in Portugal.”

“Do you know Portugal?” I asked him.

“Not at all, mid-air!” he told me. “What for? I’m satisfoid enough wit’ Spain and I’d loike to get to know da whole ting, I was at anoder border post for five yers.”

“Where?” I asked trying to be polite.

“Well, it wer real’ different from dis, der was no way to rest der, trucks and cers were always passin’ by, and they never stop comin’ even at lunchtime.”

“But where was it?” I asked again.

“On da French boarder, Hendaye it were called, such a cute name,” he replied.

“But I’m sure it’s better here,” I said.

“Yes, true dat, I can certainly assure ye, and listen, I love it so much I’ve even married one ‘o’ ya,” the man was telling me.

“Really?” I said a little incredulous. “How did you manage that? Well, Galician girls are known far and wide, when it comes to sweetness, no one beats them, they have that reputation.”

“And dis one is, so I couldn’t let her get away,” he said to me very excitedly.

As it was clear that he wasn't going to stop, because I think what was going on was that he was bored and had found a captive audience to listen to him, I said:

"Hey, how far is it from here to Lisbon?"

"You're going there?" he asked me surprised. "Well a good ole long way, and why are ye going der?"

I was getting tired of people asking me that and I must have frowned at him.

He noticed and returned the documents to me, adding:

"Sorry for me lack 'o' tact. Bye. Be careful on da road now ye hear? And remember dat der in Portugal, dey fine ye for everyting, have a good day."

"I'm sure they will if I do something wrong, but I don't intend to. Thanks, I'll be very careful," and with that I left.

Already a little more confident, I continued until I arrived at Fatima, with nothing else in my head but the matter that had brought me there: to find something here that I was looking for.

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I had gotten up early. I didn't need to touch the alarm clock. My body clock, as they call it, was accurate. When it reached five o'clock, I already had one eye open, although when it was a holiday or I was on vacation and didn't have to do anything, I stayed in bed a little longer.

That never stopped me from being an early riser though, that has been my habit since my student days, when I would get up to spend some time reviewing the lessons we had in advance so I could attend having recently read them.

I have subsequently continued to do the same thing in life, because whenever I've had to do something, when I start it early, it seems that I get more out of the day. I also had the habit of taking a siesta after lunch, only for half an hour, but enough to rest and get up with new strength for everything that I had left to do that day.

Before leaving the guest house, I would have a fleeting breakfast, something I had learned how to do the day before. They told me that it didn't matter that I was going out at such early hours, that they always left some cookies and a coffee pot with warm coffee prepared in case anyone ever needed it, as well as a jug of cold milk, in case they didn't want to drink the coffee black.

They also let me know where I could find it, because it wasn't in the dining room, since it was still closed at that time. It was down a hallway, toward the middle of it. There was a broad area there, it looked as if it had been built specifically for that purpose.

I headed for that hallway very early and I immediately saw the table all set up. It was round, the kind of table they call a Camilla table. It was covered with red fabric and a white tablecloth, with a brazier underneath it to keep everything warm. On top of it, in one corner, was the coffee pot and next to it, a jug of milk covered with a crocheted doily, those that I knew well from my grandmother's house, work that she loved. There were little pieces she had made throughout her whole house. Well, they were in mine as well, because on every birthday she managed to bring a new one, for a coffee table or to throw over a chair, saying that the one we had was already very worn.

I took a glass from among those that were sitting there upside down on a tray and I poured myself a coffee, and then a little milk and two teaspoons of sugar, as was my habit. I never took a coffee without them, even though it made Chelito say that I was the greediest in the house. I took two cookies and drank my coffee, almost in a single mouthful. It went down so well, so warm, then I left nibbling at the cookies.

I went out into the street and saw no one there. It didn't surprise me at that hour, everyone would be asleep. What's more, the door could only be opened from the inside, so there was no need for anyone to be on duty, people could only leave, no one could enter.

I opened it very carefully so as not to make any noise. I didn't want to disturb anyone, and I thought, "What if I want to get back inside, how would I manage that?" but I immediately dismissed

the idea. “Such folly, this is exactly what I wanted, to see everything quiet at this time, with not a soul to bother me, because everyone will be sleeping and the place will be empty.”

I found myself on the street. A drizzling rain was falling, and I said to myself, “Well, it doesn’t matter, I know this kind of rain, it’s like ours in Santiago,” and I set out on my morning stroll.

I wandered about the streets a little absentmindedly. As I had imagined, the place was empty. It was still dark and there were barely any lights on. There were some, but they were so far apart from one another that I had to be very careful not to stumble over any stones that might be on the road that I would be unable to see. I didn’t want any surprises, so what was I thinking coming out so early? But it was too late to worry about that now.

As I was so distracted, I stepped in a big puddle, of course it was impossible to see anything, and I said to myself, “Well that’s a bad start,” but I continued walking. I could hardly stay there in the middle of it.

I went to a wider place, and I noticed that the ground was already much better, it was firmer and at least I could walk without having to take so much care.

A ray of light was creeping into the sky; it was already beginning to dawn. I was distracted contemplating that early morning light, we never really appreciate such things. It’s so important to be able to see and when we have enough light for it, we take it for granted and we don’t take it very seriously, but we sometimes have to see how difficult things can be when we lack enough light to see properly in order to appreciate it.

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I don’t know how long I was wandering around, but I certainly remember something that happened to me. In an instant I clearly saw three children there almost beside me, running around among some rocks. I looked more closely. There were two girls, one older than the other, and the other, who had quickly crouched down to hide, I couldn’t see properly.

It seemed very strange that they would be there at all, but I looked at them carefully, what strange clothes they were wearing, but I kept watching their games. Then came out the kid who had hidden behind the rock, and he was a boy. He said something funny and was laughing. I certainly didn’t hear it, but judging by the faces of the two girls, it must have been something they didn’t like.

I was still perplexed, watching what they were doing. I didn’t understand where they had come from, if I had been there alone and the entire place had been empty just a moment ago.

The three of them stopped near the biggest rock, and I saw the smallest of them, who from her face was clearly on the verge of tears, looking at her feet. That made me also look to see what had happened to her, and I could see that she had no shoe on one of them, she was only wearing what I assumed must have been her sock.

Approaching her and putting her hand on her shoulder, the older girl said something into her ear, and I saw how the little girl’s face changed. They both sat on the ground, and the older girl took off her shoe or slipper, I don’t know what to call it. They looked very unusual, very old, like those worn by people from the countryside. They had laces that were tied over the instep. I watched as the older girl took off her own, and gave it to the younger girl, who put it on, tied the laces and then ran away happily.

The boy then approached the stone where he had been hiding earlier, and pulled out something from behind it that I couldn’t really see at that moment. When he gave it to the older girl, I saw that it was the little girl’s shoe. With that little slipper in her hand, she called after her and I was amazed to hear her call her “Jacinta.”

What was going on? Surely it couldn’t be? But I was sure I’d heard it, it had not been my imagination.

I suddenly snapped back to reality. I was sitting on some rocks on a lonely path, but the sun was already breaking through the clouds and making its way past them. The rain had stopped and I

could clearly see my surroundings full of puddles of the water that had been falling throughout the night, but the brightness of the sun indicated that today would be a good day.

Astonished and confused about what had just happened to me, I rubbed my eyes, and looked over at that place again, but there was nothing, only empty rocks and puddles on the ground. There was no one around, because I looked over at it several times.

There was nowhere for those children to hide, there was nothing there that all three of them could have hidden behind, the countryside around me was still empty. I was sitting there alone, confused, thinking about what I had just witnessed.

I couldn't believe it, what could have happened to me? Right there in front of me, those children... What had just happened? I couldn't understand it, they had suddenly disappeared as quickly as they had appeared earlier and departed as if it had all been a dream. From where I was, sitting on a big stone, alone, I looked around and saw that there was no one.

The countryside spread out on all sides waiting for the sun to rise. I noticed the smell of wet grass, but nothing more, no trace of those little ones who I had been able to observe running around right there right next to me only a moment ago.

I got up from my makeshift seat, and took a few steps. I wanted to understand what had happened, nothing seemed out of place, nothing appeared to have changed, but, what about... Yes, given what I'd just seen, where were all the other stones? I had seen more stones around this one, I think the largest was about the same size as the one I had been sitting on, the one behind which the boy had hidden.

Everything had been so real, I couldn't believe it. I was... I wasn't scared, no, I would sooner say... exhilarated, filled with such a strange feeling, and at the same time so... I don't know how I could describe it, but I did feel a desire to repeat it again.

Hesitating, I thought "What do I do?" and between fearful and cautious, I sat down on the stone once again, this time making sure my eyes were wide open.

I saw how the sun's rays were approaching and the light of the new day was overwhelming the place. That made me feel a little more at ease.

"Now I'm ready," I thought, "let's see what happens?" I don't know how long I sat there, entertained watching the drops of water shimmer on the little blades of grass that were growing near my feet, and nothing happened, nothing at all. I waited for another little while, which seemed never-ending. The sun was now shining on my face and I decided to leave it.

I was already beginning to hear some noises. Perhaps they had already been there, but I hadn't registered them. A rooster could be heard singing in the distance, and smiling I said to myself, "That bird must have gone back to sleep, what sort of time is this to warn that the sun is rising? It's already been up for ages." I continued walking along the still deserted path, when I saw two men in the distance, coming from the opposite direction, with some beasts of burden.

Surely they must be going to work and I thought, "What will they think of me? They'll wonder what I'm doing here," and without giving it any more thought, I greeted them as they passed:

"Bon día."

They returned my greeting in the same manner and nothing more. It was the dog that accompanied them that wanted to be noticed, and spent a good amount of time barking, until one of the men, who must have been its owner, scolded it and it fell silent, and silence returned to the place, although only for a short time. The birds were already fluttering about, and even a child could be heard crying, surely that was his way of asking for his breakfast.

That was when I decided to go to the site of the apparitions. The weather was looking good and I wouldn't have any problems getting there, but as I was lost in thought, turning what had just happened to me over and over in my mind, I didn't realize that I was no longer alone and I was surprised to hear there beside me that someone was asking me a question:

"Are you going to Mass? If you don't go a little quicker, you'll be late."

I came out of my thoughtful state, and saw two ladies hurriedly overtaking me, so I didn't have time to answer them as they continued on their way.

I thought to myself, "Do I look like I'm on my way to church? They could hardly be more wrong. Of course there were not many other places that they might think I was going to wandering around here."

I spent the rest of my time walking around, I wanted to see those places that I almost knew already because I had read so much about them. They had of course changed a great deal since the events had actually occurred. The passage of time is certainly not forgiving.

Instead of having deteriorated as usually happens at other sites, what had happened here is that many of them now had new structures.

I walked slowly, I wanted to feel the air, to smell what they smelled, I wanted to try to relive what I had seen and maybe to understand it.

As time passed, I grew more confused. I certainly did not doubt that what had happened to me had been real. But why me? I don't believe in any of that, I just want to find evidence to prove that it was all a lie, that someone had orchestrated something that still evades my understanding and that tricked some innocent kids, so how could I possibly have seen them if two of them died a long time ago? From what I've since discovered, the third kid also died many years ago, although I have to study that controversy more thoroughly to see if I can clarify anything from it.

I suddenly noticed a sensation in my stomach, and when that happens to me, I know it's my body warning me, and I feel that it's telling me, "Manu, it's time to eat, and if you don't, you can't go on much further."

I was surprised. I didn't think it was so late. I headed back to my accommodation, and when I entered through the door, the owner came toward me when he saw me.

"Hey there!" he said and immediately asked me: "What happened to you this morning? My wife put out breakfast on your table and seeing that time passed and you didn't come down, she was alarmed that something might have happened to you, so she made me go up to your room."

"It's strange that he's fallen asleep until so late," she said to me very seriously. "Go and see if he's alright, or if he needs anything."

"I protested though. I told her that when you arrived last night, you were clearly very tired, but she insisted so much that I had to go open your door, and what a surprise I got when I saw your room was empty. When I got back down I told her, 'He's not in his room, could he have left without paying?'"

"Has the bed been slept in? Has he taken his things?"

"Well, I don't know what else she would have went on asking me if I hadn't cut her off, reassuring her saying, yes he's slept in it, it shows in the bed, and he's left a bag on the chair, I suppose it must be his."

"Oh good! What a fright," she said, calming down a little."

"But a fright from what? Come on, don't be silly," I told her, "he'll have gone out early, he'll be one of those people who like to get up early to see the sun rise," I said, thinking you'd be around here somewhere nearby."

"Come on! If he'd opened the window and ran off, I would have seen him leave without having to get out of my bed," she answered."

I interrupted him at that point and asked him:

"Don't tell me I can see the sunrise from my bed?"

"Yes," he said very seriously, "and where did you have breakfast?"

he asked me with a tone in which I noticed his concern. I kept talking:

"Well, you were right, I went to see what the dawn was like, but tomorrow I'll watch it from my bed, which is more comfortable and that way I won't get cold, because this morning the air froze my face," I was saying with the intention of ending the chat so I could go on up to my room.

“You have to be careful, when the breeze blows here, you really feel it. Alright, but you’ve not answered me yet,” he said very seriously.

“Answered what?” I asked in surprise. I didn’t know at that moment what he was referring to.

“Where did you have breakfast?” he asked in a worried tone.

“Well, I haven’t had it yet, although... Ah yes!” I remembered at that moment, “I had some coffee and some cookies before I left,” I answered, smiling to calm him down.

“What did you say? Come eat quickly, you must be starving.”

Almost pushing me, he led me to the dining room. I glanced around and saw that there were two ladies sitting there despite how late it was, and they were talking to the man’s wife, the other owner.

“Excuse me,” he said as soon as we entered, “this man comes hungry, you have to take care of him.”

Apologizing to the two ladies who were there eating something that I couldn’t identify, his wife turned around and went into what I assumed must have been the kitchen.

“Good morning! Excuse me,” I said, “what is it that you’re eating there? It smells so good”

Looking at me, one of them answered with a smile:

“And it tastes even better, believe me.”

I went to sit at a table close to where they were seated. The rest of the dining room was empty and I didn’t want to be so alone. I’d been on my own the whole time I’d been walking around without talking to anyone and I wasn’t going to clear up many questions that way. I saw that they’d not minded that I had sat close to them, so once I sat down I asked them:

“So where are you both from?”

“From Spain, well from Madrid,” replied the one who seemed older.

“I never would have guessed,” I replied, “you speak Portuguese very well.”

“And where are you from? You don’t seem like you’re from around here either,” she asked me.

“No, I’m not from Portugal, I’m Galician, from Santiago de Compostela,” I answered.

“Also Spanish, well you can’t tell, you also speak Portuguese very well.”

“Well, it’s easier for us to learn, it’s almost the same as our Galician, but you speak it very well, and I think having understood that you’re from Madrid, that’s quite unusual,” I said.

Looking at me, they both said at the same time:

“We’ve come here so many times.”

We all laughed at the coincidence.

“But you don’t learn the language just by visiting a place,” I said when the laughter had died down.

“No, of course not, that’s true, but when one has an interest in the things that have happened in that place, it’s best to learn how they speak in order to find out more about those things, wouldn’t you agree?” the older one asked me, trying to engage in a bit of chat, or so it seemed to me.

“Are you here alone?” the lady who appeared to be the younger of the two then asked.

“I am,” I answered a little surprised by her question.

She turned to me and said, “You can eat with us, if you feel like it.”

“No, don’t worry, I don’t want to bother you.”

“No, you wouldn’t be bothering us at all, it would be better. That way we can talk a little. Well, if you don’t mind.”

I got up and was changing table when the lady came out of the kitchen. She was holding a steaming dish in her hands and when she saw me she said:

“You’re changing table? What’s wrong? Did you not like the one you were sitting at?” and she stood there with the dish in her hands.

“It’s just that these ladies have invited me to join them so that I wouldn’t be sitting alone, is it a problem?” I asked.

“No,” she said, smiling, “that way would be better, I’ve never liked eating alone either.”

She set down the plate that she had brought out for me. I looked at it and I saw that there were vegetables with an exquisite smell, but I also looked at the plates that were sitting in front of the two ladies and asked:

“What about what they had? Is there any left?” and I pointed to the dish that was in front of the lady next to me.

“Don’t worry, when you finish your soup, I’ll bring you a big helping of cod with cream,” she said smiling, “it seems you’re eager, that’s good.”

“Did you say cod with cream? How bizarre! I’ve never heard of that.”

“Yes, but don’t you like cod?” she asked me a little surprised.

“Is that what they’re eating?” I asked, looking back at their plates.

“Yes, that’s the cod with cream,” she said.

“I’ve never tried it, but it looks delicious, and given how hungry I am today, I would eat it no matter what it was.”

“Of course!” she said with a slight tone of annoyance, “says he to whom it occurs to go out without any breakfast.”

“Ah, so you’ve not had any breakfast today?” the older lady asked me, “I’ve had so much that I can hardly move. You’ve served us a truly delicious breakfast. I can’t imagine anyone refusing anything we had in front of us, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,” she said, looking at the owner:

“Tomorrow, please just a coffee with milk, otherwise you’re going to make me fat,” she fell silent and kept eating.

Not even a minute had passed when she said:

“How can this be so scrumptious?”

Once the meal was finished, I thought I’d go and lie down for a little while as I usually do, but it turned out to be impossible. The post-meal conversation lasted until well into the afternoon. When the owner of the place finished serving us food, she brought us a coffee each, and asked for permission to have her coffee with us. The three of us had said:

“Be our guest!”

I was actually quite surprised, what confidence! As she sat, she said:

“I don’t like to drink coffee alone and now that nobody needs me, would you mind if I spend some free time here with you?”

“Not at all,” said the older lady, “sometimes we need to rest and you must have been on your feet all morning non-stop, with so much hustle and bustle.”

“Yes, as I am every day,” she answered, “it never stops here, although less people have been coming recently, probably because of the rain.”

I was keen to finish and leave, so I started to get up and said:

“Well, I’ll leave you for now.”

“No,” the three of them said, “stay a little while longer, the company will be good for you too, because I’ve seen that you came alone,” the owner of the place added.

I sat back down a little disgruntled, but the feeling dissipated immediately, as soon as I heard the older lady saying to the owner:

“Now that you’re no longer rushing about, we could talk for a while, and you can tell us things you’ve heard in passing.”

I opened my eyes and thought, “Well, this is surely the kind of thing I came looking for,” and I kept quiet to see what would become of the subject.

The owner, as a decent small-town resident, and without the intention of offending anyone, liked to gossip about what went on in her town. She began to talk and talk, she knew a lot and she knew everything first-hand. She was not one of those people who tell you that they found something out, or that they’ve been told something. No, she had seen it, she had experienced it, and she told us so much, that I couldn’t keep up. I was so happy, here I had the subject I wanted, first-hand experiences.

“Well, since I don’t know what you’ll know about all of this, I’m going to refer to something you might not know, because nobody outside the town knows about it,” she began.

She told us so many things that she spent all afternoon talking without realizing it, and we’d sat there listening to her spellbound.

At a certain point, when the lady got up to bring a jug of water and some glasses, I said to the other two ladies:

“What she’s telling us is so interesting, right?”

“Yes, yes,” they said at the same time, “she always knows how to make us happy, that’s why we come here whenever we can, we spend a few days, and she lets us know everything that’s happened.

I looked at them carefully, both had a calm countenance, as if reflecting a great inner peace, which surprised me and I asked them both:

“So what is it that you’re looking for in such a place?”

The question must have sounded funny to them, and I have no idea why, because they both started laughing.

“And where could we go that’s better?” they both said at the same time.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I answered a little surprised.

“Look, in life we all go where we enjoy, and since we came for the first time, many years ago now, we haven’t stopped coming. It’s as if we recharge our batteries here, to be able to get on with our lives, until the next time we can get back here, for another short while.”

“It’ll be because of how well they feed you here, as you said before,” I said to them taking what they had just said to me as a bit of a joke.

“No son, that’s only a very small part of what one can find here, food for the body. Okay yes, we’re not going to deny that, but the best thing that can be found here does not enter through the mouth, it enters the body through all of our pores. It’s something inexplicable, something that you have to feel yourself, one can’t put it into words, one must experience that to continue living. That being said, don’t think of it as just a lovely thing that two lonely old women tell you. We’ve seen that so many events have happened here to different people, that we wouldn’t have enough time to tell you about them even if we were telling you for a whole month straight, right Mam?” they asked the owner, who came back to the table at that point to sit with us.

“What were you talking about? Although I can imagine the subject. If you knew what happens around here, I’m sure you would be coming back as they do,” she told me very seriously.

“But what you say happens here, what is it specifically? Or is it something so personal that it can’t be shared,” I asked quietly to see how they would respond.

“No, not at all, we don’t have secrets here, because we’ve seen that by sharing this stuff, what one person experiences can help others, I’ve been sharing this with everyone I know for years. Many people come here without knowing anything other than the fact that something happened long ago, with the sole intention of taking a look around, and they find themselves fully immersed in something so important that it changes their lives. And don’t think that’s an exaggeration, we’ve seen it happen many times.”

The husband entered at that moment and said in a surprised tone:

“Wait, your conversation is still going on? Well I’m sorry to have to tell you that it’s time to start making dinner. You’ll have to leave the chat for another time.”

Standing up, his wife told us:

“I’ll prepare this in half an hour. Don’t worry, no one will be going without dinner,” and she quickly left for the kitchen.

I took advantage of the pause to ask the husband: “What do you think about all of this?”

“Son, what do I think? I think it’s all good.”

“That’s all?” I asked a little disappointed by his succinct response.

“Look, there is something here, I don’t doubt it, but it’s something that everyone has to find for themselves. What I’ve found wouldn’t benefit you, just as what you might find wouldn’t benefit me.”

“But what is there to be found?” I asked him to find out what he was talking about. “I would imagine that only those who come looking for something will find it.”

“Well, I can tell you,” said the older lady, “that it does all of us some good, because good things never come amiss in this life.”

As I saw that nothing further would be forthcoming, I told them:

“I’m going to my room for a while. I’ll be back in time for dinner,” and I said goodbye.

I had to rest, even if it was only for a few minutes. My head was bursting with so much information. I couldn’t believe how I had gotten into this situation. Nothing had shed any light on what had happened to me, but I had been able to verify that I was not the only one who had experienced something strange around here, and I certainly had to look into it more closely.

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A bullet passed me by, almost grazing me. At that point I thought I couldn’t run any further, my legs were refusing to keep going, but it forced me to decide, I had to keep going, I could not let them reach me, my life depended on those moments.

But what was going on? Why would someone want to kill me? All I was doing was looking for information. If I wasn’t stepping on anyone’s toes, who would be so upset with me? Besides, most of what I was looking at was already in the public domain. I had only gone somewhere to verify that this was true. Of course, if I’d done it quietly from home, without verifying all of this, no one would ever have known.

I kept going over the question in my head, who was I bothering so much that whoever it was had to stoop to this? This must be a last resort, to kill someone, because, although they hadn’t hit me, I don’t believe anyone shoots at people just for fun. Surely they wanted to get me out of the way, it’s insane how serious these Italians are, how easy it is for them to pull the trigger, because I don’t believe they’re all in the mafia.

I have only been moving among “good” people, people from the Vatican or in some religious bookstore and I don’t think there’s much chance that there are thugs moving in those circles. How then can this pursuit and this eagerness to get me out of the way be explained, to even go so far as to use weapons to do so?

What secrets lie behind all of this? Every time I make a move, to ask a question, even to a bookseller, it seems that the information reaches someone who does not want me to find the true answer. How else could they locate me so fast?

Running as I was, I saw a taxi, it had just stopped and a man was getting out. I immediately asked the driver:

“Is this taxi free?” and without waiting for an answer, as soon as I got inside, I instructed him, “Alla stazione Termini veloce.”

The taxi driver was somewhat taken aback, but he started the car and we left the area. I looked back, and right then I saw the two men who had been following me, watching the taxi drive away. They stood there with faces full of disappointment, but I could also see the menacing gesture that one of them was directing toward me, I think he was sure that I was watching them.

Because of how easy it had been for them to take out the gun and shoot at me, despite the fact that I had been in the middle of the street, even though there was no one else around, I deduced that they were unscrupulous thugs, and that they would not be satisfied with having lost me. If they were used to getting rid of someone on request, they would be getting paid for it, and they would not let their quarry escape, which in those moments was apparently me.

When I felt that my entire body was hurting, I shifted in the seat, a sure result of that unexpected chase I had just been given. I tried to reassure myself, and I started to look out the window. Then I thought, “The most logical thing to do, if I want to escape and leave Rome, is to head to that station,

but with a little thought, they'll also come to that same conclusion. I can't make it so easy for them... What should do I do?" but nothing came to me, I was still too rattled to be able to come up with a clear solution.

Suddenly it came to me, I couldn't go back to pick up my things from where I was staying either, because it was as I was leaving there that I noticed for the first time that they were following me. They would surely assume that I would have to return there, so I decided not to go back. All in, I had only left my toiletries and the shirt I'd brought on the trip, all wrinkled and sweaty, it wasn't much of a loss. Well, there was the travel bag, but I didn't have any special attachment to it, nor was it valuable, I could abandon it there.

I made a mental review to see if I had left anything else, but no, nothing that was worth putting my life on the line for. I remembered that there were also the pajamas, but I would abandon them there, I was certainly not willing to return to that place.

I'm sure they would go through all of my things. That's what I think spies do, to pick up clues from everything they can, but I didn't have anything else there. I decided not to go back and expose myself to danger for a few unimportant belongings.

When I saw the Pyramid in the distance, I asked the taxi driver to stop. I had regained my bearings, because with the chase I had lost my way and didn't know where I was going, I had just tried to run as fast as I could.

It's a good thing I'm in shape, soccer keeps me healthy and deep down I was grateful for it. I think it was thanks to that that I was saved by the skin of my teeth. When I heard the shot, I had turned in the same way we do during team training: a quick change of position to catch the ball and take a shot at goal with a header. That was what had saved me, because if I hadn't, the bullet would have hit me. Having turned, it passed me, just grazing me.

My body was still consumed with fear when the taxi driver, vexed by my change of destination, stopped. I paid him and said:

"Keep the change and have a good day."

Once I was back outside, the first thing I did was to take a very deep breath, it felt like my lungs were empty and like I had been drowning inside that vehicle. My legs were still trembling and I looked absently at the Pyramid and thought, "It's incredible that there are secrets everywhere. No matter what you look at, we are surrounded by them. Who built the Pyramids of Egypt? What was their function? Why do they have the measurements that they have? Look at the fact that they have been studied for centuries and still no one knows the true reason for such a construction. How would it have occurred to them to build them in that shape, a shape that has enabled them to last for so many centuries? Okay, I'm going to find a place to sit down for a while and I'll have a coffee," I thought.

Looking in that direction, I couldn't see any coffee shops anywhere. There was traffic and I wanted to cross to the other side, where there was a group of people, I did not want to be alone.

Being accompanied, even by strangers, would be safer, because if those guys who had chased me had taken another taxi, to follow me... With that terrifying thought in mind, I turned around and glanced all around me, wanting to identify some indication that would tell me if anyone else had arrived.

They were very conspicuous with their huge raincoats; it must have been part of their uniform. Of course the frightening thing is if they did take them off, I wouldn't recognize them and they would go unnoticed by me, while they did know me, so they would have a clear advantage.

Nothing, my surroundings were empty, there was nowhere nearby where they could have hidden if they had followed me. More calmly, I could cross the road and head over to a bench that I saw in the distance in a small garden. When I arrived, I sat down the way a person collapses after a long race, letting my body slump as if it weighed a ton. At last, I was free from danger, I was almost certain that they hadn't followed me, and that they couldn't find me anymore.

Looking distracted at that Pyramid that I saw in the distance, I kept thinking about the secrets that things hide, and about how we are, the people, some of whom don't care and get on with their lives, while others, for some reason that I don't really understand, are compelled to discover these secrets in the search for explanations. Why? When? Who? And a whole heap of other questions that come up, and how sometimes there is a lot of adversity to overcome to get to the answers.

I was thinking now about the number of explorers who have had the idea of entering a Pyramid. Why? What did they hope to get out of it? I thought about how they don't stop their efforts until they've achieved their goal, leaving their country, their family, facing a thousand setbacks until they see what they once possibly discovered in a book and which caught their attention.

Every search has its origin, like an internal voice that asks questions from deep within. What is it? Why don't you find out? And the listener looks for answers, and not only that, but every time the listener finds an answer, it seems that the call only adds another question and another mystery that has to be resolved.

As if only just becoming aware of where I was, sitting on a bench in a garden, I looked around. A very elderly gardener was beginning to prune some hedges there next to me. He gave me a signal that I understood, that I should move, because he was going to bother me, or rather that I had bothered him, because the branches that he had to cut would fall on the bench where I was sitting. I dare say, could he not have started at the other side? But surely he was thinking, "What is this guy doing here at this time, not letting me work in peace?"

Sensing that I was bothering him, and since I had already rested a little and had calmed down, I got up and gesturing with my hand, I said goodbye to the gardener, leaving him to get on with his work.

I looked both ways before crossing the road and as I saw that no cars were coming, I went back to the side of the Pyramid. I don't know why, but being close to it made me feel at peace.

I felt at that moment as if this place was safe, and while I was there, nothing was going to happen to me. From what I had read about it, I know what it had been through, and still it remains defiant of time, as if saying, "If you want it, you can get it." That internal affirmation that I had made to myself helped me to take the decision to continue investigating, to continue the work I had set out to do, to get to the bottom of the matter and see what was hidden.

Why was there so much zeal to keep whatever it was from being discovered? Who was behind all this? Because I was being increasingly pointed toward the upper echelons of the Church, and that I couldn't quite believe. Why would they want to hide a message that was supposed to be from Heaven? At that moment, the question gave me strength.

I had to continue with all of it. It was as if the Pyramid instilled me with courage, and motivated me to continue researching.

Calmer, I turned and bid it farewell, until next time, because I was sure I would have to return to Rome another time, perhaps when the dust had settled and they forgot about me, and that way I wouldn't have to gamble with my life for an answer.

I looked for an entrance to the metro and when I went down the stairs, I thought, "I'm not going to go to Termini Station, because surely they'll be thinking that I'm going to escape and they'll be waiting for me there." When the train arrived, I took it in the opposite direction and decided to continue to the end of the line.

I hadn't even paid any attention to where I was actually going, I didn't care much, I just wanted to put some ground between us, so when we arrived I was surprised.

I had been gathering my thoughts and minding my own business for the entire journey, at first standing up, because all of the seats had been occupied when I got on, but when I saw that one was empty, I sat down and I became completely disconnected to everything, after all, I didn't have to be aware of what stop we were passing through. I would get off when the train reached the end of the line and figure out where I was.

We passed through tunnels, we stopped at stations. I don't know how many, I wasn't counting them, but I thought we must be far enough away by now, and I said to myself, "I could get off," but then I thought: "The further the better," so I decided to follow the original plan: to not get off until the end of the line, wherever that might be.

I knew that the subway lines are very long in Rome, and they do go far. That was what I was looking for, to put some distance between us and to make it impossible for them to find me, because I was sure that those two would be good bloodhounds, that's why they would have been hired in the first place. If I was even slightly careless, they would sniff me out, because they would not be willing to let their target escape. From what they told me the first time, they only wanted me to leave the country, but after the shooting, I wasn't so sure that was their only order.

The train arrived. It stopped and I felt like I was waking from a dream, although I'm sure that I'd not slept. I realized that I was alone in the car. Where would the people have gotten off? I don't know, nor had I noticed, but surely they would have gotten off gradually as they always do.

When the train arrives at a stop, some get on and others get off, everyone goes on to their destination, but it seems that I was the only one going here. What would this place be? And where would it be?

I looked out the window as I got up from the seat and quickly got out of the car, because at that moment I heard the beeping and I didn't want to stay locked inside and be taken back to where I had gotten on it.

I saw through the windows that we were at a station, but not underground as would be normal for a subway station. The sunshine came streaming in, we were in the open air, I didn't quite get why.

Outside the car, the first thing I did was to look all around me. Where was this? A small town, surely not, was I asleep? I rubbed my eyes and no, when I looked again I saw the sea in the distance, how was that possible? How had I gotten there if I took the subway in Rome? How could I be close to the sea? Well, not quite close, since the sea was down there and I was up on a mound, standing there at the station, but I was still astonished. "But the sea is very far from Rome," I said to myself. "What a day I'm having! What weird things are happening to me!"

I read the sign, the name of the station was Ostia Antica, where would that be?

I sat on one of the three benches that were there, in the shadow of the canopy of that old place. I couldn't believe it, I thought I had gotten onto a subway train.

Of course, I'm sure I had entered a subway station, but now looking all around me, I saw that it looked like a regular train station, a wooden building painted green, a little house typical of mountain villages. Inside, through the windows on the side of the building, I could see a room where there was a table with two chairs and a blackboard with something written on it. I could also see a man who was now heading toward the door.

When he came out and saw me sitting there, alone and surely with a look of confusion plastered across my face, the man approached me. I gathered that he must have been the station guard, because he was wearing blue overalls, which must have been his work clothes.

He looked at me very seriously, it seemed that he did not dare to speak to me and he moved away, then turning around he came back to where I was still sitting and said:

"Necessita qualcosa amico?" which I understood to mean, "Can I help you with anything friend?"

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In those moments, when I was listening to that man speak to me in Italian, I felt joy. I understood and, now more than ever, I appreciated the idea that my mother had that day for me to learn it. I had never studied Italian before, since I knew French and English.

It was so she wouldn't have to see me going out to play soccer with my friends, which she never really liked. She said she didn't understand what we got out of kicking a ball and running around without stopping, which was fine for kids, but older people never understood it.

I think what she didn't like in reality was that I came home with muddy clothes. On top of that, if she ever told me to do something after a match, I would always answer that I was very tired.

Italian turned out to be very easy for me to learn. I have to say in all honesty that I have always had an affinity for languages.

We had spoken Galician in our house ever since we were little, especially with my grandmother, who said that Castilian Spanish was for school. She never understood how Franco, in his Galician homeland, had allowed the speaking of Galician in the streets to be prohibited, why did he want us to speak something else? Having always only spoken Galician in her own town and having done so very well, she was always understood by all her neighbors and hadn't ever needed to speak anything else.

One day, while I was still just a boy, I was going to the home of a school friend and when I passed by the door of the Cathedral, some men who spoke strangely were going inside. I was very surprised because I only half understood them, and I asked my friend:

“What are they saying?”

“It's Portuguese, couldn't you tell?” he answered.

And I became curious about that language that was so similar to ours. My interest led me to study it, and over time I managed to master it so well that, as I can verify from my trips to Portugal, not even the Portuguese notice any accent in my voice when I talk to them.

I started studying Italian at the same academy where I learned English and I was fortunate enough to have a beautiful teacher from Florence, who in addition to teaching us how to speak, also made us fall in love with “Mia cara Italia,” or “My beloved Italy,” as she called it.

She taught us with so much warmth, that when she told us bits of its history, it seemed that we were experiencing it for ourselves, we were going through those streets.

I remember the day she told us about Venice, her words immediately transported me into a gondola, and I could feel it moving through the calm waters of its canals, to the point that I could almost hear the gondolier singing a barcarolle.

We were exploring those narrow nameless streets, as she told us:

“I don't know how they can know their way around.”

Then we reached St. Mark's Square, the water level almost reaching the wooden walkway where we all walked in single file, careful not to fall, so as not to get wet. They are spread out across the square so people can cross on the day of the “Acua Alta,” as they call it, and walk around without getting their feet wet when the high tide floods the entire square.

She taught us these things, as she told us about them, with pictures that she had and that way we could learn words that she made us repeat until we were pronouncing them correctly.

When she told us about the Tower of Pisa, and she told us that it was leaning, my image of it was so real that I asked the teacher:

“And when it falls, then what?”

“No, it's been like that for many, many years, and it seems to be safe, it won't topple,” she said, laughing at my idea.

Then she showed us the picture, I was even more surprised and I thought, “I have to go see this one someday, it's not enough to only see her image, I didn't believe her when she said it wasn't going to topple.”

And that's how she told us things about each of the important cities of Italy, and this made us talk in a natural way about each of the places, because the whole class was in Italian.

She wouldn't let us say a single word that wasn't in Italian, and she made us ask her about everything she was saying, to see if we were learning properly and we loosened up with the language and understood everything. She encouraged us to go to her country, she said it was the most beautiful place in the world.

She showed us many images, especially of her beloved Florence. She told us where she used to play when she was a little girl, the place where she was born, the squares that were close to where she lived. It made us fall in love with those places that seemed so dream-like to us.

She told us about events that occurred in the Middle Ages when the city was very important, and those buildings that had those two-colored bricks caught our attention.

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Now, here in this station, when the guard asked me if he could help me in his peculiar small-town Italian, I could understand his words and answer him in a way that he would understand me too.

“I don’t know where I am,” I said a little embarrassed.

“That happens to many folk, don’t worry. People get a surprise having gotten on in Rome and turning up here, almost getting their feet wet,” he replied with a smile. This train has always been used by the people of Rome to get to the sea.

I couldn’t help but smile, knowing that the same thing had happened to others calmed me down.

He was the one who told me that the inhabitants of Rome had always come here to these beaches since ancient times, and that these days they also used this train to come and sunbathe and cool off if the weather permitted it.

“It’s very comfortable, so they don’t have to drive or worry about finding a place to park, and that way it’s cheaper, they just have to pay for this ticket and then to get onto the beach.”

“Onto the beach?” I asked somewhat taken aback, thinking that I had misunderstood.

“Yes, don’t you know? You have to pay to get onto the beach here,” he told me emphatically.

“Paying to bathe?” I said in surprise, but deep down I thought it was a joke.

“No, you pay to get onto the beach. If you don’t want to bathe in the sea, that’s up to you. You can also just lie down to sunbathe, or sit down to eat a sandwich. Each person can decide what they want to do,” the man said very seriously.

I was a little hesitant. It hadn’t been a joke on his part. Paying to get onto the beach, I’d never heard of such a thing.

Well, the important thing is that now I knew where I was. Then I asked him at what time I could return.

He informed me that the subway trains ran at all hours of the day and that it was very punctual, because as it was the first station on the line, punctuality was the most important thing for them. If they lost even a few seconds, little by little, as there were so many stations, they would arrive in Rome very late.

The phone rang inside that office and the guard said goodbye and off he went with a brisk step to answer it.

When I was alone again looking in that direction, I saw the station bathrooms, where I decided to go. I went in and the first thing I did was freshen up my face, I needed to wake up.

I knew I was not asleep, but the cool water was good for me. Having calmed down, I left and headed confidently into town. I had to find somewhere to eat, and I had to drink something because my stomach had started to grumble very loudly, since, alongside some other things, I had neglected it.

I crossed several streets and found nothing. I couldn’t seem to find anywhere where I could buy some bread at the very least.

Suddenly I saw the water, the sea, there in the distance. I had forgotten it was there and I lost my hunger, at least momentarily, and I went toward it to get a better look. How could the sea be there? I still didn’t get it. I just kept remembering that I’d taken the subway in Rome.

Since I couldn’t ask anyone because the whole place was empty, I opted to sit there for a while on the beach. It was full of dark pebbles, and almost entirely covered with everything that the sea brings in after a stormy day, logs, the occasional rag, heaps of seaweed, all dragged in by the sea.

Looking absent-mindedly over all of this, I got to thinking once more about what I was doing, about how my life had taken me, or rather, my curiosity had taken me, into such a strange situation,

sitting there in that lonely place, in an unknown corner of Italy, hungry and not knowing what I should do next, or what my next step should be.

Hitting me in the face, the sea breeze was agreeing with me, erasing all my worries as if by magic. I noticed that coolness in the air caressing me, and it calmed me. I suddenly felt that I had nothing to fear, that everything was fine, that there was only that moment and that I should enjoy it, no matter what had happened, or what was still to come.

I don't know how long I was sitting there like that, looking all around me, gazing at the stones on the ground, when I asked myself, "Is it really true that you have to pay to get onto the beach here in Italy? I've never heard of such a thing in all my days." I still thought it had been a joke, by that man who had told me, even though he didn't have the face of a joker. "Who would pay to enter such a place? If the sea belonged to everyone, in my opinion, who would have come up with such a strange notion."

Turning that issue over in my mind, so odd, yet so unimportant to me, I was forgetting all the commotion that'd had to happen that day to reach this point.

Relaxed, sitting there facing the sea, the Mediterranean was so calm. It seemed, as they say, "As still as a millpond," so different from the Atlantic to which I was so accustomed to seeing.

There was no chance of ever finding the sea calm along the coasts of Galicia, it always seemed to be wild, like it was angry, as if it wanted to smash the rocks that prevented it from penetrating the land. It was nothing like here, where it gently approached and receded again, almost in silence, as if it didn't want to cause a fuss.

Today at least, the water moved silently. The waves were barely noticeable, although looking around and seeing the debris that was scattered over the stones, it was clear that it wasn't always so peaceful, that it also knew how to get angry. That being said, the important thing was that I was enjoying it now as it rocked gently back and forth in front of me as if it wanted to reassure me, saying, "Relax, all the danger has passed."

I was watching it for a while and I began to think about how curious it is that even in nature, there are massive differences. Tiny plants born next to towering trees, long-necked giraffes alongside large-shelled turtles with almost no neck at all, although I do know that in Australia, there is a native species of turtle with a long neck. That's rare of course, but there are many things there that can't be found anywhere else except for in those distant lands, from what I've read about them.

Well, this wasn't the time to think about that, although one day I would like to visit that distant country and check out the curiosities of its culture for myself.

We Galicians have always boasted about the antiquity of our land, but I think the aborigines in Australia say that they have lived there for 40,000 years, that the gods had left them there to take care of everything and that one day they would return and hold them accountable for it.

Of course it's important to see that different beliefs are held in different places, and I dare say, something really must be hidden behind traditions, because if not, where did they come from? Who was the first to come up with them? And why have they not been lost with the passage of time?

Too many questions always arise as soon as you start to really think about something, but it would be interesting to know all the answers.

I remembered that there is a belief in witches, or "the Meigas" in my beloved Galicia, and when you ask people, as I had asked my grandmother on several occasions:

"Have you ever seen a 'Meiga?'" I asked her inquisitively, so she would tell me.

"No, child, never, but I'm sure they exist, as they say, 'Just because you haven't seen them, it doesn't mean they're not there,' and if you don't believe in them, they come and punish you," my grandmother would answer very seriously.

That subject had scared me for a time, and it made me not want to go to my grandparents' house. I was almost sure that because my grandmother believed in them, even though she had never seen one, a "Meiga" was roaming around her house, and I didn't want it to see me. When it saw that

I didn't believe they existed, it would punish me by not letting me play or by taking away my snack, which was worse, because as my brothers say, I have always been a glutton.

My father used to say that I must have "Tapeworms," because I was always eating and I was like a toothpick. I didn't understand it, but the truth is that I've been thin all my life. My mother put it down to soccer, and more than once when she got angry because I had borrowed something, Carmen had called me scrawny, which she knew bothered me a lot.

"It seems you're jealous of me," I would say, "for not having my slim figure and you can't eat all the bread you want, because you say that bread is fattening. It must be for you because I eat sandwiches and I've never put on weight. Maybe it's that the bread knows who's eating it, and since it knows that you don't like to be chubby, the bread stays inside your body just to annoy you and it sees that such nonsense doesn't matter to me, so it leaves me in peace."

The discussion would have to end, because my mother would get between us and say:

"That's enough, everyone eats their own food, case closed."

Leaving a piece of her snack as soon as my mother left, she would hand it to me and say:

"Let's see if this'll make some of your bones less noticeable."

I was delighted that she would give it to me, I don't remember ever saying no.

CHAPTER 5.

A mild ache in my belly reminded me that I hadn't eaten anything for a long time. At that moment, I suddenly heard a noise and I said to myself, "What's that sound? It sounded like someone was raising a metal shutter, the kind they have in some stores. Let's see if I'm lucky and it's a coffee shop or something. Whatever it is, at this point I'll settle for anything, sweet or savory, it's all the same to me, but I can't hold out much longer without getting a bite to eat," I thought, "I'm going to end up fainting."

Getting up from those stones that I'd spent such a long time sitting on, and becoming aware of some pain in my buttocks, caused by the discomfort of my seat, I headed toward the place where I thought that sound had come from.

I was walking slowly, my legs seemed to be half asleep because of the way they'd been positioned, when I suddenly saw a girl walking a dog. She was calling it beautiful and other things that I found amusing.

Why do people imagine that animals are listening to them? I have stopped to think about that at times. I had a neighbor who lived alone, and with the idea of keeping loneliness at bay, or so he told me, he bought a puppy. It was a tiny little thing, a Chihuahua, I think it's called. If you weren't careful, you could step on it, and when I would meet him on the porch as he was coming in or setting out for a walk, my neighbor would tell me:

"Manu, you have no idea how good company he is."

Smiling and doubting his words, I would leave and hear him talking to his dog as I walked away.

"Let's go here or there, I know you like it there," he would say to the dog.

How did he know what his dog liked? What an imagination. Well, this girl was so entertained talking to her dog, that when I said, "Hi," having not seen me approach, she was startled, so I immediately added:

"Don't be afraid, I just wanted to ask you if you knew where there was a coffee shop that would be open at this time."

After her fright, she had pulled on the dog's chain and placed him between us, to defend her. She made a gesture with a shrug of her shoulders to show that she hadn't understood me, which made me realize that I had spoken to her in Spanish.

I immediately said the same thing in Italian, and when she heard it, smiling, she extended her arm and pointed to a place for me. I looked toward the place she had indicated and saw that the curtains were being drawn at that moment. Yes, that must have been the place where I had heard them raising the shutter earlier, I had no doubt. I thanked her and headed over there with long strides.

I pushed on that glass door and looking over near the windows, I saw that a waiter was finishing drawing the curtains, he still had the cord in his hands.

"Buongiorno, can you give me something to eat?" I asked immediately, trying to pronounce it properly and in a way that he would understand me. He didn't react as that girl had just a moment ago.

Looking at me in surprise, he replied:

"We don't have anything at all. This is a coffee shop, there is no food, we're only just opening," he told me in Italian of course, but speaking slowly. It was clear that he was used to talking to strangers, perhaps visitors from other countries, because he understood very well.

As I sat there at a table, I said:

"Whatever you have, cake, bread with butter or coffee with some cookies, whatever you want, but surely you have something in there that could placate my stomach," and I put my hand on my stomach to make it clearer.

He didn't seem to understand me as well that time, even though I had taken a lot of care when I said it, but turning around and without saying anything, he went into what I assumed must be the kitchen, and immediately came back out with a plate full of pastries.

My eyes widened when I saw that treat. Given my sweet tooth and the hunger I felt, surely I wouldn't leave a single one.

I held back, but as soon as he left it on the table, I thanked him and took the first one, I wasn't going to be fussy.

I reached out for the biggest one, which was decorated, it was covered in chocolate. I could not believe how lucky I was while I took my first bite. "Food finally," I told myself.

I was like a little kid, but I was already feeling very faint, so I said to myself, "Why should I wait before I have more?" and when I'd finished with that one, I took another.

I was starting to eat that one when the waiter approached me. He was holding a cup of steaming hot coffee in his hand, which smelled... Aaah! It smelled so good! How wonderful! That made me forget all my aches and pains.

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Ever since my student days, coffee has been my drug of choice. I've never even considered trying any others, even though "certain companions" have invited me to on occasion, I have always been clear, no drugs. They bring a lot of problems, but I had never been able to resist coffee.

Of course I picked up the habit at home, with the coffee my mother made. I've never had any quite like it, and of course I dare say, knowing how much mothers love their children, none would consider giving their kids a substandard version of something.

Therefore, if she made me that delicious coffee every morning, well, it was sure to be a decent brew, not that she would give me a lot. Whenever she poured it for me, I would ask her for "one more little splash," and she would top me up with a few more drops on top of what she had already given me, saying:

"That's enough to keep you alert."

That's how I gradually fell in love with coffee and I've never gotten out of the habit. It's not that I abuse it, but it's true that I prefer it to anything else.

A warm sip of that coffee that the waiter had given me made me recall that now long ago day and that decision I had made. I had to learn everything I could about those three children, and about what really happened.

Surely they'll all be stories whipped up by priests. They were Portuguese and when communism was introduced there, someone very smart must have said, "Let's fight it," and the plan was surprising at best, they would have to have had a lot of resources to implement it.

Because of what little information I'd been able to glean so far, led by my curiosity, there were people who really believed it, even that "the sun had danced", what nonsense! How far did superstition go? How can you be deceived like this and believe that nonsense?

But I was ready and willing to discover the deception. I had no idea how difficult that would be, but I had nothing better to do. I would devote myself to it for as long as necessary, because when I set out to do something, I go all in to reach my goal.

On top of that, I had read something about the subject of Fatima, to try to understand "The Documents," which I had hidden well. It was not until my first vacation, when I had more free time, that I thought I would devote a little time to that topic, to see what I could find out.

"I'm going to Portugal for a few days," I told my family.

"Son, when did you make that decision? Why so suddenly? Has something happened that you don't want to tell us about?" asked my surprised mother.

"Mom, I'm older now," I replied with affection, "it's high time I made a move and learn something for myself."

“No, it’s not that I object, but tell me, what part of Portugal will you go to?” she asked in a worried tone.

“I think I’ll go to Fatima,” I said, lowering my voice.

“Whaaat?” said Carmen, “to Fatima? Did I just hear you properly? What business do you have going to Fatima?”

“Well, to Lisbon,” I adjusted quickly.

“I thought I heard you say you were going to Fatima,” she said with a smile. “Will it not be to pray, to get rid of those weird ideas in your head?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked seriously. “We all have the freedom to believe in whatever we want.”

My father, who certainly had an opinion on a matter like that, even if it was not the same as mine, intervened and said:

“Yes Manu, believe, if you can, in whatever you want, in something that’s not right and which I think even goes ‘against nature.’ I didn’t know then what it meant, to not believe, to question everything and to have such absurd ideas, but how can there not be a God who created us, who created everything? That’s impossible.”

“Dad,” I said, “let’s drop the subject, we’ve already discussed many times. You have your ideas, and I have mine, and I don’t think I’m hurting anyone thinking the way I do, and Mom, rest assured that I’ll be careful and nothing bad is gonna happen to me,” I said when I saw how her expression had changed when that topic of conversation had come up.

My mother, who didn’t want to talk about it either, said:

“Do you know that the twins have written?”

“Really? And what did they say?” Carmen asked very quickly, because she wanted to move away from the subject too.

“Well, that they’re doing very well at camp, that they swim a lot and that they’re training for a competition. They both say they’ll win.”

“Well, as always,” said my father, interrupting her, “they’ll have to give the trophy to both of them and they’ll have to share it. In reality that won’t be difficult because they sleep in the same room.”

“Well, I wonder,” said Chelito, “why don’t they each focus on something different?”

“But darling,” said Mom, “that’s impossible, they always have to do everything together.”

“No, I know that they were born together, but at some point they’ll have to realize that they have to do things separately, otherwise when they get older, will they also marry the same woman? I think that with that condition, no one will want them.”

Laughing at the remark, we finished the meal, but after having been in my room for a little while, I heard some tapping on the door. I was surprised because I hadn’t heard any footsteps in the hall.

“Yees?” I said.

“Can I have a moment?” I heard quietly.

“Sure,” I answered. “Come in, come in, what do you want?”

Opening the door just a little, Carmen slipped inside:

“You don’t fool me you know. What are you looking for in a place like Fatima?” she asked, and then she said, “Look me in the eye and answer me, are you questioning something about religion at this point? You can count on me brother, you know that, right?”

“No!” I said in a serious tone. It seemed to just come out of me and I raised my voice a little.

“Alright, don’t be like that, don’t get angry, just acknowledge that what you said is very strange, that the one time you go on your own vacation, you’ve chosen to go there,” she told me.

“Well, it’s not the first time I’m leaving home on my own. Besides, what do you care where I’m going?”

“Why wouldn’t I care? I’m your big sister and I know it’s not the first time to see you doing something on your own. I already know that, but the other times were different, you got up to those high jinks over your summer breaks, to ‘help out in your own way,’ as you put it when you didn’t want to give us any further explanation.”

“What’s wrong? Can I not do what I want now? Didn’t I go to Paris?” I said a little nervously.

“Yes,” she answered immediately, “Paris, you were so lucky! I remember it well, but you weren’t alone, I think you were four, right? I think it’s great that you’re going where you want, I just wanted to know why this time was different, it just surprised me, that’s all.”

Not wanting to give her any more information, I said:

“Go on, leave me be, I have to study. I’ve got a final exam tomorrow and it’s gonna be pretty hard.”

“Alright, but when you come back from your trip, you have to tell me what you’ve seen, okay?”

“Okay,” I said so she would drop the subject, and saying goodbye, she left the room.

I looked at the closet. Fortunately, no one knew what I had hidden there. They would have asked me so many questions if they did. I would’ve had to give them so many explanations, and say to them, “Please don’t tell anyone,” so many times.

It was better this way, with only me knowing. I would share it with them some day, when I was clear on the matter, when I had discovered the reasons why that person had hidden it in that place.

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On my second day of being in Fatima, a very strange impulse within me compelled me to head to a solitary place. I let myself be carried away. For some time, I had stopped wondering about certain things that happened to me, and my curiosity made me follow those impulses. I knew that what happened next was not by chance, because I’ve never believed in coincidences.

I walked slowly, as if I were waiting for something, but waiting for what? I didn’t know anyone there. I had only arrived yesterday, and nobody knew that I was there, because I hadn’t told any of my family the specific place where I was going to stay.

Surely they thought I would be staying in Lisbon and that was also what I had thought at first, but when I arrived here at Fatima and after driving around a little to take a look at the place, I saw that sign that said, “Quartos,” or “Rooms,” so I stopped the car and got out. I had to ask if there were any free rooms to spend the night. A man was standing there at the door to the place and approaching him, I asked about it.

“Yes son, there are still some left, they’re not exactly banging my door down, this place only fills up on special occasions, and now it seems that the weather isn’t bringing much business with it,” he answered before entering the building.

I turned around to properly park and lock the car, then I went back to the entrance and saw the man talking to a woman. They both looked over at me as I came in through the door, and the man left to go into another room, closing the door behind him as he went.

After greeting me, the lady asked me if I would stay that night. At that moment I was confused and answered:

“I don’t know!”

Opening her eyes wide, she said:

“Do you no longer want the room? What happened?”

“No, yes, I want it, but I don’t know if it’s only for one night or if I’ll stay for longer,” I answered.

“Ah, alright, don’t worry about that, stay as long as you want,” and she gave me a key. “Look at this one, it’s bigger than the others and you’ll get a better sleep,” she said putting a smile on her face.

“Can you tell that I’m tired?” I asked.

“Well, getting a little sleep is good for us all. I’ll prepare something for your dinner, you must be hungry, and it’ll do you some good to have eaten a little something before going to bed,” the woman

was telling me with such confidence, as if she were a relative, even though we had only met just a few moments ago.

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve been driving for a long time, I didn’t want to arrive too late and find everything closed around here.”

“Alright, well, everything will be ready in half an hour,” she told me, “I’m running off to make it now.”

I went to the car, because I just remembered that in the rush, I hadn’t taken my luggage, and I took out a bag that I had prepared, with some clothes and shaving stuff. Although I didn’t really have much of a beard, one of my friends had told me that if I shaved every day, it would grow quicker and come in more, and I wanted to have a beard.

What’s more, I was determined that when it grew in properly, I would leave it, that would certainly give me a more serious look, because I was tired of everyone telling me I had a baby face. That made me mad, I at least wanted to look my age.

I went up to the room. Upon entering, I looked around to take it all in. It was a simple room, but everything was very clean, I liked it, I was sure I would get a good rest there.

I tossed the bag onto the bed, then I thought better of it and picked it back up, putting it on the table and I lay on the bed to stretch my body a little. I spent a little while there before going downstairs for dinner.

What she had prepared for me smelled so good! It was a vegetable soup, something indescribable. There were vegetables of all colors, but the taste was incredible!

I had to ask her how she had done it. I wanted to tell my mother so she could make it for me. I complimented her for it and she stared at me. At first I thought she hadn’t understood me correctly, but immediately putting on a broad smiling, she said:

“Son, it’s just a handful of vegetables from the garden, boiled in some water,” and smiling, she walked away saying: “That poor boy was so hungry, it looks like he hasn’t eaten all day.”

When I heard her, I thought she was referring to how quickly I had eaten it, right to the last spoonful of that course that had tasted so good.

The second course wasn’t long in coming, an omelet, from the smell of it, and again I got that impression that it was fresh food that was being prepared. I waited a little for it to cool down, and as I absently-mindedly split it with my fork, I thought, “Who would have told me that in this life it would have occurred to me to come to this place, with so many other places to see, and look at me now, here I am, let’s see what comes of it!” and thinking that the omelet had already cooled enough for me to eat it, I put a piece into my mouth:

“Ow!” I said in surprise, it was still too hot

Well thank goodness I was the only person in that dining room, something that I had verified with a quick glance to see if anyone had heard me.

No, nobody saw it. I waited a little longer and then I tasted that delight, omelet with asparagus, which surely was also from her garden. It was so delicious, and even I was thinking that, not being a great lover of vegetables, but I acknowledge that that night, everything was excellent. Perhaps it was because of the trip that had made me so hungry, and that I had long since finished the last sandwich my mother had prepared for me to eat, because I wouldn’t let her give me more, I thought I would have enough. Maybe it was the exhaustion or I don’t know. What I do know is that I did have to take a bite out of one of the sandwiches from time to time, which I’d put there next to me on the passenger seat, until I finished it and reached for the next one. I don’t think I was eating like that just out of hunger, but out of loneliness too.

“Be careful what you eat out there, you don’t know how it will be made,” my worried mother had told me while she gave them to me.

“Mother, relax. I’m sure that the Portuguese also know how to cook properly, though I’m sure not as well as you,” I said to try to get her to think of something else.

“Manu, be careful with the road too. Don’t rush, you know you’ll be safer if you drive slowly.”

That’s what I think was troubling her, but I was someone else in the car, I think I was cautious to the extreme. I didn’t like rushing, or exposing myself to any danger.

I had a lot of respect for the wheel, and my father also told me, “I’ll pay for your gasoline for now, but any fines you’ll pay yourself, because if you drive carefully, they’ll never impose one on you, as has happened to me. I’ve never once been fined.”

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn’t realized that I’d finished that delicious omelet. At that point, the lady came out through the door with dessert in her hand, a homemade flan, that was really too much for me, and I said:

“If you keep treating me this well, you’ll not let me continue my trip, I’ll have to stay here forever.”

“Well, I just want you to feel good, and that way you’ll remember us, and when you come back through here again, you’ll surely pay us a visit,” she said smiling.

“Certainly, you can be sure of that,” I said and began to taste that delicious flan, which was wobbling on the plate, just inviting me to eat it.

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I felt quite nervous during the first part of the night. Something was wrong, although I didn’t know what. It was impossible for me to fall asleep and I did nothing more than toss and turn in bed. It’s not that it was uncomfortable, it was quite the opposite, it was very comfortable. In fact, it had been a long time since I’d been lying in such a big bed, because it was a double, for which I thanked the owner of the place at that moment in my mind. I was certain that as she saw I was so tall she’d said to herself, “This one needs something big,” and that’s why she’d given me this room.

I blamed the problem on the fatigue of the trip, I had never driven so much. I was remembering reaching a certain point along the road where I’d stopped and gotten out to stretch my legs a little, and I’d been contemplating the landscape for a while.

I could see the Miño river, how full of water it was and how wide it was, I’d never seen anything like it and I liked what I was seeing. I noticed the island and the structure in the middle of it, I knew it was a prison and I wondered, “Who’s idea would it have been to build it there? It would have been better to have built a hotel there with this landscape and the guests could have enjoyed the views.”

At that point, I was still not sure whether I should continue with the journey or not, I could still go back. I asked myself, “Why had I insisted that I had to go to that particular place? What did I want to find there?” and I told myself, “Well, seeing that I’ve come this far, I should continue, there’s no turning back now, let’s see what comes out of all this.”

Now that I was finally here and after that long journey I’d just made, I couldn’t forget that thought I’d had from there, looking out over the Miño. “If you had stopped before you got here, you’d not be here now,” I was saying to the water, and that made me continue, more emboldened. I was also going to continue on my way to see where it took me. I got back into the car, started the engine and said:

“Thank you Miño for your boost,” and crossing the bridge, I didn’t hesitate again, “The die had been cast,” as they say. I would continue to the end, I had to see what destiny had in store for me.

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I had taken out two books, those that seemed the most interesting. “It would be quieter here,” I thought, leafing through them as I used to do whenever a book fell into my hands. I had the habit of taking a look at the whole thing first, to see the chapters. I used to read the last page too, although someone had told me:

“That’s how you take away the fun.”

I’d been doing it that way since my sister Carmen once told me:

“Manu, when you know the ending, you read it more carefully.”

I think of her all the time, but that's because she's older than me, she taught me so many of the things that I know. It is true of course that my parents tell me things, but being parents, there is a lot they don't take into account.

What are they going to tell me? Just adult things, but what my sister told me was different, she had always taken care of me, and her advice came in handy. When I followed it, which wasn't always I'll be honest, because I'm a little stubborn, but when I did pay attention to what she told me, I could generally see that she was right.

She helped me with my homework, and helped me get good grades, because she always added some example for me, with which I could then show off in class, because my classmates didn't know it.

That was the advantage of having an older sister and one that was so smart. I could ask her about things, and she would know the answer.

She was two years above me in school, and since she was very studious, she'd always gotten the best grades in her class.

I started reading that book in my hands with curiosity to see what happened, I had liked the ending. It was a study, conducted by an author who self-identified as an atheist. That was curious, that made two of us who were interested in that topic, because the rest of the books were either written by priests, or by journalists who were very personally involved in the subject for religious reasons. That was what had made me decide upon these two that I had brought with me.

One seemed scientific, with dates of the event and almost no additional comments to divert attention away from the occurrence itself. This was the one I had in my hands, which purported to be, according to its synopsis, an aseptic, in-depth study of "The Great Deception that Surrounded the Entire Subject and Discovering the Reasons Behind it." Although those words written there seemed a little harsh in my view, deep down I did agree with them.

If you really want to analyze a subject, you cannot take part in it. Feelings or beliefs should never be involved, just a study of the facts and nothing else. That's what I had proposed from the beginning, to try to collect as much information as possible and then collate it thoroughly, and write a paper on it.

I wasn't sure why I wanted to do it, but I had to continue, because it was getting interesting.

I kept remembering the amount of documentation that I had found when I'd first started looking, and without the need to leave my hometown, but I was determined to travel, if necessary, to continue finding more material on the subject.

I had to get up to turn on the light. The sun had gone, I don't know how, or when, I hadn't been aware of the passage of time, what I was reading was so interesting that it had flown past, as they say.

First I turned on the ceiling lamp, stretched my arms a little and thought, "I'm going to make myself a sandwich and I'll continue reading for a while, I don't really plan to go out," the weather didn't really invite it. In addition to the fine rain that we usually always have in Santiago, there was an unpleasant breeze blowing today, the kind that gets right into your bones.

After a visit to the bathroom, I quickly made a sandwich with the first things I found, a slice of bread with chorizo sausage, that would surely be delicious. The truth is that I don't have any aversions to anything, everything seems great when it's time to eat. Well, if I did have any aversions, I don't know what they would be to, because I'm forever eating.

I didn't have the patience to eat the whole thing and after a few mouthfuls, I looked back at the book. Leaving what I still had in my hands on the napkin, I continued, engrossed in my reading. It was so novel and so interesting that before I realized it, it was morning, or rather, the alarm clock sounded.

I got freaked out, that could not be the time. Yes, I'd been reading all night and not only that, but looking at the table, I saw that more than half a sandwich was still sitting there, just left on top of the napkin. "How could I have left it sitting there unfinished and not even noticed?" I asked myself in surprise.

Closing the book quickly, I almost ran to the shower. I had to get a move on if I didn't want to be late for work, but even though I was a little tired, the truth was that it was worth spending the time reading that book.

It's really quite amazing how the work of some people can in turn make it easier for others to get on with their own. I'd been receiving all that information compiled by the author through his trips to so many different sites, and however many interviews he'd conducted to find out so much, while I was seated comfortably absorbing the knowledge.

If I'd been determined to dedicate my time and my efforts to illuminating the truth before, a truth that seemed increasingly likely to have been concealed, now, I suddenly found myself with a huge desire to see where all this took me.

Up to that point, Fatima was just a more or less meaningless word to me, a place that had been, and which still was, important to many people, although it had never interested me personally. Now I found myself becoming increasingly interested in the place.

I wanted to know why there was so much mystery surrounding something that should be simple. If there were really seers and messages, why were they not available to anyone who wanted to know what they were, whether they were a believer or, as in my case, not?

Firstly, it was out of curiosity, to substantiate my discovery, that secret of mine, which nobody knew, and that of the person who had left it hidden there, because if they had wanted it to be known, they would certainly not have chosen to keep it there in that secluded place.

Thinking about it, why would they have done that? Couldn't they have found a better place to leave something that important?

This intrigued me right from the start, from the moment I scraped at the damaged wall, trying to fix it up a little, giving it a coat of plaster. I noticed that a brick had shifted, which made me take a closer look at it, because up to that point it had been just that, a wall that I had to scrape so I could then apply some patches and then paint it to make it look decent. It was certainly not decent-looking when I'd found it, and if that wall could speak, it could tell me how many years it had been standing there without anyone spending any time maintaining it, that's how bad it was.

"What am I saying? If the wall could speak!" That word made me reflect. That was undoubtedly what the wall had done, it had spoken to me through what I'd found. How would they have taken the brick out at the time? How had they been able to carefully place that behind it? And how could it have been preserved over all this time?

When I'd taken out the little package, the fabric that was wrapped around it was very damaged, because it had absorbed all the moisture and thus protected the contents, which were still in perfect condition.

I remember that I was going to look at what it was more closely, when I heard my companion who was shouting, calling out to me:

"Manu, it's time for sandwiches, come on, you can get back to it afterwards, it's time to rest for a while."

Fearing that he would come into the room where I was, I tried to quickly store what I had just found in the back pocket of my pants, but seeing that it wouldn't fit no matter how much I pushed it, I unfastened two of my buttons, carefully placed it under my shirt and put on my sweater, which I'd brought with me and sat down there on the floor in one corner. That was how I went out to join the others, have my sandwiches and chat for a while. And so we rested and talked about how each of us were doing in the tasks we had been assigned.

"What's up Manu?" the others asked when they saw me appear.

"Well, I've been peeling the wall and removing all the bits that are coming loose, but I think we're going to have to repair the whole thing, it's in a really sorry state," I said, taking a bite out of the mouth-watering sandwich I had in my hands, which Simón had just given me.

"You're so lucky!" Blas told me. "Today I have to repair the roof, that's much more difficult."

“Do you need any help?” I asked him, but I was hoping he would answer me that he didn’t, I just said it in the spirit of compromise. I’ve never liked heights, but I thought it would be nice to offer my assistance.

“No, I can do it on my own for now, but I’ll call you if I need you,” he answered me.

When we were finishing up with our sandwiches, a few drops of rain began to fall, and when I saw that, I said to Blas:

“Looks like your work is done for the day, you’ll not be able to get up onto the roof, it seems you won’t need my help after all.”

“Yeah, nobody’s getting up there now” he answered looking up at the sky, then he added, “Well, you know what? Now I’m gonna be the one who comes to help you, what do you say?”

And without waiting for an answer, he went with great strides into the room where I was halfway through my work and put himself to work on another wall, removing the loose pieces. He looked at me and said:

“Of course I don’t know how you always manage to land the simplest jobs, you’re so the favorite! I’m sure it’ll be because you’re always willing to do any job and you never complain about it, so they reward you by giving you the less strenuous jobs,” and laughing, he added, “I’m only kidding by the way, don’t get annoyed. Look at how heavy the rain is now, especially given how lovely a day it was earlier! It was so nice that I said to myself when I was up there, ‘If the wind blows those clouds away, I’ll have time to inspect that row of tiles and replace the broken ones,’ but clearly it’s not a day to be changing tiles, they’ll have to wait a little longer. To be fair, I’m sure they’re not too bothered, because I have no idea how long they’ll have been like this, but it’s certainly been a good few years since anyone has lifted them off.”

Impatient because the day was ending, and because I had to remove my sweater so I could get on with the work, I tried not to move much, because I feared that Blas, who was now there with me, would notice the bulge under my shirt, which felt massive to me, even though he was working on the wall behind me.

Suddenly, perhaps due to the rain, the temperature changed, and using that excuse I quickly put on my sweater again.

“You’re gonna get it caked in dust!” Blas told me when he saw that I’d put it back on.

“It’s just that I’m cold, but I’ll be careful not to get it stained,” I replied.

“Cold? Are you for real? Take it off and you’ll see how much faster the work goes,” he said laughing. “Goodness, you get cold easily!” He got on with his work and we didn’t talk any further.

With that “Little package” already well hidden, I felt calmer, but I was wishing that the day would end so I could leave. I don’t ever remember that having happened to me, because I was usually the one who always finished last.

“Let’s keep going for a while longer, there’s still a lot of work to be done here,” I would tell the others in the evening when it was time to pack up and leave.

“Leave something for tomorrow! Don’t you see that even the sun has gone to rest?” they would protest at me, already looking tired and happy to leave it behind and go home.

I would drop whatever I was doing, but reluctantly, and on the way home I would always say:

“We could have stayed a little longer, we still have a lot to get through, and if we don’t hurry, the summer will be over and we won’t have finished everything.”

“Fine, we’ll stay longer tomorrow,” they would answer me, but they never did. Normally, as soon as the sun went down, we would leave, but today I was the first to say it:

“Guys, what if we leave it until tomorrow?”

“Earlier you were cold and now you want to go? Hmm! That sounds fishy to me, you’re not getting sick are you? Those symptoms sound like you might be coming down with the flu, or something worse,” Blas said surprised.

“Get outta here, don’t exaggerate, it’s not like we can wait for the sun to set today, because it hasn’t even come out,” I said trying to justify myself.

“Well, let’s gather everything up and we’ll continue tomorrow,” he said.

The others also agreed, because even though we’d not yet finished the task we’d set ourselves, as we do every day, today we all seemed a little more tired than usual. It would be because of the change in the weather, and picking everything up, we left.

The rain started falling even heavier than before and wore my raincoat. In Santiago de Compostela you always have to be prepared, and when you get into the habit, you always carry it wherever you go.

That prevented the rain from wetting my sweater, and with it, the object that I was hiding with such zeal, but my legs were soaking wet, because the rain had been accompanied by an unpleasant wind, so the water that fell came from all directions, and it was impossible to stop it from soaking me all over.

I took a warm shower when I arrived, but quickly, because I was impatient, and I think even nervous. That was something unusual for me, my classmates had always told me:

“Manu, you’re the calmest person we know. We never see you getting nervous, you don’t seem to get bothered by anything.”

Well, I would say that I did get nervous, but I didn’t show it. Now I was really starting to notice it, instead of hitting the hot tap, I hit the cold, so when that jet of icy water sprayed out, I wasn’t expecting it and I jumped back, then in the kitchen, I went to heat up a glass of milk, to invigorate myself, and instead of milk I poured water into the saucepan. “You see!” I thought. “Boy, you’re more nervous than Jell-O, be careful.”

Just then, Mrs. Petra, the owner of the boarding house, came into the kitchen and asked me if I needed anything. She had told us from the first day that everything was at our disposal, that we were the only ones in the whole place, well, besides them of course, but that when we needed anything, there was no need to ask her, we could just take it because we already knew where everything was.

Of course, she showed it to us by opening all the drawers, so that if we needed anything, like sugar at breakfast, or water or whatever, we confidently went into the kitchen and took it for ourselves, that’s why I was here trying to prepare the milk for myself.

I answered that I was a little out of sorts and was going to prepare a glass of milk.

“Hold on, I’ll prepare it for you and I’ll even throw in a little honey, you’ll see how well your body takes to it and you’ll have recovered in no time,” and she immediately set herself to warming it up.

Already more relaxed after taking that little glass of warm milk, which went down so well, I returned to my room and sat down, carefully picking up the little package that I had left there when I came in. “What might it contain?” I asked myself. “Who could have put this there?” I also asked myself. “Hold your horses Manuel, you’re about to find out what it is,” and with trembling hands, something that I could see perfectly clearly, I started to unwrap it.

First I removed the rag, which back in its day must surely have been white, but now it was a color somewhere between brown and blackish due to the moisture it had absorbed. It was that object that I had already handled when I pulled it out from the wall, but which I had then put back where I’d found it. It seems I hadn’t put it back so carefully though, because I remember that when I had originally taken out the little package from the hole left by the brick when it had been removed, the small package was well wrapped and the wrapping was uncrinkled. Now though, as I’d rewrapped it hurriedly for fear that my companion would come in and see me with it, a part of the fabric had torn slightly.

I had already noticed myself doing it when I’d tried to unwrap it there the first time, but my haste had made me so inattentive. Now I was treating it with great care, although there was nothing I could do about the damage.

I left the pieces of cloth there on the table and continued removing the rest of the fabric very carefully. I did not want anything to go wrong, because if the fabric was the packaging, what was important was what I was about to see, what I had here in my hands, “Come on!” I thought at that moment.

Before continuing, some questions popped into my mind, “What should I do with what I have here? Who will own it? And how can I justify that I’ve seen it?”

A lot of doubts were jostling around in my mind, when I decided to cast them aside and continue with the task of finding out what it was, what it contained and I continued slowly, very slowly unfolding that fabric.

With every fold I unwrapped, I imagined the hands that had wrapped it, surely they were feminine, a man wouldn’t have been so careful.

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I was alone in the room. I had closed the door. I did not want any surprises, someone who needed something and came at that inopportune moment to ask me, or any of the guys wanting to ask me about something.

I don’t know why, but I had suddenly become afraid and that was what made me not only turn the key to lock the door, but also to place a chair to jam the door, something that I was surprised to find myself doing, because it was a reflex, like I was protecting myself, but I wasn’t sure what from.

At that moment, I saw myself doing it and I had no logical explanation for it. It seemed that I was anticipating the problems I would have in the future, but now I had no reason to be so cautious.

I took the object slowly with my hands. I’d left it on the bed when going to lock the door, because a moment ago when I was finally on the verge of seeing it, I realized that anyone could come in and catch me with it in my hand, so I left it very carefully on the bedspread. Now back, I took it between my fingers as carefully as if it were a delicate crystal.

I noticed the calluses I had on the palms of both hands, anyone who saw them wouldn’t doubt for a moment that they were the hands of a laborer, perhaps a full-time bricklayer. I had already gotten used to them, but Mom said that “I had to take care of them, that my hands were going to spoil me forever and that no girl would want me to caress her, because I would scratch her.”

Chelito had found that very amusing and said:

“You’re going to stay single, nobody will ever love you.”

“You shut up snot nose, they’re hardly gonna be knocking down your door either with those freckles you have, who’s going to notice you? And if they do it’ll only be to try to wash your face, to see if they can get those spots off you,” I said jokingly, but it always ended up making her angry, although that wasn’t what I’d intended, because my little sister was the one I loved the most.

When my mother heard me, she scolded me:

“Manu, you’re too old to treat your little sister like that, don’t you see what you’ve done?”

“Mom,” said Chelito, “but don’t you see that the poor thing has no other way of messing with me? He always says the same thing to me. It’s because men are ‘so dense’ that on some rare occasion, when something occurs to them, they use it all the time. Manu’s problem is that he envies me, you’ve not noticed it, he knows I’m smarter than he is,” and with a laugh from my mother, the discussion was over:

“It’ll be as you say darling, Manu would like to have freckles like you,” and off she went to get on with her tasks.

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I stopped looking at my hands and being careful not to damage what I had between them right then, I went ahead. I carefully removed the papers from the wrapper, I had already seen how fragile they all were when they’d been covered, and how they’d been damaged as soon as they were touched. Now I saw that yellowish paper and I took it out with great care. I was surprised; inside was “a little book.”

I sat on the bed, a chill ran through my body, what was I doing with that it my hands?

I looked around the room, as if wanting to make sure nobody saw me. “What nonsense!” I told myself.

Nobody can get in here and there’s nowhere to hide, since the room was very small. A bed, which was indeed very comfortable; a nightstand with a drawer; the chair which I had placed at the door earlier; a small closet, which of course would only be capable of hiding someone very thin, and the table placed in front of the window; that window through which the light entered and you could see the small courtyard down below, a white wall opposite and nothing else.

That made me feel calmer. I was sure that nobody was watching me. Sitting on the bed, I shifted as if wanting to reassure myself. I corrected my posture, because I had a nervous itch that ran down my back.

I realized, what if someone had slipped into the bathroom? And as if propelled by a spring, I jumped up and moving around the bed I abruptly opened the door.

At that moment, again I thought, “What nonsense!” It was naturally empty.

As my nerves were making my hands all sweaty, I rinsed them in the sink since I was already there, and taking the towel, I dried them. When I tried to put it back where it’d been hanging, I missed and it fell to the floor. I bent down to pick it up. As I put it back on the towel rack, I saw myself in the mirror and I said to myself, “Manu, why are you so nervous? This is very strange for you, calm down.”

I turned around and went back into the bedroom, I went around the bed, and sitting down again carefully, I took that little book that was there waiting to be looked through.

“BREVIARIUM,” yes, that’s what it said on the cover, which left me thoughtful for a few moments. Who would have left their prayer book in there? Why would they have hidden it in the first place? What fears led them to hide it so carefully? How would they have managed to find the right place? It’s not easy to take a brick out of those pilasters, which are solid and usually strongly secured.

The questions were crowding my mind, without giving me time to find any logical answers that could clarify anything. I opened that “Little book” that I had in my hands with great curiosity, with those black covers made of a strong cardboard, but which were very worn.

It was clear that it had been used a great deal, but why had the owner left it there hidden despite clearly having loved it so much? Maybe the plan had been to retrieve it at a later date?

I don’t know how many mysteries were surging through my mind, but what I was sure of was that it belonged to a woman. Why? That was simple, the place was a convent for nuns, as far as I was aware. That was the reason it had been built and it had never had any other tenants aside from them.

I looked at it carefully and thought, “Surely it had to belong to one of them,” but why would she have put it in such an unusual place? And if she’s living there, why hadn’t she taken it out when she’d learned that we were going to repair the walls?

It might be that the owner is no longer there, perhaps she’s already passed away, or she’s gone somewhere else. Then, why wouldn’t she have taken it with her? Maybe she forgot about it, it all seemed so strange to me!

Reflecting on these questions, I stopped and closed the “Little book” again. What if it was personal? What if she had something written down? What right did I have to read something personal that someone had written in there?

I started to feel like an intruder who was going to violate someone’s privacy, who was going to break that veil of mystery that the person had wanted to cover up there, so well-hidden, and who did I think I was to clumsily handle the discovery of that secret that she wanted to keep?

I really didn’t believe that anyone would put it there as a joke, if they were hiding it there for a prank and someone had taken it from its owner and hidden it there for her to find, why would it still be hidden there? Who would it belong to?

Of course, what was certainly beyond any doubt, is that it had been there for a long time because of the fragility of the fabric that it had been wrapped in, or could it be that the fabric was part of

the joke? and it was already old and fragile when she put it there. Surely not! If so, whoever it was would have wrapped it up with more care.

I was pondering these questions when I heard a knock on the door that scared me. I stayed very still. I think I even held my breath, when again I heard the knocking and someone saying:

“Manu, have you fallen asleep? We’re waiting for you to have dinner.”

Those words brought me back to reality. Suddenly I saw my room, I was sitting on the bed, and I awkwardly said:

“I’m coming now!” with a faltering voice.

“Wake up sleepy! If you don’t, we’re gonna eat your share,” he was saying from the hallway.

“I’m coming!” I said a little louder this time, “go on ahead.”

I listened to my friend’s footsteps as he was walking down the hallway. I took a quick look around the whole room, I had to find a hiding place for the “Little book,” somewhere where nobody would find it if they came into the room while I was not there.

At that moment I thought, “Who exactly will come in if they’ve already cleaned it today?” However, I decided to first wrap it up in a handkerchief of mine that I took from the drawer of the nightstand.

I carefully wrapped it up and then, climbing onto the chair, placed it on top of the closet, as far back as I could. Surely the cleaning girl wouldn’t be able to reach it there, because she was shorter than me. If she had the intention of searching on top of the closet to see if I had put anything there, surely she wouldn’t reach the place where I had left it.

What was certain was that as long as she didn’t bring a ladder to look on top of it, it would be impossible for her to find it, and I dare say, why would she bring a ladder? Alright, perhaps to change the bulb if it blew, but it was glowing perfectly brightly.

I was also sure that they only came into the rooms to clean up just once a day and as I had checked when I got back from the convent, the bed had been made and the towels had been changed in the bathroom. She wouldn’t be back here again today.

Another small detail; if it was dinner time, the girl would be serving the tables, so I was sure that no one would enter in my absence.

Putting on my sweater and feeling more relaxed, I went over to the door, opened it and closed it behind me. Heading down the long corridor as I went to the dining room, I thought, “And where will I leave it tomorrow when I have to go to work?”

“Manu,” I answered myself for some reassurance, “just leave it there in the same place, I’m sure there’s no way anyone will find it, and besides, who would think to look for it? Nobody knows you have it,” and more calmly, I opened the door to the dining room and sat there were my companions.

“At last! sleepy! Look who we had to go find to get dinner, when you’re normally the first to arrive saying you’re about to pass out from hunger, and you start snacking on bread while they bring us the food. Are you coming down with something?” they asked me.

“What are you talking about? I’m just tired, something that can be remedied with some sleep,” I replied to reassure them.

Dinner passed without any major upheavals. I tasted what I’d been given without much enthusiasm, and I must have made some strange expression, because they told me laughing:

“They haven’t quite hit the mark with your preferences today. Boy, that means your situation is more serious than we thought, because you normally always praise everything they serve us. We’ve never heard you say, ‘I don’t like this!’ You’re always the first to clear your plate and wipe it clean saying, ‘The sauce is the best part, and it’s a shame to waste it,’ and today it seems you’re even having difficulties chewing. Have you got tonsillitis?”

“No,” I answered reluctantly, “I’ve already had my tonsils removed, I still remember how bad those days were after the operation when I couldn’t eat anything,” I told them so they would leave me alone.

“Tell us, tell us,” they said, “you never told us that, that there was a time when you’d gone without food and you didn’t die,” Jorge was saying, ever the jester.

Everyone laughed at the remark.

“Don’t laugh!” I said, becoming serious, “I had a really hard time.”

“We’re tired of hearing you say, ‘I’m so hungry that if I don’t have something to eat, I’ll die,’ so tell us about that. Come on! How could you put up with a day without eating?”

Reluctantly, because what I wanted was to go back to my room so I could finally open that little book in peace, the book that had been so zealously hidden, I started telling them about it, saying:

“Alright, well, like I said... when you have them removed, you can’t eat.”

“Wait,” said Jorge, who was always the loudest voice in the room, and who always came up with ideas, “and to celebrate this secret that you’re about to share with us, shall we have a little something?”

When I heard the word “Secret,” I was petrified, what was he saying? Could he know something about what was going on?

When he saw my face, he continued saying:

“Boy, I didn’t know it would be so difficult for you to talk about something that I don’t think is that serious.”

As words were failing me at that moment, he started saying:

“Well, when I was little, they operated on me...”

“You too?” the others asked.

“Nah, I’m just trying to help him get started,” Jorge said between laughs.

At that point, I realized what they wanted, and I said:

“Yes, when I was little...”

“What age?” they asked me.

“Don’t interrupt him, or he won’t tell us,” Jorge insisted.

“Alright, I’ll continue, I was eight years old, I remember it perfectly, I got really sick one day. My mother sent Carmen, who as you know is two years older than me, she sent her running for the doctor. He lived on the same street as we did, so it didn’t take her long to get there, although as he said, he didn’t like visiting anyone outside of his practice hours, because he had to rest too. What if he fell ill? Who would tend to him?”

“The thing is, I must have had a high fever, I still remember that my father picked me up and carried me to the car. Wait no, it was my mother who took me...”

“Can you make up your mind?” Santi said impatiently.

“Yes, the doctor must have said something to them, because I remember very clearly that my mother started crying and my Dad scolded her, and I found that surprising, ‘We have to move quickly, this is no time for tears,’ I heard him say. Even with the amount of time that’s passed, I’ve not forgotten that, because I’d never heard my father speak to her like that before.”

“Then I remember that he took me and carried me out of the house in his arms, as if I were a little kid. Then in the car, he was driving and my mother was in the back seat. She held me almost lying down, I remember having seen the street lamps shining from back there,” I said a little thoughtfully.

“So what are you saying? Are you gonna keep telling us your story or not? What do the street lamps have to do with anything?” Jorge asked me again.

“Look, it’s because I’d never been out at night in the car, I’d seen the street lamps lit now and then on the street, but not from that angle, with my head on my mother’s legs. I saw the lights go by in such a strange way, that I remember it perfectly well, as if it were happening right now. I remember making an effort and I got up a little to look out the window, and I saw how dark everything was. You could only see the row of street lamps lighting the place. I couldn’t make out where it was. It felt to me like it took a long time. I don’t remember anything else, until I found myself lying on a bed with a huge light above my face and someone, I think a man, but I’m not sure, was watching me with his mouth covered.”

“Just relax, everything will be alright, do you know how to count?” asked that stranger with an unfamiliar voice, and I said yes.”

“Well, can you count to ten for me?” he said, and covered my mouth with something strange. I remember hearing myself saying three, four, and then nothing else.”

“I don’t know what happened, just that I wanted to continue counting at five when I woke up, and my voice wouldn’t come out. I couldn’t hear myself count, and my mother by the bed said:

“He’s waking up.”

“And I saw how my father, gave me a kiss with a worried face. That really surprised me, because he wasn’t the kissing type. Maybe he would give me one at Christmas, or on my birthday, but nothing more, and at the time I remembered that it was neither of those days. What might have happened for him to have kissed me? So I thought I had to ask him what was wrong.”

I stopped to take a breath, and Jorge impatiently took the floor.

“But boy, you still haven’t told us how you felt without eating,” he was telling me.

“Wait for me to continue then. I remember that I was very hungry. I was in bed, I had visited a doctor whom I didn’t know, that was not the norm, then I learned he was a specialist who had operated on me, an otolaryngologist,” I was saying, when I was interrupted again.

“You remember a name like that so well given how difficult it is,” the boys told me.

“Yes, because when I asked what he was called, and they told me, my father wrote it down for me so I wouldn’t forget it, and I read it so many times that I learned it by heart and that’s why I still remember it. Because I couldn’t talk, well I tried but nothing would come out, I communicated by writing in a notebook with a pencil, which the nurse gave me. I’m sure she knew what had happened because she gave it to me the first time she came to see me.”

“As you’re old enough and because I’m sure you know how to write very well, when you want something, just write it here,” and taking the two items out of her pocket she told me, “Take them, do you like them?”

“The first thing I wrote said:

‘Is it for me? Thank you, yes, I like them a lot.’”

“Yes,’ she replied, ‘I bought them for you,’ she was saying there next to my bed.”

“‘And can I take them home with me?’ I wrote again there in the notebook.”

“She picked it up again to read what I had written, she answered laughing:

‘Of course, I told you they’re for you, as they say, ‘You can’t take back a gift you’ve given, that way you won’t get into heaven.’”

“I was amazed because I’d never heard anyone say that before and I asked my mother, or rather I wrote in that notebook:

‘Mom! What is this missus talking about?’”

“The nurse, who thought that what I was writing was also for her said:

‘Missus? How old do you think I am young man?’ and laughing, she left the room.

“I didn’t understand what she meant, but my mother told me:

‘Rest up, you still have to recover.’”

“I picked up the little notebook again and wrote:

‘And when can I eat here Mom?’ I was already noticing that my stomach was grumbling having not eaten anything for a while.”

“‘I’m afraid you can’t do that yet Manu, they’ve had to remove your tonsils,’ she said, looking at me.”

“‘What does that mean Mom?’ I wrote, and I put my hand to my throat as if I wanted to look for a scar, but I didn’t notice anything, but in spite of it I couldn’t speak, even though I wanted to.”

“My father took my hand with a lot of affection, and sitting on the bed he said:

‘Manu, tonsils are the little lumps that hang down at the back of the mouth, and if they get bad, they have to be removed.’”

“Right,’ I wrote in my notebook, ‘Well, if they have already been taken out, when can I eat something? I’m starving.’”

“Oh, so when you were a kid you also said that you were dying of hunger?” interrupted Jorge. Getting up from the table, I said:

“I’m done, I’m not telling you anymore, I’m going to sleep.” But at that moment, the girl entered the dining room and came over to our table, with slices of cake piled onto a tray, one for each one of us.

“Go on then! Get outta here! It’s your loss, all the more for us, we’ll divide up your slice among us,” Santi was already saying, “since you’re so tired, I bet you’d rather be in bed than eating this.”

I looked at that tasty treat, chocolate cake, I could hardly miss out on that and I sat back down again. We distributed the slices, tossing each onto the little plates that they had set down for us. They gave me the biggest piece, saying:

“You’ve earned it for sharing your secret, but don’t take a bite until you finish telling us everything.”

“Well, there’s not much left to tell. I was there, admitted to that place, which I later learned was a hospital in La Coruña, which my parents had had to take me to in a hurry that night. Like I said, I was admitted and I wasn’t even allowed to take any water at first. I was allowed after a while, but just water. I don’t know how long that took, to me it seemed like a month or more.”

“Come on! Stop exaggerating,” the boys said when they heard me say that, “nobody stays in hospital for a month for tonsillitis.”

“Yes, my mother told me it had only been two days, then they gave me my first liquid food, but I think she just told me that to comfort me, because I really had a hard time not being able to eat, because despite the fever and everything else, at no point did my desire for food go away.”

“Did the wound hurt?” Santi asked.

“No, not at all! It was just my gut that hurt, it really craved something, anything, it kept telling me it was empty, I wrote to the nurse in my little notebook every time she came to put in the thermometer or make my bed, ‘I want to eat,’ with very big letters so she could see it properly.”

“You’ll have to wait! When the doctor tells me, I’ll bring you so much that you won’t be able to eat it all,’ she told me with a smile, but she left and nothing would convince her.”

“Then when the doctor came to see me and I showed him the message in the notebook, he would tell me:

‘Yes, I know, but you’ll have to wait a little longer, the wounds need time to heal.’”

“And I wrote to him:

‘I don’t have any wounds, what wounds are you talking about?’”

“‘You do,’ he answered me, ‘they’re on the inside and they’re doing very well.’ That was what he’d tell me after making me open my mouth and popping in a little stick, like a Popsicle stick, which sometimes made me gag.”

“‘Manu, be careful, don’t throw up on the doctor,’ my Mom would tell me whenever that happened.”

“I picked up my notebook again, I started writing there:

‘I can’t throw anything up because I don’t have anything inside me, or have you forgotten, since they don’t want to feed me here? They’ll be waiting for me to go home so I can eat there.’”

“That made everyone laugh, which I did not like and I got very angry, and I even started crying. Nobody understood the big problem that I had, the hunger that would not leave me in peace.”

“Well, that’s pretty much it, then one day I was eating just a puréed meal. It was an awful meal, but because I was so hungry, I said to myself:

‘If I don’t eat this, they won’t want to bring me anything else,’ and when I finished it, and it really wasn’t easy for me to swallow it, I remember being surprised. I said to myself, ‘Given how hungry I am, the fact that I can’t swallow it means it must be really bad.’”

“Well, after all that I did get better, the doctor discharged me, not that I knew what that meant, and he told me:

‘You have to be careful for a few days not to eat anything hard.’ I remember it very well because when I heard it, I thought about nougat, that very hard sweet my grandmother used to buy for Christmas, and I was about to write it in my notebook, but nougat was the last thing I wanted to eat at the time, so I left it because he said goodbye and left the room in a hurry.”

“Something else I haven’t forgotten is that my parents took me somewhere when we left. It was a coffee shop or something similar, I don’t know exactly, but they invited me to have ice cream. My mother told me when we entered that it was, ‘Everything you could want.’ Naturally, I chose a very large chocolate ice cream, and while I was eating it, I asked my father, very surprised and very quietly, because although the doctor had already told me I could talk now, I didn’t dare to, I was afraid that my throat would hurt:

‘And why am I getting this?’”

“‘Because Manu, you’ve behaved like a man,’ he replied smiling.”

“Right, well, now that you’ve told us your story, we should also eat this chocolate cake, which I think we deserve for having listened to the whole thing,” and laughing, we all ate our slice of cake that they had brought us, and it really was delicious.

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Poring over my memories, because there had been a lot of changes, I finally found the place where I had stayed that first time I came. Several years had passed, I didn’t remember how many exactly at the time. I had some difficulty parking, because the whole place was packed with cars, and taking my travel bag, I headed for the door.

I went in and taking a look at the place, I thought, “Everything has changed so much!” I saw new faces; could I be in the wrong place? I turned around to leave, when a person who was entering just then said:

“It’s been such a long time!”

I gave him a good look and since I found it strange, because I didn’t think I’d ever seen him in my life, I asked him:

“Do we know each other?”

“Sure,” the man said smiling, “well, I’ve not forgotten you at least, but I see you’ve forgotten me.”

Faced with what must have been an expression of surprise, he told me:

“Seven years have passed, but I still remember when you arrived that night and asked me if we had any rooms.”

Suddenly I remembered, the man I had met the first time I came, at least I assumed it was him, because the truth was that now I didn’t quite recognize him as he was. “Could I be so clueless?” I thought at the time, and to be polite I said:

“Yes! It’s been so long.”

“It was a horse caper,” the man told me smiling and raising his hand to his face.

I didn’t understand him, what would a horse have to do with anything? But I looked at him and suddenly saw a big scar that crossed his face. Was that why I’d not recognized him? Trying to be considerate, I asked:

“How did it happen?”

“Well, she got scared, forgot she wasn’t alone and she stopped suddenly and I got tossed over her head and I landed on my face. The poor animal wasn’t to blame, but my life changed at that moment,” the man was saying to me with a sad tone.

“How did it happen?” I pressed again. When I heard myself say it, I said to myself, “Manu, what a gossip you are, what do you care?”

Grateful to be able to chat a little about it with someone, something that was obvious from the outset, he thanked me for asking and told me:

“Well, you see, the truth is that I didn’t really know what had happened. What I do know is that the horse showed up back here on its own and some of the neighbors were surprised, so they went out to look for me. When they finally found me, I’d lost a lot of blood and my recovery was slow, but what it comes down to in life is that we don’t know what might happen to us when we go out into the street in the morning, whether or not we’re going to return in one piece. That being said, we can also have some mishap at home, who knows.”

Seeing that he was a little sad, I encouraged him by saying:

“Well, at least that’s all in the past now. I see you’re alright now, and that’s what matters.”

“Well son, you’re right, yes... , but I can get by,” the man told me and as if remembering himself at that moment, he asked me, “And do you want a room?”

“Of course!” I answered, “if there’s one free, because I see there are cars parked everywhere out there, it seems business is doing well.”

“There’ll be something free,” he said smiling, “there’s always room for old guests. What’s more, you brought us luck and I’ve not forgotten that.”

“How so?” I asked, in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Yes, since you were here, we’ve not been closed for a single day, we’ve always had pilgrims,” he was saying, already with another more cheerful tone in his voice.

“Pilgrims?” I asked a little surprised, “and what did I have to do with that?”

“Yes, I looked it up, precisely on the day you left, talking to my wife, I said, ‘Look, let’s keep the prices affordable, and you’ll see, we won’t lack for guests,’ and that’s how it’s been. There have been other folk who’ve opened up their own places after us and they’ve been adding luxuries to their places, even televisions in the rooms and I wonder to myself, does someone who comes to pray for two or three days really need that? Can’t they go without it?”

“You see? And another thing I don’t understand,” he went on telling me, “is that eagerness to put armchairs and carpets in the rooms. Places that people only come to lie down and rest. Of course that’s their justification for putting up the prices, but that’s what they do. Then when the good weather ends, they have to close, because nobody comes to them, and folk know they’ll always have a comfortable bed to sleep in here and a nice dish of warm soup. Even in January, we have no lack of visitors who come here to ‘Spend some quiet days in prayer,’ as they say, that solitude is what they’re looking for.”

I was already starting to feel a little restless, because the truth is that the journey had been pretty rough, and because I didn’t want to get here too late, I had only stopped when the car needed some gas, so I said:

“Excuse me, I’m just going to see if they can give me a room.”

“No, sorry for keeping you, you must be tired,” he said and went through that front door that I remembered from the last time, although they had painted it differently.

The place had changed. I didn’t remember it being painted like that the time before, nor that it had such beautiful plants. I don’t pay much attention to details, but I have always really liked plants, I must get it from my mother, who has the balconies full of them.

I saw a very pretty young lady at the reception desk, which hadn’t been there last time either, and when I approached her to ask about the room, the man came back through the door again and said:

“It’s all sorted! Give him the key to 203.”

The young lady approached me with an odd look on her face, and when the man saw her, he said:

“Yes dear, he’s been here before, a long time ago.”

“Is it the same room as last time? You’ve no idea how much I’d appreciate that,” I said smiling.

“Sure, I remember commenting when you left about how well-behaved you’d been there, no noise or distractions, just the view of the countryside and also that you’d risen to see the sunrise.”

“What a memory you have, with all the guests that must have passed through here since then,” I commented.

“Yes, that’s true, but you also told me something that I’ll never forget. We were chatting, because I saw that you were very curious and interested in a lot of things, you answered a question I’d asked you, I don’t remember what it was now, but you said, ‘I’m an atheist,’ and that’s now etched on my memory. Why was an atheist going to bother coming to this place and ask all those questions that you were asking me? I remember that from that moment, when you asked me something, I was very careful of the answer I was going to give you. I didn’t know if you had any police friends and perhaps there would be consequences later.”

I was very surprised, I did remember at that moment that there had been a change in his attitude and it felt like this friendly gentleman, who always had a little time to chat with me and clear up any questions that I had, had been avoiding me after a certain point, as if he didn’t want to speak with me anymore, and I hadn’t known why.

I’d attributed it to the fact that every time I saw him I detained him with all my questions. I was sure I was keeping him from any work at hand and that he was too polite and wouldn’t tell me, “I can’t help you just now.” Still, what I was hearing in these moments surprised me and I had to say:

“What are you saying? You thought I had a police friend and I was going to say something to him? About what?”

“I don’t know,” the man said, shrugging, “because you asked so many questions, I wondered why you wanted the information.” Ending the conversation, he said, “I’ve already said to my wife to prepare something for your dinner for when you freshen up a little.”

“It’s alright, don’t trouble yourself,” I said, “I see it’s already too late and the kitchen must be closed.”

“Yes,” he said, laughing, “but my wife has the key and doesn’t have to bother anyone. She’s the one who makes it and she’s very happy to do so, you’ll see later when she tells you the same thing.”

I climbed the steps, remembering the first time I had climbed them and everything that had happened there. Now that I was remembering, it seemed like a movie I had watched sitting in a movie theater, and not my own experiences, and I said to myself, “So now, what will happen to me? Because I really don’t know why I came.”

I left those thoughts for another time. I was too tired; with two strides I was in front of the room I knew so well.

The door had been changed. It was made of a better quality of wood than the one I remembered. “They’ve really made a lot of renovations. It’s natural I suppose, time spoils everything,” I thought standing there, as I inserted the key into the lock.

I opened it slowly, with curiosity, remembering what had happened to me inside those four walls, those experiences that had changed my life, and I looked around after turning on the light. “My” lamp had been taken away, the one that made me dream so much.

“Well this one is fine, too,” I told myself, “the other one must have broken or been replaced by a more modern one.”

How silly I was to hope that everything would still be the same as when I left it. I passed in front of the closet mirror, which was still there in its place, facing the foot of the bed, reflecting my image as I passed.

I looked at myself, how I had changed and “How skinny I was!” as my mother would tell me. She was right, I had to put on a little weight so that my bones wouldn’t be quite so visible.

“Just fill out those bones,” Mom would say, insisting that I eat a little more.

“Leave him be, he’s an adult now,” Dad would say, “he knows how to look after himself.”

I went over to look out the window. My window was still there. Of course it was, as much as they might change a room, it’s not as if they’re going to move the window from where it was before.

What they had removed were the curtains. Now it had some modern Persian blinds and some net curtains that I didn't remember from before. They'd also removed the table that I'd once used to take notes in my notebook about what had happened to me on that day so as not to forget it.

I remember the times when I wrote down the conversation I'd had with the owner and the amount of information he had given me.

Now, next to the closet was a desk. It was a modern piece of furniture with a drawer on runners and a modern looking chair in front of it. I left the bag there and went to wash my hands. I could tell that there was also something here that had changed, but I didn't pay it much attention. I finished up quickly and went downstairs to the dining room. I didn't want to make them wait, since they had been so kind as to prepare me something for dinner in spite of how late it was.

The lady was sitting a steaming plate down on a table. The rest of the dining room had been cleared. It was empty, clean and lonely at that time, although they had turned all the lights on. I smiled at her from the door, she looked the same, it seemed like time hadn't passed for her, and I told her so.

"You're very kind to say so son, but time doesn't forgive anyone, and I'm not what I used to be, if you saw how my knees are getting," she said smiling.

"That'll be because you don't rest all day," I said.

"That's true enough, but I don't know how to be still, so many years doing the same thing... but let's not talk about me, what about you? What is it that made you decide to come back?" she was saying slowly, almost with an air of confidentiality. "What? Are you back at your research again?"

I watched her closely, and said:

"What do you mean? I don't understand, it's just a trip to remember old..."

"Yes, old what...?" she interrupted, "because you're not going to tell me that nothing happened to you. You can't tell me that. I know something happened to you, right?"

"Wait, what are you referring to?" I asked in surprise.

"It's alright, I understand if you don't want to tell me. Don't worry, the day you want to share it, you know who you can talk to in confidence," she was saying softly.

I didn't quite understand it. Yes, something had indeed happened to me, but I wasn't going to tell a stranger, I couldn't even imagine doing that.

I took the spoon and began to fill it with the soup that she had brought me, which smelled so good, so I could eat it and finish up.

"Son, there are some things in this life...", she was saying, "...that get easier when you share them, don't you forget that."

Turning around, she went into the kitchen to bring me the second course, that cod that I think only she knows how to make so delicious.

CHAPTER 6.

I was walking quickly. The rain fell heavily and because it was very windy, an umbrella would have been useless. I hadn't even taken it, so my whole face was getting soaked.

When I turned a corner, someone crossed my path, I was as scatter-brained as ever, but certainly justified under the circumstances, because I was in a hurry, not just because I was getting drenched but because I was late too, which I've never liked. I kept walking, when I heard:

“Don Manuel.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned around, then I noticed who had called me, it was the person who had crossed my path a moment ago.

“How long has it been since we've seen each other?” she asked.

I hadn't recognized her before, but I did now, it was the librarian, but I couldn't remember at that moment what she was called, but masking my confusion, I said:

“How are you? And what's with this 'Don' Manuel? Has time made you forget that we're friends and all the hours that we spent together?”

“It's like looking for a needle in a haystack,” she said. “Did you continue researching the subject?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I said and added, “what do you think about meeting for a coffee this evening and reminiscing about old times? I'm in a bit of a hurry just now, they're waiting for me.”

“I think that would be good, I'm also in a hurry, besides there's not really time to be standing around here on the street with this rain.” Turning around, she said, “six at our place.”

She left me almost mid-sentence, before I had the chance to respond. I watched as she disappeared around the corner, and thought, “At our place, where would that be?” I had no idea where she meant at that moment, after all the years that had passed since I last saw her, how would I remember that little detail?

Returning to reality, I saw how the rain was pouring down and I was soaking wet. Although the raincoat I was wearing was long, the bottom of my pants were already saturated. I started walking, a little concerned because I was going to be late with the minutes I'd lost with the encounter, so I picked up the pace, well as much as the stones on the ground would allow me to, because when they're wet, it's better to be careful if you don't want to end up falling.

“Where could that place she had just told me be?” I asked myself. I kept thinking about it as I walked, when suddenly I found the solution to the problem; I know where she works. I'll go there when she's about to leave and I'll say that I've come to look for her, that way I'll look like a gentleman and she won't know I've forgotten the place for our appointment.

“The years aren't kind, I never would have forgotten such a thing in my younger days,” and regretful to realize that my memory was not what it was, I continued on my way.

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I looked at the clock, and at that point I remembered the appointment I had at six as she had told me. I left the book I had in my hands, and decided to get ready so I would arrive a little before she finished her work, that way if there was anything new I could check it out before going to get that coffee.

On the way I was thinking, “I don't think there's any literature I don't know about, because I've been paying careful attention to everything that has come out, but surely something has passed me by and she'll tell me about it right away.”

With that in mind, I arrived at the library door. I still had lots of energy and when I quickened my pace there was no one who could get ahead of me.

When I went through the library door, I stood there, surprised to see a young lady in her place. “Could she be ill? Maybe she caught a cold this morning with all that rain.”

I was about to turn around when I thought, “If I don’t have her phone number, I can’t call her either,” and with the idea of asking the girl who I assumed must be her substitute, I went over to the counter.

“Good afternoon!” I said when I got there.

“Finally, thank goodness the day has gotten better, because this morning was terrible. I don’t know where so much rain could have come from, it seemed like it was never going to stop. What can I do for you?” said the young lady in a friendly voice, standing there looking at me with a smile.

“I came to see your colleague, but I see she’s not here,” I answered her.

Her smile disappearing, she looked at me strangely.

“Colleague?”

“Yes,” I said a little confused.

“Pillar?” she said immediately, as if she had just remembered.

“Yes, Pilar,” I answered, giving a little snort, happy to finally remember that name.

Staring at me, the young lady told me:

“Well, surely you know she hasn’t been around for a long time?”

“Well, it’s been a while yes, I’ve been busy, you know how things are. You get caught up in things and you don’t have time for anything, and before you know it, the days have passed,” I answered, lowering my head in embarrassment. “Why are you asking me that?” I asked her a little taken aback. Why would she care if I came to see Pilar often or not?

“Well, because Pilar retired years ago. I don’t know how long ago, because I’ve only been working here for a few months. When she left, they hired someone else, but I took the librarian’s exams and they gave me this position, because the person who was here replacing her, was only temporary,” she said very seriously.

I was listening to her as if a distant voice was informing me, because I was lost in my own thoughts.

How could she have retired? It couldn’t be true surely, this person must be mistaken. Something suddenly hit me. Of course! She was older than I was, but not by that much, I had been all over the place lately!

“Alright,” I said to the girl, “I won’t bother you any further. Oh, and could you tell me where she lives?”

But before she had time to answer, I heard someone talking behind me.

“Don Manuel, I see you’re as punctual as ever, and as I’d imagined, you’ve come through here first to see if there was anything new.”

I didn’t even have time to react. I saw her approaching the girl, walking as quickly as ever, going around the counter and after giving her two kisses, she asked her with a smile:

“How are you? Are you bored? Be patient, rainy days you know, people are warmer at home.”

“Look, before we leave, I want you to see something,” she said to me.

She had come to my side, then walked decisively down one of the corridors and I followed, but not without saying goodbye to the lady at the counter who must have taken me for a bit of a fool.

“What do you want to show me Pilar?” I asked as I followed her.

“I see you haven’t forgotten my name, despite how long it’s been since we last saw one another,” she said turning her face and smiling.

I had the impulse to tell her that the young lady had just reminded me, but I restrained myself. No, she’s not going to believe that I have memory lapses already, and I said:

“So Pilar, what’s going on in your life? They just told me that you’ve retired.”

“Well, the truth is that I didn’t like it anymore, even though I was trying to... how can I put it? Re-engage, but it was impossible. They wanted new people, especially people who knew how to use the new technologies that were coming out, because as you can see, everything has really changed

since the computers arrived, it's not the same anymore. People prefer to find the answers easily, rather than spend hours going over tomes to find what they need."

"Well," I said, "it's always good to move forward, but now I don't know what's happening, it seems we're all in such an almighty hurry, even if we don't have much to do, we're almost running, what times we live in!"

"Yes," she said, "to then waste time watching television."

"Well, I don't watch it much, but I do like to watch the news."

"Of course, and that'll have made you stop reading the newspaper every day as you always used to."

"No, I still have that habit and I don't think anyone can take that away from me. I've been doing it for so many years, but yes, it is true that it's more comfortable to sit and watch something and have someone telling you, rather than to be reading. On top of that, my eyes are not what they used to be."

"Of course, you won't give up the habit because it's fallen out of fashion, but young people, what do you think? Watching television without making any effort to find out about things and they'll gradually stop working harder and harder and they'll stop reading altogether," she was saying to me a little sadly.

"Don't exaggerate, there have always been distractions and reading has endured," I added to cheer her up.

"Yes, but hear me well, isn't it true that people in your younger days read more than they do today? You have to admit that we liked reading more than the younger folk of today."

"Well, you're right about that," I was saying, when I saw her stop.

"All the information you want, you have it here."

We had reached where she wanted, she stopped there and showed me a device.

"What?" I asked right away. "What are you talking about?"

"Yep, everything is stored on here and all you have to do is select a date and the information comes out for you, straight away."

"What are you telling me? That the newspapers are all archived in there? Because that would be great for me, a what-do-you-call-it like this, because I have material from all these years of research, which I can't fit anywhere at home. When one of my nephews comes to pay me a visit, not that it's often, but when they pass by where I live, they ring the bell downstairs and if I answer them, they say:

'Hello uncle Manu!' and they come in to see me for a while. That's because their parents always tell them that since I'm a loner, I must get bored a lot, and because they hear it so much, they come to keep me company for a while. Well, he asks me why I don't throw away all those old papers."

"And what do they think of all your work?" Pilar asked me.

"Well, the truth is that no one in my family has ever understood, although as they know, I'm very stubborn and I was never gonna let it go, and they've never asked me to give up."

I keyed in a date where she told me, and immediately the newspaper I wanted appeared on the screen, of course I just searched for something I already knew, to see if it worked.

"How much time and money this invention would have saved me before," I said looking at her.

"Yes, she said and miles, I know you've had to make many trips to collect all that information."

Well, what have you dedicated yourself to since you don't have to go to work every day? How have you been spending your time? I was asking her curiously.

Blushing like a schoolgirl who had been caught hiding something, she said:

"I've dedicated myself to writing."

"Writing?" I asked surprised. "Writing what?"

"Well, memories, experiences, in short, part of my life between these four walls, my views on many things," she was telling me and had lowered her voice, it was clear that she didn't want anyone to find out.

"Tell me! Tell me! I'm sure it's very interesting," I interrupted her with curiosity.

“Look,” she said, looking at the clock, “let’s go, or we’re going to be too late for coffee, and we’ll get there at dinner time, but I promise I’ll tell you.”

We shut down that device and headed down the corridor to the exit, where we said goodbye to the lady. Pilar gave her another two kisses as she had when she arrived and said:

“Keep holding down the fort for me!”

As a farewell, I said to her:

“I’ll be back some day when I have more time to take a look at that little gadget you have, bye!”

Looking at me with an expression on her face that told me she had no idea what I was referring to, she said:

“Well, I’ll be here, come back whenever you want.”

I left behind Pilar, and started walking quickly, because I didn’t want her to leave me behind, but it was hard for me to stay by her side.

I noticed that time had not sapped away that energy that she always had, and that although now she would not have to walk so much through the corridors of the library, her legs were as agile as ever. Suddenly she stopped there in the middle of the street, and she started thinking.

“Look, seeing as we’re together, we don’t need to go to our coffee shop, I’m thinking of something I’d like to show you,” she was telling me with a smile.

Without asking any questions, because I thought, “She always has first-hand information,” I said:

“Whatever you want. Let’s go to wherever you’re talking about.”

We went to the Rúa da Raiña and in surprise I said:

“So where are we going?”

At that point, we passed by the door of a coffee shop, and she said:

“Look, this looks like a good place to get a coffee, what do you think?”

I liked the place too, although in reality it didn’t matter to me, so we entered and asked for one right there at the counter, which really surprised me.

I had assumed she would take advantage of the fact that we would be sitting quietly to show me what she had just told me about, but I was wrong, she didn’t want to sit down at all. When I proposed it, she said:

“No, this way is faster.”

When it was served to us, she started drinking it immediately. I saw that the coffee was steaming and I asked her:

“Are you in such a hurry that you can’t wait for it to cool down a little?”

“Wait, you’ll see,” she said, smiling, and she did not say another word.

She drank all the coffee that was left in the cup in a single sip. I don’t know how she could tolerate it and not burn her throat, because there was no one who could have drunk mine at least like that, it was just too hot.

Indicating with her hand that I should hurry, she headed for the exit, so my full coffee was left untouched in the cup. I did not want to burn myself, besides, curiosity had already gripped me. What could Pilar want to show me that would suddenly make her hurry so much?

I followed her out of the coffee shop, and of course because she knew where she was going, her steps were firm, yet I didn’t understand anything and I looked all around me, and before I knew it, we had arrived at the University library. She immediately greeted the two people at the door, it was obvious that they were old acquaintances.

“Hello Pilar! Here for information again?” asked one of them.

“Yes!” she answered. “I know you’ve received something interesting, and I’m going to keep an eye on it.” We kept walking until we got into a big room.

“I’d never come here before,” I said looking at the place. “I’d visited the public library, yes, who in Santiago de Compostela doesn’t know it? This place though, I didn’t even know it existed. Where are we?” I asked.

She smiled at me softly:

“Shhhh! You can’t talk here.”

I shrugged a little embarrassed, because for a few moments I’d forgotten that talking is prohibited in libraries. Of course, given all the time I’ve spent in them, I was almost always alone, so I didn’t have to make any effort to keep quiet. Since I didn’t have anyone to talk to, how was I going to do it?

At that moment, I don’t know why, I remembered one time when I was occupying myself with a book that I had in my hands in the Vatican library, and that nun approached me and asked me:

“Can I help you?” and I immediately realized that she had asked in English.

I looked at her surprised and thought, “How strange! Why have you asked me like that?” Then I answered:

“No, thank you.” I was of course trying to pronounce it properly, in the same language that she had spoken to me, English. It’s a problem that I’ve always had, even though my teachers have always told me:

“Manuel, you know how to assert yourself very well,” but when I’ve had to speak it, I’ve always been indecisive, fearing that the person who was listening to me wouldn’t understand me, because I was pronouncing things wrong.

The nun gave me a pamphlet, and turning around, disappeared into the aisles of the place. Surprised, I looked at what she had given me, I opened that pamphlet to see what it was when I saw in large letters, “FATIMA.”

I got up as if propelled by a spring to look for her, but it was useless. There were a lot of people sitting there, priests, the odd nun, and I looked at them closely, to see if the nun who had spoken to me was among them.

But nothing! I couldn’t recognize her because I’d not taken notice of how she was dressed, and here there were different uniforms, or habits as I believe their clothes are called, some dressed in blue, others in black, still others in white, which surprised me. What would they be doing here? Why were they not at their convents?

Well, since it was none of my business, I let it go. Since the pamphlet was in my hand, I looked at it more closely. It was written in English, and I thought, “How would she have known that I was looking for information on this subject?” I could not get over my astonishment, but even more so when I read on the pamphlet, “Pilgrimage to Fatima.”

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Now, being here with Pilar, uncertain about what she was going to show me, I asked her:

“How do you find out about any new information?”

“I’ve been working on this for many years, so I know all my counterparts, and if there’s a new one somewhere, I try to visit them and become friends with them, that way I know that when something comes to them about the topics they know interest me, well they let me know straight away,” she said quietly.

“And what subjects are those that interest you?” I asked at that moment.

“Shhh!” she said. “You’ll see it now.”

She went to a bookshelf and took down what she wanted, so determined that I was sure she already knew that it was there. We both went to the reading area and after sitting, I looked curiously at what was written on the book she had just taken, which read: “Latest Research on Fatima.”

“Oh, so you’re still researching the topic?” I asked a little surprised.

“And you’re not?” she returned the question. “Surely you haven’t dropped it, am I wrong?”

I put on that half smile, as if I had been caught out. I answered:

“Sure, I never dropped it.”

“I already knew you hadn’t changed. When you start with something you like, you never leave it,” she said, approaching me so I could hear her properly, because she spoke to me very quietly.

We spent a good while there reading, the time that remained until closing time. We went for a walk when we left. Even though it was a little chilly, we went to the Plaza do Obradoiro.

When we arrived, Pilar stood there in the middle. I watched her, not understanding anything of what she was doing.

“Why have we come here?” I asked at that moment.

“Each stone contains its secret,” she told me very seriously, pointing to the Cathedral.

I didn’t understand what she meant by that and I asked her:

“Pilar, what do you want to tell me? I don’t understand any of this.”

She got very serious and answered:

“Time erases everything, but there are secrets that need to be recovered and spread.”

I still wasn’t understanding anything and I asked her to please clarify it for me.

“Who built it?” she asked me suddenly.

“Well, they say...”

“No!” she said and didn’t let me finish. “That might be who ordered it to be built; who paid for the construction; who controlled this territory when it was built, or was it simply someone later, who said, ‘Isn’t this lovely! This is mine,’ but truly, who built it? What man spent his time chipping at the stone for hours and hours for someone else to then claim it? And it could possibly have been someone else entirely who built it here. We’ll never know that, but despite our ignorance, here it is, one stone resting on another, and in turn supporting another, thus forming the entire structure, which seems monumental, but they are simply that, a collection of stones performing a function.”

As she had been saying that, she’d approached the wall and touched that stone she was talking about with her hand and continued:

“How many drops of rain have fallen on it in the time it’s been standing here? How many hours of sun has it had to endure? And here it is, standing firm where they placed it, without moving despite the inclemency of the weather. How much has it experienced? We’ll never know.”

I continued listening to her, but without understanding anything she was saying to me, why was she talking about a stone like that? I was perplexed until I said:

“Hang on! Sorry Pilar! You lost me a while ago, what are you getting at? What are you trying to say? I don’t understand.”

Taking a breath with resignation, she said:

“We all have to be like that, be in the place they have put us, and comply fully with what they entrust to us.”

“But what do you mean? Who puts us? Look, when I leave my house there’s no one to tell me whether I should turn to the right or to the left, I do what I want,” I was saying.

She interrupted me to ask me:

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” I affirmed emphatically, but I was a little confused. How strange it was! Surely she wanted to tell me something but didn’t dare to, that’s why she was making so many detours.

I felt the cold already starting to bother my throat a little, so with a distracted motion, I raised the collar of my jacket. Tightening her coat at that same moment, she said:

“Yes, we have to leave it for another day, if we’re not going to catch a cold.”

“No, wait, no!” I said. “You can’t just leave me hanging like that, you have to tell me what this is all about.”

“Look!” she answered, watching me, “if you’re not busy on Monday, let’s meet at this same spot at five, does that work for you?”

“Monday? Why not tomorrow, it’s Friday? How can I wait that long?”

“The rest of the days are impossible for me, and I think it will be good for you to think about all this a bit, so you’ll surely understand why I told you about it,” she said very seriously.

Turning around, she left purposefully, but I overtook her and said:

“Wait! I’ll walk you to your house. It’s too late for you to be going alone.”

“I always go alone, I’m used to it, it’s better that we separate here, at this place, and it’ll be here where we’ll meet again on Monday, at five o’clock on the dot, don’t forget,” she said to me.

I stayed there for a while, watching as she walked away down Rúa de San Francisco. I turned around, approached the wall of the Cathedral, and touched the stone she had touched, as if to understand what she had been saying to me.

I was there for a few moments, then I withdrew my hand saying to myself, “If someone sees me, they’ll wonder... what am I doing?” but looking around the square I saw that I was alone, that everywhere was deserted and I touched it again.

I waited a moment, suddenly I saw something that I didn’t understand, it was a field. I looked closer, and it was as if I were getting closer to it, I saw some men who were working. I was very surprised. They were chipping at stones, some big piles, they made them into equal sizes, it didn’t seem difficult for them and they seemed happy.

I didn’t understand it, suddenly it was all gone, I stopped seeing it, it disappeared as quickly as it had come.

I looked all around me in surprise, there was no one there, I was alone in that empty square, I didn’t understand a thing.

I had no idea what had just happened so I started walking, and leaving that place, I went home at a brisk pace so I could warm up, since the temperature had dropped, and there was a cold breeze that left my face frozen.

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LÚCIA, the seer of Fatima, had she died on May 31, 1949 at the Institute of the Sisters of St. Dorothy in Tuy? Or on February 13, 2005, at the convent of Santa Teresa in Coimbra?

That was what the documents that fell into my hands that day were about. It was a surprise, I had never found anything like them, I had to study them thoroughly. This was unheard of, unexpected and strange, how could such a thing happen in this day and age?

There were many secrets around that seer, too many I would say, but every time I try to find an answer in my search, to clarify something, another question arises. It seems that there are hidden interests, that do not want facts as simple as the lifespan of a person to be known.

How is that possible? That will not stop me from striving to find the truth. These setbacks that I encounter only make my curiosity to discover what actually happened grow deeper and deeper.

What seems to have no contradictions is that when she was at the Institute of the Sisters of St. Dorothy in Tuy, she once fell ill and Mons. José Alves Correia da Silva, the bishop of Leiria, seeing her delicate state of health, ordered her to write down that secret so that it would not be lost if something happened to her.

It is also known that she wrote the document in January 1944 and sent it to the bishop with the warning that it not be published until after her death or at least not before 1960.

All this information that I already knew from other documents I had studied; I was now confirming with the ones I had here in my hands. So by taking all of this into consideration, who was the Lúcia who died on February 13, 2005?

Of course it could not be the same Lúcia. What was going on? Who was behind all this mess? I found it very interesting to continue.

I started to look at everything more closely, it couldn’t be. According to these files, it was not very clear no matter how you looked at it, because looking at the dates carefully suggests that this sister Lúcia had taken her vows at the Carmelites of Coimbra on May 31, 1949, what a coincidence! That is exactly the date Lúcia’s death is recorded, coincidence? Or is it proof that there are two Lúcias?

And if so, who set everything up? Explanations have to be found for such unusual events. If she had died, why would her life have been extended so strangely creating a double, a substitute? What for? Who could have done it? Who would benefit from it if she were still alive?

All these questions came to my mind all of a sudden, why the church? It could only have been the church; why would they have covered up that the true seer Lúcia died in 1949?

There are secrets that cannot be hidden forever, so now I will try to uncover evidence that I've been finding in my research, which surely will intrigue more than one person and intrigue them a lot. People might wonder what stake I have in it? My answer is that I don't, but it's always good to know the truth.

Why is there such controversy surrounding whether or not the third secret is authentic or false? There are things that are difficult to establish, but if we try to find the answer, we will find unexpected surprises, because it seems that anyone who has been interested enough to try to clarify everything is met with such adamant resistance that sometimes the barrier is insurmountable. But every wall has its little hole where you can slip through, to continue burrowing and gradually discover the path, where events have developed, with all of their twists and turns.

What is truth? And what is deception? I just pose the question, if that sister Lúcia, who I have no doubt was the person who had written in that little book that was now in my possession, had kept it in that hiding place.

Why wouldn't she have searched for it afterwards? Could she have forgotten? I refuse to believe that, it wouldn't be better to think that it was because she had died, at least that much is clear to me.

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I turned on the light, I was back in my room. I had calmed down while I'd had dinner with my companions.

I decided to face the surprise. I climbed onto the chair, and when I touched it once again, my heart began to beat rapidly.

It seemed to me for a moment that it was going to burst out of my chest, given how nervous I was again, but being brave I decided not to prolong the situation any further.

I picked it up very carefully, lowered it and sat on the bed. I prepared to unwrap that little book that I had carefully covered earlier with my handkerchief.

I already had it in my hand, it was small, less than a quarter the size of my hand, of course I've always had very large hands, but yes, the book was very small compared to those that I was used to reading, those study books that I'll never know why they always try to make into big tomes that are so difficult to handle. This however was so small that at first I thought it would be a kid's book.

I paid close attention to the name that was on the cover: "BREVIARIUM." It was written in Latin. I was no expert in that language, but Latin phrases did come up from time to time in my books, and I also suddenly remembered that I had studied a Latin course. I had forgotten that, I've studied so many subjects over the course of my life, that it's difficult to remember them all. Suddenly the famous "Rosa, Rosae, Rosa" came to my mind.

I also remembered how I used to say in that class at the time:

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