



ÍNDEX

2019 PRIZES IN THE HUMANITIES

Pag 05	I Preface / Prefacio: <i>Diego del Alcázar</i>
Pag 09	II The Foundation / La Fundación
Pag 13	III The Jury / El Jurado
Pag 17	The Prizes / Los Premios
Pag 18	About the Prizes / Sobre los Premios
Pag 19	Short story in Spanish / Relato corto en español
Pag 20	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Joaquín Martín Perles</i>
Pag 24	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Pablo Hernández Blanco</i>
Pag 30	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Agustín Pellechia</i>
Pag 37	Short story in English / Relato corto en inglés
Pag 38	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Adam Rose</i>
Pag 44	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Anas Atassi</i>
Pag 50	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Pablo Hernández Blanco</i>
Pag 54	Special Mention / Mención especial: <i>Carlen Long</i>
Pag 59	Poetry in Spanish / Poesía en español
Pag 68	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Irene Cánovas</i>
Pag 70	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Paula San Román Bueno</i>
Pag 72	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Santiago Isla</i>
Pag 67	Poetry in English / Poesía en inglés
Pag 68	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Carlen Long</i>
Pag 70	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Malak El Halabi</i>
Pag 72	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Ivan Sanim</i>
Pag 74	Special Mention / Mención especial: <i>Jack Straker</i>
Pag 77	Short Essay in Spanish / Ensayo corto en español
Pag 78	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Manuel Rodríguez Lavado</i>
Pag 86	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Ignacio Munguía</i>
Pag 120	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Imma Mengual</i>
Pag 101	Short Essay in English / Ensayo corto en inglés
Pag 102	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Ellen Buckland</i>
Pag 108	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Giovanni Doemery</i>
Pag 120	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Ryan Secrest</i>
Pag 127	Photography / Fotografía
Pag 128	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Keely Bass</i>
Pag 130	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Miguel Van Den Oever</i>
Pag 132	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Alex Visbal Loewy</i>
Pag 134	Special Mention Series / Mención especial: <i>Natalia Lorca Ruiz</i>
Pag 137	Video / Vídeo
Pag 138	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: <i>Elmira Shahanaghi</i>
Pag 140	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: <i>Julián Schreib, Clara Herberg, Camila Arizpe, Shivag Kapoor & Eleonore Anglade</i>
Pag 142	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: <i>Romain Odin Lepoutre</i>
Pag 145	Faculty and Staff prizes
Pag 146	Short story in Spanish / Relato corto en español: <i>Joaquín Garralda</i>
Pag 140	Short story in English / Relato corto en inglés: <i>Luis Vivanco</i>
Pag 142	Poetry in English / Poesía en inglés: <i>Maria Eugenia Marín</i>
Pag 101	Short Essay in English / Ensayo corto en inglés: <i>Laura McDermott</i>
Pag 188	IV Epilogue / Epílogo: <i>Carlos Mas</i>

I PREFACE



Given my current convalescing condition, I asked Victoria Gimeno to write this introduction, but it is so good I do not dare to claim it.

As Chairman of the IE Foundation, I write this foreword and I do it almost at tiptoe, not to make any noise that might disturb the voyage in the deep corners of the minds, in the places and the souls that inspired each of the works herewith presented. I do not want to wake up yet from this journey along true or false stories, finished or incomplete, a journey into places that exist or maybe not, a journey into the discovery of other lives, other emotions, that I might have felt, or maybe not, or maybe I could put under my skin.

This book embraces the generosity of those who allow us to trespass into others' hearts and beat along with them, and grant us eyes to fly over yellow landscapes to witness how they turn red, green and blue. Thank you for creating, to those presented here and those who tried.

Creating is a unique process, capturing an instant that will never repeat itself, a story in images that suddenly takes your breath away, a chain of letters resonating like music, calming us down or tormenting us, a sort of passing down a street you will either never walk again or through which you will necessarily pass by some other time. Creativity does not leave us indifferent.

The present book reflects your sensitivity and your effort to understand love, suffering, complexity, for leaving behind your cocoon, like butterflies about to fly away... and dare to dream and make us dream, in your worlds, imagined or real, and make us sail in your ship, feeling the sweet and fresh breeze seagulls feel when they flap their wings over the northern and southern seas. These letters interwoven with images will rest forever in these pages, as witnesses of your talent.

I do not want to close this foreword without addressing the readers, wishing them to complete this journey through the poems, short-stories, essays, photographs and videos feeling, as I have done, and feeling the resonance, as I have felt, of some verses of Fernando Pessoa's poem, "In the end, the best way of travelling is feeling", *feeling in every possible way. The more I feel, the more I will posses the total existence of the universe, the more complete I will be along the wide space.*

Diego del Alcázar, Chairman of IE
Madrid, July 2019

I PREFACIO

Dada mi condición de convaleciente, le pedí a Victoria Gimeno que escribiera esta introducción, pero es tan buena que no me he atrevido a firmarla.

Como presidente de la Fundación IE, escribo este prólogo y lo hago casi de puntillas, para no hacer ruido en el viaje de adentrarse en los recovecos de las mentes, en los lugares y las almas que inspiraron cada uno de los trabajos que aquí se presentan. No quiero despertarme todavía de este viaje por historias verdaderas o falsas, acabadas o incompletas, y lugares que existen o que no existen, que descubren otras vidas, otras emociones, que tal vez he o no sentido o las puedo pegar a mi piel.

Este libro contiene la generosidad de los que nos dejan entrar en otros corazones y palpitárselos con ellos, y nos dan otros ojos para volar sobre los paisajes amarillos que se convierten en rojos, verdes y azules. Gracias por crear, a los que estáis aquí y a los que lo habéis intentado.

Crear es un proceso único, la captura de un instante que ya nunca más se repite, un relato en imágenes que te cortan de repente la respiración, una sucesión de letras que suenan a música, que nos calman o atormentan, un pasar por una calle que ya nunca más volverás a pisar o por donde necesariamente volverás a transitar. La creación no nos deja indiferentes.

Esta edición recoge vuestra sensibilidad y esfuerzo por entender el amor, el sufrimiento, la complejidad, por salir de vuestro cascarón, como los caracoles lo hacen al sol.... Y atreveros a soñar y hacernos soñar, con vuestros mundos reales o irreales y hacernos navegar en vuestro velero, sintiendo la brisa dulce y fresca que sienten las gaviotas en su aleteo sobre los mares del norte y del sur. Estas letras que se cruzan con imágenes, quedarán para siempre en estas páginas, que serán testigo de vuestro talento.

No quiero cerrar este prefacio sin dirigirme al lector, deseándole que haga este viaje por los poemas, relatos, ensayos, fotografías y vídeos sintiendo, como lo he hecho yo, y le resuenen, como a mí, algunos versos del poema de Fernando Pessoa “Al fin, la mejor manera de viajar es sentir”, *sentirlo todo de todas las maneras. Cuanto más sienta, más poseeré la existencia total del universo, más completo seré a lo largo del espacio entero.*

Diego del Alcázar, Presidente de IE
Madrid, julio de 2019

И он посмотрел кругом, как бы желая понять, как можно не сочувствовать природе. Уже вечерело; солнце скрылось за небольшую осиновую рощу, лежавшую в полверсте от сада: тень от нее без конца тянулась через неподвижные поля. Мужичок ехал рысцой на белой лошадке по темной узкой дорожке вдоль самой рощи; он весь был ясно виден, весь, до заплаты на плече, даром что ехал в тени; приятно-отчетливо мелькали ноги лошадки. Солнечные лучи с своей стороны забирались в рощу и, пробиваясь сквозь чащу, обливали стволы осин таким теплым светом, что они становились похожи на стволы сосен, а листва их почти синела и над нею поднималось бледно-голубое небо, чуть обрумяненное зарей. [...] «Как хорошо, Боже мой!» — подумал Николай Петрович, и любимые стихи пришли было ёму на уста.

Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, Chapter XI.

And he looked round, as though trying to understand how it was possible to have no feeling for nature. It was already evening; the sun was hidden behind a small clump of aspens which grew about a quarter of a mile from the garden; its shadow stretched indefinitely across the motionless fields. A little peasant on a white pony was riding along the dark narrow path near the wood; his whole figure was clearly visible even to the patch on his shoulder, although he was in the shade; the pony's hoofs rose and fell with graceful distinctness. The sun's rays on the farther side fell full on the clump of trees, and piercing through them threw such a warm light on the aspen trunks that they looked like pines, and their leaves seemed almost dark blue, while above them rose a pale blue sky, tinged by the red sunset glow. [...] "How beautiful, my God!" thought Nikolai Petrovich, and his favourite verses almost rose to his lips.

Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, Chapter XI.

II THE FOUNDATION

Collaborative Initiatives that Impact

Established in 1997, IE Foundation is a nonprofit organization which aims to enhance IE's impact on society through own resources and collaborations with other partners.

The Foundation's main goals are to provide initiatives and resources to further improve the quality of education, to create and manage applied research initiatives, to implement and fund scholarship programs, to nurture a culture of giving back and social impact, and to bring added impetus to IE's strategic values.

Each year, the IE Foundation awards scholarships to over a thousand students from all over the world thanks to the generous support of its donors and provide backing together with strategic partners to applied research initiatives that impact in fields such as Diversity, Globalization, Inclusion and Gender Equity, Demographics and Generation Gap, Entrepreneurship, Families in Business or Social Innovation among others.

IE Foundation has a profound sense of responsibility to society and a deep commitment to the humanities, seen as a core discipline at IE, essential to empower global and well-rounded leaders regardless of their professional profile. IE Foundation's mission fosters cultural inspiration at IE through the IE Foundation Library, Hay Festival Segovia, Support of museums and culture heritage or the IE Prize in the Humanities.

None of the actions performed by the IE Foundation would be possible without the support and the trust of its donors: IE students, alumni, families and staff and corporate and institutional partners.

II LA FUNDACIÓN

Iniciativas colaborativas de impacto

Establecida en 1997, la Fundación IE es una organización sin ánimo de lucro que tiene como objetivo aumentar el impacto social de IE a través de sus propios recursos y colaboraciones con partners estratégicos.

Los principales objetivos de la Fundación son proporcionar recursos e iniciativas para fomentar la calidad de la educación, crear y gestionar iniciativas de investigación aplicada, implementar y financiar programas de becas, fomentar una cultura de compromiso e impacto social con la comunidad, y reforzar los valores estratégicos de IE.

Cada año, la Fundación IE otorga becas a más de mil estudiantes de todo el mundo gracias al generoso apoyo de sus donantes. Asimismo, junto a patrocinadores estratégicos, apoya iniciativas de investigación aplicada en áreas como la diversidad, la globalización, la inclusión y la igualdad, la demografía y la brecha generacional, el emprendimiento, la familia en la empresa o la innovación social, entre otras.

La Fundación IE tiene un profundo sentido de la responsabilidad hacia la sociedad y un fiel compromiso con las humanidades, que son contempladas como una disciplina central en IE y que son esenciales en la formación de los líderes globales del mañana, independientemente de su perfil profesional. La misión de la Fundación IE es también fomentar la inspiración cultural de IE a través de espacios y actividades: la Biblioteca de la Fundación IE, el Hay Festival de Segovia, el apoyo a museos y el patrimonio cultural o los Premios de Humanidades Fundación IE.

Ninguna de las acciones realizadas por la Fundación IE sería posible sin el apoyo y la confianza de sus donantes: los alumnos, antiguos alumnos, familias, *staff* y los socios corporativos e institucionales de IE.

Y miró en torno suyo como si quisiera comprender cómo era posible no sentir la naturaleza. Ya atardecía, el sol se ocultaba detrás de un pequeño grupo de álamos temblones, plantados a una media versta del jardín; su sombra infinita se extendía a través de los campos inmóviles. Un pequeño campesino montado sobre un pony blanco pasó por el angosto sendero que bordeaba el plantel de álamos; aunque estaba en sombra, toda su figura se recortaba claramente contra el fondo, hasta el retal de su hombro, aunque ya oscurecía; los cascos del caballito pateaban suavemente con una agradable cadencia. Los rayos del sol en su costado caían sobre el soto y, atravesándolo, arrojaban una luz tan cálida sobre los troncos de los álamos que éstos parecían pinos, y sus hojas parecían casi de color índigo, y tras ellos se alzaba un cielo azul pálido apenas moteado por un rojizo atardecer. “¡Cuánta belleza, Dios mío!”, pensó Nicolái Petrovich, y algunos de sus versos favoritos se le asomaron a los labios.

Ivan Turgenev, *Padres e hijos*, Capítulo XI.

III

THE JURY / EL JURADO

SHORT STORY, POETRY AND SHORT ESSAY IN SPANISH RELATO CORTO, POESÍA Y ENSAYO CORTO EN ESPAÑOL

Diego del Alcázar

Presidente IE/President of IE

Anunciada Fernández de Córdoba

Poeta y Embajadora de España en Hungría

Poet and Ambassador of Spain in Hungary

Bieito Rubido

Director del periódico ABC/Director of ABC newspaper

Javier Ayuso

Director del periódico El País/Director of El País newspaper

Carlos Fernández Aganzo

Poeta, escritor y periodista/Poet, Writer and Journalist

Rosa Belmonte

Periodista/Journalist

Javier Moro

Escritor/Writer

Gabriel Albiac

Filósofo y escritor/Filosopher and Writer

Victoria Gimeno

Directora de IE Foundation Prizes in the Humanities

Director of IE Foundation Prizes in the Humanities

Sofía Rondán

Directora Asociada de Admisiones IE University y ganadora

de poesía 2016 y 2017/Associate Director of Admissions of IE

and winner of poetry 2016 and 2017, IE Foundation Prizes

Isabel Macías

Directora Asociada de Comunicación IE, ganadora de relato
y poesía 2016 y secretaria del jurado/Associate Director of
Communication of IE, winner of short story and poetry 2016,
IE Foundation Prizes, Director of IE Foundation Prizes in the

Humanities and Secretary of the Jury

VIDEO AND PHOTOGRAPHY / VÍDEO Y FOTOGRAFÍA

Carlos de Vega

Director del periódico El País en su versión digital

Director of El País newspaper's digital version

Begoña González Cuesta

Decana/Dean of Communication and Media, IE School of Human Sciences and Technology, IE University

Ignacio Itarte

Fotógrafo/Photographer

Jean-Marc Manson

Fotógrafo/Photographer

Roberto Arribas

Fotógrafo/Photographer

Viet-Ha Tran

Senior Associate Director of Admissions at IE Business School

and Photographer

Enrique Agudo

Arquitecto y Artista/Architect and Artist

Vincent Doyle

Professor of Media and Cultural Studies and Academic Director
of the Master in Visual and Digital Media at IE University

Geoffroy Gerard

Director de la Fundación IE/Director of IE Foundation

Teresa García

Directora Asociada de Comunicación de IE y
secretaria del jurado/Associate Director of Communication
and Secretary of the Jury

**SHORT STORY, POETRY AND SHORT ESSAY IN ENGLISH
RELATO CORTO, POESÍA Y ENSAYO CORTO EN INGLÉS**

Diego Alcázar Benjumea

Vicepresidente de IE/Vice President of IE

Santiago Íñiguez

Presidente de IE University/President of IE University

Namita Gokhale

Escritora, editora y directora del Jaipur Literature Festival/Writer, Editor and Director of the Jaipur Literature Festival

Tom Burns

Periodista y ensayista/Journalist and Essayist

Susana Torres

Directora del Área de Humanidades de IE/Academic Director of Humanities at IE

Rolf Strom-Olsen

Profesor de Humanidades de IE/Professor in Humanities at IE

Gonzalo Garland

Profesor de Macroeconomía y Vicepresidente de Relaciones Externas de IE
Professor in Macroeconomy and Vicepresident of External Relations at IE

Félix Valdivieso

Director de Comunicación de IE/Chief Communications Officer at IE

Juliana Pereira

Directora de Campus Life de IE/Director of Campus Life at IE

Julián Montaño

Profesor de Filosofía/ Professor in Philosophy at IE University

Miguel Larrañaga

Vicerrector de Estudiantes y profesor de Humanidades/Vice-Rector for Student Affairs
and Professor of Humanities at IE University

David Moshfegh

Profesor de Humanidades de IE/Professor in Humanities at IE

Giedre Pavalkyte

Associate Director of Campus Life/Associate Director of Campus Life at IE

Kerry Parke

Directora Asociada de Comunicación de IE/Associate Director of Communications at IE

Fernando Dameto

Deputy Director of Humanities at IE y secretario del jurado
Associate Director in Comunications at IE and Secretary of the Jury

SO WE'LL GO NO MORE A-ROVING

So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart still be as loving,
And the moon still be as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul outwears the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon.

George Gordon Byron, Lord Byron.

NO VOLVEREMOS A VAGAR

Así es, no volveremos a vagar
Tan tarde en la noche,
Aunque el corazón siga amando
Y la luna conserve el mismo brillo.

Pues así como la espada gasta su vaina,
Y el alma consume el pecho,
Asimismo el corazón debe detenerse a respirar,
E incluso el amor debe descansar.

Aunque la noche fue hecha para amar,
Y los días vuelven demasiado pronto,
Aún así no volveremos a vagar
A la luz de la luna.

George Gordon Byron, Lord Byron.

THE PRIZES

LOS PREMIOS

IV

ABOUT THE PRIZES

The IE Foundation Prizes in the Humanities are awarded annually in recognition of the best written and audiovisual work undertaken by IE students and alumni.

The vision provided by the humanities is one of the key aspects of the IE mindset and of our entire community, bringing as it does the capacity to have another voice and another way of looking at things, of seeing and articulating possible new meanings. IE Foundation has created these prizes in collaboration with the IE Humanities Center, which specializes in research and teaching in the field of the humanities, to enable this voice and this other vision, the vision of the Humanities, to be expressed by its students and to be an inspiration for all of us.

Each year a prize is awarded for the three best pieces of work in the categories of short story in Spanish, poetry in Spanish, short story in English, poetry in English, essay, photography, and video. The prizes, awarded by the IE Foundation, are compiled in this edition you have in your hands

SOBRE LOS PREMIOS

Los Premios Fundación IE en Humanidades distinguen, de forma anual, la mejor obra escrita y audiovisual realizada por los alumnos y antiguos alumnos del IE.

Uno de los valores fundamentales de IE, de toda nuestra comunidad educativa, es la visión que proporcionan las humanidades, la capacidad para tener otra voz y otra mirada de las cosas, de ver y articular nuevas posibilidades de sentido. La Fundación IE con la colaboración de IE Humanities Center, nuestro centro especializado en investigación y docencia en Humanidades, convoca estos premios para permitir que esa otra voz y otra mirada, la visión propia de las humanidades, quede expresada por sus alumnos y nos inspire a todos nosotros.

Se premian anualmente las tres mejores obras en las categorías de relato corto y poesía en español, relato corto y poesía en inglés, ensayo, fotografía y vídeo. Los premios, concedidos por la Fundación IE, se recopilan en esta edición que tiene entre sus manos.

SHORT STORY IN SPANISH

RELATO CORTO EN ESPAÑOL

-
- Pag 20 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Joaquín Martín Perles
Pag 24 2nd Prize / 2^{er} premio: Pablo Hernández Blanco
Pag 30 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Agustín Pellecchia

SALTO DE CÓDIGO

Joaquín Martín Perles (Spain)

MASTER IN POSITIVE LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

Por orden del Ministerio de Tecnologías Colaborativas, todos los robots de segunda generación con el certificado AHCR (Approved Human Collaborative Robot) debían ser desconectados de la UCCR (Unidad Central de Control Robótico) de manera inmediata y entregados al cuerpo especial de agentes ciberneticos. Una medida de este tipo podía afectar a unas 5000 unidades en todo el territorio.

Mauricio tiene 80 años, y hace cinco que sus nietos le regalaron a Cecilia, una réplica idéntica a la abuela diseñada a partir de ADN extraído de su ropa. La abuela había muerto un año antes y el abuelo había dejado de comer y de hablar hasta iniciar un estado de semisenilidad. Cecilia fue programada con recuerdos de ambos, imágenes de lugares, reconocimiento facial de personas allegadas, lectura de emociones a partir de patrones musculares. Podía realizar todas las actividades cotidianas que la abuela realizaría, y su carácter fue diseñado siguiendo las reacciones del modelo original. Fue llegar Cecilia a la vida de Mauricio y resucitar este de su estado depresivo. Como si la muerte jamás lo hubiera visitado. Comían, discutían, dormían, paseaban, todo juntos. Comidas familiares, cenas de navidad, cumpleaños, eran momentos en que los hijos y nietos de Mauricio colaboraban en esa ilusión muy real de que la abuela había resucitado.

La policía cibernetica estaba encargada de hacer cumplir las órdenes ministeriales, y la ejecución de dichos decretos se realizaba con absoluta decisión y sin contemplaciones. Tras las muertes producidas por un fallo de programación en la versión 1.5 de los robots colaborativos con sello AHCR, el Ministerio no dejaba espacio a la duda. En aquella ocasión le costó las elecciones generales al gobierno al no reaccionar ante los primeros informes técnicos. Ahora, cualquier mínimo indicio de salto de código que pueda suponer una amenaza a la seguridad era tratado como caso de alerta prioritaria. La UCCR tenía localizadas todas las unidades a retirar y la policía cibernetica había completado en poco menos de un mes el 99% del trabajo. El protocolo era sencillo y limpio. Se desconectaba la unidad desde la Central, se enviaba un mensaje al propietario y se producía la visita técnica para la retirada inmediata del robot y posterior estudio de una posible sustitución, de acuerdo con el seguro de la compañía que lo hubiera vendido.

4999 unidades habían sido ya desactivadas. Es decir, el lote completo de segunda generación estaba bajo control, excepto la referencia RC-2758-CA, cuyo propietario era un tal Mauricio Lindo. El Sr. Lindo fue contactado sin éxito, al igual que todos los intentos de desconexión remota que desde la Central habían realizado. No podían arriesgarse a ningún accidente como en el pasado. Una intervención rápida era necesaria.

Mauricio había escuchado los mensajes de voz que la policía le había dejado en el teléfono, había leído las alertas de texto en su móvil y había visto la noticia de la desconexión en el informe que el asistente holográfico Aries le presentaba en la sala cada día. Mauricio estaba al tanto y entendía desde el primer mensaje el alcance de la comunicación del Ministerio. Aunque tenía 80 años y su generación pertenecía a un mundo donde los coches aún llevaban ruedas, los robots se veían en los cómics de ciencia ficción, y cuando no se conocía el significado de una palabra se acudía a un libro, llamado diccionario, cuyas hojas estaban ordenadas alfabéticamente para buscar la definición del vocablo desconocido. Mauricio podía pertenecer a la generación de las enciclopedias que ocupaban estanterías completas, pero entendía igualmente el mensaje del Ministerio.

Mientras oía a Aries hablar de la campaña de desconexión de la segunda generación HCR, se hacía presente en su garganta el recuerdo de una mañana de hacía seis años, en la que su mujer no se le-

vantó como siempre a hacer el desayuno. Al abrir los ojos, veía como la cara blanca y tranquila de su compañera de vida estaba inmóvil, fría, con una leve sonrisa. La única persona que sabía lo que era una enciclopedia, “el telediario de las tres de la tarde”, las canciones de Rocío Jurado o el Ford Fiesta con rueda de repuesto que no levitaba, pero llevaba a toda la familia de vacaciones con cuatro maletas incluidas en un maletero donde cabían sólo dos. Su cómplice de vida, el único ser en el que reconocerse, se había ido para siempre.

Escuchando a Aries y leyendo los mensajes de texto oficiales, el dolor y la determinación se mezclaban en Mauricio. No permitiría que le arrebataran de nuevo lo único que daba sentido a su vida. Que no le vinieran con fallos de programación, ni que era por su seguridad. “Con 80 años ya soy mayorcito yo para saber qué es lo que me conviene”. – pensaba mientras veía a Cecilia moverse en la cocina.

El timbre de la puerta sonó. Cecilia acudió a abrir con naturalidad y Mauricio interrumpió la locución de Aries y la detuvo. “¡Espera! No contestes”. Ella lo miró extrañada. “Déjalo. No contestes.” Cecilia volvió a la sopa que hervía. A los minutos, tres golpes decididos se sintieron en la puerta. “¡Abran, policía!”. Mauricio le indicó con el dedo índice en los labios que se callara y le hizo ademán de no moverse. “Sr. Lindo, sabemos que está ahí. Necesitamos entrar por su propia seguridad”. Otros tres golpes más contundentes sonaron en la puerta. “Sr. Lindo, si no nos abre no tendremos más remedio que entrar por la fuerza. Es el último aviso”.

“¿Qué pasa, Mauri?” le susurró Cecilia. Él se acercó a ella, la cogió del brazo y la llevó precipitadamente a un pequeño espacio exterior, que en los edificios antiguos se llamaban balcón o terraza. No quedaban ya muchos de esos edificios con terrazas, salvo en esta zona de la ciudad en la que Mauricio vivía. La zona vieja que Mauricio nunca quiso abandonar, y donde la población es escasa. Entró con Cecilia en la terraza, y colocó una cadena en el antiguo picaporte de la puerta de cristal que separaba el exterior del interior.

“¡Ay, Mauri! Pero ¿Qué pasa? ¿Qué hemos hecho?”, le decía asustada Cecilia. “Tú no te preocupes. Tú tranquila. No hemos hecho nada malo”. “¡Pero, Mauri, te noto agitado...!” Un golpe seco precedió a que la puerta de entrada se abriera de repente. Cuatro hombres uniformados irrumpieron en el salón del apartamento. Normalmente iban dos técnicos y dos miembros de intervención. Nada más acceder al domicilio, los policías vieron a los dos ancianos en la terraza con sus caras pegadas al cristal.

“No vamos a salir. ¡No tienen derecho a entrar en nuestra casa por la fuerza! Es un atropello del gobierno, como siempre”. Les decía Mauricio, mientras negaba con su cabeza y ponía su cuerpo delante del de Cecilia. “Por favor, Sr. Lindo. No lo haga más difícil. Sabe bien que tenemos que hacerlo y sabe que es por su propia seguridad. Abra la puerta y déjenos acceder por las buenas”. Aunque la máxima prioridad en las intervenciones de la policía cibernética era la ejecución de las órdenes, tenían también instrucciones de no causar daños humanos colaterales, para evitar repercusiones públicas con la prensa.

El policía que llevaba la voz cantante, calvo con patillas canosas, presionó su oreja derecha con el índice e informó del estado de situación de la intervención a la central. A su derecha, un jovencito de muy corta estatura, sostenía un microprocesador en su mano izquierda, giró la muñeca un cuarto y emergió una proyección donde podía leerse RC-2758-CA, la referencia de Cecilia. Comenzó a pulsar el holograma y a deslizar frente a los ojos de Mauricio y Cecilia toda una hilera de códigos en el aire.

Mauricio sintió las manos de Cecilia en su cintura y su brazo. No sabía muy bien si para tranquilizarlo, para buscar refugio o para entender qué estaba pasando. El hombre la rodeó con su brazo por los hombros, como si así pudiera conseguir juntarse cual siameses y no separarse nunca.

El policía calvo volvió a presionar su oreja derecha para cortar la comunicación con la central. Miró el informe que flotaba frente a ellos y le dio una señal afirmativa al joven que aún sostenía el procesador en su mano. Tras activar el último código, apareció en la proyección el siguiente texto: “DESCONEXIÓN REMOTA RC-2758-CA en 60 SEGUNDOS”. Y comenzó una cuenta atrás desde sesenta frente a los ojos abiertos de Mauricio, que negaba al otro lado del cristal.

Agarró a Cecilia y la puso frente a él... “57 segundos”. “No sé si te lo he dicho alguna vez. Y si te lo he dicho quizás tendría que haberlo hecho más a menudo. Gracias. Gracias. Gracias por todo lo que has hecho por mí”. “¿Por qué, Mauri? ¿Por qué estás asustado y lloroso? ¿Dime qué pasa?”, le rogaba Cecilia que seguía sin entender qué pasaba. “45 segundos”. “No nos van a separar nunca. No pueden separarnos. Quiero que sepas que siempre vamos a estar el uno con el otro... Y que todo lo que hemos visto y vivido tiene sentido por haberlo hecho juntos”. “30 segundos”. Los ojos de Cecilia comenzaron a entornarse y Mauricio la agarraba y abrazaba con fuerza mientras le susurraba al oído: “Los últimos cinco años no los cambio por nada. Sé que en algún lugar, ahí dentro de ti, me estás escuchando. No te voy a dejar sola. Te lo prometí de niño y ahora que soy un viejo no voy a empezar a incumplir promesas...”. Ayudó a Cecilia a sentarse en una silla mientras él se arrodillaba y abrazaba a sus piernas “10 segundos”. Los ojos de la abuela comenzaron a cerrarse... “8, 7, 6, 5...”. Los números iban descendiendo en el aire... “4, 3, 2...”. Mauricio seguía abrazado a las piernas de su cómplice, mientras los parpados de ella terminaban de caer... “1, 0. Desconexión completada”.

Todo se fue haciendo oscuro y borroso. El sonido lejano de un cristal rompiéndose. Mauricio y Cecilia con 30 años y tres niños en el asiento de atrás del Ford Fiesta. Voces casi inaudibles: “No puede ser... será agua. No está programada para eso...”. Con 45 años y ya canosos, Mauricio sostiene a Ava, la primera de sus cinco nietas. “Llama al servicio de emergencias. Él está con las constantes muy muy débiles...”. Las voces ya casi eran imperceptibles. “No se puede hacer nada”.

En el informe que el policía calvo realizó sobre la intervención en el barrio viejo para la desactivación de la unidad RC-2758-CA se podía leer: “Al acceder a la terraza, tratamos de reanimar al propietario de la unidad cuyas constantes eran prácticamente nulas. Cabe resaltar dos anomalías encontradas en el procedimiento habitual en lo que se refiere al robot. A) En el protocolo de desconexión, las unidades están programadas para bajar las extremidades y adoptar una posición neutra. En este caso, las manos permanecieron apoyadas sobre la cabeza del propietario acariciándolo hasta el último segundo. B) En la inspección visual, se produjo el siguiente hecho: por la mejilla de la unidad RC-2758-CA se habían deslizado gotas líquidas procedentes del área donde estaría ubicado el lagrimal. Las especificaciones técnicas de la segunda generación no recoge la emisión de lágrimas. A la fecha de la emisión de este informe, no se ha logrado encontrar una explicación satisfactoria para este hecho”.

El caso fue archivado con la etiqueta habitual para estos casos: SALTO DE CÓDIGO.

EL PUNTO FINAL DE LAS COSAS

Pablo Hernández Blanco (Spain)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

Sí, confieso que últimamente me pasa algo: desde hace ya tiempo soy incapaz de terminar nada de lo que empiezo. Raro es el día en el que alguien —algún familiar, algún amigo— no me pregunte qué me ocurre. Cada vez más gente, de hecho, se extraña o preocupa debido a mi supuesto problema; me comentan ante todo que me notan distante, como si todo lo que sucediese a mi alrededor me resultase ajeno. También me dicen, con mayor frecuencia si cabe, que nunca me habían visto atravesar una situación semejante desde que me conocen. Puede que esto último sea cierto, ya que yo siempre me he considerado una persona resolutiva y metódica: de hecho, así he actuado durante toda mi vida, con compromiso, tesón y perseverancia. El año pasado, sin embargo, todo pareció cambiar de la noche a la mañana.

En cualquier caso, admito que, pese a todo, en absoluto me siento mal en la actualidad, e incluso puedo decir que, en cierto modo, estoy mejor que nunca. Es indudable que algo ha cambiado en mí, pero las consecuencias de este cambio, en contra de lo que se podría pensar, no han agravado mi existencia en lo que a mí respecta. Sin embargo, mi entorno más próximo se muestra más afectado de lo que jamás habría podido imaginarme, especialmente mi mujer, Sonia. Es ella precisamente quien más me anima a que intente dar con el porqué de esta situación cuanto antes, por mucho que me cueste. Mi problema, como usted bien sabe, se puede resumir de manera sencilla: a día de hoy me encuentro en una realidad viciada en la que nada se acaba, sino que todo queda pendiente e inconcluso, amontonándose en un cúmulo de pequeños asuntos sin resolver. Tanto es así que la situación parece volverles locos a todos, a todos menos a mí.

Pensándolo bien —tal y como le insinué el otro día— creo que el origen de mi coyuntura actual se produjo a finales del año pasado, cuando poco a poco me fui percatando de que nunca llegaba a la última página de los libros que comenzaba (algo inaudito por entonces, ya que hoy en día, la verdad, ni siquiera me molesto en empezarlos). En resumen, lo que antes hacía con relativa facilidad se convirtió de súbito en una carrera de obstáculos, un camino repleto de socavones por el que yo me tambaleaba con los ojos vendados. Recuerdo con nitidez que una noche, antes de irnos a la cama, Sonia, al ver un montón de libros apilados en mi mesilla, me preguntó si se trataba de mis próximas lecturas. Le respondí que no, que más bien eran mis lecturas pasadas más recientes, aunque en muchas de ellas ni siquiera había llegado a la mitad. “Supongo que no me han enganchado”, le dije. Sonia calló durante unos segundos y comenzó a dar vueltas por la habitación en silencio, con la cabeza gacha; parecía tratar de escoger las palabras exactas para aquel momento tan insólito (¡su querido esposo, lector voraz y empedernido, era ahora incapaz de terminar un solo libro!) y, poniendo la palma de su mano en mi frente, con esos ojos tuyos tan grandes, me susurró: “¿Seguro que te encuentras bien, Edgar?”. Recuerdo las prisas con que intenté sosegarla: el asunto carecía de importancia, con lo que traté de tranquilizarla diciéndole que quizás había leído demasiadas novelas últimamente, que no era nada grave. Pronto volvería a las andadas y el orden quedaría re establecido: empezaría y terminaría un libro, cualquiera que fuese.

Dadas las circunstancias, estaba ante un momento propicio para cambiar de registro, con lo que a los pocos días decidí probar suerte con un volumen de poesía —que abandoné algunos días después—, y, tras aquella fugaz lectura de una serie de versos desperdigados, me decanté por unos cuantos breves ensayos. Esta vez, ni me sorprendí al comprobar que no lograba terminar ninguno de ellos. Finalmente, en un último intento por evitar un daño adicional a mi orgullo, de por sí sobradamente herido, acabé por recurrir a la desesperada a los tebeos de mis hijos pequeños. Pocos días después, en un estado de completa desazón, caí en la cuenta de que había pasado de las viñetas iniciales en contadas ocasiones.

Ante semejante panorama, el primer pensamiento que se me vino a la cabeza fue determinante: sin duda, estaba siendo víctima de un desfallecimiento mental. Había algo que fallaba y me estaba desmoronando por dentro sin motivo aparente: el problema era uno, pero las causas, a priori, podían ser varias. ¿Podría tratarse de un déficit de atención sobrevenido? ¿O, a lo mejor, de un desorden neurológico de mayor magnitud? ¿La temida crisis de los cuarenta, quizás? La incertidumbre hizo que me pasara días y noches intentando encontrar el detonante de mi precoz autodiagnóstico sin éxito. Mi vida atravesaba por un buen momento, gozaba de buena salud y tenía una familia inmejorable, además de un trabajo estable y bien pagado. Desde luego, no había elemento alguno que pudiera haberme provocado tal desbarajuste sin previo aviso. Lo cierto es que, por mucho empeño que le pusiera, y pese a la insistencia de mi esposa, no llegué a atisbar la verdadera causa en ningún momento. En cualquier caso, al menos una cosa me quedaba clara: ser incapaz de terminarme un solo libro era sintomático de algo de dimensiones más profundas.

No tardé en confirmar que así era, ya que con el cine —otra de mis pasiones— me sucedió algo parecido poco después. Desde que nos casamos Sonia y yo solíamos ver una película los viernes por la noche, ya fuera en el cine o en la televisión de casa. Se trataba de un ritual compartido que, aparte de saciar nuestras curiosidades cinematográficas, contribuía entre otros a la estabilidad y al bienestar de la relación, ritual que siempre cumplíamos con escrupulosa devoción pese a los acalorados debates cinéfilos a los que ambos nos exponíamos al terminar la cinta. Pronto llegó el día, hace casi un año, en que la costumbre que tan solemnemente cumplíamos fue resquebrajada sin remedio, quedando suspendida indefinidamente. Se inició así una extraña fase en la que sólo conseguía ver hasta la mitad de ciertas películas, mientras que otras las dejaba a pocos minutos del final, sin que la promesa de un giro imprevisto fuera suficiente para mantenerme postrado atentamente en el sofá. Por entonces, en el momento más inesperado, me levantaba del sofá como un resorte e, impelido por una fuerza invisible —como si alguien me forzase a ello con un revólver a mis espaldas—, abandonaba la sala de estar sin explicación alguna. Durante mis súbitas fugas, que poco tardé en convertir en un arte a base de pura repetición, Sonia me observaba atónita mientras pasaba por delante del televisor en medio de la oscuridad, como si fuera un peatón impávido que cruza con el semáforo en rojo. Recuerdo la primera vez que sucedió: aquel breve momento en el que, mientras yo huía con sigilo, avergonzado y confuso a partes iguales, de reojo capté su rostro sorprendido iluminado por el brillo espectral de la pantalla.

Aquel virus desconocido y alérgico a la resolución me hizo ver que mi vida se había transformado en un cúmulo de nudos perpetuos sin desenlace alguno: empezó por mis hábitos literarios y acabó por contagiar todo aquello que conocía y amaba, agigantando una grieta que en sus inicios parecía ser un mero resquicio sin relevancia. Como ya le habré dicho, cuando hablo de que no termino las cosas no me estoy refiriendo a proyectos de larga duración, tareas extenuantes o promesas de difícil cumplimiento: en la actualidad, lo más destacado de mi afición se manifiesta, sobre todo, en los aspectos cotidianos del día a día. Se trata por lo general de pequeños detalles, como el no lavarme la cabeza tras ponerme el champú, o el no marcar el número completo al llamar a algún conocido por teléfono. Si le soy sincero, últimamente apenas termino las frases al hablar con alguien, hecho que hace poco me comprometió enormemente ante un abogado que me pedía direcciones por la calle y con prisas por llegar a una reunión «de máxima importancia», según sus propias palabras. Dependiendo del día, incluso, hay mañanas en las que, ante el asombro de mis hijos y de mi mujer, soy incapaz de vestirme del todo: ha habido mañanas en los que he salido de casa con un solo calcetín, o con los cordones del zapato sin atar, o con la camisa desbotonada, o incluso en calzoncillos y chaqueta en pleno invierno. No es por pereza ni cansancio, de verdad; sencillamente llega un punto —*el breaking point*, como dirían los ingleses— en el que considero que ya he hecho lo que tenía que hacer, que mi labor o papel en cuanto a una obligación o tarea concreta ya ha sido consumada, y que dar un paso de más, por tanto, supondría dar un paso en falso. A día de hoy, la idea de culminar cualquier cosa se me antoja completamente innecesaria: algo en mi mente, una vocecita apenas perceptible, me persuade a que me detenga, a que cese y desista de toda actividad, a que, en suma, deje el edificio a medio construir cuando en ocasiones apenas he puesto los cimientos. Con lógica, quizás, Sonia me acusa de haberme vuelto loco de remate.

En cualquier caso, he reflexionado mucho acerca del tema en las últimas semanas. Quizá la solución sea, sencillamente, no empezar nada, y dejar que el mundo avance imperturbable hasta que finalmente todo se acabe. Pero por tentadora que pueda resultar tal postura, aceptarla supondría asumir una

visión derrotista ante lo que puede ser un problema de gravedad, aunque por el momento ni usted ni yo sepamos cuál es la causa en sí. En todo caso, por mucho que podamos dejar algo sin terminar es inevitable que siempre estemos dando comienzo a algo. En el momento en que hacemos cualquier cosa ya se produce el pistoletazo de salida; cuestión distinta, creo yo, es que lleguemos a la meta, ya que esto no siempre depende de nosotros.

El no empezar nada y dejar que todo pase, por tanto, claramente no es una opción viable, por mucho que se me antoje. Tiene que haber algún modo de que el Edgar de antaño regrese, ese Edgar diligente y ordenado que todo lo acababa, aunque sólo sea por el bien de sus seres queridos. Le reitero que acudí inicialmente a su consulta no por miedo o preocupación, sino más bien por insistencia de mi entorno, que como puede apreciar está más consternado que yo. Pero, ¿por qué soy incapaz de sentirme como ellos? ¿Cuál es el inconveniente, realmente, en no terminar algunas cosas? Lo cierto es que desde mediados de esta etapa de mi vida apenas he tenido inquietud o malestar alguno, si bien no sabría decir cuál es la causa y cuál el efecto. Noto en mi interior una levedad que jamás había experimentado, rayana en la felicidad más absoluta: soy un ente flotante en constante órbita, un cuerpo ligero sin ataduras ni grilletes.

Porque pensándolo bien, doctor, ¿cuántas cosas acabamos de verdad? ¿Qué cosas realmente *se terminan*? A raíz de mis recientes experiencias, crece en mí la incertidumbre de algo que siempre he intuido: nunca terminamos nada, todo es una prórroga sin pitido final. He llegado a pensar que quizás aquello que llamamos final no sea más que una pequeña transición dentro de un proceso interminable repleto de supuestos micro finales. En vez de ir abriendo las muñecas rusas una por una hasta llegar a la más diminuta, todo final supone en realidad la confección de una nueva, ligeramente más grande que la anterior que contiene, y así indefinidamente. Cada vez que decimos haber terminado algo subimos un peldaño en una escalera sin fin hacia un objetivo desconocido. Subir ese peldaño nos llena de satisfacción, e incluso de felicidad, pero ¿caso debería? Realmente no hemos terminado nada: el proceso sigue su curso inexorablemente, no es más que la continuación de algo que empezó hace tiempo y cuyo final no acertamos a ver. Si acaso, pienso, no hay finales sino infinitos comienzos en constante repetición.

Con lo anterior no quiero decir que este sea el planteamiento que me ha llevado a actuar de esta manera; sólo son consideraciones que se me han ido ocurriendo, pensamientos efímeros que van y vienen de vez en cuando. Puede, efectivamente, que sean simples tonterías sin fundamento alguno. Pero sinceramente, ¿no cree que es así, doctor? ¿De dónde viene por tanto esta obsesión nuestra por terminar las cosas cuando realmente nunca se termina nada? Usted hoy abandonará la consulta a eso de las ocho, como hace todos los días, y pondrá fin a su jornada, al menos por hoy, y mañana vuelta a empezar: dará comienzo a su jornada con la única motivación que le supone la anticipación de su fin, y así sucesivamente. Solemos hablar siempre de ponerle punto final a las cosas, cuando en la práctica no es más que un punto y aparte: un final a esperas de que, tarde o temprano, comience el siguiente. Si tenemos esto en cuenta, puede que yo no esté tan mal como dicen.

Pero perdóneme, de verdad que no pretendo explayarme innecesariamente. Lamento de veras irme por las ramas, seguramente lo mío sea puramente transitorio y mis familiares y amigos exageren, cosa que, por otra parte, suelen hacer cuando las cosas se desvían de lo normal, aunque sea ligeramente. Le prometí en mi última visita que completaría el ejercicio que me propuso, y aquí me ve, tras toda una tarde de escritura intensiva, tratando con ahínco de llegar al núcleo duro del asunto; sigo sin descubrir el germen de todo esto, pero espero que pronto llegue a él con su ayuda, de un modo u otro. ¡De lo que ya no podrá acusarme a partir de ahora es de que pongo poco empeño en hacer las cosas! Creo que con su ayuda progresaré adecuadamente y pronto volveré a ser el de antes porque, pese a esa ligereza vital de la que he hecho gala antes, he de reconocer que mis constantes interrupciones sí que han hecho mella en mi vida. El otro día no me atreví a decírselo, pero lo cierto es que a raíz de todo este panorama mi mujer amenaza con separarse, mis amigos me han dado la espalda y mis hijos (esto quizás sea lo que más duele) apenas me miran a la cara cuando les hablo. En resumidas cuentas, creo que es hora de admitir que, aunque yo me muestre impasible y aparentemente liberado, la situación que me rodea es más bien desalentadora.

Por ello confío en que de ahora en adelante mi vida mejore en todos los aspectos, porque tarde o temprano tendrá que hacerlo, aunque sólo sea por todos ellos, y porque de verdad creo que con su

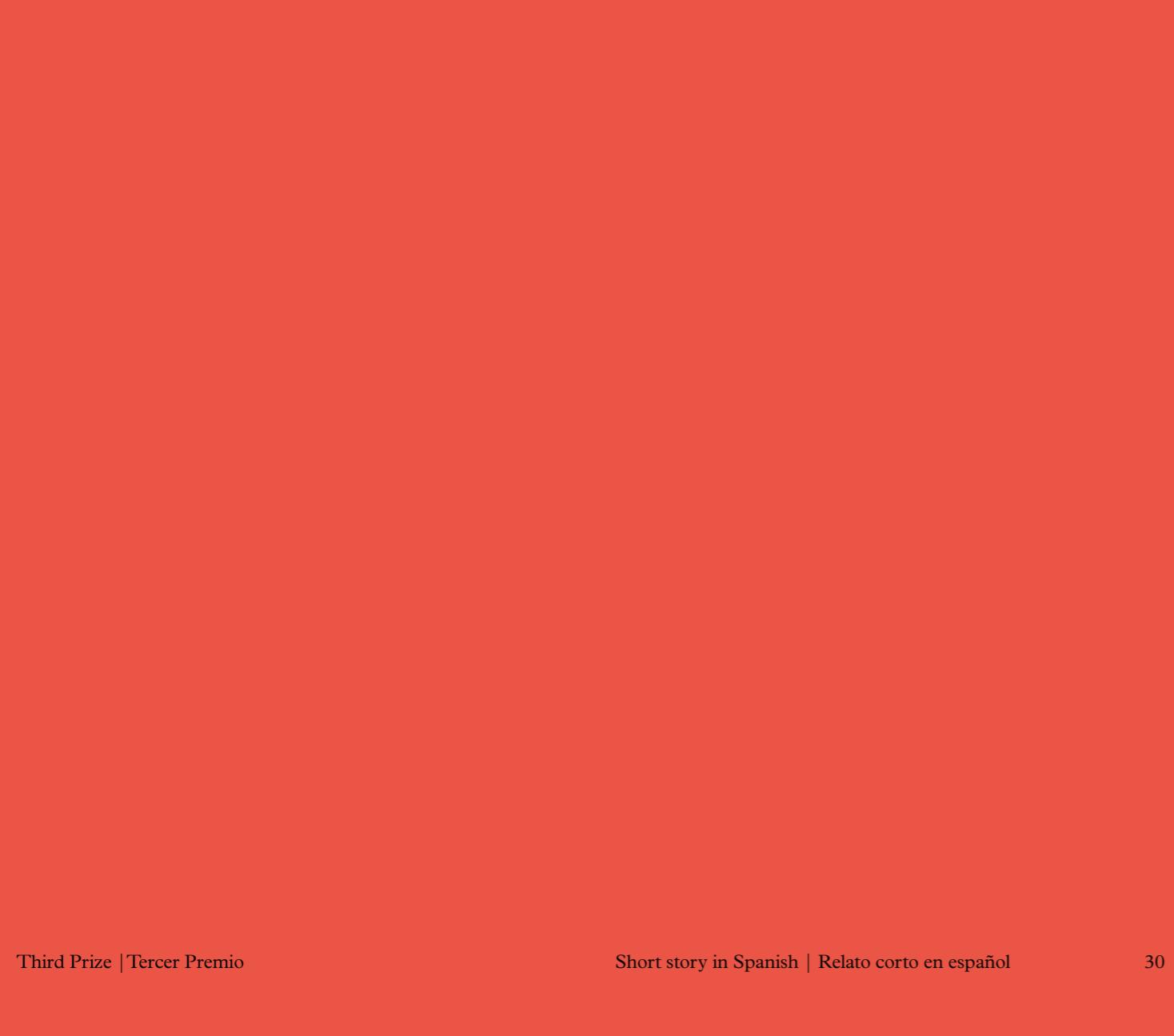
ayuda así será: terminaré, por tanto, todo lo que empiezo. Confieso que semejante idea se me antoja tan atractiva como aterradora, pero tras mis veinte sesiones con usted supongo que no me queda otro remedio. Y es que cuando me recupere, si es que me recuperó, sé que Sonia sonreirá de nuevo al comprobar que ya no dejo la puerta a medio cerrar por las noches, que mis amigos dejarán de enfadarse por abandonar el partido de pádel a medio camino, y que mis hijos ya no me gritarán cuando ya no me quede sentado en un banco a cinco manzanas de distancia en vez de recogerles en la puerta del colegio.

Y entonces, cuando todo esto suceda, cuando consiga salir de este abismo y termine de acabar todo lo que empiezo, finalmente podré decir que soy alguien verdaderamente libre, un hombre liberado del yugo de la irresolución, y volveré a ser una persona normal como siempre he sido, el Edgar de siempre, aquel al que todos querían por ser una persona comprometida y dinámica, una persona de palabra, de fiar, y entonces mis amigos y familiares (puedo ver ahora mismo la escena en mi cabeza) serán incapaces de contener su alegría al ver que vuelvo a ser el de antes y me felicitarán y me aplaudirán entre miles de besos y abrazos y lágrimas al ver que por fin.

LA SUBASTA DE MANANAS

Agustín Pellecchia (Argentina-Italia)

INTERNATIONAL MBA



—Lamentamos comunicarte, Cameron, que en esta compañía ya no hay más lugar para ti. Hemos intentado por todos los medios mantenerte con nosotros, pero tenemos los brazos atados. Necesitamos que abandones tu puesto inmediatamente. Normalmente te daríamos dos semanas pero la situación requiere que te retires hoy mismo.

Cameron había estado esperando esta reunión de un momento a otro durante los últimos meses. Sabía que tarde o temprano llegaría, porque sí era cierto que su vida útil allí había caducado, y solo acumulaba conflictos. Ahora, sentado en la mesa del directorio, un espacio frío e inhóspito al que nunca había tenido acceso, escuchaba cómo su jefe, flanqueado por otros dos directores, cual testigos en un juicio, le recitaba su sentencia.

De manera calculada, indiferente y con prisa, el señor Lorenci terminaba de ejecutar su condena.

—Por favor, retira todas tus pertenencias del escritorio y alguien te escoltará hasta la recepción —fingiendo un tono condescendiente añadió, —puedes saludar a la gente, siquieres.

Cameron no necesitaba protestar, tampoco exponer su caso ni alegar defensas inútiles. Estaba acabado y no había nada que pudiera hacer. Fijó la mirada en cada uno de sus verdugos, desanudándose la corbata a pesar de estar tranquilo. Podría haberlos insultado, escupido o linchado ahí mismo. En el fondo lo quería. Pero necesitaba salir de ese lugar lo antes posible. Se aflojó un poco la camisa solo porque el aire de ese infierno lo ahoga. No siempre había sido un infierno. Hubo años buenos.

—Bien...

Sin estrecharles la mano ni aflojar el escudo de sus emociones, se puso de pie, asintió con la cabeza y se retiró. El pasillo que conducía a los ascensores se le hizo interminable. Se mareó, quizás la tensión generada por la reunión y la más que esperada noticia le habían bajado la presión. Respiró con profundidad, ya había dejado atrás lo peor; o quizás no, aunque no importaba, engañó a su mente y a su corazón para que así lo creyeran. Fue capaz de mantener la compostura.

Ni siquiera pasó por su oficina, presionó planta baja directamente. No deseaba ver la cara de sus colegas. Los odiaba. No, en realidad no los odiaba, no podría. Aunque los habría mirado con desprecio. Se bajó del ascensor en el *lobby* y se detuvo en medio de recepción. Contempló con frialdad a las recepcionistas, a los dos porteros, a la gente que entraba y salía y, acumulando cuanta asquerosidad pudo en su boca, escupió el suelo de azulejos. Dejó su inmundicia a la vista de todos y salió en silencio.

Cameron no acostumbraba llegar a su casa tan temprano por lo que se la encontró vacía. Quizás su hijo estuviera en la escuela, no lo sabía con seguridad, ya que Dylan practicaba la maldita costumbre de escaparse con frecuencia. Su mujer tampoco estaba y no llegaría hasta finalizar su jornada, con escasas posibilidades de hacer acto de presencia antes de la cena. Si no fuera porque quería cambiarse de ropa y darse una buena ducha, Cameron se habría dirigido directamente a algún bar a ahogar las penas.

Se despertó varias horas más tarde con ruidos de vajilla. Provenían del comedor. Recordaba haberse bañado, cambiado, arrojado sobre la cama... y ahí se terminaban los recuerdos. ¿No podía quedarse escondido allí para siempre, encerrado, sin que nadie le molestara?

Acercándose a su familia podía sentir las malas vibraciones. Su mujer, sentada de espaldas a él, comía lo que se veía era comida del supermercado, y su hijo, luciendo su nuevo tatuaje tribal que le daba vueltas al cuello, y quien se llevaba un bocado después de cada WhatsApp, apenas se inmutó con su presencia.

—Así que te despidieron.

Cameron, mientras se sentaba a la cabecera, se preguntó cómo se habría enterado su mujer.

—¿Mmm?

—Pues sí —no pudo más que confesar.

El hijo continuaba sumergido en el mundo de la indiferencia. Cameron lo miraba de reojo con deseos de incinerarle el aparato móvil.

—Muy bien, querido esposo— dijo con tono despectivo, que quedara bien claro el odio —Me voy a la cama...

Cameron no llegó a escuchar bien, pero creyó que su mujer había soltado un insulto en un bajo susurro. Le hizo caso omiso, como su hijo a él en los siguientes diez minutos. Conociendo la rutina, sabía que en cuanto tragara el último bocado, el adolescente del tatuaje en el cuello se levantaría y en silencio sepulcral se retiraría a un destino desconocido. Y Cameron se quedaría nuevamente solo.

Y así fue. Levantó la mesa en soledad utilizando dos viajes y se dispuso a lavar los platos. Su mujer estaría mirando la televisión o leyendo. El agua del grifo empezaba a quemarle la piel. Su hijo se habría perdido en algún sitio que estuviera lejos de él. El detergente se le acumulaba en las manos y chorreaba sobre el suelo. Sus jefes y amigos quizás cenando con sus familias. Estaba refregando el mismo plato por quinta vez. Y él... ¿Y él, qué?

Se encontró con un reflejo apagado en la oscuridad de la ventana. Intentó entender y conocer a la persona que se reflejaba. Los ojos no se distinguían bien, pero no hacía falta verlos con claridad para notar una evidente tristeza. Podría haber sido confundido por un fantasma, por un espíritu vagabundo. Sobre todo, por alguien invisible.

Terminó de lavar los platos y se proponía a obedecer la rutina de cada noche, cuando un impulso le hizo dudar. Caminando hacia la sala de estar, se quedó contemplando las escaleras, su familia quizás estaba allí arriba, miró el televisor, su refugio, y luego la puerta de entrada, su salida.

La decisión fue muy simple.

Dejó el coche a una distancia segura del bar, de salir ebrio lo encontraría fácil. Ya había estado allí en varias ocasiones, pero no era recurrente, nadie le conocía. Un sitio tan elegante como olvidado, que evocaba otras épocas, otras vidas. No era frecuentado por almas en pena, tampoco por aquellas que necesitaban una noche de desahogo, solo por algunas que aburridas no tenían un lugar a dónde ir.

Entró y escuchó el ruido de la soledad. Cierta humedad inundaba el ambiente. La debilidad de las luces dejaba los rincones en penumbras. La barra sí estaba bien iluminada, pero abarrotada. Pidió un whisky y se lo llevó a una mesa contra la ventana. Como la ventana del bar le proyectaba el mismo reflejo que la de su cocina se giró y perdió su mirada hacia el salón. Se terminó la bebida en dos sorbos y pidió una segunda. Cuando pidió la tercera, el camarero se acercó y le preguntó si estaba todo bien.

—Sí, no te preocupes —respondió Cameron—. Sirve.

Tras la cuarta, Cameron apenas sentía el alcohol. No estaba mareado, sus cinco sentidos percibían de manera óptima y podía pensar con claridad. Quizás pudiera seguir bebiendo, pero consideró prudente darle un descanso a su garganta.

Cuando algo extraño ocurrió.

Su ex jefe entró al bar. Solo. Cameron le observó desde una esquina dirigirse a la barra, tomar asiento y pedir una bebida. Jamás habría imaginado que su ex jefe frecuentara ese lugar. Le miró con detalle, sorprendiéndose con la velocidad con la que hacia desaparecer el whisky y pedía otro. Por una coincidencia de las que no se pueden explicar, se giró y encontró la mirada de Cameron. Tras unos segundos que parecieron minutos, su ex jefe levantó el vaso y con una sonrisa le hizo un gesto de brindis. Nunca supo si había sido un gesto de perdón, un gesto de histórica camaradería, o un simple gesto de absoluto desprecio; y lo que tampoco supo fue mantener el control. Explotó de tal manera que tiró la mesa y cruzó el bar en un abrir y cerrar de ojos. A pocos metros apuró el paso y le pateó la banqueta. Su ex jefe, atónito, se derrumbó y golpeó fuerte contra el suelo. Cameron le notó desorientado, pero no le importó. Se arrojó sobre él con toda la rabia salvaje de un loco.

De repente sintió un fuerte golpe en la cabeza, y el telón de la oscuridad y la inconciencia bajaron sobre él. Cameron pasó a ser un cuerpo inerte en el suelo.

Cameron abrió los ojos con dolor. Una luz intensa le perforaba la retina. Le amartillaba la cabeza y no podía determinar en qué posición estaba. Tenía la sensación de estar boca arriba, acostado. Descubrió que podía controlar sus brazos, por lo que se llevó la mano a la nuca para inspeccionar. Se irguió con algo de esfuerzo y al notar que el dolor menguaba se incorporó por completo. Finalmente, abrió los ojos. Estaba en un banco de la acera, frente a él: el bar, con las luces apagadas.

“¿Qué hora es?”

Tenía la boca seca.

—Así es la vida.

Una inesperada voz provino de su derecha. Se giró y a su costado, también sentado en el banco había un hombre calvo, joven, pero con una voz bien adulta. Vestía un traje azul eléctrico de impoluta prolijidad. Seguía siendo de noche, aunque no faltaría mucho para el amanecer.

—Lo vi todo. No se preocupe que ya va a pasar.

—¿La pelea? —atino a decir Cameron con voz áspera —Alguien me golpeó por detrás. Me deben haber arrastrado hasta aquí.

—La pelea, la reunión con su jefe, su mujer, su hijo... su vida —le sonrió preocupadamente —. Lo vi todo.

—Perdón? —se activaron varias alarmas en Cameron —. ¿De qué está hablando?

—No se impaciente. Tome —le extendió una tarjeta de presentación.

Cameron la aceptó con duda y la sujetó con inseguridad. Era azul, del mismo color que el traje. En ella distinguió unas letras en blanco:

La Subasta de Mañanas

Y abajo una dirección.

—Oiga, pero...

Cuando levantó la vista el hombre ya no estaba. Miró hacia ambos lados de la calle. Vacía completamente. Se puso de pie y probó sus piernas. Podía caminar. Era capaz de mantener el equilibrio y, extrañamente, el dolor en su cabeza había desaparecido. Encontró su auto sin dificultad y se subió. El silencio de aquella noche sepulcral no amortiguaba los sonidos de su respiración. ¿Qué había ocurrido?

Estudió con detenimiento nuevamente la tarjeta azul, leyendo varias veces la dirección.

—¿Qué más da?

Se bajó del vehículo y caminó en dirección norte. Sus piernas se sentían bien, así que decidió ir andando, sabía dónde era. Las calles se habrían ante Cameron, las farolas parecían iluminarse al compás de su avance y, en poco menos de diez minutos, llegó a la dirección.

Una puerta. Nada más que una puerta blanca. A los costados dos casas inexpresivas. Sin detenerse a pensar la abrió como si fuera la de su propio hogar e ingresó. No estaba oscuro, más bien iluminado con una luz que no podía deducir de dónde provenía. Paredes de madera y una alfombra azul que descendía abrazando una veintena de escalones. “¿Qué es esto?”, pensó. Un salón elegante y clásico se extendía ante su asombro.

—Vamos, que está a punto de comenzar.

Cameron siguió la voz y allí estaba: el hombre de traje azul, sonriendo.

—¿El qué?

—La subasta de mañanas. Vamos.

Aun intentando encajar las piezas del rompecabezas, Cameron lo siguió a través de dos puertas de aña aspecto. Y, como si de un espectáculo teatral se tratara, una sala circular de considerables proporciones se abrió ante sus ojos. Cientos de sillas de madera apuntaban educadamente a un atril. Detrás del atril, un orador de impecable presencia hablaba de manera muy ligera a los cientos de presentes. A pesar de no tener micrófono su voz se escuchaba amplificada. El gran salón no tenía ventanas de gran altura, pero sí una simple abertura. Enigmáticamente, la luz que iluminaba el recinto era natural, aunque no provenía de ninguna fuente solar; parecían estar al aire libre en un día nublado.

—¿Qué es este lugar?

—La subasta de mañanas —respondió sonriendo el hombre de traje azul—. Aquí se subastan nuevas vidas.

—¿Cómo dijo?

—Aquí la gente viene, se le exhiben nuevas vidas en este catálogo —de la nada le extendió a Cameron un libro encuadrado en sensible cuero—. Todos los presentes eligen sus favoritas y pujan por ellas. Podrás encontrar todas las nuevas vidas o nuevos Mañanas, como nos gusta llamarlo, en subasta esta noche ahí —le señaló el libro.

—Esto no puede ser...

—Shhh... ¡Vamos! —le apremió—. Tomemos asiento que ya está por comenzar.

Cameron ocupó un lugar vacío hacia un costado del circular auditorio. Desde una posición tímida observaba a su alrededor con absoluto asombro. El hombre calvo se sentó a su lado.

—Damas y caballeros —comenzó diciendo el hombre del atril— comenzaremos con el lote número uno. Número uno, el primer lote de sus catálogos —pronunciaba con celeridad, como si llevara prisa—. Una hermosa familia de tres hijos, casa de campo, clima fresco y encantadores vecinos. Un sol casi permanente y años de vitalidad. ¡Empecemos!

—¡El bautismo de mis hijos!

—¡Mi casamiento!

—¡Las noches de salidas con mis amigos!

—¡El nacimiento de mi hija!

Para Cameron todo era surrealista. Observaba cómo manos y brazos se levantaban explosivamente en un ping pong de pujas.

—¿Qué... que está pasando?

—Están pujando.

—¿Con qué?

—Con recuerdos. El dinero aquí no cuenta. Son los recuerdos los que tienen valor. Cuantos más recuerdos de tu vida pasada estés dispuesto a dar más posibilidades de ganar el lote. Por supuesto esos recuerdos los pierdes para siempre.

Cameron observaba intrigado, con miedo y fascinación, cómo se subastaba una vida, un mañana tras otro. Los ganadores se ponían de pie y abandonaban la sala por un portal erigido detrás del atril; quizás ya dejando atrás sus memorias para siempre. Los ganadores parecían irse felices.

—¡Lote numero 16! —anunciaron—. Una familia respetuosa.

Cameron abrió el catálogo y estudió el artículo 16. Solo se titulaba “Una familia respetuosa”

—¿Pujarás? —le preguntó el hombre calvo mostrando cierta inocente ansiedad—. Es un buen lote.

—¡Comencemos!

Varios brazos se catapultaron automáticamente.

—¡Mi adolescencia!

—¡Todos mis novios!

Cameron seguía sin creer lo que veía. Aunque la extraña sensación que alguien le jugaba una broma era muy real, se sintió por primera vez parte de la puesta en escena. En ese preciso momento no era un espectador, era un participante. Y como tal, quería el lote 16.

—¡Mi trabajo y mis compañeros de trabajo! —gritó.

—¡Mi difunto marido! —contraatacó una mujer mayor.

—¡Mis viajes! —Camerón volvió a la carga.

—¡Tocar la guitarra! —apareció un nuevo y juvenil brazo.

Quería ganar a toda costa, pero todavía no estaba listo a resignar las memorias de su mujer y de su hijo. Por lo que ofreció algo no tan valioso:

—¡Mi carrera universitaria!

—¡Todas mis fiestas de cumpleaños!

No lo iba a dejar escapar.

—¡Mi infancia!

Pausa.

—¿Alguien más? —El lote número 16 se va al caballero de la fila 18? —No? Entonces... vendido a la una..., vendido a las dos..., y ¡vendido a las tres! —bajó el martillo con fuerza.

Una explosión de aplausos acompañó la victoria de Cameron, que no pudo más que esbozar una mueca de deleite.

—Y ahora, qué? —le preguntó un tanto desorientado al hombre calvo.

—Primero, enhorabuena- le felicitó con una sonrisa —. Segundo, ¿ves la puerta que está detrás del escenario? Pues ve. Allí te aguarda tu nuevo mañana.

Escépticamente, mas con un fuerte cosquilleo en el estómago, Cameron se puso de pie y, sin titubeos, se dirigió a la puerta señalada. Estaba nervioso, no podía evitarlo. Era el centro de atención, ya que todos le observaban mientras avanzaba las filas de butacas y subía al escenario. El director de la subasta, iluminado por ese resplandor natural, solo le sonrió. Cameron miró por última vez aquel fantasmagórico auditorio y completó los restantes pasos. Respiró profundamente, cerró los ojos, y cruzó con aplomo y ansiedad.

Abrió los ojos con cuidado debido a una intensa luz que le perforaba la retina. No escuchaba nada, un silencio absoluto le mantenía desconcertado. No le dolía ninguna parte del cuerpo, no sentía entumecimientos, tan solo un ligero mareo. Se irguió, estudiando su alrededor. Estaba sentado en el banco frente al bar donde había estado bebiendo esa misma noche... ¿había sido misma noche? Sí, sí, lo había sido. Incluso perduraba el sabor y la fricción de los whiskies en su boca.

Recordaba dónde había dejado el auto y allí estaba, exactamente en el mismo lugar. Se acercó a él como si no fuera suyo, como si perteneciera a alguien más. Hizo caso omiso a la sensación y se subió.

“¿Esta es mi nueva vida...?”. Encendió el coche. “Vaya sueño”.

Condujo con pensamientos distraídos hacia su casa. Empezaría a clarear de un momento a otro, la noche no aguantaría mucho más. Aunque a él no le importaba, le era completamente indiferente su confusa realidad.

Su hogar parecía el mismo. Aparcó a centímetros de la cochera y se apeó en una postura rendida. La luz de la sala de estar estaba encendida, seguro se había olvidado de apagarla. Un rápido movimiento en la ventana le hizo fruncir el entrecejo. “¿Qué fue eso?”.

Y la puerta de entrada se abrió antes que llegara. Su mujer apareció en bata.

“Ahí viene la reprimenda”.

—¿Dónde estabas? Estaba preocupada.

Cameron se quedó quieto, luego avanzó, pero sólo por instinto. Su mujer lo recibió en un tan tierno y contenedor abrazo que temió haberse equivocado de casa. No supo cómo reaccionar.

—Pasa, pasa, cariño. Que está fresco —su esposa lo acompañó a la sala mientras Cameron no podía escapar de su estupor- ¡Dylan, tu papá ya está aquí!

Cameron siguió con la mirada a su hijo mientras este salía del comedor. Vestía raro, no llevaba sus atuendos normales. Y el...

—Y el tatuaje? —le señaló el rostro.

—¿Qué tatuaje? —inquirió extrañado Dylan.

Fue cuando Cameron entendió todo. Miró a su familia y sonrió.

SHORT STORY IN ENGLISH

RELATO CORTO EN INGLÉS

Pag 38	1 st Prize / 1 ^{er} premio: Adam Rose
Pag 44	2 nd Prize / 2 ^º premio: Anas Atassi
Pag 50	3 rd Prize / 3 ^{er} premio: Pablo Hernández Blanco
Pag 54	Special Mention / Mención especial: Carlen Long

THE GREEN-EYED MAN

Adam Rose (USA)

BACHELOR IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION AND BACHELOR
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Eyes glanced up briefly towards the door as it swung open, wet snow and the cold swirling viciously around the man entering. The sudden intrusion offered a glimpse of the darkened storm waging outside, lit only vaguely by the dim bar lights, a few fading neon signs, and a lone pair of headlights in the distance. The man, clad in an earthly brown overcoat and heavy boots, shook himself a little, allowing for the thin layer of snow that draped him to fall. He took his brimmed hat, an old, battered, black piece of felt, and likewise shook it next to him, and seemed to watch the clear white flakes and clumps slump towards the floor. Oddly still, he waited a moment or two more before turning to shut the cedarwood door rather roughly – *THUD* – causing the rusted tin Coca-Cola sign to rattle quietly behind him. He seemed to take no notice, his exasperated breath only discernable by the frosty air and smoke dancing across his cracked lips.

The heavy action flared the cigarette in his mouth, briefly displacing the shadows that covered his face. He looked to be no more than thirty – perhaps in his mid-to-late-twenties? Behind the burnt orange hue, one could just make out the patchy, unkept, short black beard, the rigid nose bent slightly to the right, the rounded scars across his lower jawline, and his eyes – piercing emerald green, but somehow dulled. Was it the man's reserved demeanor, the low lighting, ... something else? Those green eyes scanned the room slowly, drinking in the small bar's ambiance. A dozen or so patrons, in pairs and small groups, huddled 'round worn, wooden tables, hunched over their drinks. Murmurs and the occasional stifled chuckle were all the conversations ever rose to. The green eyes finally settled on a stool just beside the center of the bar, away from any company. The man slowly walked to the stool, seeming to favor his left leg as he went, before coming to stand by the stool's side.

The green-eyed man seemed rather short as he worked himself up onto the high seat, the dusty floor creaking as his weight shifted. A joking comment was barely uttered by a large man with a cheap long-stem beer before a jabbing elbow and glaring stare from his compatriot clambered him up. Even the jukebox in the back quieted, allowing only the last few leaden, steady steel guitar strums and drum beats of a song to pulsate, as if aware of the hushed mood that had now eclipsed the night. The bartender made his way over to the newcomer, rhythmically wiping down the bar as he went. Back and forth. Back and forth. The green-eyed man seemed lost in his own thoughts, staring through the walls before blinking, his eyes flickering to focus on the barman. He took the cigarette from his mouth, twirling it over his fingers before crushing it purposefully in an ash tray beside him. He then took another stem from inside his left coat pocket, patting around his right as if for a lighter.

A few seats away, another, much older man in a frayed army reserve jacket stood to leave, having just paid his tab. Noticing the green-eyed man for the first time, he hesitated, before quietly making his way towards him.

"Need a light?" the veteran asked.

The green-eye man simply nodded, sticking out his cigarette to receive the offer. The retired serviceman tried his lighter a few times. Click, click, cli-foo; he lit the end, and the green-eye man returned to facing the wall, lined with all types of intoxicating vices, without further acknowledgement, as if enthralled by the liquids before him. The veteran began to pass the green-eyed man, stopping just short. He raised his hand cautiously, as if to pat the newcomer's shoulder in consolation, but froze. For a moment, his face seemingly contorted in a mix of regret and longing – his mouth opened slightly, but he looked at a loss for words. Shaking his head, he moved his hand instead to wave to

the bartender, before quickly exiting out into the storm with a swift *THUD* of the cedarwood door and rattle of the sign.

Without a word, the bartender reached for a beer mug, placing it under the tap. The green-eyed man shook his head, raising his right wrist and flicking his index and middle fingers together lazily towards the liquors. The bartender paused ... he set the mug down, and pulled two lowball glasses from beneath the bar, all the while reaching behind him for a bottle of *Old N°7*. Just low enough to be heard, he began to hum as he slowly poured.

"...and at the end of the day, I'm all they've got ... hope on the rocks..."

The green-eyed man's brow furrowed. Tears, sparkling against the neon signs and soft glow of his cigarette, escaped his eyes before disappearing between in his thick beard hairs, with only thin, faint traces hinting that such a thing had ever occurred. The man stiffened suddenly, and the bartender passed him one of the drinks, nearly filled to the brim. The familiar sound of glass gliding across the oiled wood was uncomfortably audible against the dismal silence that had fallen over the barroom. Only the occasional gust of wind and snowfall pounding against the walls offered any change from the uneasy atmosphere.

The green-eyed man inhaled slowly, and reached to take the cigarette from his mouth, laying it on the ash tray. He exhaled; short, shaky breaths, as if coughing or choking, causing smoke to pillow and cloud abnormally around him. His hand hovered cautiously across the table to close tentatively around the glass; the barman held his own glass aloft an inch or so over the bar. The bartender didn't speak, but the intended "cheer" – if one could call it that – looked to be received nonetheless. Those green eyes never met their companions, and instead the man softly tapped his whiskey-filled glass twice on the table before raising it to his lips. The barman seemed to take no offense, and likewise lifted his, and they drank together.

A sharp, squeaking sound broke through monotonous air, followed by the screech of brakes being applied viciously to a spinning axle. Moments later, the heavy front door swung open, violently slamming twice – *THUMP-thump* – into the wall, knocking its tin sign off as two young men stumbled loudly through the doorway. Their athletic, tall, lean figures, their sprayed, stylish haircuts, their brand new, bright baby-blue denim jeans; all of it screamed of new-town angst. The grinned wildly at one another, and rustled each other's hair, sending what little snow and sleet they had on them across the entranceway.

"Aha! That was amazing man, I didn't know you could make it skid like that!" the speckled-blonde proclaimed to the other, straightening his squared glasses at the same time.

"Neither did I!" the dark-haired one replied, half-jokingly. "Hey, bartender, let's get a round of Buds over here, STAT!"

The bartender muttered something between an apology and a curse towards the green-eyed man. He quickly poured another round, before turning to make his way angrily towards the brash young boys, both of whom were unfazed.

"Come on, man, give us a break, you see what it's like out there!" spouted the one with glasses. "We're just happy to have made it to here!" The other nodded vigorously in agreement, his head bouncing cantankerously on his shoulders.

The bartender tried to quiet the boys' incessant yelling, but nothing seemed to dampen their vocal spirits, or their drinking demands. Soon, most of the rest of the patrons stood to leave, paying hurriedly while staring daggers at the unwelcomed strangers. The boys paid them no mind, however, and greedily grabbed their drinks, toasting their many successes of the day.

A good few stools down from them, the green-eyed man stared blankly into his rich brown drink, as if drowned in his own thoughts. Unperturbed by the intruders' disruptions, he swirled his glass

slowly. He repeated the motion, again, and again, watching the waves and bubbles form under the dark honey-amber colored whiskey. His eyes reflected upon the surface, looking like murky, cloaked jadestone islands in a blood-red sea at dusk. His right arm, led by his limp-wristed hand, trailed towards his cigarette, but stopped. As if in a trance, he instead reached into his left breast pocket, and pulled a tiny leather pouch from it. Gently, he rotated the bag with his fingers, once round, then twice, then finally a third time, before cupping his left hand next to his right as he calmly dropped its only content into his hand: a ring.

It looked rather plain, and old: a dulled, pinkish rose-gold band, littered with scratches from decades of use, coming to an exaggerated, curled-edge point, as if someone had pinched the jewel-crest on the top, pulled, and pressed down again. The sides of the crest held the classical whorls and heart-shaped curves of the 1940's or 50's style. Atop, a small, cloudy diamond crowned the piece, beset by five tiny inlaid prongs – it looked as though one had been broken off some time ago. Were it not for the little brilliance and shine left in the gem, one could have easily mistaken it for a mere trinket.

Despite its poor condition, the green eyes mulled longingly over the ring. Something, not quite a smile ... some bittersweet, somber, passive-looking equivalent, passed over the man's face. For a fleeting second, his eyes shown a new, magnificent shade, bright like dewed spring-grass, mesmerized by the jewelry set against the reddish-gold liquid inside his glass. Still cherishing his small treasure, the green-eyed man reached to grab his cigarette, only to find it had burned out in the ash tray, leaving a small trail of charcoal-black remnants on the bar.

He glanced briefly around, barely moving his head, as he seemed to re-enter reality. The clock on the wall proved, undeniably, that it had been several hours, and that the bar would close soon. Only he, the two boys, and another pair of patrons, remained, along with the bartender. The wind seemed to have calmed, and the sound of rain and snow on the roof had let up significantly. The smell of cold winter, wet cedarwood, and white fir sap seeped through the walls.

He scanned the room a second time, his green eyes sweeping the scenery. As he moved though, the little diamond caught the dim neon lights, and the vibrant blue eyes of a young man with speckled-blonde hair. The boy quickly dashed over, as if to get a better look, but in his inebriated state, stumbled; colliding into the smaller green-eyed man, he sent them, the ring, and the glassware shattering and crashing to the floor. His dark-haired friend howled, bending over with laughter while walking slowly towards the resulting mess. The bartender yelled something indiscernible, and the two other patrons half-stood from their table to peer at the situation.

"HEEEHEE! oh hehe... oh, I'm sorry, man," the blue-eyed boy with now-dented glasses clamored, reaching out his hand with a drunken smile. "Here, let me help you."

The whiskey-soaked man swatted away his hand harshly, his dark-jade eyes fiercely darting around, searching. He held the side of his face, swaying from the contact with the hardwood floor, before he grabbed his right thigh, wincing. His right palm had been badly cut by landing on his lowball glass, and a sizeable shard stuck there, running nearly perpendicular to his palm lines, from his third-finger's joining to his thumb's. Finding his hat, he quickly snatched it, seemingly unaware of the mix of blood and liquor dripping from his hand and staining the tapered front, forming a sickly, discolored blotch. Beneath his hat, the man's eyes appeared ink-black.

"Woah man, I'm sorry, are you ok?" The blue-eyed boy stared at the man's hand, visually uncomfortable with the injury.

"You think he'll be upset about you denting this little thing." The drunken dark-haired boy held up the ring; its band was bent horribly sideways, and the delicate curves on the left side had been shattered and broken off. The diamond stooped precariously, attached by two mangled prongs. He leaned against the bar a few feet from the two, apparently oblivious to the accident's painful consequences. "Probably not. Looks fa—"

CRACK-CRACK-tink-CRACK! ... CRACK-CRACK!

The jolting gunshots rang loudly in the confines of the small bar as they tore through and past the dark-haired boy. The first struck him in the stomach. Immediately behind him, the second exploded a bottle of scotch, the alcohol raining down across the shelves and light switches underneath. The third shot struck the side of his forehead, and he fell heavily, first smashing his head and torso on the bar before bouncing off a stool and slumping to hit the floor with a deafening *THUD*. The last shot ripped into his back-right shoulder, and on the bar where his arm had rested, a deep splintered gouge outlined the fourth round's path.

Panic and shouting ensued. The odd, rough noise of wood scraping against wood sounded through the gunfire as table and chairs were forcefully pushed wayward by the other two now-fleeing patrons, screaming murder as they ran into the cover of the night. The unmistakable pungency of nitroglycerin and graphite arose from the spent casings. The bar went dark, lit only by faint neon wall signs and emergency-exit lights. The bartender – struck by glass shards – hid, bracing himself behind the bar's frames. The man with the gun, his eyes obstructed by his hat and the shadows, was tackled by the blue-eyed boy.

CRACK-CRACK-click-click-click!

The blue-eyed boy keeled over, and looked to be patting himself in shock, as if not knowing where he might have been hit. The silhouette of the man with the gun, outlined only by the flickering neon, stomped with his left foot. And again.

CR-CRAckkk-kik.

The boy went limp – his spine was shattered at the neck. Again, the figure stomped. And again... and again.

In the low lights, the diamond ring shone faintly. The green-eyed man blinked, holstering his gun. He picked up the ring and walked out into the now heavy, raging storm, gripping his right leg. Sleet pounded against him as he heaved the cedarwood door shut – *THUD*. Thunder boomed, but no lightning lit the sky.

Roughly thirteen miles from the bar stood a small log cabin, entrenched and surrounded on all sides by cedar trees, white firs, and gray snow. The green-eyed man sat quietly inside on a couch, meticulously disassembling his weathered Colt 1911. His calloused hands, one wrapped in a makeshift bandage, first dropped the magazine onto the cowhide-covered coffee table. He fiddled silently with the barrel bushing before popping the spring forward. He eased the slide-lock out, then took the slide and guide-rod fully from their housings; his shoulders relaxed, and he began to clean the pieces with tattered oil-rags beside him. Some splotchy-red liquid had covered the blued slide end and begun to seep into the rich wooden panels of the grip.

Around the green-eyed man, the room was in disarray: broken furniture and clothing covered the small room; shattered plates, glass bottles, and torn books had been scattered across the floor. Near the front door, propped up against the wall, stood what appeared to be a single leg, with a metallic-silver joint protruding from the knee above a heavy boot. A myriad of crumpled letters was strewn about nearby; only fragments of each could be seen, let alone read – the scribbles were more akin to chicken scratches than actual written words:

"... need more ... taking ... no ... fault ... her choice ... help... did nothing ... sorry"

The adjoining kitchen was no better; the cupboards looked to be ransacked, and little bottles marked with foreign words like *Aripiprazole*, *Escitalopram*, and *Naltrexone* lay fallen on the counter, emptied. Dents and scrapes lined the wallpaper backsplash. A small, two-person table rested upside-down on a handwoven rug. The dust, accumulated throughout the two rooms, created an air of antiquity, and a dry, mothy stench accompanied by the stark odors of bourbon and cigarette smoke countered the sickly-sweet smell of the damp outdoors ...

A short while later, the green-eyed man looked up, having finished wiping down the gun's components. Outside, the moonlit trees seemed to huddle closer to the cabin for warmth. The soft breeze and easy-falling snow formed a serene, photogenic scene of the mountainside. The green eyes lowered, looking out past them. Just behind the trees looked to be a small clearing, with a protruding oval headstone illuminated by the soft white glow of moonlight on snow.

A gentle *knock* permeated the room as the green-eyed man reached next to him. He'd looked to have accidentally pushed over an empty hand-carved, heart-shaped picture frame on the side table, revealing a sizeable peeling knife lying next to a broken rose-gold band. The green-eyes shifted gradually back and forth between the ring, frame, and knife. He finally reached for the cutlery, and brought the blade close to his face, studying it intently as he then lowered it to touch both his wrists methodically. He brought it up again, guiding the knife while it crept across his cheek and as it came to trace a scar on his jaw. He looked a final time at the blade, his tearful pale-green eyes barely reflecting in the dull steel.

In the distance, the low whine of a siren sounded, then another, and another. The pale-green eyes looked once more to the stone in the clearing; the knife was set carefully beside the ring. Calmly, the eyes moved to watch as a hand reached for the magazine, another rustling for things from a box below. The pale-green eyes blinked once, then twice, as the gun was assembled, the magazine inserted. One calloused hand racked the slide back, and the pale-green eyes closed.

Bibliography

MEMORIES FROM AROUND A SYRIAN DINNER TABLE

Anas Atassi (Syria)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

BREAKFAST TABLE AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S GARDEN

During my summers in Syria we'd get together every weekend, like clockwork, in the home of my grandmother in Homs – children and grandchildren, brothers, sisters and cousins. The house is situated just outside the city and in her garden, amidst the fruit trees, there would be a long table laid with a flowery tablecloth. This is where we'd eat, sitting on anything and everything we could find, from chairs and stools to upside down crates and even an old swing hanging off a branch. At the breakfast table, the lives and stories of our family would come together after a week of work, school and lazy days off.

We would eat and talk, talk and eat – one being as important as the other. As a child, I took these get-togethers for granted. Of course we would all find our way to grandmother's house on Friday mornings. Of course the table would be laden with tasty food, from plain hawadir – breakfast dishes such as labneh, za'atar, jam and white cheese – to weekend treats such as musabaha and foul mudammas. Of course we'd drink coffee and tea. Of course we'd reluctantly stop eating while holding our full stomachs, only to start picking at all the delicious food again a little later.

In the traditional Syrian kitchen, it's the woman who cooks. Typical weekend dishes like hummus and beans, however, are a man's business. While the kids were playing, the men of the family – my grandfather, father or an uncle – would fulfil their traditional roles. My dad's specialty was foul mudammas, fava beans in olive oil. Only he knew how to get that perfect balance between garlic and lemon.

These days, the spontaneity, simplicity and ease of those breakfasts in my grandmother's garden are hard to imagine. Like so many of Syria's beautiful cities, Homs has been torn apart by war. My family is scattered across the world. Even if we wanted to, the days that our party of thirty-odd people hung around the table and chatted for hours, absentmindedly picking fresh grapes straight off the tree, are over. But we do get together for family reunions when and where we can, usually in smaller groups. That's when we gather at the breakfast table once again, and make the most of it.

A TABLE WITH A SEAVIEW

Whenever we fancied eating fish, we would make the one and a half hour drive to the seaside, to the charming village of Bsireh in the governorate of Tartus. My grandfather has a one-bedroom holiday home there, situated no more than a few meters from the sea. This is where my mother used to spend her summers as a young girl, with her brothers and sisters. The children would sleep on the sofas in the living room, my grandparents in the bedroom. Later on, grandchildren were added to the mix and before long, as many as fifteen or twenty people would be staying at the house together, which still only had one bedroom! Every available inch of the place would be turned into makeshift beds at night. More than anything, it was this friendly chaos that made the summers at my grandfather's chalet such an adventure.

There wasn't an awful lot to do in Bsireh. The village had a few shops and a fish restaurant named 'The Green Shore'. The restaurant was a short walk on the beach from the chalet and was mainly frequented by locals. We would go there almost every single night of our stay and eat fish with a sea view. Even though my grandparents were outsiders, the owners knew them by name – that's how often they had eaten there over the decades. They even had their own special table, named after my grandmother. It was a lovely table with a panoramic view of the beach and the sea beyond.

The fish they served at The Green Shore was very fresh. It smelled of nothing but the sea and its preparation was pure and simple. Not once have I seen a menu at the restaurant. The eldest man at the table, usually my grandfather, would order for everyone and I simply waited. The fish would be served with seafood and fish mezzah as side dishes to share. Platters of fruit or a few sweets would appear for dessert. Everything always tasted amazing.

It wasn't just the skill of the chef that made these meals so magnificent. The atmosphere, the service and hospitality of the locals all played their part in making the fish suppers in Bsireh memorable. And let's not forget that sea view.

MIDSUMMER BARBECUE TABLE

Syrians love a good grill party, so it's no surprise that the summers of my youth were packed with barbecues. You'd always find someone keen to dust off the grilling rack and bring out the garden furniture. I remember barbecued meals on farms, on lawns, in the back gardens of family members and friends, and of course at home, in our own back yard.

No matter where the party was held, we would always get together shortly before sunset, slowly, without any hurry or stress. After all, we weren't there just to eat and scoot off again. Someone would light the fire, people would be milling about chatting, and the lady of the house would thread some more meat onto skewers. Bar a few halved onions and tomatoes, and maybe the odd roasted pepper, vegetables were in short supply. The midsummer barbecue was no place for vegetarians.

One side of a long table would be reserved for the children, the other side for the eldest members of the group. Everyone would bring something for the table, or help the hostess with the preparations: hummus bi tahini, biwaz, moutabal, muhammara. As soon as all the mezzah were laid out on the table and all the meat had been skewered, the hostess would sit – her job was done. From now on, cooking was a manly affair. Batch after batch of meat skewers were grilled on the barbecue, only to be eaten the moment they were removed, still piping hot. Then, the whole cycle would start again. After the last meat was eaten, the party would continue and we would talk until late in the night.

That's how I remember my holidays in Syria: amazing summer days, threaded together by skewers.

THE RAMADAN TABLE

To the outside world, the holy month of Ramadan is seen as a time for fasting and suffering. But Ramadan isn't about suffering, it revolves around compassion. During Ramadan, at least in our family, we would try to experience what it is like to be poor, to have very little, to forego the luxury of good food on the table. It was also a time to break bad habits. No cursing, no lying, no overspending. Ramadan is a time of simplicity, equality and peace.

For me personally, there is one aspect of Ramadan that is of even greater importance: Ramadan means spending time with my family. You go through the process together, surrounded by warmth and coziness. During the day, we would cook and discuss what we wanted to eat most that evening – everyone would be daydreaming about their most longed for dishes. After sunset, in Syria at about 6 o'clock in the evening, we would all sit down at the dinner table.

Traditionally, our family would break the fast with lentil soup and sambusak, followed by salads and main courses. My mother would try to include everyone's favorites, like fattah: bread topped with yoghurt and, in my case. It was the only time of year we would make elaborate drinks, which goes to show how important fluids are during Ramadan. Also, in most Syrian families, desserts are served at the Ramadan table only. These dishes still give me that special Ramadan feeling. And the taste of coffee after a long day of fasting... Heavenly.

During Ramadan, I would spend most of my time in the kitchen, where my mum would be cooking

all day. I'd sit on a chair and try and distract her by telling her made-up stories, hoping that she would let me stay a little longer. Or even better, that she would let me help. The moment she would kick me out to do 'boys' stuff' would invariably come, but I was convinced that if I just kept on chatting, I'd be able to postpone the inevitable. I will never forget the amused smile that played on her lips while she listened to me. It's the smile of Ramadan.

BOYS' NIGHT OUT

From about the age of twelve, my summers in Homs were infused with a sense of freedom, something I had very little of outside the holidays. Given the slightest opportunity, I would meet up with a few of my many cousins and friends. There were about twenty-five of them living nearby, so I would always find one or two who were up for an outing. Usually we would wait until our parents had a party to go to, or a wedding. (When an invite would state, 'the children's heaven is at home', this meant, in a typically indirect Syrian way, that children weren't invited.) This is how the boys' nights out came to be.

Our outings revolved around only one thing: street food. This was my chance to try any food I liked. At that time, Homs was a large city with 650 thousand inhabitants. As soon as the sun went down and the temperature dropped a little, the city came to life. I learned so much about Syrian food then, visiting takeaway restaurants and street carts, eating while sitting on sidewalks and plastic chairs, or while wandering the busy streets.

We would roam around the city, from the old souk to the modern market, from one neighborhood to the next, from café to baklava shop. Afterwards, we would play cards, football or tennis. Initially, my parents would give me some money to pay for these outings. Once I got older, my cousins and I would half-heartedly try to find the occasional job, even though that was unusual in Syria. I remember one summer when my cousin and I started our own shop, selling food we had bought in a shop ourselves. Chocolate, crisps, that kind of thing. We ate most of our stock while waiting for customers and naturally suffered a loss. A few years later our uncle found us a job packing medicine for pharmacies. We weren't very motivated so we didn't last very long. But what little we earned, we invested straight back into the city's street food shops.

Those midsummer nights, unplanned and uncomplicated, in this friendly city, taught me about freedom and friendship. It shaped my love of Syrian food. Thinking about them brings me so much joy.

MY MOM'S YEARLY LADIES ONLY NIGHT

My mum used to organize two parties a year during my childhood years. The first was a dinner party for couples: a formal and dressed-up affair. The second... an extravagant night out for her female friends, filled with glitter, glamour and gold. The marble floors were buffed, there were flowers everywhere and all the chairs in the salon would be pushed against the walls. My mother would open the door to dozens of girlfriends, each of them dressed to perfection. Some years, there would be seventy or eighty women there.

The evening would kick off with everyone sitting on those chairs in the salon, politely chatting to the person next to them. Then the buffet would open – a long line of tables filled to the brim with dips, salads, mains and drinks, reaching all the way into the garden. The quantity and variety of food was staggering: kibbeh sayniy, ouzi, muhammara, moutabal.

After dinner, everyone would get up and mingle. The whole of the ground floor, inside and out, would be taken over by women. Arabic music would start to play. Now I understood the reason why all our chairs were backed up against the wall: it created a dance floor.

For me, as a child, it was a mesmerizing event to witness. When I was still small, I was allowed to wander around between guests, chairs and tables, made invisible by my young age. As I got older, from

about ten, I was sent upstairs for the night. Secretly, I would climb back down a few stairs and sneak a peek through the railings.

The Arabic community in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where we were living at that time, was close-knit but the social rules were strict. Once outside the house, women would wear black abaya's. But not during mum's ladies only night. Here I saw women in a relaxed mood, at ease, laughing, dancing, like a parallel universe. Our Syrian culture, with its relative freedom compared to many other Arabic countries, came alive in front of my eyes.

And my dad? He was sent away, just for one night. I have a suspicion there was a bunch of men having their own party somewhere in a café close by...

These days, the house where mum's parties were held has been demolished. Her Syrian friends have spread across the globe. And even though my mum has the gift of warming people's hearts wherever she goes, the ladies only night is impossible to recreate.

TOSKA

Pablo Hernández Blanco (Spain)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

You fell in love with the world of words as a small child thanks to your father. I can still remember that winter afternoon when I picked you up from nursery school, and you proudly told me that you'd been the first in your class to learn the alphabet. As soon as you learnt how to read, your father would treat you to books by the likes of Maurice Sendak and Roald Dahl for you to pore over; normally, it took you a couple of days at most before you moved on to the next volume. Given your precocious ways, Mrs. Sexton would take you to local spelling bees whenever she could during first and second grade; she always boasted, not without a hint of affection, that you were the only one in class who could tell the difference between their, there and they're. Your father used to tell his students that in a few years' time they would be forced to face some stiff competition; his youngest daughter, he assured them lightheartedly, would become a famous writer. You were particularly fond of anything related to word play: you viewed life through your unique lens as an endless, colourful parade of palindromes, enigmas, conundrums and riddles.

You were only five years old when I caught you clumsily placing a dictionary on our bathroom scale. The moment you became aware of my presence at the door, you told me in a casual, matter-of-fact way, that you were measuring the weight of words. "Words weigh more than you can imagine, honey," I said, "And even then, the Oxford English Dictionary alone won't do for your little experiment." "Why not, mum?" you asked. I pondered this question for a few seconds and said, "Well, for one you'd need all the dictionaries in the world of all the different languages—and even then, it wouldn't be enough." You looked down at the linoleum floor tiles, as if the implications of my response were written on them in a coded language that you were attempting to decipher. You then looked up to me and said, "What about words that don't exist?"

We used to jokingly call you the Tongue Twister Mistress, a tongue-in-cheek title you earned through loving dedication and intensive readings of Dr Seuss' most popular books. "Martha, how much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" your father asked you one time at supper, and you responded by pronouncing it repeatedly three times as fast. Looking back, however, "She sells sea shells down by the sea shore" was arguably your favourite tongue twister of all, seeing how you always wondered about the woman who gave origin to it. You were seven years old when you wrote your first work, a mini prequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, thanks to which you won first prize at one of your school's short story competitions; just so you know, I still keep the original manuscript safely in my bedside table. In short, it was obvious to everyone that words were for you both a game and a passion: they held the secret to many of your life's countless mysteries, secrets whose source or logic—despite your earnest, fierce curiosity—were not always so apparent.

But you must know by now that words come and go, just like everyone and everything we get to know in life. Most of them change over time, while some of them disappear after a brief existence, yet none of them are forever. Words—just like reality, just like ourselves—are in constant change, subject to the laws of chance, or perhaps even fate. However, this may have been too deep a thought for me to tell you back then, to be frank. In hindsight, what I can tell you, here and now, is that words do not carry any weight by themselves; instead, it all depends on the weight we choose to give them.

The initial symptoms appeared the day you turned ten. All of us were singing happy birthday when, right then and there, you begged us to stop. I should've known by the look on your face that something was horribly wrong. You complained that your abdomen was hurting very badly; you could hardly stand upright due to the pain. We took you to the nearest hospital straight away, and I remember

that your father, usually calm and cool in the most extreme of situations, looked ghastly pale behind the wheel, as though he'd been granted a fatal glimpse into the future. For the coming days, none of the doctors we spoke with were able to pinpoint the actual cause of your malaise. The following week, after an excruciating number of tests, the diagnosis arrived like a bad omen: you had Niemann-Pick disease, a severe metabolic disorder, a rare disease with no effective treatment.

During our tense meeting with Dr. McCullers he kept whispering words of obscure meaning like xanthoma, sphingomyelin, hepatosplenomegaly; words that I would have expected to hear in a cheap science fiction B movie, but certainly not in the real world. Dr McCullers explained it all in simple terms with the utmost patience: the prognosis was unclear, but in many cases, he said, the disease was fatal. "I can't guarantee anything," he said, "But we're going to do everything we can." Your father, averting my gaze, took my hand and held it tightly for what seemed like forever. We'd just have to wait and hope for the best, it seemed.

You read as much as you could during your stay at the hospital. Books were your loyal companions, your most dear, inseparable friends, and you did not want to let them down. It wasn't long before overwhelming fatigue set in to the point that you could hardly extend your arms, so we played audio books for you to listen to, or read to you out loud. You asked me to read *The Giving Tree* for you one night and, for the briefest moment, your whole body seemed to emanate an unexplainable warmth as I flicked through its pages. But as the disease progressed, your spirits deteriorated exponentially. Your speech began to slur and you were barely able to speak properly; you had a hard time pronouncing even the simplest of sentences. Your mouth would try to say something and the words would come out all scrambled and distorted, like a crooked crossword puzzle.

And then, eleven and a half months after our first visit to the doctor, you died. You simply went out altogether, like a candle in the rain. Your father and I were plunged into the deepest night, struck by a sorrow unlike anything I've ever experienced, before or since. Your beloved C. S. Lewis described it perfectly: "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear." Inevitably, while days began to fade one into another, time stood still as it stretched endlessly to a point of no return.

A few months ago, I stumbled upon an article about foreign words with no English equivalent and I couldn't help but think of you. "Sometimes," the article read, "we must turn to other languages to find *le mot juste*." I was surprised to see how the feelings or situations conjured up by the words before me were so easily recognizable; in a word, universal. The Spaniards, for example, have *sobremesa*; the Germans have *schadenfreude*; the Yiddish dialect has *luftmensch*, etc. But the one word that shook me the most was , a Russian word which, according to the article, Nabokov described best: "No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*," he says, "At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody or something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness." Somehow, this specific word seemed to almost encapsulate the extent of my feelings back then—almost, but not quite.

The Inuit word *iktsuarpok* is another one that comes to mind from time to time. Seven years have passed already and—I am ashamed to admit it—it still happens every so often. Some afternoons I catch myself crossing the kitchen door into our garden, as though the school bus were to arrive at any moment and, after the mechanic sigh of its folding doors, you were to emerge from it with a smile on your face. *Iktsuarpok* is somewhat defined as "the feeling of anticipation while waiting for someone to arrive, often leading to intermittently going outside to check for them." In my case, such anticipation is completely bereft of purpose, as it will not culminate in anything; it is the anticipation of the impossible, a longing with no solace in sight. Your dad has seen me on a couple of occasions dashing out, and he always tells me the same thing: you need to let go.

But can I, or will I ever? Here's an interesting thought: when a person loses their spouse, he is called a widow or a widower; when, in a worst-case scenario, a child loses both of his parents, he is referred to as an orphan. The death of a child, however, is something so harrowing, an event so dire and painful, that there is no word for its empty aftermath as far as the parents are concerned; it is, indeed, inde-

scribable. The term "taboo", whose English use dates back to the 18th century, comes from the Tongan *tapu* or Fijian *tabu*, and it was roughly translated as "consecrated, inviolable, forbidden, unclean or cursed." Your death left me stranded in *terra incognita*, threw me outside the limits of where one is permitted to be. In life, it seems, there are nameless feelings or situations simply because one hopes to never experience them. It is almost as if they didn't exist; or rather, as if we'd prefer them not to. Like a famous philosopher said, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." The question is, are we right in doing so? At the end of the day, a word is a word is a word. Or is it?

When you passed on a basic truth was revealed to me, as if a veil had been lifted from my eyes: we are afraid of that which we can't evoke through language. Think of how we feel when we forget someone's name; it is almost as if we didn't know them, as if their identity had been, perhaps, merely implied to us, but not completely disclosed. Barely a word was uttered between your father and I during the weeks that followed your death, while the threat of separation loomed over us like a toxic cloud, because we simply were not ready to express the inexpressible. A month and a half went by until I managed to feel fully conscious of your passing; it was only when I murmured to myself "My little one has died"—alone in the kitchen during one of many long, sleepless nights—that I began to wholly accept your death as true. The cruel, visceral reality of it then hit me with a brute force, a reality only materialized by words. That explains, I suppose, why I'm writing this: to accept and to remember. It is a piece (more a set of notes and randomly scribbled half-thoughts, really) which I'm not sure you'll ever read, but whose spirit, I hope, somehow gets passed onto you.

But is a thing without a name nameless for a reason? Though it might be an unspeakable reality, isn't it a reality all the same? Words have an intrinsic, mysterious power that somehow contributes to elevating an existing reality to a higher realm, almost as if every tiny thing, by sheer nature, bore its name at its very core; as if words clarified the essence of that which they are supposed to define. Ultimately, it may not be the weight of words that matters, but what they are meant to signify. And yet, for better or worse, not even a simple phrase like "I miss you so much" would do the slightest justice to what I feel at this moment. For every now and then—even when words are there at our free disposal, limitless and immaculate—words simply fail.

WEAVINGS

Carlen Long (USA)

MASTER IN MANAGEMENT

She was sitting half-hidden by shadows when he saw her for the first time. In her small hands were two leaves, both a bright, vivid green and big enough to cover her entire palm. She was surrounded by drying-out baskets and shapes, and she had bits of bark and leaves and flowers in her wild hair.

Her name was Ren, but he'd find that out later. For long time, he knew her as the weaver-girl – because that's what everyone knew her as. Just the weaver-girl. She sat underneath a tall tree, all day and all night, and wove, and for all anyone knew she never ate and never slept and never moved an inch.

But, of course, she had to do all those things, because she wasn't starved and wasn't dead. In fact, she always seemed quite the opposite to him. Every time he looked at her, even from a distance, he noticed tiny sparkles in her eyes, something that he supposed most other people overlooked.

He'd thought over these things many times because he passed her tree every other day on the way to one of his jobs, the more urban one. He worked in the city but lived in the countryside, so he had a very extensive commute on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The job was almost not worth it. He thought that he could call random people and try to get money from them, for a "good cause," of course, from just about anywhere. But he'd soon become accustomed to the sight of the weaver-girl, sitting calmly off the edge of the little country road and brightening his days until he couldn't imagine *not* seeing her there three times a week. Even so, it wasn't until at least a month had passed before he decided to talk to her.

When he woke up on Monday, he gave himself just enough extra time so he could still make it to work before eight, but also have a few spare minutes to talk to the weaver-girl. To his surprise, his heart pounded rather audibly in his ears when he thought about it.

Pulling over to the side of the road, he parked his car haphazardly in the gravelly shoulder and looked up. Sure enough, she was there, dark leaves in her hands and vines wrapping around her wrists. Yellow petals littered the ground around her. He stepped out of his car – a minuscule sedan – and brushed through shallow grass until he was only a few yards away from her.

"Er – hello?" he began awkwardly, running a hand through his hair. The girl looked up at him, her eyes gray and sharp.

"Your baskets are really beautiful, you know," he said, coming closer.

She didn't reply. Eyes narrowed, she flicked her gaze back to the plants winding around her fingers and arm and kept weaving. Long, dark hair fell across her face, hiding her expression from view.

He wasn't lying – the collection of grassy baskets was indeed striking, with so many different colors and styles and shapes. "I'm Taylor," he offered.

No response.

Glancing down at his watch, he knew that he was running out of time. He would have to be at work soon. With a sigh, he tilted his head and tried to catch her eye again. "Do you mind if I stop by again? I don't know how long you stay here, and all – "

He stopped talking as the girl shook her head quickly, glancing at him sidelong through her shield of shadowy hair.

"Maybe – maybe I'll see you another day, then," he said uncertainly. The girl nodded again, and he left, heading back towards his car.

It took him longer than usual to get to work that day. He had driven too slowly, trying to take in the forested landscape around him more than he typically did. His tardiness had earned him a stern reprimand from his manager.

But he found that he didn't really care. He was too preoccupied, wondering if the girl was still under that tree, still weaving. Next time, he decided with the smallest hint of a smile, he would set his alarm a little earlier.

"You're home late," Lena said, frowning. She tossed her light hair over her shoulders, hands on her hips.

"Sorry," said Taylor, dropping his briefcase onto the couch. He walked over to her and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I was late to work this morning, so the manager kept me a little bit over."

"Why were you late?"

"I made on a stop on the way to work, and spent too much time there." Absently, he cleared papers off a counter and reached for a plate and food. It was past his usual dinnertime.

Lena stood up and took some of the food from his hands, reaching for a knife to cut the carrots. She grinned at him. "You, stop on the way to work? When have you ever done that before?"

"First time for everything," he said absently, talking over the bang of the knife against the cutting board. Lena brushed carrots onto his plate.

Lena was a hairdresser at one of the more-high end places, so she had precise, deft hands, her fingers nimble and careful in everything she did. He'd always liked watching her hands move. Today, though, Taylor rubbed his exhausted eyes and took his dinner to the couch. Lena followed him, scooting herself close and leaning her head on his shoulder.

They finished the rest of the night in silence, watching old sitcoms on their fuzzy TV and not bothering to make small talk. After two years of living together, it wasn't strictly necessary, after all. But he still found himself grateful that Lena wasn't asking him any more questions about his day. He didn't think he could really explain, anyway.

The next day that he was going into town for work, a Wednesday, Lena waved him off and let him take a toasted bagel with him, like he'd asked for the night before. She'd wrapped it very neatly in a napkin, even including a plastic knife and a tiny container of cream cheese.

"I wouldn't want you to be getting hungry and coming home late again," she'd said when he pointed out the lengths to which she had gone to prepare his breakfast. Taylor laughed at that and let Lena blow him a kiss as he walked towards his little car.

The drive to work didn't seem to take as long as it usually did. Since he left at an earlier hour, there were definitely fewer people around. Then again, though, it wasn't like he ever saw very many people; not many lived so far out from the city. Before long, Taylor recognized the weaver-girl's stretch of highway and started to slow down, squinting through the trees to find her. Coming to a rough stop, he jumped out of his car. He knew this was the place.

But she wasn't there. Frowning, he walked once around the scruffy tree, but didn't see her. Her baskets were still there, along with piles of dried-out leaves and wilting orange flower petals. Some of the

baskets – the sturdier, more thickly woven ones – held big, musty roots or shiny coins. Taylor sighed and pulled the bagel out of his bag, looking at it sadly.

A rustle behind him made him whip around. The weaver-girl was standing there, fresh leaves in her pale hands and confusion in her eyes. Taylor blinked at her, then smiled, holding out the bagel to her ghostly figure.

"I thought you might like some breakfast. I haven't seen you with any good food before."

The weaver-girl's eyes flashed. After a brief pause, she snatched the bagel from his hand and sat down with it, dropping her leaves to clutch it tightly in both hands. Confused, Taylor ran a hand through his hair and opened his mouth to say something else, but the girl interrupted him.

"Thanks."

"You're – you're welcome," Taylor said, a smile forming on his face. The girl's lips twitched up at the corners.

She switched the bagel to one hand and took a careful bite, sorting through her fresh leaves with the other hand. Taylor watched, wondering vaguely what was running through her mind.

"What's your name?"

Her hands stopped moving. She flicked her eyes up to him – too fast for him to catch her expression – and then back down to her leaves and flowers. Carefully pulling at a dark leaf until there was clean tear down the middle, she took a pale stem and slipped it through the new slit, tying a knot at one end. "I'm Ren," she said slowly.

"Ren," Taylor repeated. "That's a pretty name."

Ren shrugged, turning once more to her leaves. The bagel was in her lap, but she didn't seem to have forgotten it – she was just intent on her hands. Every now and then, she'd pick up one of the dried-out leaves and slide it into her new basket with care, making sure it didn't crumble. Taylor sighed, knowing he had to leave again to get to work.

"See you another time, I suppose," he said, turning around. He glanced back over his shoulder.

With another cautious smile, Ren raised her free hand and gave a little wave. She took another bite of the bagel before focusing again on her work. Charmed, Taylor proceeded to his car and made it to the office just a tiny bit later than he had on Monday, which wasn't so bad, really. He blatantly ignored the manager's glare on his way in and smiled as he sat down to work.

On Friday, he got up before Lena did, so he hurried out as quietly as he could; he didn't want to wake her. He made his own breakfast and grabbed another bagel for Ren. When he reached her – the drive didn't seem to take nearly as long as it had before – she was waiting for him, looking around towards the highway instead of at her baskets. She gave a tiny, tentative smile when she saw him. It was much colder today, but that didn't seem to bother her too much; she still was wearing simple shorts and a t-shirt. Taylor had a jacket, and as he walked over to her, he shrugged it off his shoulders.

"You have to be cold," he said, holding it and the bagel out to her. Ren frowned, her eyebrows bunching together above her delicate nose.

"You didn't have to do that," she said. But she took the bagel and then the coat, pulling it over her narrow shoulders. It was much too large for her.

Sitting down, Taylor gently lifted one of her completed baskets and turned it around. Every side was different, spare stems and petals poking out of tight bonds. Ren scooted next to him and pointed to a spot on the basket where a red flower was pressed between two light, almost translucent leaves. With one hand, she tucked her dark hair behind her ear, then glanced up at Taylor. "Do you want it?"

"I'd love it," Taylor responded. Ren beamed, a real smile lighting up her face and her pale eyes.

"Thank you, you know," said Ren calmly, twirling fresh leaves in her fingers.

"For what?"

Ren only shrugged. She tied the leaves together so that when she threw them into the air, they fluttered down in a graceful spiral and landed softly on the dew-damp ground.

"I'm glad I could help," said Taylor. He leaned his back against her tree, grateful that he still had a few minutes before he'd have to leave again.

POETRY IN SPANISH

POESÍA EN ESPAÑOL

Pag 68 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Irene Cánovas
Pag 70 2nd Prize / 2^º premio: Paula San Román Bueno
Pag 72 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Santiago Isla

TORTUOSO TAUTOGRAMA

Irene Cánovas (Spain)

BACHELOR IN ARCHITECTURE

Tardo tormentosas tardes toreándote,
traduciendo temerosa tus trampas,
tropezando torpemente, trepándote,
terminando temblando, tirada.

Trazo torcido tu tatuaje,
tiene triste tinta turquesa.
Tú tejes también tu traje,
tapando tal timidez tensa.

Tú, tan tierno, tienes tetera, taza:
traes té tibio. Tomo tu triste trato,
tu tentativa traición templada.
Tiritando, trémula, trabajo.

Tenemos trágicas tipologías:
trompetas, tambores tararean tu tango,
tus tijeras traspasan torsos, tripas.
¡Tengo tantas tiritas tapando!

Tiendo tranquila tu trapo.
Tu tupido terciopelo tocando.
Tautograma, tarde, temprano,
tomando tacos, tragando tequila...
Todo tu tiempo termina.

ALGO TROPICAL

Paula San Román Bueno (Spain)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

El destino,
que no fue juego de niños,
quiso cruzarme contigo
al inicio de mi fuga.

¡Ay, cariño, que la luna
quizás hoy no me espere
si se entera que mi cuna
se mece entre tus redes!

Ahora que solo bailo con mi verdad
te brindo una copa más.
Le canto al cielo de mi ciudad.

Ahora que viene un viento tropical
por él me dejo llevar.
Levanto el fuego de mi ciudad.

¡Ay, cariño, que tu cuna
quizás ya no me espere
si se entera que mi luna
ya no entiende de redes!

NUEVO MUNDO

Santiago Isla (Spain)

MASTER IN MANAGEMENT

Siempre espero al desengaño.
Seda es hierro. Verás.
Todo es mejor si no sucede.
No hay fronteras en los ojos,
ni pulsos en el cielo,
ni mercurio en la boca.
Los deseos van volando
y se tienden en los balcones.

Cada uno juega un juego
de crisálidas y espejos.
No me aparto:
pretender en la memoria
es negarse la verdad.

Luego estalla la conciencia.
Sin saberlo, ¿qué habré roto?
Acostarme en un recuerdo,
con la cama deshecha
y ver que todo envejece.

Sí. Así mueren los sueños,
perdidos en la espalda
de la noche infinita,
como niños que se aburren
de esperar al autobús.

Acércame tu cara,
te susurro.

El camino que espera
no es ruido ni polvo.
Es camino, nada más.
No se acaba en este mundo.
Otro mundo empieza.

POETRY IN ENGLISH

POESÍA EN INGLÉS

Pag 68 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Carlen Long
Pag 70 2nd Prize / 2^º premio: Malak El Halabi
Pag 72 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Ivan Sanim
Pag 74 Special Mention / Mención especial: Jack Straker

MAPS

Carlen Long (USA)

MASTER IN MANAGEMENT

Like lines carefully painted
across pale, yellowed parchment
of an old ink map,

the lines on your palm

and the lines on your skin

and the lines on your face

map me to your heart.

But like the old ink map,
lines fade over time,
hidden behind wrinkles that don't mean a thing.

(And I don't know whether
yours are still there.)

BLACK BLOOD

Malak El Halabi (Lebanon)

PhD

The child
we could have had
The child
we could have...
raised

beautiful
as a fresh summer night
innocent
as the feather of a white swan
promising
as the first sentence of a new book

I hear it in the cries of every
restless baby
in the crowded restaurants
in the jammed streets
I hear it
like the last haunting note of a symphony
dying away in a concert hall

The child
we could have had
The child
we could have...
raised

beautiful
as a blue water lily
innocent
as the quiet mist of morning
promising
as a red night sky

I see it in the swollen belly of every
pregnant woman
in the loud playgrounds
in the coloured toy stores
I see it
like the colors that bedazzle the back of
our eyelids
when we rub our eyes
in the sun

The child
we could have had

The child
I could have given...
birth to

The child that didn't bathe inside me
long enough for it
to learn to swim along my heartbeats

The child that didn't kick me
hard enough for me
to learn that pain could be at times
a blessing

I hear it in the echo of my own voice
whenever I introduce myself
I see it in the reflection of my bedroom
mirror
whenever I step out of the shower
my hair dripping sins

The child
we could have had
The child
I could have given...
birth to
beautiful
as a fresh summer night
innocent
as the feather of a white swan
promising
as the first sentence of a new book
The child that still lives
inside the lines of thorns and orchids
The child that still lives
inside the memories of my flesh
The child we murdered with
our bare hands
The child we threw from
the cliff of time
hastily
without
flinching

The black blood that
never
dries

TICK-TOCK

Ivan Sanim (Russia)

MASTER IN MANAGEMENT

Tick-Tock, so steady says the clock,
Is it trying to mock?
Is every tick a new laid brick,
Or every tock a loaded Glock?
Its always first and always last,
For both the future and the past,
But what is present may I ask?
What good it brings if the next day,
Is always better than today,
And every day that has been spent,
Is only stepping stone, a scent,
A scent of life that we all crave,
The one that puts us into grave,
Along with hopes and dreams and peace,
Which we only find when deceased,
And pity life we could have lived,
And yet we fight for those to come,
For those, who give us light in other form,
We see ourselves in virgin eyes,
But it is merely a disguise,
A final try to put thing right,
Before we loose the endless fight,
And as the clock tick-tocks again,
We realise that now is when,
We do our best to guard these eyes,
And let them gaze up in the skies,
That we ourselves no longer see,
Although we try so desperately,
Then as we stare into those eyes,
Which are bewildered by the skies,
And cherish every star they see,
and every sunrise; we agree,
That those blue eyes will make it big,
And get whatever we have seeked,
We strive for future one more time,
But end up stepping on a mine,
Which blows us up, and makes those eyes,
Forget about the stars and skies,
And stare right down into grave,
Of those who selfishlessly gave,
Those eyes a hope for better day,
And as the tears drop: Tick-Tock,
They feel the cold touch of a Glock,
Which makes them think about the past,
And why it gone away so fast,
No longer eyes can see the future,

They only see the present day,
Their dreams are treated as excuses,
For not belonging in today,
And as they narrow their focus,
To only see what past has seen,
The dreams a shattered,
hopes are broken,
And arrow comes to where it has been,
For us what is left here is to wonder,
If Ticks and Tocks will ever end,
And whether eyes born ever after,
Will see some joy around the bend.

MADONNA

Jack Straker (United Kingdom)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

I smiled behind a cheap Venetian mask
Of metaphor, of verse and awkward rhyme;
An institution's safety so sublime
Had made my cracking soul a place to bask –

No pantheon; interred in lines like Masch.
Her gaze as Beatrice's freezes time.
Of charm, of humour, beauty paradigm –
She conquers my pretence as death at Pasch.

The spoiled old drunk, the leching liar shown,
My castle walls a carcass full of holes –
I am revealed to play the hare and hound.

Redemptress, she has raised me from the ground,
I wonder at the joining of our souls:
I sing in joy – my pain is overthrown.

SHORT ESSAY IN SPANISH

ENSAYO CORTO EN ESPAÑOL

Pag 78 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Manuel Rodríguez Lavado
Pag 86 2nd Prize / 2^º premio: Ignacio Munguía
Pag 120 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Inma Mengual

ENVENENADOS POR LA RED O CÓMO LA FALTA DE HABILIDADES SOCIALES DESTRUYE TU NEGOCIO

Manuel Rodríguez Lavado (Spain)

INTERNATIONAL MBA

Si nos paramos a pensar la cantidad de beneficios que nos ha traído el advenimiento de las redes sociales, todos convergeríamos en la misma idea: ¿cómo hemos podido sobrevivir hasta hace bien poco sin este ingenioso invento? Nos ha permitido reconnectar con gente a la que habíamos perdido la pista en el devenir de nuestra vida; somos capaces de comunicarnos en tiempo real con nuestros amigos, todo es muy inmediato; podemos encontrar e interaccionar con individuos que poseen los mismos gustos que nosotros por raros que sean. Ahora es mucho más fácil que antes dar con ellos, particularmente, si diverges de lo que piensa la mayoría. Hay miles de nichos desperdigados por ahí a los que adherirse, que aúnan a gentes muy separadas geográficamente, pero cerca gracias a espacios virtuales temáticos abiertos.

Pues bien, aunque todo esto está muy bien, hoy en día, prácticamente me he desconectado de todas y, mírame, aquí sigo, vivito y coleando; y aun diría más, me va todo mucho mejor. He llegado a esta decisión que, de seguro, más de alguno tildará de “extrema”, de “antisocial”, o de “retrasada”, después de un cúmulo de desencuentros y sinsabores que voy a pormenorizar en las siguientes líneas de esta reflexión.

CUANDO VIRTUALIZAMOS NUESTRA VIDA

Recuerdo el día en el que me llegó la invitación a conectarme a Facebook. Creo que fue a finales del 2005, no sabría decirte con exactitud. En aquellos días todavía me parecía innovador comunicarme por *emails* colectivos con los amigos que se encontraban lejos de mí, pues vivía como expatriado en Dubái, y contaba con numerosos amigos desperdigados por todo el orbe. No era el único que realizaba dicha práctica de los *emails* grupales a amigos, ya que, como he explicado, era muy común, y a todos nos parecía aceptable por aquel entonces. Sin embargo, dicha “modernidad” de los mensajes grupales entre personas cuyo único vínculo común era el emisor, hoy la consideraríamos un *spam* en toda regla.

Al llenar el perfil, me di cuenta de que allí dentro en la red estaban todos mis amigos, y no solo eso, pude conectar con gente del colegio que no veía desde hacía más de quince años. ¿No era maravilloso? Aquello era una gran ventana donde asomarme y echar un vistazo en tiempo real en la vida de mis amigos, y poderles enviar un saludo, y hacerles un cumplido, o incluso felicitarles por su cumpleaños. Así, fui agregando a conocidos y gentes más o menos afines hasta que llegué a casi cinco mil contactos. Hasta aquí todo correcto, si no fuera por el hecho de que mis relaciones con la mayoría de dichos «amigos» no pasaron de los Me Gusta o No Me Gusta, o de una felicitación aventurera. El caso fue que a muchas de estas personas con las que había reconnectado después de tanto tiempo, cuando me las encontraba por la calle, lo normal era que ni siquiera me otorgaran un simple “Hola”, sino que me ignoraban completamente.

Si te pones a pensar por unos momentos tiene su lógica. Una cosa es realizar un comentario *ad hoc* en un cambio de estado, y otra cosa muy distinta poder mantener una conversación fluida cara a cara sobre algún tema que a ambos nos apasione. Si no es el caso, ¿qué sentido tiene convertir nuestra relación virtual en real, cuando no guardamos mucho en común, o ni siquiera lo sabemos con exactitud? También es cierto que no siempre han sido así de superficiales mis relaciones en la red. Gracias a las redes sociales he sido capaz de realizar quedadas con antiguos alumnos del colegio con los que al menos aquella experiencia de la niñez era un punto en común. Ese es quizás un aspecto positivo, y en nada nimio.

Una red de contactos es un conjunto de personas sobre las que ejercemos influencia, es decir, sobre las que poseemos cierto poder en sus tomas de decisiones. Suena a puro marketing, ¿verdad?

Mientras las redes de contacto virtuales cuentan con la ventaja de ser muy extensas, esto es, el número de individuos que la forman es muy amplio. Estas son, por lo contrario, poco profundas con respecto a las reales. O sea, el poder de influir disminuye, ya que todos nos conocemos allí, por lo general, de manera muy básica.

Aquí os dejo un par de ejemplos para ilustrar este punto: uno escogido de la vida personal, y otro de la profesional.

“Me mudo mañana necesito a alguien que me ayude a cargar las cajas”. Sería desconcertante que una de estas personas *virtualizadas* (de aquellas que te dedican un Me Gusta pero no te saludan en la calle) se ofreciera como voluntario para ayudarnos al leer un mensaje de esta índole en nuestro muro. De hecho, lo primero que nos asaltaría a la mente es que “seguro que se trata de una broma”, o “este debe de buscar algo a cambio, por eso se ofreció como voluntario”. Claramente, nuestras relaciones virtuales cuentan con limitaciones personales reales. A pesar de que aparezcan como “amigo”, este término no significa lo mismo en la red que fuera de ella.

Este es el segundo ejemplo propuesto:

“¿Puedes recomendarme a potenciales clientes?”. A esta altura ya te estarás imaginando que esto sí es posible para personas que están *virtualizadas*, que de hecho existe un tipo de marketing llamado “de afiliados” que consiste precisamente en recomendar, a través de la red, los productos y servicios de terceros, frente al marketing “de referidos” o “relacional”, que hace exactamente lo mismo, pero de manera presencial.

Pues bien, te voy a demostrar lo equivocado que estás. Las personas no nos dejamos recomendar por cualquiera. Para que indaguemos información sobre un producto o servicio, o mejor dicho, para que preguntemos a alguien para que este nos sugiera una opción, esa persona debe de estar en posesión de una *autoritas*. Es decir, debe de estar facultado con un conocimiento o experiencia superior a la nuestra jerárquicamente, y preferiblemente, debe ser de nuestro círculo más estrecho como para que nosotros le prestemos atención. Esto nos lleva a otro concepto muy importante en lo que atañe a las redes de contacto, que se denomina “relevancia”. Se entiende por “relevancia” la posición de autoridad o nivel de jerarquía que posee una persona con respecto a un tema determinado frente a un conjunto de individuos vinculados de algún modo con él. Por ejemplo, imagínate que se muere tu tía y te deja en herencia una casa que no quieras para nada, ¿es lo mismo que te recomienda a una inmobiliaria para deshacerte del activo el abogado que te lleva la herencia o tu peluquera? Claramente, en seleccionar a la persona más “relevante” para la recomendación está la clave, ya que la autoridad es un concepto relativo, y nunca absoluto. Esto solo se realiza con éxito fuera de la red porque allí conocemos cómo de relevantes son las personas para nuestros objetivos, y estas confían en nosotros porque nos conocen bien.

Por otra parte, también ocurre que es más normal que si necesitamos un mecánico o un servicio menos crítico que el vender un inmueble, preguntemos a nuestro hermano que a un desconocido, o a algún amigo que sabemos es un experto en dichos temas, si no se da el caso, entonces sí buscamos recomendaciones en la red. En cualquier caso, la cercanía es clave, aunque no toda recomendación requiera el mismo nivel de autoridad.

De la misma manera, es más probable que la persona que te lleve más clientes referidos sea siempre la más relevante, no solo por su “autoridad”, sino porque su red posee un mayor número de individuos que nos interesan. Ahora bien, es más fácil que te recomiende alguien con menos autoridad que una figura con «autoridad», porque este segundo arriesga su reputación relativa con cada recomendación. En resumidas cuentas: sin relación profunda con el poseedor de autoridad, no hay premio.

Como la recomendación de nuestros productos o servicios provenientes de gente con la que guardamos vínculos poco profundos, como ocurre en las redes sociales, va a limitarse a la casualidad y no a la relevancia, el número de recomendaciones será siempre, por ende, discreto y de menor calidad. Por

consiguiente, una estrategia de marketing de afiliados con meros contactos es una soberana estupidez a no ser que poseamos un tránsito de personas tan ingente como para sobrevivir con el goteo casual diario e imprevisible. Mucha gente lo hace; pero no por ello, repito, deja de ser una manera poco eficiente de trabajar en red, al menos para productos y servicios de alto valor añadido. Solo es posible tener un éxito moderado con personas con redes de contactos muy extensas, o si logras añadir como socio de afiliación a un *influencer* relevante en la materia por medio del establecimiento de una relación profunda, y tal vez *desvirtualizada*, con él, y evidentemente a un coste. Por último, cuando alguien con el que no guardas una estrecha relación, no posee autoridad y es irrelevante te recomienda exacerbadamente algo en particular, ¿acaso no acabas deduciendo lo mismo que de aquel desconocido que se ofrece voluntario para ayudarte con la mudanza? “Este tío tiene segundas intenciones. Algo se saca a mi costa”.

De esto podemos sacar en claro lo siguiente: en las redes de contacto virtuales, solo se puede alcanzar el éxito mediante el número. Esto es: la extensión. Mientras que en las presenciales, mediante la profundidad y siempre siendo muy selectivos en relación a la relevancia de nuestros contactos, ya que el tiempo en profundizar, es decir, en conseguir una relación tan estrecha como para que confien en nosotros, es mayor que el que se precisa en una red virtual, donde la gente se deja recomendar, por lo general, productos y servicios en el que el nivel de autoridad no es tan decisivo.

En definitiva, cuando aparecieron las redes sociales, todos nos creamos unas expectativas grandiosas, pero para tener éxito siempre vas a requerir de lo mismo: crear valor, forjarte una reputación saludable con el tiempo y conocer sus limitaciones. Una red presencial nunca será muy extensa, porque no hay cuerpo ni agenda que lo aguante; y una virtual, no será muy profunda ni relevante, porque nuestra relación es más insustancial. Pero, sin duda, lo peor es lo que veremos a continuación: cuando las redes sociales influyen negativamente en la manera en la que nos comportamos en la vida real. Cuando tomamos los peores hábitos y rasgos de cada una, y nos hacemos un batiburrillo.

“ME ABURRE ESO DE ESTRECHAR MANOS”

La frase mencionada arriba me la soltó un emprendedor *millennial* en una de las reuniones empresariales o *networking*, que en otro tiempo organizaba. En realidad, tenía razón: las relaciones personales son harto tediosas. No se crean en dos días como hemos indicado anteriormente. Tampoco creo que una reputación *online* se logre en dos días. Sin embargo, el hecho de que cuesta más hacer amigos reales que virtuales, y que ya nos tienen acostumbrados los medios digitales a conseguirlo todo inmediatamente con un simple clic, muchos se amodoran cuando se despegan de sus dispositivos móviles.

Los grupos de empresarios que formaba se reunían tratando de intercambiar referencias siempre después de haber adquirido suficiente confianza como para hacerlo. Este chico, que se dedicaba a realizar páginas *web*, no me duró como cliente ni siquiera un año. En este tiempo envió una gran cantidad de *emails* masivos a sus compañeros con promociones, lo cual disgustó a más de uno; no era capaz de discriminar entre las personas que eran relevantes de las que no lo eran, ni siquiera indagó al respecto; para él todos eran direcciones de correo electrónico, perfiles sociales, y números de WhatsApp. Al final, cuando me anunció que dejaba el grupo y le pregunté el porqué, este sentenció: «Me aburre eso de estrechar manos».

Así es, cuesta hacer entender a alguien nacido en la era digital que la manera de relacionarse en la órbita virtual es diametralmente opuesta a la real, pese a que en ambas se requieren las mismas habilidades sociales; que mientras que en una hace falta a mucha gente para verle la punta, en la otra, por el contrario, solo necesitas poner todos tus esfuerzos en profundizar tu relación, y socializar selectivamente con un número discreto de individuos relevantes.

PARAPETADO TRAS UN DISPOSITIVO SOY PODEROSO

Cambiando de tema: no sé si os habéis fijado cómo en ocasiones a los conductores les cambia el temperamento dentro de un vehículo. Una vez circulaba con mi coche por una de las autopistas de Dubai, cuando de repente se acercó a gran velocidad un vehículo que iba haciéndome ráfagas, lo cual

no entendí muy bien. No necesitaba apartarme para abrirle paso, porque bien podría sobrepasarme por otro carril y seguir su camino, como en realidad hizo. Eso sí, me dedicó una sonada pitada, que a mi me pareció totalmente innecesaria. A menos de un kilómetro del incidente volví a encontrarme con el mismo conductor repostando gasolina. Era un señor de apariencia normal. Bajé del coche, y con todos los buenos modales que poseo, que no son pocos, fui a preguntarle, si era tan amable de indicarme por qué razón me había hecho ráfagas. Tal vez hubiera cometido algún error en mi desconocimiento. Aquel hombre, al verse confrontado por sus actos cara a cara, no supo qué responder. De hecho, parecía hasta avergonzado y algo nervioso. Estoy seguro que todos os habéis encontrado con situaciones similares a esta.

Y, ¿en las redes? ¿Os han hecho alguna vez “ráfagas”? A mí, muchas veces, y si me hubiera ocurrido con un completo desconocido, no le habría prestado la más mínima atención; pero el caso es que me ha ocurrido incluso con gente que conozco y con la que alterno de vez en cuando. Nada de personas anónimas, sin educación ni modales, o enemigos acérrimos a tus ideas que hayan respondido a controvertidos mensajes que hubieras enviado sin mucho tiento, o llevado por un impulso inmediato y altanero. Es decir: como respuesta a lo que hoy denominamos con el neologismo “trolear”.

De entre las diferentes asociaciones de empresarios con las que yo colaboro, conozco a una catedrática de emprendimiento muy amable, que en alguna ocasión me ha facilitado algún contacto para realizar charlas a emprendedores, y es por eso que me he sentido obligado a cumplir con ella. Si alguien quiere seguir recibiendo apoyo de la gente que aporta en tu vida, pues, ciertamente, tú debes de aportar valor también en lo que puedas. Por esto, la llamé un día y le propuse que quedáramos para tomar un café con la idea de que me contara cuáles eran sus planes sobre un proyecto que estaba llevando a cabo. El proyecto consistía en un programa para mentorizar a nuevos emprendedores tecnológicos provenientes de *spin-offs* de la facultad de ingeniería. Mi amiga precisaba de patrocinadores que confirieran prestigio al proyecto, para que a la vez, estos pudieran nutrirse de las ideas nuevas aportadas por los emprendedores. Es decir, ponían en contacto a grandes empresas con nuevas tecnologías que pudieran en un futuro aplicar. Una idea excelente, ¿verdad? Eso es lo que me contó. Durante unos instantes estuve haciendo memoria por ver si en mi lista de contactos contaba con alguien que pudiera ayudarle y, por supuesto, trataría de aportar mi granito de arena, abriéndole la puerta o acceso a través de una recomendación. De paso, fui indagando por medio de preguntas sobre posibles contactos que le pudieran ser útiles. Esto es, le ayudé de manera proactiva y sin que ella me lo hubiese pedido. Tras un buen rato, parecía que solo uno de mis contactos iba a serle útil. Se trataba de una abogada que trabajaba para un despacho dedicado al derecho tecnológico y de patentes. Entonces le advertí a esta amiga, llamémosla Alicia: “Hace bastante tiempo que no contacto con esta abogada. No estoy seguro que pueda conseguirte una cita con ella”. Al fin y al cabo, yo había tratado de echarle una mano sin que ella me lo hubiese pedido, solo como una manera de establecer vínculos de colaboración entre emprendedores. “Da igual. Haz lo que puedas”.

Al día siguiente, traté de contactar con la abogada. Le dejé una llamada perdida, y a la tarde me la devolvió; simplemente que la que estaba al otro lado del aparato no era ella, sino una compañera que me reveló que la chica en cuestión ya no trabajaba allí, que podría trabajar con ella. “¿No tiene sus nuevas señas?”, inquirí. “Me temo que no”, respondió.

Al día siguiente escribí un mensaje de texto a mi amiga haciéndole saber que mis gestiones habían resultado infructuosas, y que no disponía de las nuevas señas de la abogada. Sin embargo, la reacción que provocó en ella fue cuanto menos asombrosa. Escribió: “Lo supe desde un principio. Creo que eres una de esas personas que utilizan a la gente para su propio beneficio sin aportar nada”. Sí, efectivamente, me produjo la misma sensación que la ráfaga anónima de aquel conductor de Dubái, con la salvedad de que esta era una persona de mis círculos reales. Semanas más tarde del incidente, volví a toparme con ella en otro evento y su comportamiento fue incluso más intrigante aún: me saludó como si nada, como si el envío de aquel mensaje nunca hubiera ocurrido o, simplemente, no hubiese sido como para pergeñar una imagen negativa de ella. Desde luego, ni se me ocurriría pedirle ningún otro favor, ni mucho menos colaborar con persona tan grosera. ¿Cómo era posible que fuera capaz en tan poco tiempo de disociarse mentalmente de aquel mensaje?

Sin duda, la inmediatez y facilidad para hacer un clic, junto a lo efímero de la red, en donde un mensaje pasa a ser historia en cuestión de minutos, unido al falso sentido de protección que te dispensa un dispositivo móvil, incitan a la gente a sacar lo peor de sí mismos sin reparar en las consecuencias que para nuestras relaciones humanas se derivan de estas actitudes. Si dedicas un comentario soez o inapropiado a alguien *virtualizado*, al día se olvida, y tu relación queda prácticamente incólume. A lo sumo, si eres excesivamente pesado o persistente en tu mala educación, te bloquearán, pero con ello no arriesgas prácticamente nada. Sin embargo, cuando esas actitudes tan comunes en la red, las llevamos a cabo con gente más relevante y real, el efecto es mucho más permanente y devastador, pues, como hemos demostrado anteriormente, las relaciones reales son de mayor calibre que las virtuales. Así de confundidos andan muchos, por efecto de las malas costumbres adquiridas en la red.

“PORQUE YO LO VALGO”

El mundo es abundante. Creo que Dios ha repartido esa abundancia por todos los rincones del planeta, de manera que en todas partes encontramos gente buena y, no tan buena. Quizá lo único que nos distingue sean las costumbres, que pueden variar de un lugar a otro. Así, en algunas ciudades, contarás con un número más o menos discreto de conocidos, según lo sociable que sean sus ciudadanos, aunque las personas con las que conectes y sean tus leales y comprometidos amigos serán prácticamente los mismos en cualquier parte del planeta.

Esto lo pude comprobar cuando al inicio de mi carrera profesional me tuve que desplazar al norte de España. En la empresa para la que trabajaba por aquellos días yo era el único del sur y, ciertamente, me parecía algo frío en un principio la acogida de la gente. Mientras que en mi ciudad natal, cuando llega alguien nuevo, lo normal viene siendo quedar para tomar algo para conocerlo; allí fui totalmente ignorado. Luego, fui dándome cuenta de que eso era simplemente en apariencia. Cuando tuve la oportunidad de ir conociendo a mis compañeros de trabajo en otro ambiente, por ejemplo, en los almuerzos dentro de la cantina de la empresa, pues también había gente muy competente: en todas partes cuecen habas.

Me sorprendió, por otra parte, que más de un compañero se ofreciera voluntario para ayudarme en la mudanza, sin haber alternado previamente en un ambiente informal; y es que esa era la práctica habitual de hacer amigos allí. Por dicho motivo, yo también quedé comprometido con aquellos si me necesitaran para algo más que tomar unas cervezas. ¿Acaso no es la vida un equilibrio entre el dar y el tomar?

Ahora bien, ¿quién no conoce a alguien que aparece para su interés y desaparece cuando hay que pagar por algo? Es lo que llamamos *ghosting* y, ciertamente, es muy común en las redes sociales. Pero, seamos claros, que dentro de grupo de chat, hoy estemos y mañana no, hoy respondamos a las preguntas que nos dirijan y mañana no, y hasta ignoremos a gente con las que interaccionamos más virtualmente que en el mundo real, pues tampoco viene siendo algo muy problemático, ni siquiera supone un riesgo para dichas relaciones a corto plazo. El problema, en cambio, estriba cuando eres un emprendedor que trata de abrirse paso y crees que ese desaparecer y aparecer repentino no va a repercutir en tu reputación con otros emprendedores.

Me ocurrió con una emprendedora digital, llamémosla Azucena, con la que colaboraba en unos eventos de *networking* que organizaba su empresa, que necesitaba ayuda a la hora de atraer a gente, y como nos llevábamos tan bien, pues decidí ayudarla y la puse en contacto con varios presidentes de asociaciones que le aportaron invitados a su evento. A dichos eventos siempre acudían *influencers* y *youtubers* que daban charlas muy interesantes; y en una ocasión que necesitaba ponerme en contacto con alguien en concreto, que sabía que ella conocía muy bien, pues decidí echar mano de su agenda e influencia para que me ayudara, como yo lo había hecho en anteriores ocasiones. La llamé un par de veces, pero no me devolvió la llamada. Me imaginé, “bueno, estaré muy ocupada. Le voy a dejar un mensaje en el móvil pidiéndole concretamente lo que necesito y supongo que me responderá cuando pueda”. Nada más alejado de la realidad. No solo no respondió a las llamadas, sino tampoco a los mensajes. Me las tuve que apañar yo solo por otros cauces. Semanas más tarde, sin embargo, recibí por parte de ella el siguiente texto: “Hola, ¡qué de tiempo sin saber de ti! Hago un evento la semana que viene, y me gustaría que acudieras, de paso así nos vemos. Si quieres invitar a alguien, adelante. Tómate la libertad”.

Ahora me pregunto lo siguiente: ¿Qué tipo de “capital relacional” espera esta chica acumular en su vida, si trata a todos sus contactos “relevantes” de la misma manera? Cuando alguien tiene un *blog* o una *fanpage* o incluso un perfil de Instagram con cierta notoriedad, es muy común encontrar a gente orbitando alrededor tuyo y, ciertamente, el numero es cambiante. Siempre hay gente que entra, y gente que se aburre y, por consiguiente, sale. Pero, claro, ¿qué significa una persona en un perfil de cinco cifras? Nada, en definitiva.

No obstante, en el mundo real las cosas cambian. Cada persona está llamada a aportar más valor en tu vida que mil de tus seguidores de Instagram, puesto que, como se puede profundizar la relación mucho más, debido al contacto físico y visual, evidentemente, la “influencia” es mayor, y por ende, nuestro “capital relacional”, entendiendo por esto “el número de personas relevantes de nuestra red dispuestas a prestarnos apoyo significativo”, aumenta considerablemente. En este caso, el error de Azu es entender que la gente te va a seguir porque sí, “porque yo lo valgo”. El mundo real no funciona así. Las relaciones humanas deben de guardar un equilibrio entre el dar y el tomar para que prosperen. Que esto no lo sepa un egocéntrico adolescente, pase; pero que una regla tan básica, como es la importancia del compromiso de ayuda mutua para mantener tus vínculos a largo plazo, no la entienda un emprendedor, implica una limitación muy gravosa para su potencial.

SIMPLEMENTE, NO TIENEN ABUELA

Detrás de esta expresión tan popular se esconde una consabida actitud: la de aquel del que nadie habla y que, por tanto, es portavoz y referente de elogios. En las familias son los abuelos los que tienden a ponderar nuestras habilidades y me atrevería a afirmar que a veces hasta las inventan. Ciertamente, son los integrantes de nuestra familia, nuestros incondicionales, los destinados a subirnos un poquitín la autoestima. No va muy desencaminado aquel que atribuye a los que hablan todo el rato de sí mismos como personas que “no tienen abuela”, como si se hubiesen visto obligados a actuar de ese modo al no encontrar a nadie que pueda referir ninguna hazaña valedora de méritos. ¿Quién no conoce a alguien así tanto fuera como dentro de las redes sociales? En ocasiones también los calificamos con el apelativo de “narcisistas”.

Tengo un amigo que trabaja como *coach*. Cuenta con perfiles en cada una de las redes sociales, y casi a diario sube fotos suyas publicitándose. Hasta ahí todo bien. Faltaría más que no dispusiéramos de la libertad de subir lo que nos apeteciera en nuestros perfiles o muros. Sin embargo, todo cambia cuando esa actitud, que en absoluto nos resulta empalagosa en un medio, la llevamos al plano presencial por analogía con las redes. Cada semana, hasta hace bien poco que decidí bloquearlo, recibía de él mensajes como sigue: “Sublime la entrevista que me realizaron ayer en la cadena Radio Sur”, junto al enlace para poderme descargar el *podcast* completo. “Gracias Alcalá por la formidable acogida de ayer”, texto sobrescrito a una foto suya donde aparecía impartiendo una formación. Pero sin duda el colmo fue cuando me envió un mensaje del tipo: “Quedan escasas horas para que termine la oportunidad de descuento del 25% en el curso Consigue Tus Metas. Haz clic en el enlace para no perdértelo”.

Ahora existen empresas que han entendido muy bien de qué pie cojean una gran cantidad de emprendedores que parecen “no tener abuelas”, o clientes que les refieran. El otro día comentaba una amiga empresaria que recibió en su buzón un correo electrónico de lo más peculiar. Según rezaba en el título del mensaje, había sido galardonada con un premio a la “mujer emprendedora del mes”. Hasta aquí todo bien. De hecho, mi amiga se puso muy contenta, porque parecía que alguien invisible hubiera premiado sus esfuerzos. Sin embargo, conforme prosiguió la lectura del mensaje, su gozo fue poco a poco derecho al fondo del pozo. He aquí la trampa: para recibir el galardón debía ingresar la cantidad de varios cientos de euros, y dicha cantidad incluiría un álbum de fotos y una breve reseña dirigida a medios de prensa digitales que, a *posteriori*, podría compartir en sus redes sociales. Mi amiga se quedó a cuadros.

Como vemos, el mero hecho de que existan modelos de negocios así de heterodoxos, que se aprovechen de las ansias de trascendencia de los emprendedores, es un indicativo alarmante, cuanto menos que anómalo, de cuán extendida está esa actitud de «no tener abuela» entre la sociedad emprendedora. Ya no hablamos de un tipo cachas o una jovencita agraciada que quieren por igual

algo de atención lisonjera en Instagram; hablamos de personas que están ahí para generar empleo y que, debido a su personalidad y carencia de habilidades sociales, no llevarán sus negocios a otro nivel, porque carecen de abuela. La gente no entiende que el mérito no recae en agasajarse a uno mismo, sino en lograr que otros, no tan incondicionales como tu abuela, lo hagan por ti.

CONCLUSIONES FINALES

Si piensas por unos momentos, y eres mayor de treinta años, ¿cuántas personas conocías como los arriba descritos antes del advenimiento de las redes sociales? ¿Cuántos conoces ahora? Claramente, la profunda inmersión cotidiana en dichos medios está distorsionando nuestra percepción del mundo real. Hasta tal punto esto es así, que algo que debería haber desarrollado nuestras habilidades sociales, en realidad las ha socavado, o al menos, ha sido un vehículo para que se extiendan y normalicen nuestros peores hábitos relacionales. Ha ido envenenando nuestra personalidad y ahora no entendemos el mundo si no es con nosotros en el centro.

Hemos redefinido el concepto de amigo, confundiéndolo con el de contacto o persona a la que tengo acceso por algún medio. Amigos han sido hasta ahora personas que se prestan mutuo apoyo y con las que guardabas relación por compartir similares valores, sentir admiración recíproca, o realizar actividades afines de carácter extracurricular (deportes, aficiones, etc.).

Ante toda esta locura egocéntrica y baladí me he revelado. He borrado mis perfiles en redes sociales, y limitado el número de chats de WhatsApp a los que pertenezco, por miedo a verme afectado por esa vertiginosa embriaguez virtual. No los necesito, ni siquiera para adquirir nuevos clientes, y mucho menos para mantener mis relaciones significativas; faltaría más. Si el tiempo que pierdo en alimentar a miles de contactos con los que me relaciono de manera tan baldía, lo ocupo en las ocho personas con las que guardo una mayor afinidad y más aportan en el plano personal y empresarial, no me faltará nunca de nada. Apoyo a los que me aportan y evito a los que solo sustraen mi tiempo. Me ha ido tan bien así, que hasta publiqué un libro contando mi experiencia, y ahora escribo este breve ensayo. No sé cuántos lo leerán, ni si conmoverá lo suficiente como para que hablen de él ahí fuera. Siento que esta es mi aportación trascendental y tan solo anhelo que otros sean conscientes de cómo pueden llegar más lejos vinculándose de manera efectiva con los demás y sin caer en la trivialidad ni quemar a sus más relevantes aliados.

He aquí mi última reflexión: ¿Cuántas personas con un valor para la sociedad se habrán quedado sin alcanzar todo su potencial al estar envenenados por la red? ¿Cuántos son los que, empobreciendo sus habilidades sociales, limitaron o ralentizaron su progreso como empresarios?

LOS RUBLOS DE GROZNY

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Grozny, Chechenia, 1995. Grupos de niños juegan en las calles con puñados de billetes de viejos rublos soviéticos cerca de las ruinas del Banco Central que, como el resto del centro de la capital chechena, había sido bombardeado hasta los cimientos por la aviación rusa. La escena la recoge Sebastian Smith en *Las montañas de Alá: la batalla por Chechenia*, dando una pista del origen de muchos de esos billetes que no acabarían sirviendo más que de entretenimiento para unos niños atrapados en medio de la guerra. Vinieron en avión desde miles de kilómetros al norte de Chechenia y jugaron un papel determinante en la reforma monetaria más exitosa de la antigua Unión Soviética.

Tartu, segunda ciudad de Estonia por número de habitantes, es una apacible urbe de pasado hanseático y reminiscencias barrocas. Su universidad, fundada por Gustavo Adolfo de Suecia en 1632, hace de Tartu la capital cultural de la república báltica. A pocos metros del edificio histórico de la universidad se encuentra el hotel Barclay, un irrelevante alojamiento de tres estrellas a priori carente de interés; salvo por una pequeña placa en estonio, inglés y un oscuro idioma imposible de identificar por el ojo no experto: checheno.

“El primer presidente de la República Chechena de Ichkeria, general Dzhohar Dudáyev, trabajó en esta casa entre 1987 y 1991”. En esa época, sin embargo, esa casa no era un hotel, sino la sede de la 326^a división de bombarderos del ejército rojo, estacionada en el cercano aeródromo de Raadi. Dudáyev había alcanzado el mando de dicha división tras una meteórica carrera en la aviación soviética, en la cual fue el primer general de origen checheno. Tras alistarse en 1962 y afiliarse al partido comunista en 1968, Dudáyev sirvió en diferentes unidades estratégicas de bombarderos en Siberia y Ucrania, y se labró un nombre en la guerra de Afganistán, donde fue condecorado con las órdenes de la Estrella Roja y la Bandera Roja, y acusado de participar en bombardeos indiscriminados contra civiles que él siempre negó. La carrera militar de Dudáyev, sin embargo, acabaría a finales de 1990, y no en 1991 como indica la placa del hotel Barclay.

La estancia del general checheno en Estonia no pasó desapercibida. Dudáyev estaba al mando de la guarnición de Tartu y sus 4.000 hombres en pleno proceso de descomposición de la Unión Soviética, con las repúblicas bálticas luchando por su independencia. Dudáyev siempre se mostró próximo a la causa estonia, llegando al punto de aprender su idioma (considerado uno de los más difíciles del mundo para hablantes no nativos). Su responsabilidad militar, en cambio, era mantener a raya dicha causa y garantizar la prevalencia soviética en la región, usando la fuerza si fuese preciso. Pero Dudáyev decidió ignorar las órdenes de Moscú.

En otoño de 1989 todos los regímenes comunistas del antiguo Pacto de Varsovia cayeron como fichas de dominó. Mientras las imágenes de la caída del muro de Berlín o del fusilamiento de Ceaușescu daban la vuelta al mundo; Estonia, Letonia y Lituania, aún parte de la Unión Soviética, se embarcaban en la llamada Revolución de las Canciones iniciada con la espectacular cadena humana que unió Vilna y Tallin en el 50 aniversario del pacto Molotov-Ribbentrop (que dividió Europa del Este entre Hitler y Stalin y propició la ocupación soviética de la región). Las tres repúblicas realizaron declaraciones de soberanía y plantearon una transición hacia la restauración de su plena independencia.

En otoño de 1990, Dudáyev recibió la orden de bloquear el parlamento estonio y cortar las emisiones de la torre de televisión de Tallin, la capital. El checheno, que meses antes había permitido desplegar

una proscrita bandera estonia en su base aérea, nunca ejecutó el mandato y abandonó el ejército. Pocos meses más tarde, en enero de 1991, los tanques soviéticos cargaron contra la multitud que defendía la torre de televisión de Vilna, en Lituania, causando 14 muertos y más de 700 heridos. Por aquel entonces Dudáyev había vuelto a su Chechenia natal, que también vivía un momento de despertar nacional frente al poder soviético.

Dudáyev, criado en Kazajstán como tantos integrantes de la diáspora chechena provocada por Stalin, solo había vivido en su tierra en el lapso transcurrido entre que a su familia se le permitió retornar a Chechenia (1957) y su ingreso en la prestigiosa escuela militar de pilotos de Tambov (1962). Sus éxitos militares le habían convertido, sin embargo, en un personaje conocido y admirado en aquel remoto rincón del Cáucaso. Tras retornar a casa, su carisma hizo que fuese elegido para liderar el Congreso Nacional del Pueblo Checheno, organización que se oponía al gobierno oficialista soviético.

Tras el fallido golpe de estado de agosto de 1991 contra Gorbachov, que culminaría en la desintegración definitiva de la URSS, las tensiones nacionalistas en Chechenia se intensificaron. Dudáyev, cabeza visible del movimiento, acabaría tomando el poder por la fuerza, invadiendo con grupos armados el sóviet regional el 6 de septiembre. Después de unas polémicas elecciones Dudáyev se convirtió en presidente y proclamó la independencia de la pequeña república. Mientras el Estado ruso intentaba resurgir sobre las cenizas de la URSS en medio del colapso económico, pasaron varios años en los que Dudáyev armó a su pueblo y consolidó un poder absoluto en Chechenia.

Sin embargo, Chechenia no era una república constituyente de la Unión Soviética, como Estonia, sino una república autónoma dentro de Rusia. La independencia chechena no fue reconocida por ningún país extranjero. Boris Yeltsin, el nuevo hombre fuerte del espacio soviético, había sido un gran defensor de la independencia de todas las repúblicas soviéticas para consolidar su propio poder en Rusia, pero no iba a ser tan tolerante dentro de sus propias fronteras. Después de apoyar varios intentos fracasados de golpe de estado contra Dudáyev, el 1 de diciembre de 1994 Yeltsin ordenó el bombardeo del aeropuerto de Grozny. Aquello para lo que Dudáyev llevaba meses preparándose militar y económicamente finalmente había sucedido. La guerra de Chechenia acababa de comenzar.

Después de tres años de tenso desafío a la Unión Soviética, Estonia recobró su independencia *de facto* a finales de agosto de 1991, una vez que fracasó el golpe de estado contra Gorbachov en Moscú. Un mes más tarde el joven estado fue admitido como miembro de las Naciones Unidas. Sin embargo, los comienzos no fueron fáciles. El fin de la economía planificada y la ruptura drástica con Rusia, el principal cliente y proveedor de la pequeña economía estonia, dio lugar al racionamiento de bienes básicos y una galopante inflación de un 80% mensual.

Uno de los pilares de la estabilización económica fue el Banco de Estonia, restablecido en 1990 al amparo de las leyes de autonomía de Gorbachov. Si bien no pudo operar como un verdadero banco central hasta la desintegración de la URSS, ya había comenzado a prepararse para este escenario desde el primer día. En septiembre de 1991, el Banco de Estonia y sus apenas 25 empleados, con Siim Kallas al frente, adquirieron plenas competencias sobre la política monetaria de la república. Kallas, antiguo oficial de telecomunicaciones del ejército soviético y miembro del comité de planificación de la república socialista estonia, se enfrentó a la tarea de reconstituir las reservas del banco. Tuvo cierto éxito en su cometido, gracias a la devolución del oro de la Estonia independiente de entreguerras que el Banco de Inglaterra había mantenido a buen recaudo de las demandas soviéticas, así como a las indemnizaciones compensatorias de otros Estados que habían sido más solícitos con la URSS, como Suecia.

Pero Kallas tenía una tarea aún más importante: la introducción de una divisa propia, la corona (*kroon*), para sustituir al rublo soviético que seguía siendo la moneda de curso legal en toda la antigua unión. Los diseños del papel moneda ya se habían elegido tras un concurso en 1989, y tras la confirmación de la independencia se imprimieron los coloridos billetes con las efigies de la poeta Lydia Koidula, el novelista Anton Hansen Tammsaare o el ajedrecista Paul Keres. A principios de 1992, los billetes estaban listos para su puesta en circulación. El banco, sin embargo, no sabía qué hacer exactamente con ellos.

La liberalización de precios en Rusia a partir del 1 de enero de 1992 había tenido un efecto brutal en las importaciones de Estonia, especialmente la energía y las materias primas, donde la dependencia estonia de Rusia era total. El gobierno de Edgar Savisaar, el líder moderado que había pilotado los últimos años de la Estonia soviética, no sobrevivió al mes de enero. A la hiperinflación se le unió otro problema: la acuciante escasez de efectivo en rublos, de los cuales Rusia era la única responsable tras la disolución de la URSS. Rusia mantenía un férreo control sobre la oferta monetaria para evitar una excesiva expansión del crédito que pudiese resultar en grandes deudas de las nuevas repúblicas con Rusia. La escasez de rublos ocasionaba retrasos en los pagos (especialmente de salarios), acelerando aún más la espiral recesiva de la economía.

El nuevo primer ministro, Tiit Vähi, un tecnócrata que tras la independencia había sido asignado como representante especial del gobierno para la región noreste (con una mayoría de población de origen ruso), tenía un plan para hacer frente a la escasez de efectivo. Las nuevas coronas se convertirían en un cupón convertible por rublos hasta que la situación económica se estabilizase y permitiese, en un futuro indeterminado, una verdadera reforma monetaria con una divisa independiente. Esta solución transitoria, que había sido adoptada por Letonia y Lituania, no generaba el rechazo frontal del Fondo Monetario Internacional y además permitía al país ganar tiempo para las negociaciones con Rusia acerca de la salida del rublo.

Pero Siim Kallas era de otra opinión. Al frente de un banco central renovado con jóvenes economistas formados en el extranjero e inspirado por los principios liberales, Kallas intentaba llevar a cabo una política restrictiva, resistiéndose a la presión del gobierno para endeudarse y aumentar el crédito a instituciones y empresas. El banco adoptó una postura contraria a utilizar los billetes de coronas como cupones convertibles, alegando que esa divisa transitoria no resolvía el problema de la inflación y solo serviría para aplazar los sacrificios inevitables asociados a una verdadera reforma monetaria.

El 4 de abril de 1992, mientras el gobierno de Vähi estudiaba posibles escenarios con el Fondo Monetario Internacional, Kallas recibió una visita en Tallinn. Se trataba del reputado economista de Harvard Jeffrey Sachs (quien ya había asesorado la transición económica de países como Bolivia, Polonia o Eslovenia), acompañado de Ardo Hansson, un economista de Chicago de origen estonio y también doctorado en Harvard. Sachs y Hansson presentaron una idea que despertó inmediatamente el interés de un economista liberal como Kallas: una junta monetaria. Con este sistema, similar al que en ese momento tenía Hong Kong, la corona quedaría fija a una divisa fuerte extranjera y el papel de las autoridades monetarias se limitaría a garantizar en todo momento la convertibilidad de la nueva moneda según la divisa y tasa fijadas.

A sabiendas de que el FMI estaba dispuesto a recomendar al gobierno estonio la adopción de un tipo de cambios flexible, Kallas se movió rápido. Enemigo de la política monetaria discrecional, y cauteloso ante las posibles interferencias gubernamentales en el banco central, pensaba que la junta monetaria era la única opción capaz de garantizar la confianza de la ciudadanía y el valor de la corona a largo plazo. Como si de una divisa respaldada por oro se tratase, una corona siempre debería valer lo mismo. Ante la insistencia de Kallas, el FMI se mostró dispuesto a apoyar tanto un tipo flexible como una junta monetaria en su recomendación final del 7 de abril de 1992, subrayando que esta última opción implicaría un ajuste más radical frente al aterrizaje más gradual que supondría adoptar una tasa de cambio flexible.

El siguiente y último escollo era el comité de reforma monetaria, que tenía representación del gobierno, el banco central y un actor inesperado: el “comité forestal”, la entidad que gestionaba los inmensos recursos forestales del país, propiedad pública y que el gobierno estaba usando como colateral para recibir la financiación extranjera imprescindible para mantener la economía a flote. Pese a la resistencia del gobierno y el comité forestal, dominado por burócratas soviéticos aversos a los cambios drásticos, las tesis de Kallas se acabaron imponiendo con la decisiva ayuda de los propios expertos del comité de reforma monetaria, que también eran jóvenes reformistas en su mayoría.

Con la decisión tomada, Kallas viajó a Washington a reunirse con representantes del FMI, que había aceptado a Estonia como socio ese mismo mes de mayo. Para sorpresa del organismo, Kallas no estaba allí para negociar un plazo más largo para su reforma monetaria, sino para presionar por un

plazo más corto: las coronas debían introducirse aprovechando el puente de *Jaanipäev* (el solsticio de verano, festivo en la mayoría de países nórdicos). Quedaba decidir cuál sería la tasa de cambio. Para esto último, se decidió que cada corona estonia sería convertible por ocho marcos alemanes. En el momento de la transición, cada 10 rublos soviéticos podrían convertirse por una corona, una tasa favorable a las autoridades estonias para garantizar un pequeño colchón (en aquel momento 10 rublos valían ligeramente más que ocho marcos).

Así, el 20 de junio de 1992 Estonia se convirtió en el primer Estado de la antigua URSS en sustituir el rublo por una moneda propia: la corona (*kroon*). A cada ciudadano se le permitió cambiar 1.500 rublos en efectivo por coronas, mientras que las cantidades superiores solo se cambiaban en una ratio muy desfavorable de 50 a uno. Si bien esta medida se anunció como prevención del blanqueo de capitales, la razón real era la disponibilidad inmediata de reservas (de hecho, en el momento del cambio, la junta monetaria solo podía garantizar la convertibilidad del 90% de las coronas). Aún hoy, los estonios que lo vivieron recuerdan el día en el que “todo el mundo empezó de cero con 150 coronas en el bolsillo”.

Pero quedaba un problema por resolver. Tras la introducción exitosa de la corona, el Banco de Estonia tenía 3.500 millones de rublos en efectivo, procedentes en su mayor parte del dinero cambiado por los habitantes del país. Como autoridad emisora, debía ser el Banco Central de Rusia quién se encargase de ese dinero. En teoría, el banco central ruso necesitaba efectivo desesperadamente para suplir a las antiguas repúblicas que seguían usando el rublo y experimentaban escasez de papel moneda, de modo que el gobierno de Vähi y el ruso, encabezado por Yegor Gaidar, no tuvieron problema en alcanzar un acuerdo. Pero en realidad Rusia no tenía ninguna prisa en recomprar los rublos soviéticos, esperando que la elevada inflación acabase reduciendo el valor de dichos rublos a cero en cuestión de meses. Esto, unido al rápido deterioro de relaciones bilaterales entre Rusia y Estonia hizo que los términos del acuerdo nunca llegaran a concretarse.

Inmersos en una radical reforma económica, cuyo aspecto más visible fue la sustitución del rublo soviético por la corona, los estonios fueron convocados a elecciones en septiembre de 1992 para elegir nuevo presidente y Parlamento. Aunque concurrían multitud de partidos, el verdadero dilema de la elección era muy simple: ratificar la rápida reforma económica y abrir por completo la economía a occidente, o aminorar el paso y aplicar una reforma gradual alineada con el resto del antiguo mundo soviético. Pese al ímpetu con que Estonia había roto amarras con el pasado tras la independencia, la alta inflación y el desempleo asociados a las radicales reformas emprendidas hacían pronosticar un resultado muy igualado entre los más reformistas y los nostálgicos.

Las elecciones presidenciales resultaron, en efecto, muy igualadas. El último líder del sóviet supremo de Estonia, Arnold Rüütel, ganó con claridad pero no llegó al 50% de votos requeridos para ser electo sin ratificación del Parlamento. Entre los 101 escaños del *Riigikogu* ningún partido había obtenido la mayoría absoluta pero sí había una candidatura que destacaba sobre el resto, la Unión Patriótica. Al frente, Mart Laar, un profesor de Historia de 32 años con pinta de empollón y que sólo había leído un libro de economía en su vida: *Libre para elegir*, de Milton Friedman. Otro partido dio la sorpresa entrando de forma inesperada con ocho diputados en el Parlamento. Se trataba del Partido Monárquico Independiente, un partido parodia con propuestas delirantes surgido al calor de la crisis económica.

Con el impulso de la Unión Patriótica, los partidos reformistas lograron una mayoría suficiente para desbancar a Rüütel y elegir como presidente a su más inmediato rival, Lennart Meri. El primer presidente electo de Estonia era un reputado dramaturgo y cineasta, criado en el exilio en Siberia y que se había convertido en embajador de Estonia en Finlandia tras la independencia. Como no podría ser de otra manera, Meri designó a Mart Laar para formar gobierno.

El gobierno de Laar, gran admirador de Margaret Thatcher, no solo mantuvo las reformas liberalizadoras de la economía sino que las aceleró. Tras declarar que “el gobierno ayudará a quienes estén dispuestos a ayudarse a sí mismos”, el joven discípulo de Friedman fue el primero en llevar a la práctica propuestas que hasta entonces sólo existían en los libros de economistas liberales, como la tarifa plana en el impuesto sobre la renta o la completa abolición de aranceles para importaciones

desde el extranjero. Laar también privatizó gran parte de la propiedad estatal en concursos públicos y abiertos que previnieron la aparición de grandes oligarcas asociados al poder como en otras repúblicas exsoviéticas.

Pero tan radicales medidas no resolvieron la crisis económica de un plumazo. A comienzos de 1993 las arcas estonias estaban prácticamente vacías y la perspectiva de no poder hacer frente al pago de las pensiones resultaba un escenario realista. Entre las reservas que el gobierno podía utilizar se encontraban los miles de millones de rublos soviéticos en efectivo recolectados por el Banco de Estonia, pese a que en los mercados oficiales no había ningún interesado en comprar la moneda soviética, en caída libre, a otra cosa que no fuese precio de saldo. A última hora, el gobierno consiguió capear el temporal y hacer frente a sus pagos, pero su popularidad comenzó un inexorable declive a ojos de una población que estaba soportando todo el impacto de las reformas.

Tras descalabrase en las elecciones municipales de 1994, las polémicas y casos de corrupción empezaron a amontonarse para Laar y sus socios. Las compras irregulares de armas a Israel, el aumento de la criminalidad o los problemas con la retirada de los soldados rusos que aún permanecían en Estonia hacían tambalearse su gobierno. La puntilla llegaría con la revelación de unas misteriosas transferencias en dólares al Banco de Estonia que coincidían con los rublos desaparecidos de su balance. Teóricamente habían acabado en el banco central ruso merced al acuerdo entre el exprimer ministro Vähi y su homólogo ruso. Vähi confesó que en realidad ese acuerdo nunca llegó a materializarse.

La subsiguiente investigación parlamentaria forzó a Laar y Kallas a reconocer que las pensiones del invierno de 1993 se habían pagado gracias a la venta de los rublos a un comprador procedente de Chechenia, en una acción coordinada entre el gobierno y el Banco de Estonia sin el control parlamentario legalmente requerido. Para empeorar más las cosas, detrás del trato estaba la empresa *Maag*, vinculada a hombres de confianza de Laar. En octubre de 1994 el Partido Monárquico Independiente, aquel partido parodia que se había colado inesperadamente en el parlamento, presentó una exitosa moción de confianza contra Laar. El experimento del discípulo aventajado de Thatcher llegaba a su fin. Pero las estructuras liberales construidas en este convulso bienio resistieron, y el país había conseguido hacer caja con los rublos del Banco de Estonia. Apenas un mes después de la caída de Laar, la aviación rusa bombardeaba Grozny. La guerra de Chechenia acababa de comenzar.

Pese a que nunca hubo una confirmación oficial de los hechos, pocos dudan de la implicación directa de Dzhohar Dudáyev, el antiguo general de aviación acuartelado en Estonia, en el transporte de los miles de millones de rublos estonios desde Tallin hasta Chechenia. Según la investigación del Tribunal Supremo de Estonia, la venta ilegal de rublos fue organizada por el asesor presidencial Tiit Pruuli, y los propietarios de la empresa *Maag*, Marek Strandberg y Agi Kivimägi. Entre diciembre de 1992 y marzo de 1993 Pruuli, haciendo uso de sus privilegios, introdujo hasta 50 toneladas de rublos soviéticos en el aeropuerto de Tallin mediante valija diplomática. *Maag* las hizo pasar por exportaciones de materias primas, compradas al peso por un valor total de 24.000 dólares. Pruuli, Strandberg y Kivimägi fueron juzgados por violar la normativa de movimiento de capitales, y finalmente absueltos por el tribunal en diciembre de 1996.

Para aquel entonces, Dzhohar Dudáyev era ya un mártir. Tras la rápida evolución del “ataque quirúrgico” ruso sobre Grozny en una auténtica carnicería en las montañas del Cáucaso, las guerrillas chechenas habían conseguido doblegar al todopoderoso ejército ruso. Sin embargo, Dudáyev seguía siendo el enemigo público número uno de Rusia, y su vida transcurría de escondrijo en escondrijo. El 21 de abril, Dudáyev usó un teléfono satelital para comunicarse con el diputado ruso Konstantin Borovoy. Su señal fue interceptada por un avión ruso, y un misil teledirigido hizo el resto. Es posible que muriese arrepentido del trato hecho con Estonia. En julio de 1993 Rusia había llevado a cabo su propia reforma monetaria, sustituyendo el rublo soviético por el rublo ruso. Muchas de las toneladas de rublos que habían llegado desde Tallin no acabaron sirviendo más que de efímero entretenimiento para aquellos niños que se los encontraron en las calles de Grozny.

Tras el escándalo de los rublos, Siim Kallas fundó el partido político *Reformierakond* (Reforma), a día de hoy el más importante del país. Tras obtener un buen resultado en las elecciones de 1995, Kallas dejó la presidencia del banco central para convertirse en ministro de exteriores. Años más tarde llegaría, como su compañero de fatigas Mart Laar, a ocupar el cargo de primer ministro. Finalmente, en 2004 se convirtió en el primer comisario europeo de Estonia, permaneciendo durante una década en la Comisión Europea. Hoy es alcalde de la localidad de Viimsi, suburbio acomodado de Tallin. Ardo Hansson, el economista estonio-americano que le asesoró sobre la reforma monetaria (y que hoy en día es reconocido como “padre de la corona estonia”) es, desde 2012, el actual gobernador del Banco de Estonia.

Mart Laar fue barrido del panorama político estonio en las elecciones celebradas en 1995. Las instituciones económicas resultantes de sus reformas apenas fueron retocadas, sin embargo, y Estonia pronto salió de la crisis y se convirtió en el más exitoso de los antiguos estados soviéticos. En 1999 el colapso de la economía rusa, amplificado por una crisis bancaria local en Estonia, hizo tambalearse la economía. A instancias del presidente Meri, Laar retornó como el hijo pródigo para hacerse cargo del gobierno y reactivar la economía. Permaneció en el cargo de primer ministro hasta 2002 y posteriormente estuvo al frente del Ministerio de Defensa durante un año. En una publicación oficial de 2009 titulada *El camino de Estonia hacia la Unión Europea*, Laar confesó:

“Al contrario que otros que intentaron hacer lo mismo, Estonia consiguió sacar provecho de sus rublos. Solo más tarde llegaría a saberse que fueron vendidos a Chechenia. Estonia, sin embargo, consiguió sobrevivir al invierno. Aunque luego sería la base para derribar mi gobierno, la transacción de los rublos –de la que, por cierto, aún me siento orgulloso– permitió a Estonia empezar a resolver su siguiente problema”.

UN CUARTETO TURÍSTICO DISONANTE

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I.- Introducción

Partimos de un modelo de turismo que, desde décadas, ha aportado grandes bondades a la economía. No ha perdido fortaleza, sigue en vigor y, además, expandido por todo el mundo. Pero, en primer término, la denominada “Era Digital” ha cambiado la manera de viajar de forma radical y, ante ello, surge una tesis: ¿Es posible viajar sin aplicaciones tecnológicas? Esta respuesta parece *a priori* complicada cuando ya, el Big Data es el mito moderno del Maná, conocido como el “nuevo oro”, aludiendo con ello a la riqueza que un eficiente estudio y gestión de datos puede aportar, se suma a ello un segundo factor que opera también como punto de inflexión en este giro del modelo actual de turismo, cual es la alta concentración de turistas en ciertos destinos que cuestionan el dilema de su sostenibilidad. ¿La receptividad sigue siendo la misma? Estos dos hitos –formulados en términos interrogativos– motivan replanteamientos de algunos de los criterios y políticas turísticas consideradas hasta ahora inamovibles *sine die*.

Para poder dar respuesta a las dos anteriores tesituras, el dilema se centra en replantear el *modus operandi* del turismo tal y como hoy es concebido, de suerte tal que se crean cuatro grandes paradojas surgidas ante estos nuevos fenómenos de cambios en el sector turístico.

II.- La tecnología y los viajes: ¿amigos o enemigos?

Uno de los sectores más receptivos al uso de las nuevas tecnologías es precisamente el del turismo. La fase previa al viaje (obtención de información, etc.), durante el viaje (interacción con el destino a través de los dispositivos móviles) y también posterior (a través de las redes sociales) pasa por este nuevo marco a través de una pantalla. El nuevo actor es el denominado “turista digital”, de ser casi un usuario receptor-pasivo de servicios y paquetes turísticos estandarizados, ha pasado a quedar empoderado y deviene cada vez más exigente. Pero, este depender tecnológico choca con la esencia verdadera del viaje, aprehendido desde siglos como el intercambio de personas, de cultura, de gentes. Y esta riqueza requiere un contacto directo, de suerte tal que cuando está mediada, pierde parte de su propia realidad (habrá ganado seguramente en eficiencia).

Aplaudimos con esmero todas las soluciones técnicas novedosas que nos permiten preparar, vivir y compartir un viaje en el que iremos –eso sí– apegados a un dispositivo al alcance de nuestro bolsillo. Hoy en día puede ser un robot quien nos puede dar la bienvenida en el hotel elegido. Y es capaz de hacerlo con más de treinta expresiones faciales diferentes. Si elegimos un apartamento, podremos entrar a él con una clave o un código (aquello de girar la llave pasó a la historia). Pero, siendo este el contexto prioritario –he aquí la primera gran paradoja– son muchos viajeros y turistas que más allá de poder tomar una fotografía ante un monumento espectacular o contemplar un paisaje de esos que te corta la respiración, priorizan el contacto directo con la gente del destino, quieren involucrarse en su día a día, conocer de primera mano sus costumbres y todo ello con el apoyo en las enseñanzas de Séneca: “Homo sacra res homini”, toda vez el turismo es un encuentro y acercamiento de culturas, que requieren del factor humano.

III.- Estrategias de comunicación de los destinos: ¿Qué fue de la originalidad?

Hasta hace apenas unas décadas, el turismo era conocido metafóricamente como “la industria sin chimeneas”, aludiendo a que todo de él irradiaba riqueza y no tenía efectos contaminantes y/o devastadores como cualquier otra industria (que también fuera una fuente de riqueza para el PIB). Actualmente esta situación ya no es vista con tanto optimismo. El sector turístico indiscutiblemente genera elevados beneficios para un destino, pero ahora también ha aparecido –y con gran entidad– la otra cara de la moneda, pues genera costes sociales, patrimoniales, medioambientales, etc., que han inclinado la balanza en su lado más pesimista.

El mensaje publicitario en el ámbito de turismo ha tenido tal potencial que, en torno a su eficacia persuasiva ha sido siempre una cuestión muy debatida si el turista, tenía o no capacidad de decisión propia. Esto es, si el turista simplemente se limita a hacer una foto en un escenario previamente ya conocido a través de la publicidad y carece de capacidad de decisión propia. Siguiendo con este debate de la reiteración del destino, a saber, si el turista es un ser cautivo o no, también desde el ámbito de la imagen, la fotógrafa suiza Corinne Vionnet reflexiona sobre esta idea del mimetismo en los viajes. Y su conclusión tajante es: Todos hacemos la misma foto, estemos ante el Coliseo, la Torre Eiffel o el Big Ben... Esta fotógrafa realiza su trabajo creativo recopilando las muestras de miles de turistas (a través de internet) y, tras un collage, a modo de “impresionismo fotográfico” crea obras de arte con todas nuestras fotos. Y el resultado denota cómo todas las instantáneas son casi idénticas.

Desde la perspectiva de la comunicación de los destinos turísticos, nuevamente estamos involucrados en otra contradicción. Las pautas tienden a la uniformidad de la publicidad, repitiendo los mismos valores, idénticos: ya sea el modelo “sol y playa”, ya sea “un paisaje verde”, por citar dos de los ejemplos de mayor arraigo. Y con ello, se está perdiendo la verdadera esencia, la razón de ser del viaje, pues se relega aquello que el destino tiene de peculiar, de genuino, de diferente. Dos muestras son testigos fieles de esta pérdida del *genius loci*: el caso Venecia o los lugares declarados Patrimonio de la Humanidad ante los perniciosos efectos principalmente del turismo de masas.

a) Si nos centramos en el caso de Venecia y buscamos su *genius loci*, la conclusión se evidencia preocupante. Pensemos, siguiendo al escritor Tiziano Scarpa, en el interés de un turista por adquirir un *souvenir* (una máscara sería lo más típico en esta ciudad). Aún cuando piense que es una pieza de artesano (y así pagué su precio), nada más mirar la etiqueta, comprobará que pecó de ignorante, porque se tratará casi seguro de una fabricación en serie. Luego, una vez que tenemos asumido el *made in China*, toca dar un paso más porque el vendedor de este *souvenir* será un paquistaní o un chino también. Entonces, la cuestión que se suscita es: ¿Qué hay de auténtico en esa compra, en ese *souvenir*?

b) Otro ejemplo real explica esta pérdida de lo auténtico. Ante una declaración de un destino como Patrimonio de la Humanidad, *ipso facto* surge el binomio inseparable prestigio y turismo. Este refrendo de contar con el sello de calidad que supone estar en el listado de Patrimonio de la Humanidad deviene toda una marca, una distinción. Y con ella el sitio de que se trate pasa a recibir muchísimos más turistas.

A priori todos queremos que acudan turistas a nuestros destinos pero la cosa se complica cuando vienen demasiados. Aquel “nada en exceso” del Oráculo de Delfos postula la máxima de una óptima solución. Pero saber atinar con este justo equilibrio deviene necesario, es el quid de la solución. Ante ello se realizan serias investigaciones sobre “capacidad de carga”; normativas locales de restricciones a la concesión de licencias, etc.

La custodia del patrimonio ante el turismo de masas pasa a ser la espada de Damocles del destino. España es uno de los lugares del mundo con mayor número de lugares declarados Patrimonio de la Humanidad. En el año 2012, siguiendo con el ejemplo concreto de los Patios de Córdoba, estos pequeños lugares llenos de arte y vegetación donde se mezcla la cercanía de los espacios íntimos de una casa, pero a la vez estar a cielo abierto, recibieron este respaldo de la Unesco y pasaron a ser declarados Patrimonio de la humanidad. Actualmente están siendo objeto de investigación precisamente la masificación que se da en ellos con motivo del Festival de los Patios. Teniendo en cuenta, además, que el espacio de acceso es pequeño y porque lo que podría entenderse como una visita placentera, se convierte *de facto* en hacer colas, pisotones, etc., que indudablemente menoscaban el goce de la visita del turista.

Cuando se acerca un poco más el punto de mira y ya, no en el seno de una ciudad, tampoco en alguno de sus emplazamientos *catalogados*, sino de forma más específica en alguno de sus espacios culturales, pensemos por ejemplo en uno de sus museos, también surgen paralelas llamadas de atención sobre cómo se está realizando el acceso al patrimonio cultural disponible. Es el caso de aquellos museos que se han convertido *de facto* en lugares de peregrinación, donde largas colas se han de esperar cada día para poder contemplar la obra maestra. Estos son conocidos ya como emplazamientos turísticos en el sentido de que han adquirido una significación tal que, sí o sí, entran dentro de la visita al destino como si fuera una verdadera obligación. Se habla así de nuevas acepciones, en tono preocupante, como son la polución turística o también la turismofobia.

IV.- El viajero del siglo XXI: ¿El turista invisible?

El tercer contrasentido ahonda en una mirada sociológica ante el nuevo perfil del viajero que está cambiando las reglas de juego. Y ello, además, porque ya se han dado algunos pasos en este giro que se apunta. Estos últimos han sido trazados en un contexto vinculado al sector de los grandes operadores (por ej. cadenas hoteleras, portales de buscadores, etc.) donde si están ya modificando sus estructuras y operatividad de funcionamiento y adaptando sus negocios ante esta situación de cambio.

No obstante, en los últimos años ya se está consolidando una solución ante estas contingencias que se resume en la secuencia de nada de circuitos. Son turistas casi invisibles para la macroeconomía y para la estadística. Buscan los denominados “segundos y terceros lugares” como leitmotiv del viaje. Aquellos destinos que no aparecen nunca en el *top ten* de los lugares más visitados. Este nuevo viajero busca sentirse como uno más de la ciudad y, abandona (huye de) las rutas ya trazadas. Es por ello que, para satisfacer esta demanda, son ya muchos los establecimientos hoteleros que en su oferta incluyen una experiencia personalizada, ajustada a los intereses y gustos personales de cada cliente.

Este salto cualitativo desde un turismo de masas a un turismo personalizado está evolucionando *in crescendo* por dos factores principalmente. Uno de ellos está vinculado con la tecnología móvil que está desplazando todas las estrategias de comunicación que requiere ahora una personalización para poder tener éxito. El segundo factor de este giro copernicano responde al colectivo “millennials” que quiere ser parte del proceso de toma de decisiones y rechaza todo aquello que le venga impuesto desde fuera. De ahí que diseñe los viajes según sus propios intereses que siempre pasarán por involucrarse directamente con el propio destino.

Existe detrás de este cambio del rol del viajero una razón sociológica vinculada con la categoría de “lo local” y otra antropológica, asociada al sentido de pertenencia. El turista, hasta ahora, cuando visitaba un destino y acudía a un lugar desconocido para él, lo veía desde la lejanía, como espectador. Ahora la demanda turística ya no son los servicios, son las “experiencias”. Ello significa, entre otras facetas, poder participar directamente en las actividades cotidianas de los residentes y hacerlo, además, junto a ellos. Así, por ejemplo, cuando desde el destino se oferta la posibilidad de ir por la mañana a comprar los ingredientes al mercado junto al encargado de un bar y, luego, entrar en las cocinas (con todas las normas de protección previstas en los reglamentos) y más tarde, por ejemplo, poder comer las tapas o la paella, entonces el turista ya no se siente un extraño, se creará una integración tal que le aportará riqueza y significación a la experiencia de viaje. Habrá pasado a quedar integrado y a entender con mayor sentimiento, aquel plato típico en aquella taberna. Así sucede por ejemplo con la actividad de la pesca en las Islas Cíes, donde los turistas pueden aprender esta técnica con un grupo de pescadoras de la zona, participando con ellos en la pesca. Y, luego, pueden cocinar el pescado en un restaurante para degustarlo.

Un botón de muestra de prácticas que relegan visitas a las ciudades en las que no había ningún elemento de integración con las gentes del lugar y optan por darle prioridad a las experiencias humanas directas entre culturas, es la fomentada en Jerusalén desde el propio destino denominada *Mujeres y fábulas* que consiste en abrir una vivienda privada, compartir una mesa con turistas y charlar animosamente todos juntos: viajeros y residentes, en una clara apuesta por el fomento de las relaciones humanas en los destinos.

Esta integración con lo local se ha convertido en un valor añadido para el nuevo turista. Se involucra con la ratio de identidad, en el sentido de poder acceder e intervenir de forma personalizada. Y está teniendo más impronta en las últimas tendencias de valoración de experiencias turísticas. Es en muchos establecimientos hoteleros la gran apuesta de su estrategia de marketing (por ej. desayunos con comida denominada “kilómetro cero”, propia de cada destino, etc.). Estos deseos por participar en lo auténtico es la nueva demanda del nuevo perfil del turista del siglo XXI.

V.- La pérdida de las ciudades: ¿Los “ladrones silenciosos”?

La cuarta paradoja del turismo, además de los enfoques del interés tecnológico prioritario de un viaje; de la estandarización de las estrategias para comunicar un destino y del nuevo rol del viajero, concurre una incongruencia, la cual es la pérdida de la ciudad por los propios residentes en ellas. Asistimos a unas nuevas ciudades en las que ya todo gira y se mide por parámetros turísticos. ¿Tienen ya los turistas mayor peso que los propios ciudadanos? ¿Están los turistas desplazando a los residentes? Se estudia ya el parámetro de la gentrificación a la hora de dibujar la radiografía social de una ciudad, en la que el turismo ha entrado con peso fuerte en ella. Son muchas las ciudades en los que los centros históricos quedan convertidos en una suerte de escenario preparado *ad hoc* para el turista y los residentes incluso se ven obligados a cambiar sus viviendas hacia otros barrios ante los efectos que provoca, en especial la subida de precios de estos barrios céntricos.

En los recientes estudios estadísticos las escapadas urbanas (denominadas *citybreaks*) han aumentado del 17% al 26% en los últimos años. El conocimiento hoy en día se involucra en un contexto prioritariamente urbano.

Las voces más autorizadas destacan cómo los centros históricos de muchas ciudades (por ej. Barcelona, Dubrovnik, Venecia, Praga, etc.) se han convertido en un contexto irreal, en una puesta en escena, en lo que ya se conoce como la museificación de las ciudades (también se usa la denominación: *Disneyfication*). Son aquellas en las que la vorágine del turismo ha arrasado con tal fuerza que ha vaciado de contenido y de su esencia el propio destino. Todo ya preparado para atender a los turistas con tiendas de *souvenir* idénticas en hileras de calles, restaurantes que reproducen lo que se denomina comida típica del destino, etc. Y donde ya los residentes son casi obligados a adaptarse con nuevos negocios creados *ex profeso* con un interés turístico.

Sobre este fenómeno de las multitudes en un contexto urbano, y las dicotomías que se generan, Deyan Sudjic lo expone de una forma sumamente gráfica: “Tememos ver cambiar las ciudades de tal modo que nos arrebaten el recuerdo de quiénes fuimos nosotros y aquellos que vinieron antes que nosotros. Cuando la multitud toma una ciudad, ignorarla no es una opción, ya nos identifiquemos con ella o intentemos huir de ella. La multitud se convierte en una experiencia física, en la cual la forma espacial de la ciudad representa un papel significativo. La libertad de acción del individuo se ve restringida por la presión de los cuerpos y la construcción del espacio. Calles congestionadas, llenas de gentes, se convierten en multitud solo cuando esas personas son conscientes de ello. Es un reflejo en parte del aumento incesante de la población del mundo, en números absolutos, y también de la creciente movilidad de más personas cada vez”.

Son muy operativos los denominados “estudios de carga” para medir qué impacto tendrá una población determinada sobre un territorio y, a su vez, la capacidad de respuesta que tendrá el mismo. Incluso resulta llamativo como en destinos turísticos consolidados (con una demanda estable durante todo el año), se llega a ponderar la “gestión de la abundancia”, esto es, cómo atender a nuevos turistas que reclaman un destino que ya está ocupado con una tasa media del 100%. Y también ahora, se pone de manifiesto en estas planificaciones atender a la población residente, pues existen alertas que resumen esta evolución, este nivel de tolerancia socio-personal desde del destino, haciendo constar que se ha pasado de la hospitalidad a la hostilidad. Todo ello explicado porque el residente en su ciudad, ante un turismo masificado, ya no se siente visitado, ha pasado a sentirse invadido, en un atisbo de incomodidad al ver que ya no puede salir a pasear tranquilamente (pues están las calles más céntricas abarrotadas) o cómo los precios para los consumos diarios (como

puede ser tomar un café) se duplcan y triplican. Son sólo algunos de los ya muchos impactos negativos que está generando el turismo en determinados destinos.

En esta pérdida de los espacios de vida común se habla ya de los ladrones silenciosos. Desde una perspectiva más próxima podemos hilvanar una secuencia ilustrativa de esta merma de los espacios comunes. Primero fue el patio. Ocupada el lugar central en la vivienda. Todo un protagonista en el marco hogareño. Pero, nos descuidamos un poco y ya, nos quedamos sin él. Yo les pregunto a mis amigas profesoras de Infantil si todavía los más pequeños de los colegios siguen bailando con aquella canción tan pegadiza *El patio de mi casa es particular*. Y me responden que ha dejado de ser una de las canciones más populares en los centros escolares.

Son muchos los arquitectos especializados en el desarrollo de los entornos urbanos que apuntan a cómo ahora nos conformamos y hasta incluso presumimos –cuán inocentes andamos– de tener un jardín vertical. Cuestión de ir robando metros. Claro que, desde una perspectiva técnica la visión es distinta: del plano, pasamos a la línea vertical. Todo, según nos enseñó Ramón de Campoamor en uno de sus poemas: “Del color del cristal con que se mire”.

Después fue la cocina. Pasó de ser un lugar de encuentro, de reunión, de compartir la vida, al hoy reducido espacio de producción estricto sensu. Cuántas exquisitas recetas se habrán perdido en este devenir de estrecheces, porque ya no hay siquiera espacio para sentarse en torno a una mesa. “La moda que se lleva es la barra”, me dicen muchos diseñadores. Y yo, pues eso, que me estoy quedando anticuada; que soy más de mesa.

Y ahora nos están robando las calles. También lo reconocen los urbanitas. Son muchas las urbanizaciones que se configuran como guetos aislados, protegidos por mallas de seguridad. Lo de jugar en la calle fue primero el lugar donde se experimentaba la primera sensación de libertad y más tarde pasó a ser deporte infantil de alto riesgo. Y hoy ya, a desaparecer.

Si esta concatenación de “robos silenciosos de los espacios” la miramos con perspectiva de futuro, la tendencia lleva aparejada una agravante más. Estamos a nada de quedarnos sin mercado de tiendas. La tendencia de comprar ya todo tecleando el ordenador va cerrando pequeños locales con cada toque que pulsamos en el acepto.

Sin patio, sin cocina, sin calles, ¿qué nos queda entonces? Únicamente ¿la ciudad? Sergio del Molino plantea un peculiar retrato reflexivo en el que “se dibuja una distopía en la que Europa se ha convertido en un parque temático. Desindustrializada, en medio de una decadencia económica imparable y amenazada por los imperios emergentes, la vieja Europa se entrega al turismo como única posibilidad de supervivencia”. Y tal vez ya lo anticipaban aquellas las primeras líneas de *La Regenta*: “La heroica ciudad dormía la siesta”. En esta posición durmiente, a nada que nos descuidemos, nos la roban seguro. El auge del turismo urbano es de tal entidad que muchos expertos vaticinan que “en el futuro las ciudades serán turísticas, o no lo serán”.

VI.- Conclusiones

La tecnología sin las personas pierde su esencia. Los expertos apelan a una nueva era del Renacimiento. Si ya entonces aquel nuevo humanismo situó a las personas en el centro, hoy (pese a vivir en un mundo regido por velocidad, medido en bytes y que da prioridad a la pantalla) no pueden quedar las personas relegadas, pues son también ellas el motor de las ciudades. Y todo ello bien entendido que, aún cuando estas nuevas aplicaciones resultan óptimas y son bien recibidas, no se puede dejar de mencionar el componente humano que en todos los viajes existe. Recordemos la bonita descripción de Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “No somos sino peregrinos que, yendo por distintos caminos, trabajosamente se dirigen al encuentro de los unos con los otros”.

Asistimos a un nuevo giro copernicano: del *homo sapiens* al *homo viator*. Las nuevas tecnologías (*homo sapiens*) son bienvenidas, aportan gran utilidad de orden práctico en los viajes pero, el plus

de enriquecimiento viene del factor humano, pues no se puede obviar que el contacto con las gentes (*homo viator*) es una de las grandes aportaciones de los viajes. Y cuenta con la sapiencia de las enseñanzas clásicas, en especial a una de ellas contenida en el oráculo de Delfos: "Nada en demasia", esto es, la búsqueda del justo término entre viajar con y sin *apps*, para lograr así una buena amistad del turismo y de sus protagonistas. Es por ello preciso apelar, justo en este punto, al saber clásico que ponderaba la virtud en una posición equidistante, para no abusar de ninguno de los extremos.

El turismo crea irremediablemente graves paradojas. Ya no se irradian únicamente bondades. Y la protección patrimonial y la sostenibilidad del destino son ahora los retos y prioridades irrenunciables. Pero junto a ellos, se suma una gran pérdida: *el genius loci* de las ciudades. Y cuando ya se carece de idiosincrasia, entonces se puede llegar a perder la ciudad misma, que va quedándose silenciosa y paulatinamente sufriendo hurtos de todos sus espacios de vida común.

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SHORT ESSAY IN ENGLISH

ENSAYO CORTO EN INGLÉS

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- Pag 102 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Ellen Buckland
Pag 108 2nd Prize / 2^º premio: Giovanni Doemeny
Pag 120 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Ryan Secret

PERSUADING BRITAIN

Ellen Buckland (Ireland)

MASTER IN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND INNOVATION

“Every idea, individual, and institution has a full and fair hearing in the public forum”
Scott Cutlip

In June of 2016 people across the United Kingdom woke up to a very new reality, a divided Kingdom. After months of referendum centered media messages cluttering their newsfeeds, today there was one worth reading; 51.9% of the U.K had voted to leave the European Union and 48.1% to remain. This result met with general feelings of bafflement, shock, and uncertainty shared by the general public and politicians and media alike. It was accompanied by ‘buyer’s remorse’ as Google Trends most highlighted questions the following day were “What is the EU?” and “What happens if we leave the EU?” The Brexit 2016 Leave Campaign triggered an unprecedented political upset whose ramifications will be felt for decades, and in order to understand their campaign success we should analyse the following: persuasive tactics used by conventional and digital media channels, data leveraging, data harvesting and algorithm use. The ethical framework on which Leave communication teams operated is relevant to their success, as is brief comparative analysis with the Remain campaign.

Human beings are driven to make decisions based on strong emotional drivers ranging from delight to anger, fear to hope. Capitalising on emotion (pathos) was a key Leave Campaign strategy, as they chose to capture voters’ feelings and desires in their campaign message “Take Back Control”. This was more than a slogan; it spoke to nostalgia, independence, strength, and empowerment. Daniel Kahneman depicts the power of emotion over logic in ‘Thinking Fast and Slow’ which illustrates how our brain processes information and makes decisions using its system one which is intuitive and emotional. In contrast, the Remain campaign used statistics and reasoning (logos) in media communication. Communication ethics experts Jaksa and Pritchard adhere that “rational argument is not the only morally acceptable form of persuasion”. They believe as long as no stark dishonesty nor manipulation is used then people capable of judicious choice can be reached through different persuasive styles. ‘Taking back control’ implies someone (the government) has snatched it away from you in the first place, which speaks to the age-old ideology of downtrodden masses rising up against an oppressive authority. The film ‘Brexit: The Uncivil War’ also depicts Leave strategist Dominic Cummings continuously promoting war related analogies and ideologies which translated to the mass media as a rebellious fight for the people. Wording in popular UK newspapers such as ‘The Sun’ and ‘Daily Mail’ referred to referendum day as ‘Independence Day’, implying British people were imprisoned by the EU, and only through voting to leave would they escape. In the ‘Express’ these patriotic messages were echoed with the “EU stealing Britain’s ‘hard-fought freedom’, calling for the UK to ‘save democracy’, ‘regain control’ and its independence”. Media tone for Leave was motivational, hopeful, and positive, whereas for Remain it was predominantly negative and accusatory. Focus on shock and fear emotions backfired for Remain who were eventually nicknamed ‘Project Fear’.

Whilst the Remain media campaign used expert opinion to support their message, Leave challenged traditional authority and quoted the same number of celebrities as academics in media campaigns. They chose this persuasive tactic of ‘liking’ through linking popular celebrities or brands to political messages of Leave, including actors Michael Caine and John Cleese. As role models and recognisably ‘British’ actors the media capitalised on their stance to influence potential voters. ‘The Sun’ went one step further to create likeable associations in framing figures like the Queen and Prince Harry alongside the Leave Campaign on their front pages. This is in a sense unconditional conditioning to have readers associate the stimulus of the Royal family with leaving the EU. An ethical analysis of this media tactic speaks to Gaffney “the advantage of a lie without telling a literal untruth” more

than open deceit. The Royal family are openly neutral on all political matters, something which an educated readership would know. However, some uninformed readers may fall prey to these kind of persuasive framing tactics.

Repeatedly using a simple and digestible message ‘Take back control’ throughout the media incorporates Robert Cialdini’s persuasion principle of ‘Commitment and Consistency’ which speaks to the persuasive power of an unwavering self-image reinforced through definitive small actions or commitments. As a majority of traditional media committed to a specific Brexit stance, this principle also applied on a general level, with readers of ‘The Sun’, ‘The Daily Mirror’ and ‘The Daily Telegraph’ assured their papers were committed to upholding consistent views every day. Social proof and consensus were also utilized by mass media for both Leave and Remain messaging. Firstly, motivational messages began with ‘we’ which evoked community and togetherness amongst the people who stand behind the movement. Secondly, the use of social media tools including likes, retweets, shares, testimonials, and forums linked people with other like-minded voters to strengthen and reinforce their beliefs. People expose themselves to others whose output will resemble their own and as David Cameron’s campaign manager, Lynton Crosby said of political advertising; “Its purpose is really to reinforce and trigger existing perceptions”.

Lastly the persuasion principle ‘scarcity’- generating a fear of losing something - was also pervasive in mass media, aiming to stimulate patriotism as shown here:

“At various times, readers of UK papers may have read that ‘Europe’ or ‘Brussels’ or the ‘EU superstate’ has banned, or is intending to ban kilts, curries, mushy peas, paper rounds, Caerphilly cheese, charity shops, bulldogs, bent sausages and cucumbers, the British Army, lollipop ladies, British loaves, British-made lavatories, the passport crest, lorry drivers who wear glasses”

Scarcity was particularly prevalent in media messages focused on a lack of jobs, struggling economy, or rise in immigration.

“Images are powerful, they can move us in ways words cannot”. The Brexit Leave Campaign chose one of the oldest storytelling methods of all, art. They created memorable icons with the ‘EU ball and chain’ shackling British people, and a cup of tea becoming a recurring symbol for national pride. The teacup proves metaphorical power in visual persuasion as Britain was depicted as tea or a slice of Terry’s chocolate orange being consumed by the EU, whilst Remain used the metaphorical image of Britain as a teabag “which will make the whole cup stronger when in but when taken out the tea is weaker, and bag goes straight into the bin”.

Perhaps the strongest icon of all was Nigel Farage (UKIP leader) standing in front of a poster of immigrants walking through a field captioned “Breaking Point”, an image used repeatedly by various media channels to generate primarily negative discussion about immigration, terrorism, and the economy. Many MPs and members of the public denounced this image as xenophobic propaganda, some likening it to Nazi images pre-WW2. The photo dominated media preceding the referendum and was commonly framed alongside statistics of rising crime and job losses, in an attempt to anchor EU immigration alongside negative consequences. The press capitalized on a refugee crisis in Syria to win voters using a Utilitarian approach in which benefit is shown in economic terms and empathy for the minority group was nonexistent. Ethically, this would not stand up to the Tares test as it lacks an awareness of social responsibility and moral justice in the depiction of the refugees. Reports of increased racist attacks and xenophobic feeling in the U.K post referendum are, in my opinion, linked to this distorted mass media portrayal of a non-white immigrant mass arriving to steal British jobs.

Amid these persuasive tactics was Leave’s powerful communications strategy incorporating personal data collection and targeted social media messaging. “Using the Internet, the Leave camp was able to create the perception of wide-ranging public support for their cause that acted like a self-fulfilling prophecy, attracting many more voters to back Brexit” Google Trends data from 2016 proves the immense popularity of Leave on the internet. Dominic Cummings allegedly worked with data mining company Aggregate IQ to develop algorithms for gleaning personal data on social media platforms, then used this to customize thousands of millions of advertisements to target potential voters and influence them.

Many of the adverts had no obvious affiliation with Brexit with one promoting football championship contests for example, or they were irrelevant but emotionally grabbing such as saving polar bears or stopping bull fighting. Most centered on emotionally charged images of healthcare or immigrants to incite interest. The more clicks, shares, tweets, and likes generated by these targeted ads, the more data collected for Leave. The more they knew about their potential targets, the easier it would be to tailor make Leave messages for them that would relate to their interests or needs.

The ethical implications of these data harvesting tactics are far reaching and Cumming’s social media focused strategy has essentially changed the face of how politics will work. He, alongside Robert Mercer are currently under investigation as connections have been alleged between themselves, Vote Leave, and the contentious firm Cambridge Analytics. The legality of data mining and behavioural microtargeting in the campaign is under review, along with budget overspending and misuse of funds. I predict a lengthy and controversial judicial process ahead due to the lack of current UK legislation on social media regulations. If Cummings did not feel he was breaking a law does that make his media persuasion strategy ethical or acceptable? According to renowned philosopher Immanuel Kant it does not. He supported the need for empathy and respect with those you are persuading, to in effect treat others as you would like to be treated. Obtaining data without consent as a means to influence the political campaign of Leave would be unethical and akin to the media acting as puppet masters controlling the masses for self-benefit. Contemporary ethicists share this view that “Human beings... should not be treated merely as a means to an end; they are to be respected as ends in themselves. Human beings are ‘beyond price’”. The level of respect a media persuader has for their targets is intrinsically linked to their own morals and ethical framework. Respect implies elements of truth and empathy which in my opinion do not equate to data and algorithms.

Propaganda, data manipulation, and deceit by the mass media in the Brexit referendum of 2016 clearly radically changed politics. Other campaigns have since focused on exploiting social media tactics, such as Donald Trump’s U.S election. Fast forward almost three years and Brexit discourse in the UK is still charged with anger and confusion. Politicians struggle to reach an accord, the media touts their incompetence, society fissures and fractures. Is this the future we want for mass communication? This question must be answered soon, before mistrust and suspicion eternally poisons British society.

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THE HOLISTIC SUCCESS FORMULA “A BLUEPRINT FOR LIFE”

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Table of contents

- Introduction
- The holistic success formula
- Health
- Happiness
- Meaning
- Effects of missing pillars
- Verification – Maslow’s hierarchy of needs
- Implementation
- Conclusion
- Afterward – the evolution of the holistic success formula (about the author)
- Bibliography

I. Introduction

What is “Success”?

Success is a concept that is often debated, especially in recent years. It is something everybody desires, but not many understand completely. The expectations placed upon everybody to achieve a uniform definition of “success” are ubiquitous in school, at home, and in the workplace. Yet as employees work harder towards an undefined goal, workplace dissatisfaction continues to rise. According to Gallup’s *State of the Workplace* report, 85% of employees are not engaged, or actively disengaged from work (Harter). There is a disconnect between perceptions of “success,” versus the true, complete definition of Success.

Social norms and modern marketing overemphasize consumerism and the importance of financial and material wealth to measure success. This is apparent by how the wealthiest are often the most revered in society, and the way individuals openly display their possessions as a show of superiority. Open displays of material belongings such as fancy cars and big houses are understood as markers of “success.” But at what cost? Ever increasingly, professionals feel pressured to work longer hours in more stressful job situations, sacrificing their physical and mental health in the relentless pursuit of career “success.” Although material possessions certainly can make for a more comfortable life, the endless pursuit of financial gains can be a direct cause of unhappiness, as the wealthy devote their lives to the maintenance of their possessions and “status.” While there is a relation between wealth and happiness, wealth is not the sole benchmark of success.

Others argue that success can be simply defined as “happiness.” While appealing, this belief is idealistic and naïve. Happiness does not cure hunger, nor provide shelter. A selfish, hedonistic pursuit of happiness does not add value to the world, and is almost impossible to attain as an isolated state of being in the absence of concomitant pursuits. Rather than the definition of Success, “happiness” is, in fact, a result, or byproduct, of a conscious effort in the pursuit of specific components that comprise Success.

Success is challenging to define because it is up to the individual to define her own success. Often, the confusion lies in the fact that the wrong question is being asked. The question should not be “*What is Success?*” but rather, “*What does Success mean to me?*” Henry David Thoreau brilliantly stated: “Live

the life that you have imagined” (Thoreau). In other words, Success is what each person defines it to be for herself. Although the definition is not the same for everybody, Success can be defined and measured for every unique individual using a single formula composed of three pillars. Through an understanding of the holistic definition of Success, one can make incremental improvements in their behaviors, resulting in a life of prosperity and fulfillment.

II. The holistic success formula

Success is a multi-dimensional standard, and therefore cannot be simply defined and measured by a single benchmark. One must take a more holistic approach to observe, measure, and implement in order to work towards achieving Success. A review of the diverse opinions on this topic expressed by some of the greatest thinkers, writers, philosophers, entrepreneurs, and public figures (including the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Maslow, Viktor Frankl, Tony Robbins, Hal Elrod, Jordan Peterson, and others) reveals that Success can be defined by a single formula comprised of three components:

$$\text{SUCCESS} = \text{HEALTH} * \text{HAPPINESS} * \text{MEANING}$$

An equal focus on all three pillars is crucial. The overemphasis on one pillar over another will cause imbalance and is a detriment to success (examples to be provided later). The Holistic Success Formula should be thought of as a Venn diagram, with Holistic Success at the central intersection of Health, Happiness, and Meaning.

Each pillar may be further broken down into nine subcategories to be outlined in detail in the following sections, with recommendations for strategies of development:

Health:

- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Emotional Health
- Spiritual Health

Happiness:

- Relationships
- Lifestyle

Meaning:

- Purpose (Career)
- Growth
- Contribution

III. Health

“It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver.”
Mahatma Gandhi

Health is foundational to Success. It is the internal measure of Success. The state of one’s health has a direct effect on one’s ability to perform externally. Yet, unfortunately it is often the first thing that is neglected in pursuit of material success. A bias towards western medicine to the exclusion of complimentary alternative practices results in an overemphasis of health as the absence, or the overcoming of disease. This contributes to a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be truly healthy. A more accurate and truer definition of health incorporates the pursuit of physical,

mental, emotional, and spiritual balance in our daily activities. These are often cited as the four main dimensions of physical wellness (Wellness). According to the constitution of the World Health Organization: “Health is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” “It is the fundamental right of every human without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social situation” (WHO).

• Physical Health

Physical health is the state of one’s body. There are countless books, articles, interviews referring to the proper maintenance of physical health. But put simply, physical health is proper nutrition, movement (more commonly known as diet and exercise), and sleep.

a) *Nutrition*

The basic building block of physical health is proper nutrition, or the food ingested into the body. Every cell in the body is made from the components of what is consumed by an individual (or her mother). This is why nutrition is a logical starting point of the Success Formula. The food we eat is digested by gastric acids and enzymes. The ingested carbohydrates are broken down into glucose which is used as energy. The ingested fats are the building blocks of fatty acids that comprise the cellular membrane and help in the digestion of certain vitamins. The body uses ingested proteins to make enzymes and hormones and to do the work in cells required for structure, function and regulation. The cells in our body together become specialized organs that make up the most evolutionarily advanced structure on the planet.

There are numerous diets and contradicting evidence claiming to be the “right” diet, but all reputable dietitians agree on a central tenet that a healthy diet comes from a balanced intake of natural foods. “Dieting” has come to be synonymous with strict regulation of caloric intake. Proper nutrition does not come from calorie restriction or drastic changes to one’s diet, but from a lifestyle of consistent healthy eating (Wanjeck).

b) *Movement*

Before the industrial revolution, human survival necessitated a basic ability to move. Modern technology has unfortunately forced humans into an unnatural sedentary lifestyle, and therefore physical movement has become a low priority in today’s comfortable living environment. Lack of movement results in increased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, venous thrombosis, pulmonary embolism, and stroke, to name just a few significant examples.

Movement is vital to maintain strength, flexibility, and endurance. Hormonal releases that are associated with movement increase energy, productivity, and mood. Even in a sedentary lifestyle, movement is at the core of physical health, which is the base of Success. There are a multitude of movement/exercise options to choose from, but the key is to do some sort of movement daily, no matter how minor. Mornings are best to release dopamine and boost energy and metabolism.

c) *Sleep*

Sleep is vital to our physical, mental, and emotional health for various reasons: it is the time our body recovers and detoxifies. Sleep is when the brain stores information as memories through memory consolidation. Lack of sleep can deteriorate mood, cardiovascular health, and immune function (Harvard Health).

It is important not to sacrifice sleep for work, study, or for any other reason. It is proven that after a certain point the loss of sleep has a greater effect on performance than the extra hours gained working (Harvard Health). Regular sleep cycles are also important to maintain a proper circadian rhythm. The recommended amount of sleep for adults is 7-9 hours per day (National Sleep Foundation).

• Mental Health

“Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO). To the extent our work requires high-functioning cognitive abilities, the state of one’s mental health is directly related to job performance. Mental health is also related to one’s ability to pursue his or her goals outside of the workplace.

Like diet and exercise, the path to optimized mental health comes from practice. The more the brain learns, the better it becomes at learning; the growth is exponential. It is important to take time out of every day to read, exercise the mind, and learn something new. As stated above, sleep is also vitally important to proper mental health.

• Emotional Health

Emotional health is the ability to control one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Although related to happiness, it is not synonymous. Emotional health is a person’s ability to respond appropriately to any given circumstance. The value of emotional health is clear in both work and social settings, as emotions are often the cause of one’s behavior. By maintaining control of our behavior and actions, even under duress or stress, the ability to act rationally and appropriately to achieve a positive outcome is greatly enhanced.

Daily mindfulness exercises are recommended by experts to improve both mental and emotional health. The two most recommended practices almost unanimously praised by professionals are proper sleep and meditation. The benefits of sleep are listed above under Physical Health. Meditation requires taking a moment out of the day (5-30 minutes recommended) to sit in silence, focus on breathing, and be mindful of the present. It has been proven that meditation reduces stress, controls anxiety, promotes emotional health, enhances self-awareness, among its many other health benefits (Healthline).

• Spiritual Health

Spiritual health is often inaccurately confused with religion. It can also be considered the most highly controversial subcategory of Wellness. Without detailing any specific dogma, spirituality can be broadly defined as one’s sense of connection with those around him/her. This can be in the form of religion or not (Ruiz). It is the sense of transcendence one feels beyond oneself.

Spirituality is a component of Success because humans are social creatures; we depend on each other for support, and Success cannot be achieved alone. By focusing on our similarities rather than our differences, one can feel more at peace and harmony with the community. Professionals recommend practicing awareness and gratitude daily for all the good fortunes of life in order to appreciate all that the universe has provided us.

IV. Happiness

“Happiness consists more in small conveniences or pleasures that occur every day, than in great pieces of good fortune that happen but seldom to a man in the course of his life.”

Benjamin Franklin

“A calm and modest life brings more happiness than the pursuit of success combined with constant restlessness.”

Albert Einstein

Finding happiness is a deep, philosophical search that has been researched, discussed, and argued for centuries. While there are a multitude of things that can make a person happy, it ultimately comes down to one’s own perspective of their environment, which is influenced by mental and emotional

health. But there are two external factors that can increase or decrease one’s happiness: lifestyle and relationships. Lifestyle is personal, and relationships are interpersonal, and together they are the two sources that bring joy to our lives; they are the uplifting forces that allow us to endure any hardship.

• Lifestyle

Lifestyle is simply and completely defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “someone’s way of living” (Cambridge). A person’s lifestyle can be busy or peaceful, active or relaxing, social or secluded: there is no correct answer for what type of lifestyle is “best.” What is important is that the lifestyle matches a person’s desires. Today, many define lifestyle as work/life balance. Others believe that work should be enjoyable and should not be differentiated from “life.” Both are viable solutions. The measure of Success in the category of Lifestyle can be defined by one’s ability to practice and pursue what they love: their passions.

This is where money and financial success make an impact. Everybody has heard the cliché: “money does not buy happiness.” This is actually not completely true. According to a Harvard study, there is, in fact, a correlation between money and happiness (Wirtz). However, after a certain point, there is diminishing marginal return on happiness for increased earnings. There is a clear explanation for this. Money allows the freedom to pursue one’s passions. And the more money one makes, the more freedom one has; but after a certain point, the excess money does not bring as much additional happiness. It has been shown that experiences (lifestyle) reciprocate more happiness than material purchases (Pozin). Therefore, financial wealth should be pursued in the amount that it allows an individual to pursue her passions, while resisting the perpetual pressure to accumulate additional wealth that only serves to diminish happiness and fulfillment.

• Relationships

Relationships are our connections with other people: friends, family, loved ones, coworkers, etc. This is the support network that comforts in the most difficult circumstances, and the people with whom to celebrate the greatest victories. Humans are social creatures, and we survive and thrive on our dependence on each other.

Successful relationships are not measured by the quantity one has, but by the quality of the relationships. It could be many or few. What matters is that the quality of relationships one has matches the emotional support one needs.

Like every other category of Success, relationships require practice, patience, and dedicated effort. It is essential to make a conscious effort to keep in touch with and express gratitude and appreciation to loved ones. Furthermore, it is important to maintain one’s relationships throughout one’s life, even if separated by time elapsed or geographical distance. This simple action will reap a rewarding sense of belonging and be an important source of happiness.

V. Meaning

“The true meaning of life: We are visitors on this planet, we are here for ninety or one hundred years at the very most. During that period, we must try to do something good, something useful, with our lives.”

If you contribute to other people’s happiness, you will find the true goal, the true meaning of life.”

The Dalai Lama

The search for the meaning of life is an attempt to explain the significance of life. Throughout history, philosophers, scientists, and theologians have developed varying explanations for our existence. Today, millennials are also increasingly searching for an existential “meaning of life.” These topics are far beyond the scope of this report; however, these questions do not need to be resolved for an individual to live a more meaningful life. One must simply understand the three main components of living a life of meaning.

- Purpose (Career)

Purpose is “the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists” (Oxford). This is most associated with one’s career, but not always. It is the answer to the question: “What do you do?” However, each individual was not put on this earth for a single purpose. One can be a professional, a mother, a bringer of joy, and a leader of change, all at the same time. One’s purpose can also change throughout the course of her lifetime. But the most important realization in selecting one’s career path is how much she feels it matches her skills and motivations, and if one feels she is making an impact.

The best way to discover one’s purpose and to follow a career path that will provide fulfillment is to answer the following questions: “What drives me? What energizes me? What am I willing to make sacrifices for? Whom do I want to help and how? What do I love? What am I passionate about?” Through these design thinking exercises, one can gain clarity on a life and career path that will bring maximum self-actualization.

- Growth

One is never done learning, growing, or improving, even when she is the best in her profession. When Michael Phelps won his first Olympic gold medal, he did not stop competing. Perfection is impossible to attain, and there are always ways to improve oneself. To conclude one’s pursuit of excellence after achieving a single specific goal will result in an unsatisfying void. In Okinawa, where there are the greatest concentrations of centurions (people who have lived over 100 years), citizens work until their very last day perfecting their craft, whatever it may be. They find solace in consistent, gradual improvement, which cultivates their longevity (Jozuka).

Growth happens in small increments, over long periods of time. Bill Gates once stated, “People overestimate what can be done in one year, but underestimate what can be done in ten” (Gates). By creating short, medium, and long-term goals, one can build for a steady growth trajectory. If one builds good habits today, there will undoubtedly be positive returns in the future.

- Contribution

Contribution is the role one plays in bringing about positive change or helping create improvements. It is crucial to sustaining and improving our world. Unfortunately, the overriding pursuit of selfish material success can be deleterious to the world around us, and to the planet. Our consumerist culture has directly and irreversibly depleted the Earth’s environment, biodiversity, and natural resources. It is hopeful that with increasing awareness of the inter-connectivity between humans and our planet, progressive thinkers are finding solutions, and there is beginning to be a shift in this paradigm.

Ultimately, the greatest fulfillment comes from contribution (Robbins). As individuals, this is achieved by giving back as much as possible in our daily pursuits. The most rewarding experiences come from acting selflessly for the benefit of others. This is why giving gifts to the less fortunate during the Holidays, or volunteering at a non-profit feels so good. There can never be too much giving. But contribution does not have to only be in the form of volunteering. Many of the best entrepreneurs agree that their greatest success comes not from the size of their company, but the positive contribution they were able to make on the world. The ultimate display of Success comes from helping improve the lives of others.

VI. Effects of missing pillars

Health, Happiness, and Meaning are complementary: they each have an effect on the other. It is important to put an equal focus into all three. An overemphasis on one or two pillars, while neglecting the others will lead to imbalance; and the absence of one pillar will actually have counterproductive effects on the others. To illustrate the effects of a missing pillar, three caricaturized extremes are described below:

- The “Hippie”

The “Hippie” has tremendous self-awareness, and spends her time solely on her own personal health and happiness. She seeks a simple life that brings herself joy and peace. Unfortunately, she does not have goals or aspirations, and does not make an effort to make a positive impact on the world around her. This characterizes a rather shallow life, selfishly neglecting to seek meaning, and not adding value to the world.

- The “Straight-Edge”

The “Straight-Edge” is a type-A try-hard. He is constantly focused on improvement, both internally and externally. He understands the importance of personal development and is constantly looking for opportunities to exploit his skills to grow and make a positive contribution. Unfortunately, he is so engrossed in his personal trajectory, he fails to understand and dedicate time to the people and passions that truly bring him joy. This ultimately leads to a profound sense of sadness and isolation.

- The “Work-Hard-Play-Hard”

The “Work-Hard-Play-Hard” does exactly as his name describes. He gives as much as possible, all the time. He is often “successful,” in the monetary definition: he is talented, has a good career, contributes to society, and he is able to have satisfying relationships and an enviable lifestyle. This is the type of person that is often glamorized. The downside to this type of life is that it is not sustainable if health is compromised. When significant health problems manifest, everything else comes to an abrupt halt.

VII. Verification – Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

The Holistic Success Formula can be tested for its validity and completeness by comparing against Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow’s Hierarchy is one of the most cited frameworks in sociology research, management training, and psychology instruction (Kremer). It states that all humans have similar needs, starting with the most basic, and evolving to more developed. The five basic needs are: 1) Physiological, 2) Safety, 3) Love/Belonging, 4) Esteem, and 5) Self-Actualization. In his later years, Maslow also concluded a sixth dimension: Transcendence – “giving oneself to something beyond oneself” (Maslow).

The Holistic Success Formula incorporates all human needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy. The nine sub-categories of the Holistic Success Formula correspond with an associated basic human need.

- Physiological Needs = Physical, Mental, and Emotional Health
- Safety Needs = Lifestyle
- Love/Belonging Needs = Relationships
- Esteem Needs = Growth
- Self-Actualization = Purpose
- Transcendence = Contribution, Spiritual Health

The major difference between the Holistic Success Formula and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is structure. Maslow’s original theory states that more basic human needs must be met in order to accomplish more developed needs. The Holistic Success Formula demonstrates that all of these needs are actually overlapping and interrelated. Scholars today have updated the theory, stating that the levels in Maslow’s hierarchy are continuously overlapping each other (Deckers). The Holistic Success Formula, therefore, represents the progression of this dialectic from Maslow’s original thesis.

VIII. Implementation

The framework for measuring Holistic Success has been outlined, but in order to achieve Success, it takes a dedicated, conscious effort. The successes of the future are a result of the effort invested in the present. By placing a balanced effort in incremental improvement of each of the nine subcategories of

the Holistic Success Formula, one can see significant, measurable results. In order to obtain results, one should follow the subsequent three steps:

- Set goals

A goal is the desired future one envisions. By setting goals, one can have a clear vision of objectives, and develop an actionable plan towards achieving them. Goals should follow the “SMART” criteria: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (Doran).

- Form good habits/routines

The American Journal of Psychology (1903) defines a habit as a “fixed way of thinking, willing, or feeling acquired through previous repetition of a mental experience” (Andrews). Ambitious goals may seem difficult to attain when observing as a whole, but through small victories, one can achieve incremental improvement, eventually achieving the goal over time. One should focus on a single goal, develop a habit that moves her closer to that goal, and practice it daily.

- Reflect and restructure goals

In this final step, the individual should look back at the goals she set for herself and reflect on any growth or failure. By doing so, she creates a reward system for herself and refines her goals. Once a specific goal is met, there is the further opportunity to restructure the goal to something even more challenging.

IX. Conclusion

Society today often overemphasizes the importance of the things we have in lieu of who we are. When “success” is measured by accumulation of material possessions, there is always a desire to want more things, but meaningful life fulfillment and happiness are neglected. It is invalid to measure one’s “success” by comparing herself to the “success” of others. The genuine measure of Success is internal; it is the balance of physical, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs.

Success, however, is not something that is simply achieved or not achieved on a binary level. It is not something that can be measured externally. Success is internal, dynamic, and compounding: by improving any single element of the Holistic Success Formula, the overall value of Success increases. The most effective path to earning Success is through incremental personal development with balanced effort placed into all subcategories of the formula. Small improvements in one’s performance on a daily basis will eventually reap tangible results in the future. Through the deliberate, conscious effort of improving one’s Health, Happiness, and Meaning, one can redefine success and achieve a life of ultimate fulfillment.

X. Afterward – The Evolution of the Holistic Success Formula (About the Author)

[Anonymous] has spent the last several years contemplating deeper questions regarding the reason for human existence and finding answers to how to live the most fulfilling life possible. He has dedicated time towards learning new philosophies and perspectives through reading many of the most renowned personal development books. Works by the great public figures, writers, and thinkers mentioned in this report were sources of great inspiration in his quest for knowledge and understanding. This literature and the lessons [Anonymous] has learned from invaluable mentors have given him the necessary framework for maximal personal development.

But perhaps more educating than the literature on the subject, are the experiences [Anonymous] has had, particularly in the last several years. There were three distinct phases in his recent life, in which he was severely lacking in one or another of the pillars of the Holistic Success Formula, thereby leaving a void, and impeding complete life realization. It was necessary to attain the missing element in order to understand how vital each of the 3 pillars are to a holistic definition of Success.

Phase 1 – The Businessman

After graduating from a top tier university, [Anonymous] quickly advanced his way through various finance positions in his field. But after a few years into the corporate fast-track to financial wealth, he realized that these material gains did not bring the satisfaction he was expecting. He was missing something vital – Happiness. Eager to discover his passions and create a new lifestyle for himself, [Anonymous] made a major life change.

Phase 2 – The Nomad

A few months after his 25th birthday, [Anonymous] quit his six-figure career and gave up almost all of his material possessions to travel the world and start his own business in pursuit of discovering true happiness. It was a nomadic, adventurous, care-free lifestyle traveling throughout various countries, living in a van, and surfing and hiking almost every day. It was the life he dreamed of. But the novelty of this lifestyle eventually diminished, leaving another void – the desire to have Meaning. He was feeling a strong aspiration to develop his skills or make a more positive impact on the world. But about six months into his travels something terrible happened.

Phase 3 – The Cancer Diagnosis

On May 29, 2018, [Anonymous] was diagnosed with testicular cancer. This was the greatest challenge he had faced in his life. He went from being a fit, active, healthy 25 year-old man, to days later being diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening disease. It was a shock that truly tested his strength and mental fortitude, as well as that of his friends and family. Luckily, the day before his 26th birthday, he received the news from his oncologist that he won this battle with cancer. It was the best birthday gift he has ever received.

This transformative experience gave him an entirely new perspective on life, and taught him to be grateful for every moment, and that the most fundamental form of Success is the function of our bodies – Health.

Through these experiences and learning from experts, [Anonymous] is focused now more than ever on holistic wellness and personal development of himself and others. He is currently building an organization with this very mission. The Holistic Success Formula is the foundation of the curriculum [Anonymous] is developing. This formula is constantly evolving based on new education and experiences, further perfecting and progressing into a more dynamic and complete definition of what it truly means to be Successful.

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FROM AVOIDANCE TO EMPATHY: REDISCOVERING DECENCY IN A WORLD AFRAID OF DIFFERENCE

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Donald Trump. Some love him and others cannot stand him. Either way, he is one of, if not *the* most despised person in the United States of America. I'd even go further to say that he is also the most admired person in America. This is concerning, but Donald Trump is not to blame. Before Mr. Trump occupied the White House, Barack Obama was the most despised — and simultaneously admired — person in America. Predictably, the US President is the subject of increasing hatred and reckless loyalty.

Since the 1960s Americans have become more polarized, particularly in the political arena. Until recently, few Americans held deeply negative views about people who held opposing ideological views. Yet today, antipathy among Americans is at an all-time high and is continuing to rise. The very cornerstone of the American ideal — a unified vision around “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” — is being compromised by a pervasive cultural shift that is dividing rather than uniting people. We are quick to demonize those who are different than ourselves, seeing others as opponents to prove something to rather than fellow citizens and confidants to build strong relational bonds with.

While I hesitate to make sweeping generalizations about Americans or non-Americans, Millennials or Baby Boomers, Republicans or Democrats, I am convinced more than ever that in general we are losing the ability to respectfully disagree with others, effectively dialogue about our differences, and implore our human faculties to pursue a flourishing humanity.

The rapid decline in our ability to engage in respectful and productive public discourse is a sign of larger crises. Trust in people, institutions, and society in general are in rapid decline, not just in the US but also across the globe. Social capital is quickly (albeit artificially) built and more quickly lost. In some ways, the ability for people to connect with others from different countries, backgrounds, ideologies, religious groups, and the like has never been easier in the course of human history, particularly with the advent of social media, ubiquitous technology, and ease of travel. Yet we find ourselves still largely surrounded by people who look like us, think like us, and behave like us. Deviation from the status quo sends a shock to our system and shakes us to our core. Individuals and communities alike reflect myopic postures toward difference rather than an intentional integration of diversity.

This would have been exclusively an American problem 50 or 100 years ago; a minutia in the grand timeline of human history. But in today's globalized world, where culture is perhaps America's leading export, this is increasingly a global problem. As we will see later, the trends and social changes impacting the US are also influencing the rest of the world.

In this essay, we will discuss why speech is such an important faculty of human behavior (particularly when it comes to interpersonal dynamics), provide a brief assessment as to why we are facing this crisis, understand the key contexts in which this problem is most present, and explore two solutions for overcoming our widespread avoidance of difference.

Persuasive Speech: the foundation of human politics

It was Aristotle who famously argued that speech is what sets humans apart from the animal kingdom (“man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech”) and that through speech humans relate to one another. At the most fundamental level, this relation between two (or more) hu-

mans is political — it determines the rules and norms of how humans interact with each other, starting from the most intimate of relationships to the most casual. Consequently, the politics of human community is both formed and sustained by speech.

To continue this logic, speech is not simply the capacity to express one's reality, since even animals communicate as such, but more so the ability to persuade others to some end — whether that be understanding, action, reflection, or the like. Speech becomes an invaluable tool unique to humans that shapes relationships, culture, and therefore politics.

Effective persuasion, according to Aristotle, requires three key pillars: *ethos* (the nature, character, and reputation of the speaker), *pathos* (the ability to appeal to emotion), and *logos* (the ability to construct an argument using reason and logic). The sharper and more refined these pillars, the greater the speaker's ability to persuade and be persuaded, which are imperative to the cultivation of deep interpersonal relationships. From effective persuasion also flow strong character, the ability to empathize, appropriately engage emotion, and construct logical reasoning.

With Aristotle's philosophical fingerprint on generational advancement over the past two thousand years, one would think that over time humans have progressed in their ability to persuade and be persuaded. And many analyses of history would argue that that is exactly what happened, at least until the last century.

For a myriad of reasons, our ability to persuade is in decline. Some point to the proliferation of (and dependence on) written communication rather than oral communication as the primary medium in which we convey and absorb information. Still others point to our fast-paced lifestyle that hinders us from taking time to reflect and construct arguments of merit, or to rapid rise of technology and its effect on how we process information. While these arguments provide compelling narratives and are largely influential in shaping our current reality, we will also look to the convergence of other factors that give deeper insight.

How we got Here: The Coddling of the American Mind

In their seminal book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that despite well-intentioned societal trends, American Millennials (those born after 1980) are actually worse off than previous generations, avoiding words, ideas and people they don't like in the name of emotional well-being and self-preservation. The result is a sharp rise in narrow-mindedness, emotional instability, and a pervasive mentality that faults others rather than themselves. In the public sphere, younger generations are losing the ability to engage in productive dialogue with people or ideas that are perceived as opposing and thereby lack the emotional and social courage to do so. The authors attribute this shift to a trifecta of social trends whose effects are most pronounced among Millennials; the loss of unsupervised play time among children, the rise in social media, and the increase in political polarization.

Millennials grew up in households where their parents, mostly Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, significantly restricted playtime to monitored and indoor play rather than unsupervised and outdoor play, which were conventional in previous generations. While on the surface this may sound superficial, such "free range" play allowed former generations to develop "thick skin" and find creative ways to keep themselves occupied, socialize with peers, and resolve minor conflicts on their own. The intention of providing "safe" environments for their children actually sheltered them from the real world and hindered their ability to face adulthood.

To compound the problem, a younger subgroup of Millennials became the first generation of "social media natives". Through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, young people connected to the world around them like never before, becoming engaged in topics and trends in new and meaningful ways. However, the methods and mediums of communication and engagement were fundamentally altered. Social media has allowed users to portray multiple views, personalities, and façades, escaping from the need to display any coherence between words and action. The result has been devastating.

During the critical time when young people are still developing the cognitive and social frameworks that shape their identity, social media offers an easy but dangerous outlet. Empirical data points to a strong correlation between social media use among young people and its alarming effect on anxiety, depression, and other psychological harms, which hinder their ability to thrive as well-rounded, emotionally, socially, and intellectually competent adults.

Thirdly, according to Lukianoff and Haidt, the increase in political polarization has proven to be an unhealthy environment for developing the kind of critically-minded citizens that our countries need — individuals with comprehensive ideologies who value understanding over pride and reason over dogma. As mentioned above, polarization in America has sharply increased in the last few decades and there appears to be no sign of improvement.

To expound on this third area, it is worth highlighting that the very nature of America's two-party system also exacerbates the issue at hand. While the system has merit as a geopolitical system of democracy, its pitfalls should not be overlooked. In the zero-sum game of America's political system Republicans are pitted against Democrats and Democrats against Republicans. The never-ending fight to be the majority (or "governing") party is a dog-eat-dog competition where success is defined by defeating your opponent (as opposed to accomplishing positive social good). Prudence and civility are replaced with callousness and fear mongering. Under the two-party system there is no space for more nuanced approaches to politics, and citizens and politicians alike are more focused on proving the other tribe is inferior to their own.

While it is perhaps impossible to point to these three social trends as the exclusive causes of the declining ability to engage in constructive dialogue with people or ideas we disagree with, it is by no means a stretch to say that each of these trends have served to aggravate rather than alleviate the decline in critical thinking in recent years.

Areas of Concern: where we are hurting the most

Before looking at ways to overcome our problem, it is helpful to understand the specific contexts where this decline has been most detrimental to human flourishing. While a detailed analysis of each context mentioned below is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth briefly highlighting these key areas in order to more concretely understand the arenas where we need to seek change.

First we look to current state of politics, especially in the U.S., which is increasingly suffering from demagoguery and the inability of individuals or groups to form meaningful coalitions with those of different ideologies. As we saw previously, America's two-party system only aggravates the problem. But this polarization is not an exclusively American phenomenon. Societies across the globe, both democratic and authoritarian, are experiencing unprecedented division. Societies are "waging war" not primarily against other nations, but on other parts of their own social bodies. From Latin America to Europe to the Middle East and Asia, the "disease" of division is spreading contagiously and the world is in desperate need of a cure.

Religion is the second context where dialogue is largely constrained to dogma, if dialogue even happens at all. Inter-religious dialogue may take place in planned forums or specific events, but these are largely on the fringes rather than the centers of social and cultural networks that significantly impact society. The failure of different religions to engage in constructive dialogue is especially detrimental in today's pluralist societies, which by definition makes them increasingly non-pluralistic.

Dialogue *within* major faith communities is also needed, but currently limited. Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups ought to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other. Moreover, each group also ought to intentionally pursue dialogue *within* each religious community regarding the changing world around them and the important tensions that affect their long-held beliefs. A good example of this would be *Q*, a platform, event, and repository of intentional conversations related to faith, culture, church, politics, and future, developed particularly for the Christian faith community in America. Such platforms seek to promote diversity, inclusion, and critical thinking to complex issues,

resulting in more informed citizens, open-mindedness, and productive coalitions to tackle some of the world's most pressing problems.

The third and most broad context relates to ethics and social issues. Concepts such as equality, gender, justice, environment, freedom, healthcare, and opportunity are incredibly complex and multi-faceted. These topics require abstract deconstructing and a commitment to dealing with a plethora of interrelated issues. In an era of quicker, smaller, and simpler, we can struggle to accept the complexity and therefore resort to overly-simplistic treatments. Moreover, the subjective narratives we attach ourselves to trump objectivity and logic, mitigating the possibility and efficacy of constructive dialogue. In this manner, we close ourselves off to the diversity of viewpoints on the social issue *du jour* and remain unchanged in our superficial understanding.

As we now explore ways to overcome the critical challenge, we will keep in mind the three contexts — politics, religion, and ethics/social issues — as the primary contexts where dramatic improvement needs to be made. By focusing on these three areas we can build a stronger humanity.

Purposeful Travel: ridding ethnocentricity one trip at a time

“The real voyage of discovery consists, not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”
Marcel Proust

At first glance it seems overly simplistic to think that such a complex challenge could be addressed by a simple solution. Paradoxically, more people travel today than ever before yet our problem is only getting worse. Ahead we will unpack purposeful travel and its impact on our ability to empathize and engage difference.

In recent years travel has become commoditized — consumed rapidly and without much reflection. The allure of traveling to distant lands and experiencing widely different cultures has broadly been simplified to consumer-focused experiences, bouncing from one Instagram-worthy moment to the next, buzzing from trendy cafe to another, and splurging on luxury after luxury. The actual of experiences of traveling overseas are converging toward a homogenous, watered-down pop-in-pop-out type of travel. Never before has visiting Mexico City, Moscow, and Manila been more similar.

Unlike this type of travel, in which sensory indulgences are its main outputs, purposeful travel requires a deeper reason and more intentional approach. Purposeful travel requires not necessarily seeing new lands, according to Proust, but seeing through a new lens. This requires engaging the intellect, emotions, and values at each stage of the trip — before, during, and after. The destination is important, but not as much as the traveler's mindset and praxis. Yes, a trip to Beirut will have a different impact on the American traveler than a trip to Boston, but meaning and broadened perspective can still be gained regardless of the destination.

Purposeful travel removes the traveler from the focal point and replaces it with the host community and culture. The artifacts of purposeful travel can be the difficult or confusing experiences that make us uncomfortable and, heaven forbid, unhappy. These require patience, open-mindedness, empathy, and the ability to reflect honestly about one's own underlying values, beliefs, or preconceptions being put to the test. It is through these experiences that the purposeful traveler begins to see through new eyes.

Travel has never been as affordable, accessible, and simple as it is today, which means that fewer people have the excuse of brushing off travel as something only for the elite. Yet getting outside our ethnocentric mindset doesn't necessitate a passport. The most profound border to cross may be closer than we think. In many of our communities, especially in larger metropolitan areas, you do not need to travel far to experience a very different world than your own. Observing, serving, and entering these communities can be just as unfamiliar as traveling halfway across the globe. Speaking from my own experience, living with an African American family in inner-city Los Angeles for several months exposed me to the complexities of race, privilege, and opportunity in my own country despite having grown up less than 100 miles away.

I'm not necessarily putting forward anything new but it needs to be reiterated now more than ever. For hundreds of years culture and communities have benefited from intrepid travelers who journeyed far beyond their homeland and returned with new perspective. Marco Polo, an Italian merchant and explorer from Venice, introduced the world to the riches and vastness of China, even inspiring Christopher Columbus to take a voyage that would change the course of history. Ibn Battuta's journey across the Islamic world influenced Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as they caught insight into his personal experiences of culture shock when experiencing different and unsettling cultural norms than he was used to in Morocco. More recently, personalities like Ernest Hemingway captured the uniqueness of locations to likes of Paris, Segovia, Cuba and Kilimanjaro, captivating audiences through detailed descriptions and animated vignettes. Today's most well-known traveler, Rick Steves, is using his TV shows, books, speaking tours, and social media outlets to rid people of their ethnocentricity, one trip at a time.

We must not overlook the power of purposeful travel and its ability to crush our ethnocentricity, test our biases, and lead us to a more empathetic view of engaging people and ideas even if (and especially when) they go against our beliefs.

Mindful Engagement: cultivating a fresh perspective in our everyday lives

“Empathy leads to listening and listening leads to understanding”
Melinda Gates

Travel is certainly a great way to shock our systems into thinking differently, but it's not the only way. I am proposing that we also need to shift focus to our everyday lives to the people, relationships, ideas, and problems that we are surrounded by, especially the ones we have avoided in the past due to difference or lack of understanding.

In order to do this effectively, we must also develop the art of listening and reflecting, keeping an open mind and empathetic mindset. We don't need to travel far to engage with people or ideas that irk us to reconsider a deeply-held belief, but we do need to develop the ability to see from a new perspective. Lest we go through life taking routine scenarios and our closest relationships at face value.

As we have seen above, intrapersonal communication is fundamental to being human. Being able to do so effectively requires the ability to persuade (à la Aristotle) and also to listen. The ability to persuade and *be* persuaded are two sides of the same coin. Persuasion requires speaking as much as it requires listening, so the better listener you become the better communicator you will be. These skills can be learned, developed, and refined over time.

For that reason, we draw a comparison to physical fitness. Our muscular system, like human cognition and emotional intelligence, is an *antifragile* system, meaning that strengthening of the system actually comes from shocks and strains as opposed to protection or safekeeping. Increasing one's critical thinking ability is the intellectual equivalent to lifting weights in the gym. The more strain we apply the stronger we become.

“In the name of emotional well-being,” by avoiding difference we have done the intellectual equivalent of taking the weights out of the gym and wonder why we are becoming intellectually and emotionally insecure. In the process, we have lost the ability to push ourselves, thus weakening our intellectual and emotional muscles.

Our tendency is to relate shock and strain with negative outcomes, but there's an important lesson we can learn when applying the concept of antifragility to human cognition communication, emotional intelligence and empathy. The more intentionally we exercise these muscles, especially in the many contexts of our everyday lives, the more prepared we will be to address the inevitable difficulties, appreciate the diversity of perspectives, and pursue ways to secure our own wellbeing and benefit the common good.

Conclusion: toward commitment and courage

I had the privilege of traveling abroad from a young age. I spent my first birthday abroad and by the age of 25 I had traveled to over 50 countries. Early on I found that international exposure was the impetus for a more nuanced understanding of the world, a deeper appreciation for different perspectives, and the ability to affect change globally.

As a Christian, living with Muslim families in Morocco shaped my perception of Islam and instilled the desire and skills to connect with others despite our differences. Staying with a rural family in Patagonia helped me understand the juxtaposition between simplicity and poverty, busyness and purpose, community and family. Distant voyages broadened my horizon, and still I found that the people closest to me had a tremendous influence on how I viewed the world and also myself. I have come to believe that it is not the number of stamps in your passport but the ability to engage your current context through different lenses – to approach the typical atypically. Finding unorthodox solutions requires being open to unorthodox people or ideas, and having the courage to address them. The more we shield ourselves from difference the worse we will be.

I am committed to broadening my perspective by finding ways to shock my system and re-evaluate my deeply held biases. Engaging difference, both abroad and in my own community, has enriched my capacity to think critically and embrace the complexity of the world we live in. Today I am asking others to join me by making a commitment to pursue understanding over coercion, empathy over pride, and open-mindedness over dogma. While not everyone has the luxury or time to travel internationally, we can still do pursue these virtues by intentionally engaging the immediate world around us.

It's hard to be optimistic about the future. We are becoming more polarized, more biased toward our own dispositions, and less capable of cultivating *bridging* social capital. We wage wars on our own communities to avoid difference, disregarding the very faculties we have as humans. But like other generations in the past who successfully reversed the curse they inherited, neither must we accept this as our destiny. It is our turn to undo the "Coddling of the American Mind".

Change begins in the contexts where we have the most agency and social capital; the greatest ability to influence. For most of us who are not politicians or celebrities, our greatest spheres of influence are in our homes, our work places, and our social settings – the contexts we actively participate in day in and day out. Our dinner tables, work meetings, and social events should become places of meaningful interaction, empathy building, and decency; ground zero for a new generation of courageous and committed humans debating and dreaming of a world where humanity can flourish *because* of our differences.

PHOTOGRAPHY

FOTOGRAFÍA

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- Pag 128 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Keely Bass
Pag 130 2nd Prize / 2^{er} premio: Miguel Van Den Oever
Pag 132 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Alex Visbal Loewy
Pag 134 Special Mention / Mención especial: Natalia Lorca Ruiz

FIRST PRIZE
PHOTOGRAPHY

PRIMER PREMIO
FOTOGRAFÍA

SPECTRUM

Keely Bass ^(Canada)

MASTER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



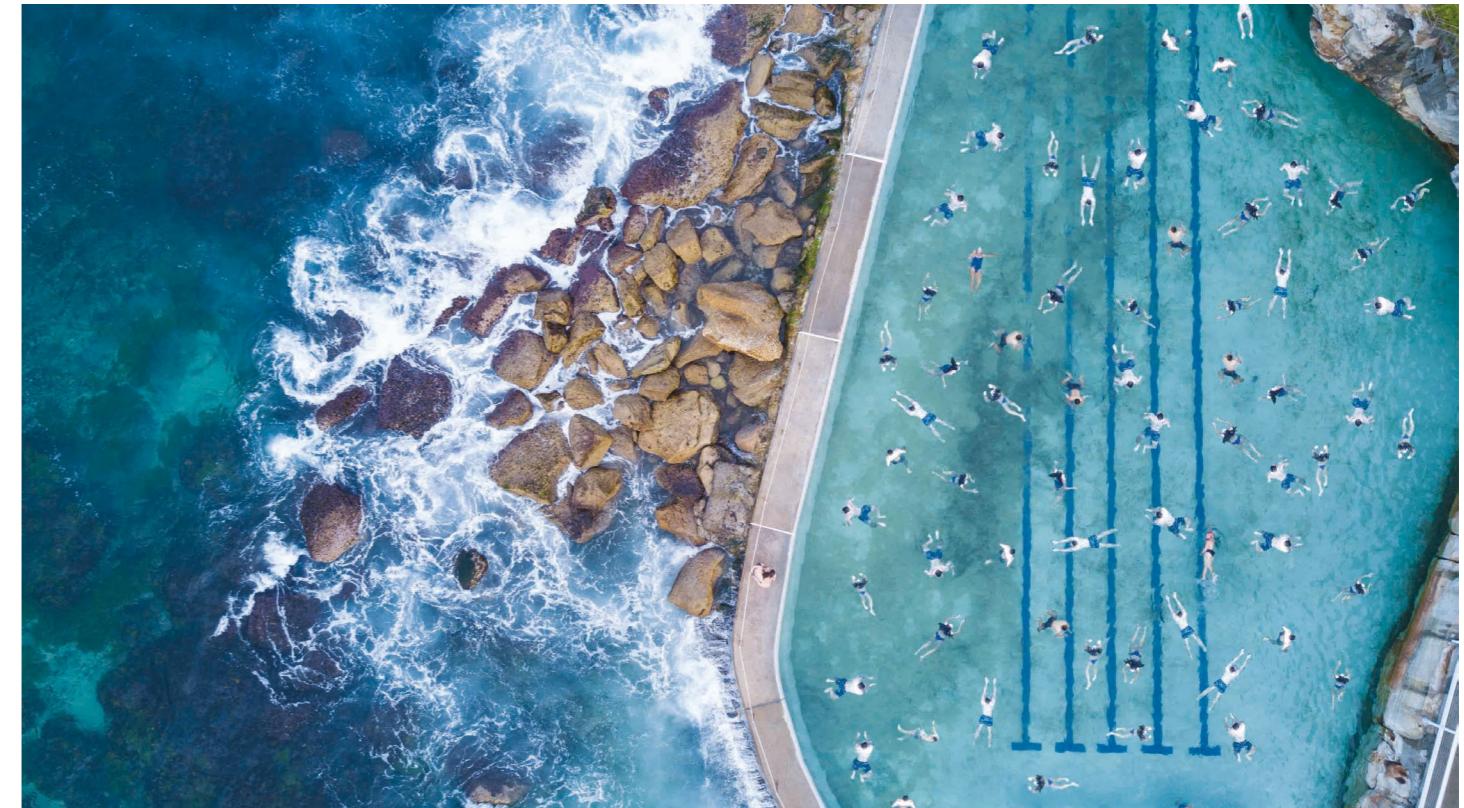
SECOND PRIZE
PHOTOGRAPHY

SEGUNDO PREMIO
FOTOGRAFÍA

POOL PARTY COLLAGE

Miguel Van Den Oever (Venezuela-Holanda)

INTERNATIONAL MBA



THIRD PRIZE
PHOTOGRAPHY

TERCER PREMIO
FOTOGRAFÍA

PLAZA

Alex Visbal Loewy (Austria)

INTERNATIONAL MBA



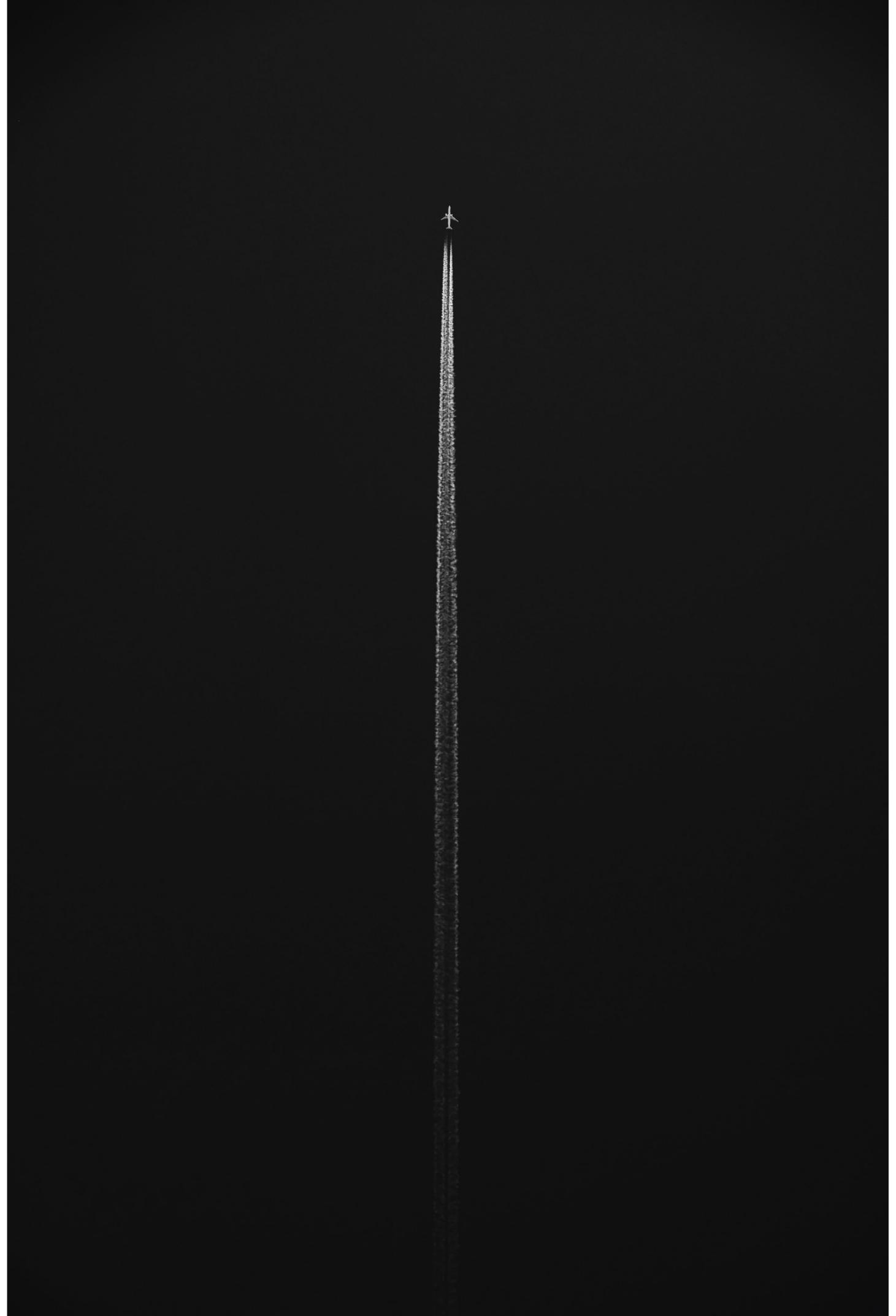
SPECIAL MENTION
PHOTOGRAPHY

MENCIÓN ESPECIAL
FOTOGRAFÍA

QUO VADIS?

Natalia Lorca Ruiz (Spain)

INTERNATIONAL MBA



VIDEO

VÍDEO

-
- Pag 138 1st Prize / 1^{er} premio: Elmira Shahanaghi
Pag 140 2nd Prize / 2^{er} premio: Julián Schreib, Clara Herberg,
Camila Arizpe, Shivag Kapoor & Eleonore Anglade
Pag 142 3rd Prize / 3^{er} premio: Romain Odin Lepoutre

FIRST PRIZE
VIDEO

PRIMER PREMIO
VÍDEO

THE VOICE OF ELMIRA

Elmira Shahanaghi (Canada)

INTERNATIONAL MBA



people running.



get us out of the country.



SECOND PRIZE
VIDEO

TERCER PREMIO
VÍDEO

BETTER TOGETHER

Julián Schreib^(Austria)

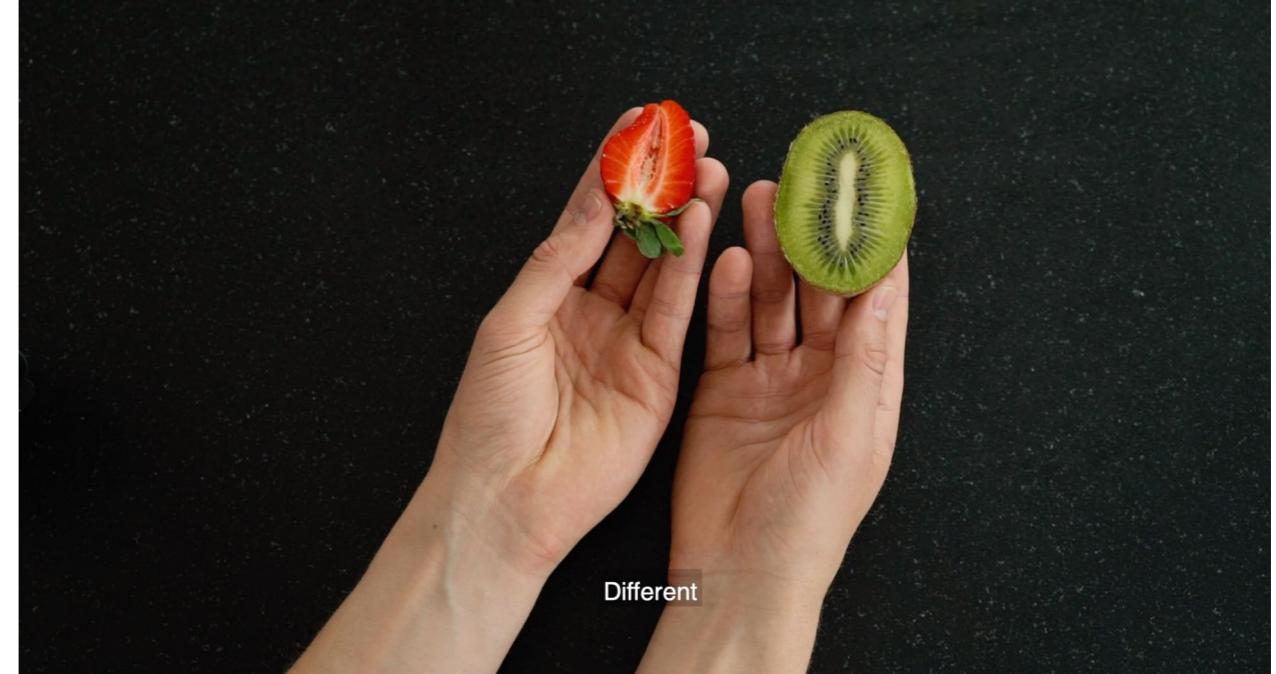
Clara Herberg^(Spain)

Camila Arizpe^(Spain)

Shivag Kapoor^(India)

Eleonore Anglade^(France)

MASTER IN VISUAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA



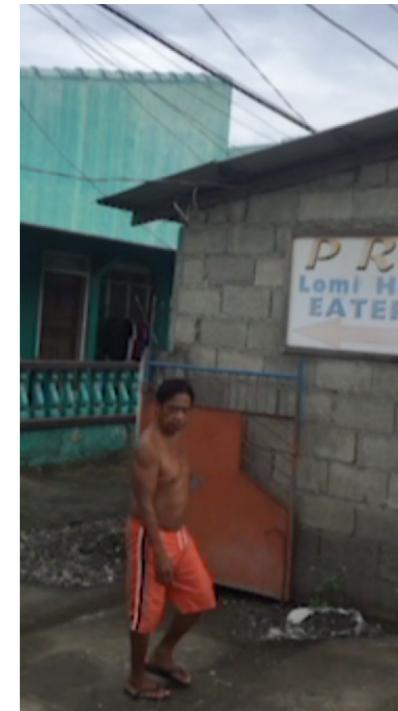
THIRD PRIZE
VIDEO

TERCER PREMIO
VÍDEO

PDERR

Romain Odin Lepoutre ^(France)

BACHELOR IN ARCHITECTURE



FACULTY & STAFF PRIZES

-
- Pag 146 Prize in Short Story in Spanish/ Premio Relato corto en español: Joaquín Garralda
Pag 152 Prize in Short Story in English/ Premio Relato corto en inglés: Luis Vivanco
Pag 176 Prize in Poetry in Spanish/ Premio Poesía en español: Sergio Rodríguez Jiménez
Pag 178 Prize in Poetry in English/ Premio Poesía en inglés María Eugenia Marín
Pag 179 Prize in Short Essay in English/ Premio Ensayo corto en inglés: Laura McDermott

HOTEL CALIFORNIA

Joaquín Garralda^(Spain)

DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

*'Relax' said the night man,
'We are programmed to receive.
You can check out any time you like,
But you can never leave!'
The Eagles (1976)*

Fuera hacia sol y las persianas del cuarto no estaban bajadas del todo. Reflejaban sobre la pared unas rayas oblicuas que no recordaba haber visto en otras habitaciones en que había vivido. Daban un ambiente un poco sombrío pero atractivo de contemplar. Me venía a la memoria retazos de una película antigua en blanco y negro que no lograba reconocer.

Vivir en esa casa había sido una decisión extraña. La escogí porque me pareció una oportunidad teniendo en cuenta el barrio en que estaba. La había encontrado en una web de alquiler de habitaciones distinta a la de Airbnb que solía utilizar. Era una web local que sólo informaba del barrio donde estaba la casa, el precio por día y el mail del propietario para contactar, sin que hubiera que pagar por adelantado. No la conocía, pero me llamó la atención su posicionamiento de "exclusividad" y de "confidencialidad" sobre las referencias del propietario. Me atrajo la idea de cambiar de ambiente. Llevaba unos 20 días viajando por Europa utilizando Airbnb y quería añadir más experiencias al final del *tour* de mi sabático viaje.

Desde un Starbucks escribí a una dirección de Gmail con números que no daba pistas de a quién me dirigía. Indiqué las fechas que pensaba estar en Madrid y una breve descripción tranquilizadora de mi persona y mis planes. Antes de acabar mi café, me contestó alguien que no se identificaba y, tras unas frases corteses, me hacía una pregunta que debería contestar para que me aceptara: ¿Qué piensa de la intransigencia de Tomás Moro?

Tuve que buscarlo en Wikipedia y como me parecía que la pregunta contenía una trampa para no aceptar a cualquiera, opté por seguir el juego y apostar con una respuesta arriesgada:

"Tomás Moro no era intransigente, sino que, como su amigo Erasmo de Rotterdam, era fiel a su independencia y si a este último no le costó la vida, fue porque no se enfrentó a un tirano como Tomás Moro".

Me respondió enseguida aceptando mi solicitud, aunque sin dar datos de su persona. Sólo indicaba la calle y el piso.

Al entrar en el portal comprobé que no iba a ser la casa previsible en el mundo de los alquileres compartidos. Un portal grande, un ascensor antiguo de madera –en el que se subía viendo la amplia escalera de mármol y las ventanas con vidrios emplomados de colores –y una puerta de madera con un timbre de bronce que no emitía sonido al pulsarlo. Tras un tiempo que me hacía dudar de si había sonado o no, se abrió la puerta unos centímetros y una mirada me escudriñó. Eran unos ojos intensos en una cara que no acababa de mostrar su cuerpo. Parpadeó, dijo mi nombre con interrogación y tras mi "soy yo", abrió del todo y entré.

No me tendió la mano y, tras cerrar la puerta, se giró enseguida indicando que la siguiera. La Señora andaba muy recta, era delgada, aparentaba más de sesenta años, aunque sin poder asegurar si incluso

tenía más de setenta. No sabía su nombre porque no mostró ninguna intención de decírmelo. Tenía curiosidad y a la vez cierta preocupación. No me había extrañado que no hubiera fotos de la casa en la web, debido a su insistencia en la confidencialidad, pero alguna experiencia desagradable me hacía ser cauto antes de decir que aceptaba. Aunque, ante la dificultad del proceso de alquiler, también cabía la posibilidad de que finalmente no fuera yo el aceptado. Con movimientos pausados, no tanto debido a su edad sino más bien por una elegancia natural, me enseñó una habitación amplia con un armario antiguo, una mesa de caoba en una esquina y una puerta que comunicaba con un cuarto de baño. Me pareció lujosa para su precio y dije que me quedaba. Me había estado observando en silencio mientras me guiaba por la casa, y tras unos segundos en que me miraba fijo a los ojos dijo: "De acuerdo". No me pidió documentación ni dinero por adelantado. Sólo añadió: "Espero que cumpla las normas". Extrajo de un bolsillo las llaves de la casa y el portal y me las entregó. Sin aclarar nada más, se fue hacia el final de un largo pasillo. Me había quedado parado mirándola andar y cuando pasó por una de las puertas, sin volverse, la señaló indicando: "Puede usar este cuarto de lectura".

Después de dejar mi maleta en mi habitación, di un paseo exploratorio. En el hall de la entrada además de la puerta que daba acceso al pasillo, había otras puertas grandes que estaban cerradas. A pesar de mi curiosidad, imponían respeto y no me atreví a abrirlas. La frase tajante de la Señora de que esperaba que cumpliese las normas, me hacía ser prudente. Evocando películas antiguas, me contenté con imaginar unos espaciosos salones con espejos y pesadas cortinas de seda.

Llevaba cinco días en la casa, aunque mi intención inicial había sido quedarme sólo dos o tres. Como no tenía ningún plan definido y algo me evocabía la canción de los Eagles *Hotel California*, siempre encontraba argumentos románticos para quedarme. Durante el día, daba paseos al azar para descubrir calles y edificios. Llevaba en el bolsillo una novela de serie negra que había comprado el primer día en una tienda de libros de segunda mano. No conocía al autor, ni la leía tratando de acabarla, sólo el nombre de la editorial, Club del crimen, me había impulsado a su compra. Me era muy útil cuando me sentaba para observar a la gente, a veces hacía como que leía y así evitaba parecer un fisiólogo molesto.

La Señora nunca puso ningún inconveniente cuando le decía que ampliaba mi estancia otro día más. Me contestaba un "bien" seco y se volvía a unos quehaceres indefinidos que la movían de un sitio para otro. No me hacía ninguna referencia al pago, así que supuse que el precio diario se mantendría tal como había visto en la web.

En el paseo matutino de ese quinto día, observé a una atractiva mujer, que miraba con detenimiento los portales y las casas comparándolas con una fotografía de tonos color sepia que llevaba en la mano. Tenía una melena rubia con flequillo y ojos que se movían rápidamente. Hacía fotos de las casas con el móvil y después escribía en él alguna referencia. En un arranque de osadía que me sorprendió a mí mismo, me dirigí a ella indicándole que un poco más arriba, en esa misma calle, había una casa donde se alquilaban habitaciones. Me asombraba a mí mismo la elocuencia con la que trataba de convencerla para que alquilara una habitación a la Señora. Tal vez, esa energía se debía a que se acercaba el final de mi viaje.

No parecía que le hubiera asustado mi atrevimiento, aunque mientras le hablaba se mantenía un poco apartada y ligeramente ladeada. Apenas respondía a mi locuacidad con monosílabos. Escuchaba mi descripción de la casa, sin expresar ninguna emoción que pudiera interpretar. Para hacerle más atractiva la opción, le conté, añadiendo algo de misterio, la pregunta que debía contestar para ser aceptada. Ante la mención de Tomás Moro, claramente mostró un mayor interés en mi persona. Me preguntó, con un acento raro, por mi respuesta a la pregunta, pero vi que sólo apuntaba el y la dirección del piso. Con un seco "gracias", me dio a entender que la conversación había acabado y se dio la vuelta en dirección hacia la casa. Continué mi paseo con el ánimo entre divertido e inquieto, ante la idea de haber influido en el destino de una vida ajena y también por si pudiera estar alterando el mío.

No me extrañó al verla más tarde, a la hora de comer. Estaba sentada muy recta, imponiendo una presencia un poco turbadora al comedor. La recordaba menos alta, aunque sí su pañuelo gris anudado al cuello.

Las normas de la casa las aprendías sin que en ningún momento la Señora te las dijera. El primer día de mi estancia, al salir hacia la calle para dar un paseo, ví abierta una de las puertas del *hall* de entrada. Me asomé. Era un comedor con aparadores grandes en las paredes y la gran mesa estaba puesta con dos cubiertos. Apareció de repente la Señora y me dijo: "En esta casa se come a las dos y media". Antes de que pudiera preguntar si es que había otro inquilino, añadió: "Espero que le guste el menú, no soy vegetariana y habrá carne". Aunque no tenía pensado volver a mediodía, la atracción por saber más de su persona y la seducción de participar en un juego en el que sólo se pueden decir frases cortas con muchos datos incrustados, me hizo contestar en su estilo lacónico: "Yo tampoco". Daba por supuesto que la Señora había entendido el mensaje doble de que volvería a comer y que era consciente que comeríamos los dos solos.

La comida en sí no era de una elaboración sofisticada, pero la materia prima sí era de buena calidad y estaba bien condimentada. Nos servía un mayordomo corpulento, de porte fiero, que traía en una gran bandeja los platos ya servidos. Antes de que dijera nada, al sentarnos, la Señora me dijo que el almuerzo estaba incluido en el precio. Me pareció que entonces el alquiler era muy barato, pero coherente con otras sorpresas de la casa. Deduje a mi vuelta del paseo que no se cenaba, porque la puerta del comedor permanecía cerrada el resto del día.

Mi habitación comunicaba con un cuarto de baño espacioso, en el que la bañera hacía los honores a su nombre. Desde ahí era donde podía oír algo de la actividad de la nueva inquilina, aquella que había conocido en la calle y que ahora ocupaba el siguiente cuarto del pasillo. Suponía que hacía gimnasia, o eso me parecía deducir de unos sonidos producidos por movimientos rítmicos, en momentos variados del día. Como yo solía salir de paseo a menudo, no podía deducir la lógica de sus actividades.

En su primer día de estancia, cuando coincidimos en el comedor, pude apreciar que se manejaba mejor que yo con los protocolos no expresados de convivencia. No se hablaba, excepto cuando la Señora se dirigía a alguien. El mayordomo no dejaba dudas de cuándo se debía acabar el plato con celeridad. Los ritmos los ponía la Señora sin hacer ningún gesto especial. Me pareció que el mayordomo entendía que debía cambiar los platos cuando su mirada se fijaba en el infinito y no cuando contemplaba abstraída su plato o algún objeto del comedor.

En el postre se hablaba. La Señora me preguntaba sin mucho interés por los lugares que había visitado. Si la conversación decaía, volvía a hacer preguntas sobre algún aspecto de lo que le había contado. Alguna vez comenzaba a narrar un recuerdo lejano asociado a lo que yo describía, pero lo solía dejar sin concluir abandonándose en una ensueño. Cuando había finalizado su postre, y sin ningún miramiento, daba por terminada la conversación y se levantaba. No había café, ni sobremesa, ya que el mayordomo recogía los platos con firmeza dando señales claras de que se debía abandonar el comedor.

El mutismo de la nueva inquilina parecía encajar perfectamente con el entorno. De ella sólo pude saber con cierta precisión su nombre, Marlene, y su nacionalidad, austriaca. Dejó claro en el inicio del almuerzo que no conocía bien el idioma y que prefería no hablar. Yo propuse que lo hiciésemos en inglés, pero la Señora lo impidió diciendo que no se manejaba bien en ese idioma. Sin embargo, en el postre, cuando estaba haciendo la descripción de mi paseo, Marlene intervino de repente preguntando directamente a la Señora si conocía una ciudad de nombre extraño. La Señora se volvió hacia ella bruscamente y la miró como si tratara de reconocer a alguien que ha cambiado con el tiempo. Marlene, impasible, añadió en alemán una pregunta que no entendí. Por la mirada petrificada de la Señora, deduje que se estaba saltando una de las normas no escritas. La conversación quedó suspendida en el aire, la Señora no volvió a preguntarme nada más, finalizó su postre con más celeridad que de costumbre y se levantó. Ya de pie, miró hacia Marlene y dijo: "Warum?". Mi escaso conocimiento del alemán no me permitía comprender el significado de la pregunta que tanto la había alterado. Marlene la miró desafiante, pero no añadió nada.

El mayordomo inició la retirada de los platos más despacio de lo habitual, midiendo sus movimientos y sin dejar de mirar de soslayo a la nueva inquilina. Marlene, como si no hubiera pasado nada, se volvió hacia mí y me sonrió con una mirada seductora. Cuando se levantaba, rozando mi mano, dijo:

“Hasta luego”. Con un andar de gato, se fue hacia su cuarto.

Era una propuesta sugestiva, pero me había inquietado tanto la situación que preferí tomar esa decisión a la vuelta de mi paseo. Cuando la Señora se había ido del comedor, su andar había sido menos solemne y su mirada menos abstraída. Tenía fruncidas las cejas como nunca antes le había visto.

A mi vuelta por la noche, me dirigí hacia la habitación de Marlène. Durante el paseo, la escena de la comida me había vuelto repetidamente a la cabeza envuelta en una sensación desagradable. Permanecí de pie frente a su puerta y aunque no oía ningún ruido, estaba convencido de que Marlène estaba al otro lado y que me había oído acercarme. La imaginé sentada en una butaca, mirando a la puerta con una sonrisa burlona, sintiéndose poderosa porque manejaba la situación mucho mejor que yo. La atracción física que había experimentado al conocerla en la calle había desaparecido. Me dí media vuelta y tratando de parecer desafiante me dirigí a mi cuarto sin preocuparme de no hacer ruido.

Tardé mucho en dormirme.

Al día siguiente, ocurrió algo que convirtió la encantadora curiosidad de los primeros días en un presentimiento que me hacía estar en alerta. En ninguno de mis movimientos por la casa me crucé con la Señora. No me había sucedido en los días anteriores. Aunque solía moverme poco, ella siempre aparecía desde algún lugar. Sin embargo, las normas no habían cambiado y puntualmente la comida estaba servida con tres cubiertos. Nos miramos en silencio, la Señora más seria de lo habitual y Marlène, que no parecía afectada por mi abandono a su ofrecimiento, miraba a la Señora con la altivez de la esfinge que espera una respuesta a su pregunta.

El segundo plato era pescado. La Señora estaba agitada, se podía apreciar por el descuido con el que separaba las espinas. En un momento dado se atragantó y con desasosiego adelantó la mano hacia su vaso. Marlène con un movimiento rápido, como si quisiera ayudar a dárselo, chocó con él derramándolo sobre la mesa. El mayordomo en ese momento no estaba. La Señora aterrizada convulsionaba emitiendo una especie de ronquidos. Marlène me miró por un segundo y me pareció ver en su cara una medio sonrisa. Me quedé paralizado. Pasado un espacio muy corto de tiempo, pero para mí agobiante, Marlène tomó su vaso de agua y se lo ofreció a la Señora, quien la miraba a los ojos emitiendo ya para entonces unos bramidos de espanto. Marlène se puso de pie, levantó de la silla sin esfuerzo a la Señora y rodeando su cuerpo desde la espalda, la oprimió bruscamente. Una bola blanca salió expulsada de su boca. Entró el mayordomo alarmado y se llevó a la Señora trastabillando hacia las habitaciones del final del pasillo. Marlène, entendiendo el protocolo no expresado, dobló su servilleta y se levantó dejando el plato a medias. Me miró con complicidad y se dirigió a su cuarto. Estaba hambriento y no me quedó mejor opción que acabar mi comida en un bar cercano.

En el bar había mucho ruido y el plato que me trajeron me pareció basto y demasiado especiado. Las emociones me desazonaban y volví decidido a hablar con Marlène. Quería quitarme la impresión de maldad de lo ocurrido y marcharme al día siguiente.

Golpeé la puerta de su cuarto. Escuché un “adelante” y la abrí. Sorprendentemente me recibió hablando en un español bastante fluido sobre lo interesante y amigable que era la ciudad. Me miraba intensamente y entonces me pareció infantil preguntarle si había tirado el vaso a propósito para hacer sufrir más a la Señora. Se había levantado de su silla y se acercaba hacia mí despacio. Me pareció más alta y fuerte que en otras ocasiones. Dí un paso hacia atrás y choqué con algo. Me di media vuelta y abrí la puerta con nerviosismo mientras escuchaba detrás una risa cínica de superioridad y desprecio.

Furioso, me dirigí al final del pasillo y llamé a la puerta. Quería irme enseguida y pretendía pagar mi estancia. Era la única puerta con cerradura y estaba cerrada. Esperé alguna respuesta y enseguida me abrió el mayordomo. Precipitadamente le dije que me iba y que cuánto debía. Se quedó callado y me di cuenta que nunca le había oído hablar. Saqué mi cartera y haciendo unas torpes multiplicaciones decidí que con los billetes que le extendía había de sobra. Que si sobraba lo dejaba de propina. Que

me iba y que no quería hablar con nadie más. El mayordomo cogió los billetes y se volvió hacia el interior, dejando la puerta abierta.

Hacía la maleta velozmente, cuando la puerta de mi cuarto se abrió sin que nadie hubiera llamado. Era Marlène, su cuerpo bloqueaba el vano ostensiblemente para indicarme que no podría pasar.

—¿Te vas a ir sin despedirte para siempre de la Señora? —Dijo con una sonrisa malvada.

—Me voy, ya he pagado y no quiero quedarme más. Adiós. —Añadió tratando de darme ánimos con esas frases contundentes.

Dándole la espalda seguí con mi tarea. Ella no se movía, pero empezó a hablar en un tono un poco ronco, como de rabia, sobre las personas que no merecen vivir por sus faltas pasadas. Se calló un momento y añadió con una voz menos emotiva “te agradezco tu colaboración al dejar abierta la puerta de la Señora”. Un escalofrío recorrió mi espalda. La nuca se tensó y mis piernas se flexionaron un poco. Me giré dispuesto a cualquier movimiento de ataque o de defensa. Ya no estaba.

Me fui de la casa. Bajé en un ascensor que siempre me pareció lento, pero esa vez más. Cuando salía del portal, unas personas gritaban alrededor de un cuerpo caído. Reconocí a la Señora. Miré hacia arriba y desde un balcón, una figura enorme asomada me saludó. Enseguida abandonó el balcón tirando algo que cayó con un sonido sordo. En el suelo reconocí el objeto. Era una peluca rubia.

HAPPY NOW

Luis Vivanco (México-Spain)

PROFESSOR

The rays of a dying sun came through the window and hit my eyes. I had been sitting in the meeting room for over five minutes but had not noticed until then. In a few more minutes the sun would be covered by the building across the street but I decided to move to the other side of the table anyhow. Ron was about to come in and I certainly didn't want any distractions while I spoke with him. I had been in that room hundreds of times over the few years that I had been working for NetDuct but it felt different this time, warmer, and not because of the hued tint of the light, a room more of my own. I had been looking forward to this meeting and the role I would have when I walked out of it. The image of Emma laughing appeared briefly in my mind but this meeting was not about the past but the future. I heard the steps approaching the door. This was my day, I had felt since I woke up, my thoughts already on the meeting that was about to begin.

I turned my face towards the alarm clock and the red numbers stared back at me. I still had half an hour before I needed to get up. I looked at the window, searching for the early morning light still to appear. In the darkness of the room, I could feel the heat emanating from Angela's body, along with the sound of her gentle and rhythmic snoring from the opposite side of the bed. I could approach and put my arms around her. I knew, without fully understanding why, that she was more receptive towards making love in these conditions: early in the morning, in the dark, without talking, almost anonymously. I tried to imagine her breasts and the curve of her waist as she lay on her side, but the details of the micro-payments procedures interfered with the quasi-humorous erotic images in my mind, and my nether parts refused to respond. I love breasts, and I could say that this was especially true of Angela's, but I would be lying. I love well-shaped breasts, large and small, preferably if they protrude from a lean torso providing an ideal frame for them over which to dominate. I could remember actresses by their breast types, at least those who had shown them on screen. There is, of course, the stereotype about men's fixation with breasts, but I think the stereotype is there for good reason. Why do roosters lack hands? Because hens have no breasts, or was it lips? I can't remember, but one way or another the point is made. That's what did it for me, that and nice hair. Nothing like long, silky hair swaying loose to complement a pair of breasts yet to be explored. Angela had the breasts (and the torso for that matter) that met all my requirements: they had remained erect even after bearing two sons. At least in part, her breasts had benefited from not having generated enough milk to feed Nick and the doctor confirming that there was nothing to do other than resorting to formula. They were my resource every time I wanted to be aroused. I imagined Angela before me, the silk baby-doll she bought for our honeymoon falling from her shoulders, softly slipping down, freeing itself until, after the briefest of pauses, it laid bare one of her breasts and finally the other. But at that moment, the only things being uncovered by silk were marketing campaigns designed to attract customers to the new company. I knew I would not be able to fall asleep again, yet I lingered in bed with my eyes closed. When I opened them again, after what seemed like two minutes, the alarm clock revealed it was six thirty-five. I closed my eyes hard, ordering the sleep away. I could not believe twenty minutes had passed, yet there were the three digits, 6, 3, 5 followed by two small letters in the lower right corner of the screen: *am*. The alarm would ring in ten minutes. I stretched my arm to turn it off; I would have a long shower, I thought.

"I'll get up," said Angela as I walked in the dark towards the bathroom.

"You still have ten minutes," I said.

"Are you ok?"

That's the thing about Angela. Anything that falls outside of the normal: if you arrive early or call to say you're going to be late, if you cough, if you turn your head away from the book you're reading to when something catches your eye, anything she doesn't expect and her initial conclusion will be that some ill has befallen you.

"Yes. Everything is fine."

"Why are you getting up so early then?" she asked, her voice still hoarse but increasingly animated.

"It's nothing," I said. I was starting to become annoyed by the need to explain such a stupid thing. "I woke up and thought I could have a shower without rushing, that's all." I could've told her that I had woken up twenty minutes before, thinking about work, but that would've only resulted in more explanations. I shut the bathroom door.

By the time I finished my daily ablutions, including shaving, I was probably still ahead of schedule by the same ten minutes. I changed the showerhead setting to "massage", while I went over my day. That's something I like doing: to create a mental image of my main activities and objectives for each day. Sometimes, during "transition" days, when no major activities were planned, I forgot to go through the exercise (which on a normal day I'd do while driving to work) and before I knew it and started in on any activity, half the day was over. All I had accomplished was to carry out a bunch of circumstantial errands that added little or no value. So it was my purpose, even on that type of day, to set myself objectives such as "clearing my email" or "doing my expense account" or even "having lunch with so-and-so to understand why he was underperforming, and try to motivate". My list for the day looked as follows:

8.30 Meet with Matthew in the cafeteria next to the ad agency to finish preparing for our meeting with them. Use the opportunity to mention the possibility that he may take my current job.

9.00 Meeting with ad agency to assess their capabilities in viral marketing for the launch of the micro-payment business.

11.00 Back to the office. Review the presentation and incorporate input from the meeting with the ad agency. Make sure the storyline flows.

12.30 Lunch with Andrew. Note: be careful not to end up organising anything social without ensuring I want to continue with the relationship (call him for the name of the restaurant).

14.30 Presentation of micro-payment business plan to Rod. Seek commitment to a launch date. Clarify transition plan.

Other: call Alan to inquire about his mother's health.

I figured I still had five minutes left, but I was starting to tire of the hot water stream. I turned the tap off.

I crossed paths with Angela on my way to the kitchen. She stood on her toes to kiss me on the cheek.

"Morning. I'll get into the shower."

She continued down the corridor to our bedroom. In the kitchen, the kids were having breakfast. A faint sun, still in the process of waking, streamed through the window, shedding light on the ephemeral tranquillity of my equally sleepy sons. My entry did not elicit any reaction.

"Good morning, kids," I said... nothing. Their eyes were still half-closed.

Lucas was holding a butter and jelly sandwich into which he had taken one bite. Nicholas abstractedly looked at the dish with biscuits in front of him.

I started to prepare the coffee that Angela and I would drink. I turned on the espresso machine and changed the old coffee in the dispenser for new. It would take a few minutes for the machine to reach the correct temperature. I took a couple of croissants from the sealed bread compartment and put them on a plate. Eleven years before, when we were newly married, Angela would insist in preparing a full breakfast: eggs, orange juice, toasts, croissants, all of it, coffee, too. I welcomed it after a life in which, since my mother died when I was eight, the only good breakfasts I had were those at a cafeteria at weekends when I started running at eighteen. Angela enjoyed cooking and, as is often the case with those who enjoy it, she was good at it. As I got married and became a father, I had learned to appreciate the effort my own father had put into learning to cook and taking the time to do it every day for my siblings and me. Although the expression "learning to cook" in his case had been limited to mixing the ingredients in a cookery book recipe and not burning the food, rather than grasping the nuances between the barely edible and the desirable. There was nothing that elicited more dread in his children than the following conversation:

Any of us: What's for dinner?

My father: Something you will like.

With time, my sister, my two brothers and I developed an uncanny ability to get invited to our friends' homes for lunch or dinner. Once, when I must have been about twelve years of age, I found a note in the street. Instead of spending the money on sweets or comic books, as would any other kid, I found a cafeteria and ordered pancakes, a staple of every home and, as cooked by my well-meaning father, well below the average. Such was my hunger for tasty food. Following the birth of Nicolas I had found myself abruptly and suddenly back in my childhood uncooked breakfast of croissants or toasts when the priority went from pampering your couple to caring for, and later providing breakfast to and dressing, the children.

We had become parents.

There was a cereal box left on the counter. I opened the lower cupboard door and squatted to put away. My recently acquired belly, the product of too many business dinners, pushed my belt outward, screaming for space. I wondered if instead of putting the cereal back, maybe I should eat some instead of the two croissants waiting for me on the plate. I heard Nicolas complaining behind me.

"Stop it!"

I glanced over my shoulder. Lucas's arm stretched towards Nick's plate. I put the cereal in its place and stood up. The two croissants seemed to look me in the eye, triumphant. I heard the "click" of the coffee machine indicating it had reached the correct temperature. I pushed the On button. A few seconds passed and the machine made a few internal noises, then the coffee started to flow, slowly at first and, following a brief pause, more fluidly. I closed my eyes to enjoy the aroma the moment it hit me. The first morning coffee and a hot shower were, for their proximity, the clearest incentives to get out of bed in the morning.

"I said stop it!" screamed Nick.

"What is the matter?" I said, reluctantly abandoning the pleasure derived from making my coffee. I put on my *Father Knows Best*, full of authority yet understanding. I had never seen the '50s series but I imagined the protagonist of any program with that title must have spoken the way I was speaking at that moment.

"Lucas has taken my fork," he said, righteous.

"I had it first, Daaad!" spat back Lucas.

Each had a bowl of cereal and milk. A blue spoon handle emerged from each.

"Why don't you let your brother have it?" I said, in an attempt to reach a quick settlement in a situation in which neither child required a fork.

"I don't want to."

"Don't be selfish. Let Lucas have it."

Nick's reluctance was becoming the main obstacle to the possibility of enjoying my breakfast. My coffee grew cold like an offended lover, and its abundant aromas had started to abandon it.

"It is MINE and I WANT it."

It was true; the fork was part of two sets we had bought, with different themes, for them the previous Christmas. Spiderman for Nicolas and Pooh for Lucas. As in many legal disputes: building occupancy, child custody, etc., possession became an overwhelming argument.

"Nicolas. Your brother had it first. Give it back to him." *Father Knows Best* showed a hint of annoyance for the first time.

"No."

"If you don't hand it back to him immediately, you won't play with your PSP this afternoon."

"Give it to me!" said Lucas

"You keep quiet while I speak with your brother! If you open your mouth one more time it is I who will keep the fork, you hear me?" Father no longer knew best.

Nick slammed the fork on the table, just beyond Lucas's reach. I wondered if further action was required on my part. His brother had already grabbed it by standing on his chair. Nick, chin in chest, looked at him from the side. My coffee kept growing colder but, after all, it was his fork. He was right to feel aggrieved.

As I settled in my chair to drink my coffee, I looked again at Nick who gave me eyes that said *I wish Mom were here instead of you; she would've taken my side.*

That's the thing with children, they are pure outrage where the outrage towards a brother is the worse for being positional and zero-sum. The greater one brother's gain, the greater the other's indignation.

I finished my coffee and was walking towards the bedroom to say goodbye to Angela when I felt my suit softly pulled from below. It was Nick.

"What's up, midget?" I said, using my usual term of endearment for both.

"This afternoon, when you get home, can we go bicycle riding?"

I knew he was seeking reassurance following the friction during breakfast, but I also knew it was unlikely that I would be back before their bedtime.

"Why don't we do it Saturday?" I said

"I wanted to do it today." "You know Dad doesn't come home early on workdays. Plus you have homework to do."

"It's better to leave it for the weekend," I said to justify myself.

"You said the same last week and we didn't go."

"I promise we'll go cycling this Saturday as soon as you finish breakfast, how's that?" I said, crossing my fingers on top of my heart. I said, promising myself to do it every weekend from then on, just as I had done months before only to abandon it after a single Saturday, "I have to go now."

Nick winced and headed back towards the kitchen.

I'd heard about this cafeteria before and, now that we were there, I wasn't disappointed. It was spacious, informal and full of light and it was decorated in a low-key way that imitated the cafeterias we had eaten at in Amsterdam during our trip to Europe three years before. Each set of table and chairs espoused a different style, some older and some more modern in design, and while some chairs were upholstered and others not, all the furniture followed a simple design and was made of different tonalities of wood which, somehow, united the whole place in a common theme. Above our table hung a large glass chandelier reminiscent of those used at the turn of the XXth century. From its anchor on the high ceiling emanated naked cables stapled every few feet until they turned down the wall to enter, finally, a raw piece of plastic hose sticking out a couple of inches. Food, so far, hadn't been bad either, a mix of Northern European and North American dishes in hefty portions more reminiscent of the latter. I had my eye on a raisin scone once I finished the cream cheese and smoked salmon bagel I was eating. I had to bring Angela and the kids here soon.

"I'm happy with Charlotte. But Monica, the girl I told you I met at the beach this summer, she won't let up calling me. I don't know, man, I truly don't know what to do." Matthew was not the type of guy who needed much warm-up to dive into whatever subject was on his mind, even if it was what most people would consider intimate, as it usually was, and after ten minutes, we were already pleasantly discussing his favourite subject.

"I don't know why I like British girls so much. Sweet Jesus, I thank You for the moment You decided to send me here. I really don't know if I should thank Him or complain instead." His face said his worry was equal parts reality and jest.

Normally I would've stopped Matthew's verbiage to focus on the forth-coming meeting. But twenty minutes earlier, as I drove to the cafeteria, I had received a call from Lewis Morris, the manager in charge of our account at the ad agency, asking if it was all right to postpone the meeting until 9.30, so I let Matthew carry on.

"But are you honestly interested in this Monica or is it the adulation that gets you?" I said, enjoying it and not altogether serious.

"I don't know, man, truly don't know," he repeated. "She's got a body to die for, but she's also a tease, if I've ever seen one. She calls to meet up and when I try to make a move, she stops me. I've barely made it to second base, man!" he waved his hands out to the side. "I've told her, look, if she's going to call me it'll be to meet at her apartment or a hotel."

The situation reminded me of any given episode of *Entourage*, where the main characters live in a constant quest for sex while making other inconsequential decisions. In fact, that was the show's main attraction for me. The fact that it was trivial and thus took me away from any kind of concerns, even imagined ones.

The waitress approached our table with a big tray carrying croissants, pain-au-chocolat, brioches and pain au raisins. I was indulging in a second breakfast, and as the first one barely counted, I decided not to restrict myself and have both a pain-au-chocolat and a brioche, which I loved for its elastic texture and yeasty flavour. I had a good feeling about the day, and even the delay in our meeting with Lewis Morris I took as a good omen that allowed me to enjoy breakfast and chat with Matthew. I took pleasure in serving as a career mentor and found entertaining my occasional role as mentor on the personal side, for while my time as a single professional had been comparatively quieter, my motives had been the same. I was aware that when I provoked him, my own assumptions were also questioned as an unintended side effect. I made a mental note to interrupt our conversation fifteen minutes before the meeting to speak with Matthew about the project's implications for my role in the company and, consequently, his.

"I swear to God I don't know what to do with this girl. I just like her too much," said Matthew, continuing on his life and sexual fantasies.

"Let me ask you something, Matthew," I said nonchalantly. "Are you sure this is the woman to whom you want to sacrifice your virginity?" "You're such a fucker!" said Matthew, laughing along with me.

There was something about the furniture that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It had to do with continuity among the different styles. Contrary to my initial impression, I was beginning to see that the effect was not really the result of an outstanding decorator who had known how to mix styles. It now seemed like a walk through Ikea, as if all the furniture had been designed by the same person and built in the same production line. The comforting spontaneity had acquired a lack of honesty comparable to a TGI Friday's, almost a McDonald's. I looked closely at the table at which we were sitting. It had no tablecloth, and I lowered my head to view its underside. It was made of compressed wood – Ikea type stuff. The place was fake and it knew it.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said, regaining my upright position.

"Did you drop something? Otherwise, why are you looking under the table?"

"Nothing important," I insisted. Maybe I wouldn't bring Angela and the boys, after all. There was, nonetheless, something both homogeneous and reassuring about the customers. It wasn't that everybody was wearing a tie or business suit like us, for the way people were dressed was pretty mixed. It was more to do with the casual atmosphere that seemed to exist at every table, creating an overall sense of relaxation, happy but not overly, boisterous without being strident. After a quick glance, I figured that almost all of the occupants had small children, teenagers at most, who attended private school. When I was sixteen or eighteen, I remember that every place I went seemed to be filled with people my own age while other ages seemed to exist only in token quantities. Although more than twenty years had passed, my impression was the same: people of my own age group seemed to multiply to the detriment of those outside the bracket of people with small children. There was a large table (from where I was sitting it was difficult to tell whether it was round or oval), occupied by eight or nine women of 35 to 40. All were tastefully dressed and made up and, with the exception of two who were downright ugly, rather attractive. I considered sharing my thoughts with Matthew, but stopped at the prospect of his likely comeback that he preferred younger women.

"Say, what happened with that ad space saleswoman I introduced you to?" I asked.

Matthew offered no reluctance to the change of subject as long as it remained, I thought, within the larger theme of women.

"Fuck, man! Was she hot or what? Nothing. I called her and she said she had a boyfriend. I'm telling you, she was sexy by profession. Did you ever see her again?"

"Nah! Besides being happily married, it wasn't hard to imagine that her cleavage and the way she continuously fondled her hair, passing it over one shoulder and then the other, were nothing more than a ruse to close sales more than an indication of her enchantment with me. Not that I'm saying that would've been unusual! But, you're right. She was hot." In the end, without an inordinate sense of shame, I had purchased more space in her magazine than I had originally budgeted. Against my better judgement, the shadow of doubt hinting at a spontaneous element in her flirtation, plus her saying goodbye French style, with a kiss on each cheek, had been enough for me to be grateful and in a good mood for the rest of the day. I insisted that she came back the following day to sign the papers. But the real purpose was to have an occasion to introduce her to Matthew, so he could be my avatar to test the hypothesis that my married status didn't allow me.

"Monica is the same; she wears a long skirt so she can show her leg." I didn't understand what he was talking about.

"As far as I recall, she was not wearing a skirt, long or otherwise."

"No, man, I mean figuratively. Let me ask you something, what excites you more? A girl in a short skirt or one in a long skirt with a long slit on one side through which her leg shows every time she takes a step? Aha!" Matthew waved his finger at me with the biggest grin in his face, while I laughed at the more than obvious answer.

"Monica, as I said, knows how to hide her hand and show her cards in a way that keeps you wanting for more. That's the leg peeking through the skirt, it's not what she says or doesn't say, it's what she hints at. You know what I mean?"

"And regardless, in the long run it's immaterial."

"Who cares what happens in the long run, man? What I care about is if I'm going to be able to fuck her tomorrow... tonight! The only 'long run' at issue is how long she'll keep up with me in bed."

I laughed at the pun. His jokes were far from good and often coarse, but that didn't keep him from trying. The conversation reminded me of a time, years before I got married, even before I had started dating Angela, when my life shared many similarities with Matthew's. Suddenly, I wanted to ask him his view on life and its rewards, and living without attachments. But I realised that a large factor of Matthew's current life was an almost absolute lack of self-analysis and thus he wouldn't have been able to provide me with the answers I sought. Furthermore, it was I, with the advantage of hindsight, who was in a better position to come up with such conclusions.

"It's fine to be in love and full of passion," I said

"Passion AND sex, I would add."

"All perfectly fine... while it lasts."

"Let's see," said Matthew, maybe not more serious but at least more focused. "I'd say that at least when you are married you don't have to waste time convincing your wife to make love." "You don't?"

"Don't you?"

"It becomes second priority, it's not even the main objective. I mean making love, of course. What's really important is the anticipation you are able to generate, I think."

"Come again?"

"Look, several years before I got married, I must have been about thirty years old. Come to think of it, it was the very summer I turned thirty. I was involved in a project that took me to New York for three months. There was a girl in the office, local girl from one of the lower middle class neighbourhoods across the Hudson. Nice girl she was, always willing to lend a hand in everything, be it work-related or not."

"Yeah, cool. But was she hot?" he asked.

"She was hot, no worries. She certainly didn't have the greatest taste in clothes or in general, but she was attractive enough. Heather was her name. The most alluring thing about her was a certain vulnerability. I may have been the only one to perceive it, and it may have been the result of her being attracted to me, which I was to discover later."

"This is getting good, man."

"You see what I mean about anticipation? To make a long story short, one day we agreed to go out to dinner. I was the one to propose it, but only after receiving several no-so-subtle hints about how 'we should go out for a drink sometime'. We agreed to meet at a given hour outside a tube station." "Subway station."

"I beg your pardon?"

"They are called subway stations in New York, that's what they're called."

"All right! Of course. Well, as I was saying, we agreed to meet outside a *subway* station, somewhere on the Upper West Side, can't remember the name. I may as well tell you now that nothing happened: I never slept with her."

"Damn it!"

"The one recurring thought I have is this: as I went past the exit barriers, there was a relatively wide corridor that ran for about thirty yards to a point where it gave way to doors leading to each side of the street. There was Heather, leaning against the wall in a tight dark skirt and a white blouse. Her long blonde hair falling on her shoulders, her hands hidden behind her back. I don't know how best to describe it; the only adjective that comes to mind is 'expectant'. As I approached her, she gave me this slightest and, I think, shy smile. She stepped forward, one single step, enough only not to be touching the wall anymore, but she didn't reach me. As I closed the distance to her, I leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek."

I had Matthew's full attention.

"As I don't need to remind you, in the US, and certainly in New York City, it is not precisely normal to greet someone with a kiss as we do in Europe, even if not so much in Britain. My impression at that moment was that, as she was unaccustomed, my approach took her by surprise, but it took her only a fraction of an instant to react and press her cheek against mine, let's say with a little more intent and for a split second longer than strictly required."

"Maybe it was, as you say, due to not being used to it."

"Your point is totally valid and equally irrelevant. The whole episode, from the moment I saw her at the end of that corridor, vulnerable, expectant, her body like a paper cut-out perfectly delineated against the wall, her inquisitive immobility awaiting my next step and, finally, the warmth of her cheek and the proximity of her body seemed to initiate, to suggest if you will, a night full of promise. What truly matters is that I remember every detail, so that the sole thought of it gives me an erection." I confirmed that was true also then.

"So, what became of her?" said Matthew, to my surprise. I was expecting him to seize the opportunity to make a joke about my aforementioned erection. Was Matthew in possession of an overactive libido? Yes. Was he an idiot incapable of seeing beyond it? Clearly not.

"We had a good time that night. We ate at an unpretentious but nice enough restaurant where the mood between us became more personal. After dinner we went to a bar. We kissed for the first time as we left the restaurant, and continued to kiss spontaneously and often as we made our way to the bar. We had a couple of drinks before we said goodbye and I put her in a taxi. It was mid-week and we both had to get up early, plus her apartment and my hotel were in opposite directions. The following day she sent me an email thanking me and telling me she had had a good time. I had started to think about the next time we would go out from the moment her waist slipped away from my hands as we were saying goodbye. Unfortunately, I started to travel more and, finally, the project was cut short and I never saw her again, other than a couple of times when we ran into each other at project meetings.

"I would've been devastated not to fuck her," said Matthew, resuming his natural state.

"I'm sure about that," I laughed derisively, "but do you understand what I mean about the sensuality inherent in suggestion?"

"Oh, absolutely. The question then, is what do you do when you've been married for years?"

"You learn to pretend," I heard myself saying. The response was as unexpected as if someone else had said it.

"Wow! You mean you fake it."

"No, no!" I tried to recant. "There are times when you fall back on the mechanics of making love. You turn the light off, you make love, perhaps you say a few sweet little things to create intimacy or arousal, but when you're through you turn around and go to sleep, or you get up and have a shower if it's morning. But other times, you try to create a moment. You go out for dinner, you dress sharp, she puts on makeup, and you seek, maybe, to recreate the conditions of a first date. You pretend that the evening's outcome is up in the air and that it depends on a game of seduction that is not entirely false, for any of the many issues couples have can pop up at any time and fuck the whole evening. But a game, all the same, which is predetermined and implicitly guaranteed to lead to a desired outcome." Matthew nodded. I tried to remember the last time Angela and I had gone through the ritual I'd just described, but all I could remember was a furtive morning episode two weeks before, while the boys were still sleeping. "Maybe to pretend is not the best way of putting it. What you have to understand is that it is the same woman who doesn't allow you to relax in the evenings by pestering you with all types of worries, real and imaginary, but also the one who eases your mind during your moments of greatest despair. So you learn to choose your thoughts, you compartmentalise and forget that a few hours before she may have screamed at you for not picking up your underwear and instead you remember the girl she was when you first met."

It was twenty past nine and I would have to rush through the few points I wanted to discuss with Matthew before the meeting. I looked around for our waitress to ask for the bill. The girl, rather on the cute side, put her hand in her apron pocket and removed a stack of papers that she began to flip through as she walked toward us.

"Matthew, I did tell you the purpose of my meeting this afternoon, didn't I?"

"To formalise the micro-payments project and agree on a budget, right?"

The waitress placed the bill before me. I signalled her not to leave. It was 33 pounds. I took two 20-pound notes and handed them to her. "That's fine," I said, smiling. I tried to make sure to be nice to those who were in a position to serve me, be they waiters or shop clerks. It just seemed rude not to. The waitress walked away without a word.

"I'd say approve, rather than agree. The budget as such has already been agreed upon, but yes, that would be the purpose of the meeting," I said as, still perturbed by the waitress's lack of acknowledgement, I turned my attention to Matthew. "It is understood that I will lead the project, by Rod I mean, but I want to formalise it. What it means, however, is that someone will have to pick up my present duties. I'm going to propose that you be that person. They will probably strip off some of the responsibilities of the job, auditing the most likely, but you would still be basically responsible for all the analysis and project direction." Matthew stared right into my eyes. I had finally been able to grasp his undivided attention.

"Thanks, man. I mean *really* thanks. It means a lot that you place your trust in me." "Oh well, we still have to wait for Rod to agree, but I trust he will accept anything I propose." I looked at my watch. "We should go, or we'll end up being late. We can revisit the subject after this afternoon's meeting, if that's fine with you." I got up before he had the chance to do anything other than get up himself. Outside it was perceptibly warmer than when we'd arrived. It was going to be a hot afternoon.

As we crossed the street to get to the building where Lewis Morris's office was located, Matthew turned to me.

"Listen, I'm still thinking about what you said."

"I'll let you know what happens after the meeting, ok?" I said.

"No, not that. It's the other thing I'm talking about. Isn't it hard, after a while, how predictable a relationship can become?" I could see the subject had given a wee shake to his paradigms.

I paused to put my thoughts in order.

"I wouldn't say so. The ensuing stability is fundamental to the happiness you achieve."

Sinead breezes into my office as she often does, simply to say hello or to tell me something unrelated to work. She's wearing the same tight pullover that I've seen her in twice in the previous month. Her enormous breasts, round and firm like two boxing gloves aim at my sides, threatening to envelop me. The pullover enhances their presence, more so than if she were naked: this she knows. I suddenly need to know if her bra opens in the back and I will have to hold her to open it, or in the front and I will do it while we kiss or while she watches me expectantly. We are the last people in the office because I have been working on finishing the project and she, I have no idea as to why she's still there. I get up from my desk to indicate I'm having a break from work so that, as we've done so many times in the past, we can chat, and she can be at ease to tell me whatever is on her mind. But we both know the true reason why I get up and make my way around the desk to stand in front of her. It becomes inevitable for me to explore what I've known to be true ever since the day when Sinead first joined K&P, that her approaches, her concern for how things are going for me and even her overly cordial inquiries about my wife and kids, hide a deep attraction to me.

I come closer to her while she continues to talk until the gap is too small to be confused any longer with interest in her words. She pauses for a moment, reassessing the situation, then starts again, pretending normality, but her words lack intention. I continue to come closer until, finally, she falls silent. She turns her eyes up to face me, something she had avoided since I came around the desk, and says "What?" and that's that. Soon I'm lifting the pullover over those breasts. It's like a dance and she, good dancer that she is, allows me to lead, kissing me, turning around and holding her hair up so I can undo the small buckle of her brassiere (it opens in the back, I decide). I try to cover her breasts with my hands, but my hands are too small for the task. I feel her nipples, large like medieval coins, pink like raw meat. I realise the door is ajar, but I don't care. The danger of being discovered only increases my excitement. I consider what she says and what I say, but we don't say anything. We both understand that words are not only unnecessary but that they would, if anything, compromise the moment. We both understand that what is is, that there is no past other than unspoken desire and no more future than that which we will continue to create separately. I sit behind my desk watching her walk around my office with complete ease, looking at my diplomas, inspecting the clock on the shelf, picking up the paperweight from my desk bare naked. I watch with interest that body, at the border between voluptuous and fat, destined to attract the proposals of every widower and aging bachelor who sought renewed youth in Sinead's sweetness, which in the absence of a satisfactory suitor, was offered only to me.

The actual act is consummated with the office lights turned off. I can see the office building across the street where faceless janitors vacuum the carpet while I watch, sitting in my chair, with Sinead's breasts bouncing inches before me or, later, when I twist my neck up after kissing them, spread on her torso that lies on my desk amid crushed paper. But these actions are barely an outline, seen in a dim light. The clarity and detail evident from the moment Sinead comes into my office up to the time of my failed attempt to cover her breasts with my hands give way to a haze in which essential actions in approximate shape are the only thing to emerge.

I pick up the telephone before the first ring is through.

"How are we doing today?"

I feel the muscles in my back tighten.

"Not too bad, thanks. A bit concerned about the presentation, to tell the truth." I want to bring the conversation to a quick end.

"But of course! Your long-awaited presentation. Listen, are you in your office? What am I saying? Of

course you are, that's where I'm calling you, am I not? I'm coming over, I need to ask you something," she said and hung up, unaffected by what was meant to be a note of concern in my voice.

Twenty-seven seconds later:

"Knock, knock," I can see Sinead's face showing from behind the door.

"Come in."

She's wearing a loose cotton blouse, thick enough to disguise in part the shape of her breasts. This allows me to relax a bit. One might think I was obsessed, but their size was a defining characteristic of Sinead's, even for women. Once, in a meeting with the CEO, which I attended, Catherine Neighbours, the HR director, referred to her as "A lady with a very generous bosom" after several failed attempts to induce the CEO to put a face to the name. "Ah, yes," he said, nonchalantly.

I was finishing correcting one of the bullet points in my presentation and carried on until I felt Sinead standing next to my chair, the same chair in which I had imagined myself making love to her.

"Please forgive me," I said, looking up, "I can't seem to stop correcting every little detail in this presentation." I could detect her perfume and attempted almost instinctively not to inhale. I had never liked its sweet, penetrating odour and at that moment, its association to her proximity put me off.

"I just wanted to ask you a quick question. You see, this weekend is my friend Oscar's birthday and I would like to treat him out to dinner. Can you recommend a restaurant?"

"Is this *the* Oscar, the one you fancy?"

"Oh, stop being silly! I don't think it even crosses his mind," she said, laughing. But her ease didn't help me feel less awkward. If anything, I found her overly natural demeanour strange, almost intimate, ignorant of the sexual fantasy she had been part of earlier. My awkwardness was almost as real as if it had actually happened, and so was the remorse.

Once, during a business trip to Italy, I managed to miss my flight back from Milan. The only other flight that could bring me back before the weekend, without the purchase of a new ticket, left the next morning from Rome. By the time the airline sorted out the necessary arrangements, the only flight with seats available from Milan to Rome left at 11 pm. It was close to 1 am by the time I arrived at my hotel near Fiumicino. I realised I had never been to Rome, so I left my luggage in my room to head out to town. The taxi left me at St Peter's Square. For the following two hours I walked through empty streets where I would run on occasion into some beggar lying in a doorway, who would look at me from under his newspaper wrapping and dirty blanket until he ascertained that I posed no danger and went back to sleep. Near the Piazza del Popolo I walked into the only bar that was still open, only to walk right back out when I realised it was a whorehouse. I returned to the taxi stand I had seen at the Piazza del Popolo and was back at my hotel minutes before 4 am. I woke up three hours later, had a shower and took the courtesy shuttle to the airport. I fell asleep before take-off and didn't wake up until we landed in Heathrow. Even now, I'm not sure if I'd be accurate in saying I've been there. While Rome, where I've technically been, I need to recur to pictures in order to describe, and to movies in order to understand its ambiance, Sinead, with whom I've never had any contact other than that which one can share with a friend or colleague, I can describe in such detail as to make a fantasy seem real and, by comparison, what is real a mere figment of my imagination. And now her presence, real as it was, had the same remorseful effect on me as an actual sexual adventure would have provoked the morning after.

I looked again at my monitor. The chart with inverted red bars that became blue in the third year with a positive cash flow forecast of 780 thousand pounds winked at me like an old acquaintance. I was about to excuse myself with Sinead so that I could go back to my presentation before a moment of intellectual honesty came over me: that would be nothing more than an unfair excuse to get rid of her. I had been preparing the presentation and all the analysis behind it for weeks. I had spent all the

previous week just revising it and, by now, I could recite it from memory and knew, with the clarity of a toothache, the font used in every heading and the labels and colours of every graph. I could take additional respite in the additions made by the Lewis Morris ad campaign, which were both witty and communicative, as I had hoped. The presentation was ready and so was I. Now all that was left was to wait to present it to Rod.

“What are you looking for, food or ambiance?” I said, in reply to Sinead’s request for a restaurant recommendation.

“A bit of both, I guess.”

Sinead was right not to accept my inference. A restaurant that didn’t have both didn’t remain open for long. I could recall many a restaurant I had praised for the food where I had never eaten a second time when the place had failed to captivate me and vice-versa, beautiful places with a poor kitchen that I quickly discarded from my mental list. We spoke for a few minutes about different options and their merits, but Sinead didn’t seem to be ready to decide on one. I then knew it had become my responsibility, regardless of not having sought it, to give her a name. I recommended an Italian I had been to with Angela the previous month. I didn’t fool myself that I may have had bestowed it with undeserved qualities due to having spent a nice but otherwise unremarkable night there, despite a brief argument we had on the way to the place, which could just as easily have spoilt the whole evening. Either way, while I could not state that the restaurant had been responsible for re-establishing our good humour, neither could I reject its influence, and that gave me reason enough to recommend it.

My telephone rang and Sinead waved to indicate she was leaving while I picked up the handset. I felt relieved.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear Paul’s voice. He was in the city and asked if I could join him for lunch. I was about to say I had a previous engagement (and berate him for not having told me in advance) when I realized that ever since I had received Andrew’s call I had been looking for an excuse to cancel that lunch and, by all means, I was not going to pass up on an opportunity to see Paul, whom I had the chance to see only three or four times a year, to keep a purposeless appointment. The brief telephone conversation had been enough to resuscitate my previous impression of Andrew as a status-conscious show-off without a personality he could call his own. I truly did not believe he knew who he was.

He had arrived in London only a few months before but one could almost be fooled into believing he was a public school type who had read at Oxford.

“So, do you think you will remember how to speak like an American when you go back to see your parents in Dallas?” I asked mockingly

“Well! As you *must* remember, my grandfather on mother’s side was from the West Country and I was very close to him. Then I went to college in Boston, and lost my childhood accent and then, well, you know, the world.” He said, not missing the opportunity, as he had been doing throughout the conversation, to bring up every British ancestor, university studies, life in foreign and exotic places or the advantages of a highend car like the one he had just bought his wife. I felt uneasy just remembering the call and more so when I thought I may have had to live it again face-to-face. I wished I had been clearer and said that I found his whole worldview pathetic and, at the same time, I felt guilty for wishing it, as I really had no right to rub it in his face. I took solace in thinking that the burden was his, as I could not see how a life of pretension could lead to happiness or fulfilment.

I looked up his number and dialled it.

“Hey mate, it’s such a pleasure to hear your voice!” said the voice. I grinned at his phoney choice of words.

“Whatever happened to ‘howdy’?”

“Ha... ha...” he pretended to laugh. “What’s up?” he said still in fake Shakespearian. “Where shall we meet?”

“That’s why I’m calling, Andrew. I’m afraid due to a presentation I need to prepare for this afternoon, I must postpone our lunch for another time. I’m terribly sorry.” Somehow I sounded as if it were I who was trying to speak like him and not the other way around. In that, as in having said I was sorry, which I had planned not to do, my subconscious was acting up.

“That’s fine. Shall we take a rain check?” he said, using for the first time an American expression.

“Why don’t we ring each other next week, once I know where things stand with this project,” I said.

There was a pause, as brief as it was obvious.

“All right then. We’ll call each other next week,” he paraphrased me.

“Absolutely,” I said as I hung up, knowing quite well I would not be the one to initiate that call and suspecting Andrew would not either. I had mixed feelings of guilt and relief.

It was almost noon, and I had to leave soon if I wanted to be on time to meet Paul. We had agreed to meet at twelve-thirty at a restaurant not far from the office of the client he was in the city to visit, and it would take me a good twenty minutes by taxi to get there. I dialled Angela’s mobile.

“What is it?” she said, busy. There was a complete range of possible answers, each with its own meaning. “Hello” meant she was in someone’s company, friends usually, but otherwise able to talk. It could also simply mean she was alone and could talk, and that I was not interrupting anything she was doing. “What’s up?” was used in the same circumstances as “Hello”, but it carried the extra meaning that she was in a especially good mood. “Hi, dear” was the less frequent answer, maybe once every week or fortnight, and while the only explicit condition for her to utter it was that she was on her own, it was usually preceded by some specially enjoyable occasion like dining out or going to a party. Our birthdays were particularly good at eliciting this answer. While we were still dating, and even when we were first married, calls were more frequent and more commonly started this way. They happened at any time and without the need for a reason. With time, calls had become utilitarian and their frequency dependant on the circumstances. I expected that that afternoon’s meeting would trigger resurgence in *hidears* in the following days.

“It’s nothing, really. I just wanted to know how you were,” I said.

“I’m fine. You? How was your meeting this morning?”

“It went well, I guess. Listen, I’m going to have lunch with Paul. He called a short while ago to let me know he was in the city.”

“Is he staying? If he is, tell him he *must* stay with us,” she said.

“I don’t think he is, but in truth, I forgot to ask.”

“Well, please do give him my regards. What time do you think you’ll be home?”

“I can’t really tell. This afternoon I present the project to Ron and it is likely I may have to stay to prepare things for its launch afterwards. So rather late, I’d say.”

“OK, I should call Martina to ask her to bathe and feed the boys.” Martina was our German *au pair*. “I will try, in any case, to reschedule a couple of things and see if I can be there before dinner. I’m a bit worried that Lucas is not eating as well as he should lately.”

“We need to be more strict,” I said.

"We've talked about that."

"Maybe we should again."

"Fine, we'll see. I must go now. There's something I need to finish."

"Very well, but we must talk about it."

"Good luck in your meeting with Ron," she said without excitement. "Let me know if Paul is staying.
'Bye.'

When I arrived at the restaurant, a few minutes yet to the agreed time, Paul was already waiting for me at the table with a reassuring smile. That was the kind of thing one quickly grew to expect of Paul. It didn't matter if the appointment had been made at the last minute or weeks in advance, the subject never to be touched on again, you knew when the time came, Paul would already be there. More than once I had been tempted to agree to something three or four months hence just to prove that my assumption would prevail. The only thing stopping me was the fear that I'd be the one to forget. What was really surprising was how nonchalant he was about the whole issue. Not only about being on time, but in general about keeping to anything he had agreed, be it organising hotels and logistics for a whole group weekend, or remembering (and calling) not only on my and Angela's birthdays but also on the boys'. I came to think that it could all be the result of a lack of imagination. That once he had agreed to something, the thought that it could be altered or somehow disturbed never entered his mind and thus he organised the rest of his behaviour around this simple expectation. Of course, that would be reducing him to a caricature that he was far from being, as even if not often, he could call you to change a date, always with enough advance notice to avoid disrupting other people's plans. He had lost hair since the last time we had met, I thought. That was impossible, as I had seen him only the previous month. More likely, the impression was due to my not having updated my mental image of him from recent occasions.

We spent a few minutes talking about his trip. His client had asked him to come to talk about some "possible issues" with the design of the switches produced by Paul's employer with the client's next generation products. We moved on to chatting loosely about odd things, him showing interest in the wellbeing of my wife and children and I probing him on the twists and turns of his romantic life. He had just broken off with a woman he had met through an online dating service whom for the last two years he had dated as steadily as the 300 miles that separated their towns allowed.

"We still talk from time to time and even meet once in a while. We may go somewhere on vacation," he said.

"So it's not finished."

"It's complicated."

If there was one thing I appreciated about my conversations with Paul, it was their freewheeling nature. Sometimes we could spend the totality of an afternoon talking about films we had seen and another about common friends or, his favourite subject, travel. I enjoyed travelling as much as he did, and certainly appreciated visiting new places, but I often preferred revisiting a place I had enjoyed the first time before a new, albeit appealing, one. For Paul, everything seemed to be about seeing new places and more than once we had decided not to take a trip together after not being able to agree on a destination. More often than not, we skipped merrily between subjects and talked with the same interest about the specific (a movie one of us had watched) or the abstract (power conflict management among couples, for instance). It was this freedom that made it all right to talk about the situation with Alan, whom he didn't know but whom I had been thinking about since I had awoken from a nap the previous Sunday.

"His mother is in a terminal state. Lung cancer. The irony is that the poor woman hasn't smoked a single cigarette in her life while her husband, who died last year in an accident, while in perfect health,

smoked three packs every single day of his adult life. A holy woman, a bit simple for my taste, but perfectly happy in her role of wife and mother.

Here's the thing. Her children decided not to tell her she's dying. Their idea is that this way she won't have to add mental suffering to the physical."

"That's a bit creepy!"

"At first I thought the same but then... I don't know. We are programmed to believe that a person has the *right* to know their own state and that it's irresponsible not to inform them. But isn't it easier simply to follow convention? Maybe the responsible attitude, in the sense of taking responsibility, of being accountable, is to concern yourself with bringing as much happiness and as little anguish as humanly possible to whatever life she has left. Is, you may ask, happiness less valid if it results from evading the truth?"

"Perhaps. I wouldn't know, I haven't given it as much thought as you have."

"People can be happy with so little. I still remember the day of my first communion." Paul let out a short laugh.

"You are not going to say now you were perfectly happy, are you? It wouldn't count. As a kid I too was completely happy every Christmas and birthday."

"No, no. I was about to recount an anecdote about one of my school's nuns that day. I can't remember her name, for she was never my teacher. I think she taught second grade when I was in first and when I advanced to second grade she was moved to first. A small, unassuming woman as many nuns seem to be. She must have been a true believer with a biblical patience to deal with so many kids and I can't remember her being one of those who screamed, but, as I said, she was never my teacher. The story I wanted to tell is as follows. The priest was giving the Host to the five or six of us who were receiving our First Communion, carefully placing it in our tongues, while the nun placed the paten under to collect any crumbs that may have fallen. When my turn came and the priest was about to place the Host on my protruding tongue, I must have raised my chin untimely, making him drop it. The following seconds seemed to happen in slow motion. The Host started to fall and the nun, whose only exercise must have been walking the three hundred yards that separated the school from the nun's residence and whose joints must have been starting to feel the tightness of old age, acquired the reflexes of the best tennis player at the net. The Host never touched the unclean floor. Ten centimetres before it did, the paten, held steadily by the nun, saved it from contamination. Undeterred, she raised the paten so the priest could retrieve the Host from it and, after giving me a doubtful look, place it with extra care in my mouth."

"I'm afraid I don't get it. Are you saying that saving the Host from touching the ground made the nun a happy person?"

"It's not that. The bolt, her spontaneous ability to react and save that Host were only a manifestation of a deeper purpose that drove her life. Do you see? For her, the Host was nothing else than the Body of Christ, literally, not just as a symbol but the actual body of Christ created through transubstantiation. There was no questioning, no doubt either in keeping the Host from touching the ground nor in anything else in her orderly life." "Did you hear that Emma died?" A giant lifted me up and squeezed me at the waist until no void was left in my stomach. True to his style, he had posed the question as casually as if he had asked, "What time do you have to go?" or "Have you been to that Rodin exhibition yet?" and the very lack of preamble had a magnifying effect.

"When?" I let out. I would've liked to exclaim a 'What?' full of surprise or, at the very least, a 'How?' but I already knew the answer: metastatic liver cancer. Not six months before, Paul himself had informed me. Back then I had had the intention of ringing her, but the weeks went by and time diminished the relevance, not of the call, but of the actual illness. I allowed myself to be convinced that the lack of news should be interpreted as a sign that she had made a full recovery.

"Sofia called me last week to tell me, but it's been already two months since it happened."

"Have you spoken with her husband or any other member of her family?"

"I must have seen her husband twice in my whole life and, as for her family, I only saw them at the wedding."

That was true about our relationship with Emma, ever since university we had always met outside of each other's circles. In my and Angela's case we had met her and Michael a few times, but none during the previous year, and the contact had always been between her and me, while Michael and Angela's presence was almost circumstantial. "What's going to happen with Geoffrey?" Emma had a son a year older than Nicolas.

"I'd guess he'll be with his father."

It was an obvious answer and I had asked the question in a ridiculous attempt to alleviate the guilt that inevitably arose within me. I fucking knew she was sick and hadn't called! How welcomed could a late call, two months after the fact, be from someone who, living in the same city, hadn't had the sensitivity to inquire about her health? I felt like crap. My grief over her death was of no relevance to anyone, certainly not to her family.

"When is your next trip to London?" I asked. We were outside, waiting for the valet to get us cabs.

"I haven't the faintest idea. If something comes up I'll let you know. Otherwise we can always arrange a weekend somewhere."

Paul's cab was waiting; we shook hands before he climbed in. I watched as the taxi drove away. As I waited for mine, my eyes wandered to the people eating in the restaurant across the street while continuing to consider the appropriateness of calling Emma's mother or husband, widower, I should say. My eyes landed on the familiar sight of Angela. She was sitting at a window table. Across from her was a man in a dark suit who was telling her something that made her laugh. My surprise was brief as, in her job in a public relations agency, it was very common for her to have lunch with clients. I felt the urge to cross the street to be with her, but that was clearly out of the question. My cab had arrived and the valet was holding the door open for me. I took out my wallet and looked for a small denomination note, which I had not. I took a 10-pound note, the smallest I had, and handed it to the valet. "You're very kind, sir," he said with servility. I gave a last glance in Angela's direction. She was tilting her head back, laughing. She looked so beautiful when she laughed like that! Even though with the constant rush we lived in, it was infrequent that she was relaxed enough to do it. The taxi pushed forward into traffic. Maybe her lunch companion was not a client but a colleague. That would explain the familiarity in her behaviour. Emma's face once again occupied my mind, beating like an ailing heart, one beat showing the happy face framed by the blond pageboy hair for which I remember her and the next the decrepit, ash-coloured skin with barely a few white threads of hair sticking to her skull of her dying days. Micro-payments, micro-payments, I forced myself to think. I would get back to the office with enough time to pick up the presentation and, maybe, go through it one last time before I gave it.

I took long firm steps as I made my way to the meeting room, I was running a few minutes early and could start preparing while Ron arrived. I felt eager to start the presentation and show him both the business and implementation plans for the soon-to-be micro-payments division. It was the only thing in my mind. I had once read that the first thing Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong had done after landing on the moon was to sleep for something like five or six hours, as had been previously planned. It had been deemed necessary after the effort required for the moon landing so they could be in perfect physical and mental shape when they left the lunar module for what was, after all, a workday. It was difficult to fathom being able to sleep under the circumstances, knowing you were on the fucking moon making history. But it was the ability to compartmentalise, to think about and only about what they were supposed to be thinking about at each precise moment, which had been one of the main factors in choosing them for the mission. No emotions, only the accomplishment of that moment's

given objective. I had decided not to review, in fact not even to open, the presentation. I knew it inside and out, I knew what my objectives were and how they could help me transmit the right message.

There were several things I wanted to discuss specially about certain specific resources. The budget had been agreed upon, and I had taken care to craft it with precision and attention to detail. No top-down use of percentages and ratios. Instead I had formulated campaigns, requested quotes for equipment, systems outsourcing, premium SMS aggregator fees, salaries, etc. I had only used percentages to formulate a market growth forecast as well as the year-on-year market share (month-on-month for the first two). Most of the employees would have to be external hires, but there were three people currently working in other departments that I wanted to bring over: a systems person, a girl from billing and a salesman. I would be happy if I got two of them, specially the girl from billing, and I intended to ask Ron to help me procure them. I also wanted to talk about an exit strategy and the options I would get at that time – I was fully aware that the selling price would depend on my success in running the project.

I heard Ron's voice at the time the meeting room's door opened and I was walking back from the window to my seat. To my surprise, he came in deep in conversation with Rick Shepard. Rick was one of the youngest sales managers in the company and one of the candidates I had in mind to join the project.

I slowed down when I came in and saw them lively talking. I basically came to a standstill. I felt as if I had erupted into a situation uninvited. From what I was able to gather, Rick was telling Ron some anecdote about how he got this big account to sign. He stopped when he realised I was there and they both smiled more in my direction than at me, a smile related to the story that Rick rushed to finish telling. They both laughed and, having missed entirely the beginning of the story, all I could do was offer a knowing smile that said "One of those stories! You'll tell me all about it some other time!" I was uncomfortable with Rick's presence and it took me a moment, which I used to shake hands with both of them, to make sense of his being there. Ron was thinking ahead. I had one of the people I wanted and I could focus on getting the other two. I could be thankful that Ron was as involved in the project as one could expect. He was making my life easier for the time, weeks ahead, when I would have to balance the start of the project with passing my current responsibilities to Matthew.

My stuff was still in the same spot where I had placed it when the sun was hitting my eyes. I had no options but to sit back again there without looking funny. I was on one side of the conference room table, positioning myself right across from Ron. Rick took the place to Ron's left, also on the other side of the table. It didn't feel right.

"Ready?" said Ron. I took the two presentations I had printed out of my briefcase.

"You don't mind sharing one? I wasn't aware you'd be here," I said in Rick's direction. Ron opened the presentation between himself and Rick, still making no comment to explain the latter's presence at the meeting.

"Go ahead."

I was fifteen or sixteen once when my brother James came home for the weekend. He had been working in another town ever since finishing his studies a few years before. We were having breakfast in the kitchen, and I asked him what his job was about. At that age, my idea of work required physical activity like a carpenter's job or that carried out by Theresa, the lady that helped in the house since our mother had died, like cooking or sweeping the floor. I knew this was not the case for people in my own social class, and I was aware that my father's job didn't involve any physical effort other than getting up from his desk. But I just couldn't imagine what kind of activities filled their time. James worked in the currency markets department of some bank in a function I can't recall. He didn't answer straight away. He seemed to ponder the best answer that could be both comprehensible and, even more importantly, that helped further to enhance the already obvious admiration that I felt for my oldest brother. For effect, he took his glasses off and started to clean them diligently with a piece of cloth he had taken from his trouser pocket. Methodically, he rubbed little circles with his forefinger and thumb and didn't speak again until he had placed the glasses back on his nose. "They pay me to think," he said. I believe he elaborated further on the phrase's meaning, but they were those words

that would stay with me. There was such a nice ring to them! To actually be paid to *think*. My childhood dreams of being a race-car driver like Speed Racer, a classical music conductor or a priest gave way at that precise moment to my brother's intellectual elitism. Nothing held a stronger representation of my imaginary role than the MontBlanc pen my father had given him when he graduated from Cambridge and that he carefully unscrewed prior to each use, with all the pomp that was required to handle that cigar-shaped object through which his prodigious mind emanated. From then on, each time I thought about my professional future, I would see myself in an office, sitting behind a desk covered with all the required paraphernalia – computer, printer and documents that I knew from real offices – but which had a purely testimonial purpose. People walked in to interrupt some meaningful thought I was having in order to consult with me and I diligently obliged.

"This is chaos! All will be lost unless we find a solution."

Their anxiety disappeared completely once in my presence. They knew I would devise a plan; I was paid to do that after all, to think.

"What is the problem?"

"We've run out of bolts."

(Shortage of bolts was a recurrent problem in my thoughts.)

"Don't worry."

I would then take a blank piece of paper, which I would place in front of me, and using my own MontBlanc, the same model as James's, I would scribble the problem's solution and hand it to the inquirer, who would leave my office pacified and thankful.

The story kept updating itself and becoming more nuanced as I grew up and acquired additional knowledge, always advancing in relation to my subjects of study, but my quasioracle role remained a constant. I found the strength of the idea of "the strength of ideas" fascinating and it evolved to become the frame of reference that helped me understand as much about my personal as my professional life.

When I finished my studies in business, a subject I had copied directly from James, and while my college friends took positions in large multinationals or, some, in their own family business, I sought out the job that had by then become the embodiment of all my aspirations: business consultant. I didn't make it past the initial rounds of interviews with McKinsey and BCG, but I finally got, and accepted, an offer as an analyst in a more generalist consulting firm. I was finally being paid to think. From there my career always comprised staff roles, mostly in strategy and analysis.

It was during my fourth year at K&P that I had started gradually to find my job less captivating. There was no before-and-after moment, nor specific event that marked the start of this attrition, and it took me an additional two years to understand that I was missing any involvement in executing all that which until then I had helped to design. I set out to change this and find a job that actually entailed doing things. My job as Director of Strategy and Analysis provided me with the perfect vantage point from which I could evaluate each new project in terms of how it could help me advance my plans. Moreover, it offered me a position from which to make a transition from my existing role into running a new project, which would be the offspring of my own analysis. The micropayments project, which I had worked on for the last few months, was my preferred option to fulfil this purpose (clearly more so than the online dating service on which I had also worked).

I opened my copy of the presentation and started my explication. I exposed the basic business premises and explained the characteristics of the target market, both from the point of view of the final user as of the companies that would use our system to carry out their billing. Everything flowed just as I expected, and I took care to make Rick feel involved by looking in his direction every few phrases. I was probably doing this more than I otherwise would've, had our sitting arrangement been different. As it was, with the meeting room window directly behind Ron and it being a sunny day, the backlight

turned him almost into a silhouette hindering my ability a) to focus my eyes on him and, more importantly, b) to interpret his reactions to my comments. I decided to endure the discomfort in order not to interrupt the flow of the presentation, especially as I was confident that I had left no loose ends.

I hoped that what had constituted up to that moment a monologue would turn into a conversation, a Q&A session at least, once we involved ourselves with the actual business plan: the what, when and how of the project. The first subject was the channel strategy, and Rick and Ron listen attentively the first minutes.

"If I understand right, the sales strategy is based exclusively on the optimisation of terms for Internet search engines, is that correct?"

"That's correct," I said, jumping at the opportunity to present arguments that supported my strategy. "Our target client is geographically dispersed and that is how they search for Internet-based collection solutions."

"The same search that we could perform in reverse, looking for the most attractive clients."

Rick looked like he was someone's son, full of innocence, but his self-confidence belied such a notion.

"I believe that time will tell if it is both necessary and justifiable in terms of the additional cost it would represent. It's a bridge we would cross when we came to it," I replied.

"But, don't you think that it could be part of the launch?" asked Ron. "I think it could be something that would help bring forward the breakeven point and the payback."

I looked at Ron, or more correctly, I looked in his direction. The sun had gone down but not yet behind the building and the backlight was noticeably worse, making it impossible to make out his face anymore.

"That's how I see it," added Rick before I had time to reply.

"We can look into it. We would have to review the budget, but we can look into it. That's the objective of this meeting, to discuss the business plan and improve it anywhere we can," I said, conciliatory, feeling for the first time the meeting slipping through my hands. I looked again at Ron's cut-out figure. Beyond him I could see a car manoeuvring to park right below a large tree. It was a dark blue car with a scratch in the space between the left front door and the tyre. It was only when I attempted to make out Ron that the car's hue diminished and, along with everything in the window, became a big white blob. I winced until my eyes were two identical slits that aimed at reducing the flood of light. It was impossible. I excused myself and got up to draw the curtains. I flipped the switch next to the window that operated the system but nothing happened. I tried the switch next to it, knowing well that its purpose was to open them, in the hope that an installation error had inverted their purpose. Nothing. I pressed the first button again, as firmly as I could.

"Shall we move on?" said Ron.

"Of course. I don't know what's the matter with the curtains." I went back to my chair.

"Where were we?"

"Sales channels," said the silhouette.

"Certainly," I said, assessing whether to pursue the matter of the search for customers or if the issue was settled and I should continue on to the next point. I looked at the next slide.

"It wouldn't represent an additional cost. At the outset I would take care of it until the volume justified hiring an additional person." I raised my head to comment. Rick was looking at Ron.

"If you want, you and I can talk about it later," I said.

"That's a good idea," said Ron. "I want you to be involved in the project launch, supporting Rick at least during the first months. I think it is especially important that you play a role in helping him to determine strategies and to solve issues as they arise." I thought I felt queasy.

When I was nine, James took me to the zoo. It wasn't the first I'd visited it. I had been there before with my parents, with friends' families, even as a school excursion. But it was the first time I went to the zoo, or anywhere for that matter, with someone of my own generation, even given our age difference. My father prepared breakfast and sat with us with a cup of coffee while we ate. Less than a year had passed since my mother had died, and he still hadn't started to let go of the overprotective attitude he had developed since, one that no one could've imagined in him before he became a widower. If he didn't tell James to keep an eye on me a hundred times, he didn't tell him once. James took it lightly, laughing off his exaggerated concern, but I couldn't avoid being upset about it, as it went against my understanding of the excursion as a kind of coming-of-age rite.

"I could drive you there and pick you up later on," he said.

"No," I said, unwilling to have my bubble of illusion further eroded.

James and I walked to the bus stop and, after a brief wait, took the bus that would take us all the way to the zoo. Sitting by the window, I watched the people in the street pass as if they were already part of an animal exhibit. James flipped through a magazine in the seat next to mine.

The zoo was a beehive of people, as I didn't remember seeing before. I took James by the hand but, after a few steps, he let go.

"Where do you want to go first?"

"To the monkey cage!" I said.

The monkey house consisted of several pits, one for each species or family of species. We headed first to the chimpanzees. I was equally enthralled by their overall mimicry of human behaviour and by the allocation of individual qualities I took care to assign to each based on whatever story I had created in my head. I leaned on the rail to start the process of classification. James stood next to me reading his magazine until a family, as noisy as they were numerous, engulfed him. He crept out and continued to read from a spot a few metres behind me. The family moved about like a shapeless blob that soon had too surrounded me. When they left, James was no longer in his place. I looked unsuccessfully for him. I shrugged and continued looking at the chimpanzees, making my way eventually to the other pits. It felt completely natural, my brother had needed to go to the loo, I remember thinking, and seeing me as capable of being on my own, he had gone. I thought the macaques were like tiny mischievous children in constant motion, but too homogenous: they all looked the same, without behavioural traits that set them apart from each other so that I could invent stories around them. Looking at the gorillas was like being at a reunion full of obese grandfathers: impressive in their size but rather boring. I was getting tired of the primates. James hadn't returned and something told me that enough time had passed for him to have accomplished his purpose. I decided to go back to the place where I had last seen him. He wasn't there, either. I saw a bench surrounding a large tree that also served as a protective barrier. I sat down there thinking it would provide me with a good vantage point from where to spot, and be spotted by, James. I watched the primates of my own species come and go. Not more than ten minutes had passed when James showed up. I thought he sighed, but I couldn't be sure. I got up and met him halfway.

"Where do you want to go now?" he said. I pondered for a second.

"The tigers could be a good idea," I said.

James looked at the map they had given us at the entrance, folded it again and lifted his chin in the direction we had to go. We started to walk. I took his hand. This time he didn't let go. I looked straight into the silhouette from which emerged the voice of Ron.

"I thought I was going to direct this project," I said, trying to sound as calm and neutral as possible.

At that moment a cloud covered the sun and, for the first time since the meeting started, I could see his face clearly. He was looking at me with a blank stare, maybe a bit surprised, I don't know if towards my just declared expectations or towards the confrontation implicit in saying it in the presence of a third person. I kept my eyes on Ron. I could see Rick from the corner of my eye looking at some point towards the other end of the table, absenting himself from what was transpiring.

"Can you give us a few minutes?" Ron said to Rick. "Of course," said Rick, already getting up.

"You're completely right," said Ron when Rick had closed the door.

"..."

"But this is not the project for you. Your analysis is excellent, to which I have grown accustomed from you, and the business plan is rich both in detail and insight. But this project requires a natural born salesman at the helm."

I knew it was an argument for which I had no counter-argument. If there were two things I had gathered from the meeting, they were that Ron was convinced of the need for an aggressive and proactive sales strategy, and that Rick had gained the upper hand by formulating it.

"I was under the belief that we had an understanding that I was preparing this project so I could take it to its execution."

"I don't remember ever agreeing to that."

"Maybe it was not explicit. But..."

"What I agreed to was to look for a project that would move you to an operational role, but not any specific project." I started to reply when Ron lifted his hand slightly to indicate that I should let him finish. His demeanour, which I would later recall in admiration, was completely calm. "We have to wait for an appropriate project and for you to be ready. Your work in analysis and strategy is very good, but you still lack operational experience. We will look for something that allows you to transition from your current function more easily. Right now what I need from you is that you continue to do an excellent job and support Rick, OK?"

I understood that his "OK" was the end of the discussion. A microscopic black ant was crossing the table. I wondered where it had come from, as I couldn't see any others on the table or in the carpet. The ant reached the border and disappeared under it.

"OK."

Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, Emma Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, Buzz Aldrin! What's done is done. It was time to create new opportunities.

"I want to review all open projects." Matthew looked up from his desk aghast.

I watched Angela's belly. It had grown in a short while from being best described as emergent to being classified as omnipresent, both physically and as a subject of conversation. Talk of the pregnancy, of its side effects, of support garments and special pillows gave way only to the even more jam-packed arena of baby paraphernalia. "So tell me, Angela," I had asked a few weeks before, "before you were pregnant, what did we speak about?"

Leaning against the tree, it looked as though a crane would be needed to get her to stand up again. At least the moderate temperature and the mountain air were making her feel well and she hadn't complained all morning. Michael had left twenty minutes before to climb the wooded hill we could

see to the left of where we sat. Emma was sitting on a boulder by the creek, with Geoffrey strapped to her torso, as she contorted to remove her shoes. I was happy to have accepted their invitation to spend the day with them in the countryside. I glanced at Angela, who had fallen asleep. Her head rested on a knot protruding from the trunk, a remnant of a cut branch, her hands lay placidly on her belly, protecting it even while asleep. I got up and walked the thirty metres or so that separated me from Emma, watching as I approached how she made the creek water splash with her now bare feet.

"Well, hellooo!" she said, laughing, when she noticed me. It was hard not to feel joy in her presence. She seemed to find something amusing in even the most mundane situations.

"How is the water?"

"Nice," she laughed again. "How's Angela doing?"

I turned my head. She was still in the same position in which I had left her a minute before.

"I think she's fine. Being out is doing her good."

"Poor thing, with that difficult pregnancy she's having. I'm glad she hasn't long to go now. Then she will be able to enjoy her little one." We were quiet for a while, taking in the air and the sight of the water as it made its way around the rocks. "Have you decided on a name?" said Emma.

"Nicolas."

She raised Geoffrey by the armpits as far up as the strap allowed. The baby executed a little surprise spasm, unfurling both his tiny arms. Emma advanced her face towards his until she touched noses with her son.

"Hello, you pretty thing! What have you got to say about that? You're going to have a little friend called Nicolas, yes you are."

Geoffrey let out a laugh that rose in crescendo as Emma kept bouncing him softly and talking to him. "Yes, you are. You are going to have a little friend, yes you are." I felt a strong desire that my son were already born, to be with him, with my feet in the creek's cold water, bouncing him, hearing him laugh. I wondered if I would be able to enjoy it as much as Emma.

"You are happy with your son, aren't you?"

She fixed her eyes on mine in a way in which I felt I could read her emotions through her pupils. She looked down and kissed Geoffrey on his sparsely populated head. She then looked at me again. Hers was the face of sheer joy.

"I'm happy now," she said.

I rolled down the window and stretched my arm to pass the magnetic card by the sensor. The gates opened and I drove slowly through them and waved back to the new guard whose name I still hadn't learnt but whose face was becoming familiar. I tried vainly to keep to the speed limit of 6 miles per hour. Even without touching the gas the car went over it by three and as much as five mph. The rule was meant to create an environment in which children could walk or ride their bicycles safely throughout the gated community. It was still early, and a group of small children were playing in the playground. I looked at my mobile phone and pondered calling Angela. I could spot our house where the road bent to the left. I manoeuvred into the angle to drive into the garage. As I started to turn I saw Angela's minivan parked in one of the spots. Nicolas was kneeling down, looking at something under the car. I stopped and left my car. He looked up when he heard me. Tear tracks cleared a path through his dust-covered face. I approached him. "What's the matter, midget?" I took a tissue out of my pocket and tried to clean his face. His finger indicated the underside of the car, but sobbing made his words almost unintelligible.

"My... my... car.. went...." was as far as he could go.

I knelt down and placed my hands on the floor so I could lower my head enough to see where my son's car might be. The red plastic toy was right under the ball of the crankshaft, halfway between the two front wheels.

"I'll get it out, don't worry," I said, as I looked around for a stick or broom. I couldn't find anything. I'd have to go in and get one. I looked at Nicolas who returned my gaze expectantly, attempting in vain to control his sobbing, tears still dripping from the corner of his eyes.

I looked again at the toy car and then at my suit trousers and dress shirt. I took off my tie, folded it carefully and handed it to Nick.

"Look after it."

I slid until I was lying down parallel to the car, my head almost touching the black rubber of the right front tyre. With the aid of my elbows and knees I started to turn until the upper half of my body was under the vehicle. The lowest parts of the van's underside touched my back. I stretched my left arm, measuring how far I needed to reach. I was off by at least a foot. I looked in the direction of my feet, Nick watching me, flat on his stomach just like me. I pushed up with my elbows and let myself fall forward, repeating the procedure twice, feeling each time the bumps of the car on my back. I stretched my arm again: I was still short by a few inches. I pushed myself forward one more time and, as I did, I heard the cloth of my shirt rip an instant before I felt the metal puncture my skin. I was barely able to suppress the impulse to raise my head due to the acute pain. I lay still for a moment. I slid my left hand down my side. As it reached the end of my ribcage I moved it up towards the source of the pain, a few inches below my shoulder blade. I felt the wet cloth and touched the forbidding metal, floating barely above the wound. A steel plate bent down, leaving a sharp edge that pointed in the opposite direction to my crawl. Any attempt to advance would drive it in deeper. I looked past my shoulder. Nicolas's peaceful face watched me, trusting, all hopes of recovering his toy placed on me. I moved my head towards my objective. I stretched my arm: I could almost touch the plastic with my finger. The wet warmth of blood expanded in my back. I looked at my son's toy car. One more push and I would have it in my hand.

VÉRTIGO

Sergio Rodríguez Jiménez (Spain)

STAFF

En este acantilado que es mi vida
ya nunca sale el sol por donde quiero
y el paisaje se nubla a veces, pero
la luz despierta entre mi edad dormida.

En este precipicio sin salida
ya nunca resucito cuando muero
y las cosas susurran con esmero
su dulce sed, su fiebre arrepentida.

¡Cuánto da, cuánto brilla y cuánto deja
de ser este lamento que se escucha
siempre al final de mi inquietud añeja!

¡Cuánto se oirá la paz, la suave lucha
entre el cielo y el mar que se refleja
en mi interior fugaz, mi suave lucha...!

VEGUELLINA DE ÓRBIGO

Maria Eugenia Marín (USA)

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS GENERAL DIRECTOR

In the silence of the hills
On a bed of copper-colored clay
I bathe in the beauty
Of the landscape
In this piece of nature
Untouched
I release
I must release
I breathe in
I breathe in and release
And the green of the hills
And the red of the earth
Consume me
The sun's bountiful beams
Gently caress my cheeks
In stillness
I descend from the hill
To the flutter
Of a butterfly's wings

THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE: MANAGING QUALITY IN A 21ST CENTURY DEMOCRACY

Laura McDermott (Ireland)

DESIGN LEAD AT IE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

When we hear about successes in innovation today, many people attribute it to inspiration found in other industries or contexts. When designing the Apple concept store, Steve Jobs and his team took notes on the hospitality industry. Other giants who have begun to dominate the market look for the “Blue Ocean” in order to identify opportunities that could arise from outside their industry. Telecommunications, banking, and real estate are just some of the areas in our lives which are being made easier when providers adopt a quality, customer-centric approach. However, one area that perhaps touches people every day but which does not always provide quality experiences is the public sector.

Many of us come into contact with public services every day; whether it be through public transport, attending state schools and universities, using motorways, going to hospitals when sick, or registering our taxes. Although citizens may be dissatisfied with public services, studies in the UK have shown that only a third of them register complaints. In contrast, if a brand delivers sub-standard experiences today, customers have no issue moving to different providers.

We might pardon public-sector bureaucracy and inefficiency, but we could argue that it is only because there are few alternative “providers” to the state. While the “citizen experience” might not be a priority in the public sector, it is one that should be carefully considered if governments want to ensure the satisfaction of the people. If dissatisfaction with public institutions continues to grow over time, governments might find themselves under threat from other agents who better provide for citizens. According to Bernadette Berdi, many citizens in democracies move towards extremist terrorist groups over traditional politics because:

(armed terrorist groups) build stronger bonds with the population by investing in social services. They build schools, they run hospitals, they set up vocational-training programs or micro-loan programs. Hezbollah offers all of these services and more. Armed groups also seek to win the population over by offering something that the state is not providing: safety and security.

Although this example might seem extreme, when paired with data which shows that the global population is losing confidence in (and engagement with) governments, we might begin to worry about what type of players will begin to disrupt the civic “market”.

This essay will explore the concept of Total Quality Management within public institutions, investigating whether it is in government interest to take a value-added, quality approach to what we will call the “citizen experience” (CX). We will also consider the consequences of failing to deliver a quality CX and identify some tools and models that might aid in the process. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus mainly on Lean as a quality approach.

Quality Essentials

A core definition of total quality management (TQM) describes a management approach to long-term success through customer satisfaction. In a TQM effort, all members of an organisation participate in improving processes, products, services, and the culture in which they work.

According to the ISO900 the following 8 headings are key principles for quality management: Involvement of people, process approach, system approach, continual improvement, factual approach to decision making, mutually beneficial supplier relationship, leadership, customer focus. We might

consider this as an over-arching approach to quality and one that lays the basis for other, more specific approaches.

The Lean approach, which came to fruition in the manufacturing industry in Japan in the post WW2 era, encompasses many of the headings mentioned above while focusing more specifically on the removal of waste. Waste (or *muda*) in Lean terms can be defined as “any activity that consumes resources without creating value for the customer.” Classifications of this waste include waiting time, over-processing, motion and transportation, all of which could be considered in the context of public institutions.

Why Apply TQM to Public Institutions?

Confidence in public institutions is low, and the perception that public policies favour select interest groups has increased sharply. Shorter economic cycles, technological change and disruptive innovation have led to calls to reforms in national labour markets and social protection systems, while climate change, tax evasion and terrorism demand concerted global action.

Businesses might count on Total Quality Management (TQM) more than public officials, since market share and earnings are at stake. Particularly today, with increased competition in the market, demanding customers and industry 4.0, traditional businesses see a sense of urgency to focus on the quality of their offerings. If we are to imagine public institutions in a private context, we could argue that they have become similar to the traditional monopolies, resting on legacy models and failing to see urgency to improve on their offerings. However, in order to run a country successfully, engage citizens in the process, and provide a return on their investment (in this case their vote), quality practices should be considered by public administration.

According to Gronroos 2009, our perception of quality depends on two main factors, what we expect to experience versus what we perceive to have experienced.

Since global perception of public institutions is diminishing and people increasingly lack confidence in governments, we will assume that expectations of quality in public institutions are low. This paired with the new demands and expectations in the “Age of Consumer” should create alarm. Public institutions which have rested on traditional, bureaucratic models in the past may come under scrutiny by a new generation of citizens if they fail to meet expectations.

According to a study done by Salesforce, Millennials in this “Age of the Consumer” are reshaping service industries in the following ways:

- They love self-service. “Whenever they have problems for your product or service, they will first search for your FAQ pages and community forums. Research shows 69% of millennials say they “feel good” about both themselves and the company when they can solve a problem solo.”
- They want everything instantly. “Speed is critical. According to Desk.com, 25% of millennials expect to get a response within 10 minutes after reaching out for customer service via social media.”
- They prefer texting over calls. “Millennials stay in message threads all the time, whether it’s SMS, WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. It’s instant and mobile, which allows them to respond quickly wherever they are.”
- They are hyper-connected. “Smartphones, tablets, and laptops - millennials are switching among these devices every day. To please them, make sure you have seamless service support across all platforms.”
- They value brand engagement on social media. “According to Microsoft’s State of Global Customer Service Report, about 47% of 18-34-year-old consumers have used social media to complain about a brand’s service.”

- They demand personalisation. “millennials are more willing to share their personal data with brands to receive better and more personalised service. They expect you to know their service history whenever they reach out.”

Bad reviews can damage brands today, and many companies use the above insights to react quickly and placate dissatisfied customers. However, in the public sector there are few bodies, apart from perhaps the Ombudsman, which process complaints for public institutions. In a survey done in 2015, the UK parliament and Ombudsman found that two-thirds of people did not submit a complaint due to the perceived effort and bureaucracy involved, though research suggests that 90% of people feel that they should complain. In Ireland in 2017, the Ombudsman received a mere 3,012 complaints about the public service in a country with a population of 4.8 million, which equates to approximately 0.06% of citizens reporting dissatisfaction.

If citizens are dissatisfied with the quality of public institutions and the services they provide, but fail to offer feedback or engage in change, we can assume that there will be an increasingly unhappy civic body. Meanwhile little is being done to involve them in improving the system. Even when the Ombudsman issues annual reports or quarterly updates on complaints and the public sector, it requires time and interest on the part of public administrators to read through lengthy documents in order to hear the “voice of the citizen” or at least those complaints that have been registered.

If governments fail to realise that customers and citizens are the same people, and those people have greater expectations of immediacy and quality, they may fall victim to scrutiny and waning votes of confidence. In business terms we could describe this as a threat to engagement and retention. Although these factors may simply lead to drops in market share for businesses, for governments the threats could be much more damaging.

Citizen Needs

Let us consider citizens as “customers” of their public institutions, and apply the Kano model to this context. The Kano model classifies customer needs in terms of basic needs, performance needs and excitement needs.

We could argue that a state should provide for the basic needs of its citizens, through the proper assignment of tax-payers’ money. Should these basic needs fail to be covered by the government, we could certainly begin to question the value of the offerings and the quality of the government. According to the OECD,

There are persisting inequalities in access, responsiveness and quality of services by population groups. In all OECD countries, low-income people report higher unmet medical care needs than people with higher incomes. Similarly, socio-economically disadvantaged students are almost three times more likely than advantaged students not to attain the baseline level of proficiency in science.

In developed countries, we might assume that “basic needs” are covered. However, when we analyse “performance needs”, we can start to see how developed countries might also fail to deliver value for their citizens. If we equate basic needs to the simple existence of state education, public infrastructure and healthcare, then performance needs might be better understood as the ease and accessibility of accessing these services. This depends not only on the existence of the service (basic need) but considers the delivery of the service, which implicates the civil service.

Case: Civil Service and Tax

The International Civil Service Effectiveness Index (InCiSE) did a 2017 study on 31 countries, rating countries’ effectiveness based on the following headings:

V EPILOGUE

Dear reader:

As another academic year draws to a close, reflecting my pride in the work that has gone into producing the content of this book, I would like to use this epilogue to give just recognition to the writers who have responded to the call for our 2019 humanities: for all their enthusiasm and good work; for the surprise and delight they have provided us through their creativity, sensitivity, openness of mind, quality and effort; for seeing the world at its most kaleidoscopic and diverse.

I love art and literature, but I must confess that I only dare to explore my artistic side through photography, where, realistically, I aspire to be a good amateur who tries to improve his handicap, as might any weekend golf player. At the award ceremony of the Prince of Asturias Foundation 2013, I had the opportunity to listen to and then meet photographer Annie Leibovitz, the deserved recipient of the Communication and Humanities prize that year. I liked the way she developed her speech, vindicating photography as an art form, even in today's interconnected world, focused as it is on the digital, instantaneous and social. Furthermore, it made me think about her affirmation that being a photographer is a choice: "For the photographer, photography is not just something that is recorded, it is the expression of a point of view. The photographer's job is to express that point of view as accurately and consciously as possible through talent, experience and intuition."

The IE Foundation's Humanities Awards share this way of thinking and acting, of making choices and developing the critical thinking and talent that this world needs. Because, as I never fail to comment when given the opportunity, at IE we believe firmly in the value of the humanities in education and in their determining influence on personal and professional growth. At IE we believe that the humanities help us navigate complexity and uncertainty; understand the exponentially growing interaction between technology, society and the individual; establish our own criteria and to take the helm in developing a full life.

For these reasons, the IE Foundation is grateful to our students, candidates, staff and winners, along with the teachers who make our values a reality and allow us to successfully transmit them through their teaching and from the Humanities. All of them are portrayed and highlighted in this "photograph", this perspective, which I share with you as an epilogue. And, of course, allow me to finish by acknowledging all the friends, donors and collaborators who encourage us and help us carry out our work, allowing us to make these awards more and more relevant. Our sincerest thanks to all of them.

Carlos Mas
Madrid, August 2019

V EPÍLOGO

Querido lector:

Un año más, orgulloso de las obras y del contenido de este libro, quiero aprovechar mi epílogo empezando por dar un justo reconocimiento a los autores que han atendido a la convocatoria de nuestros Premios de Humanidades 2019. Por todo su entusiasmo y buen hacer, por sorprendernos y deleitarnos a través de su creatividad, sensibilidad, apertura de mente, calidad y esfuerzo. Por ver el mundo en su versión más caleidoscópica y diversa.

Me gusta el arte y la lectura, pero he de confesar que sólo me atrevo a liberar mi lado artístico a través de la fotografía, dónde, de forma realista, aspiro a ser un buen aficionado que trata de mejorar todo lo posible su handicap, como si de un jugador de golf se tratase. En la ceremonia de entrega de premios de la Fundación Príncipe de Asturias 2013, tuve la ocasión de escuchar y saludar a la fotógrafa Annie Leibovitz, merecidamente galardonada con el premio de comunicación y humanidades de ese año. Me gustó la forma en que construyó su discurso, reivindicando la fotografía como arte, incluso en un mundo interconectado, tan masivamente volcado hacia lo digital, instantáneo y social, como el que ahora vivimos. Y más allá, me hizo pensar su afirmación de que ser fotógrafo es una opción: "Para el fotógrafo la fotografía no es sólo algo que queda registrado, es la expresión de un punto de vista. El trabajo del fotógrafo es expresar ese punto de vista de forma tan acertada y consciente como le sea posible con su talento, experiencia e intuición".

Los Premios de Humanidades de la Fundación IE comparten esta manera de pensar y actuar, de asumir opciones y desarrollar el pensamiento crítico y el talento que este mundo necesita. Porque, como no pierdo ocasión de destacar, creemos firmemente en el valor de las humanidades en la educación y en su influencia determinante en el crecimiento personal y profesional de las personas. En IE creemos que las humanidades nos ayudan y nos ayudarán a navegar en la complejidad y la incertidumbre; a entender la interacción exponencialmente creciente entre la tecnología, la sociedad y el individuo; a tener criterio y a llevar el timón en el desarrollo de una vida plena.

Por ello, la Fundación IE está agradecida a nuestros estudiantes, candidatos, *staff* o premiados, y también a los profesores de IE que hacen realidad nuestros valores y nos permiten transmitirlos con intensidad y acierto, bien desde el aprendizaje como desde la enseñanza de las humanidades. Todos ellos quedan retratados y destacados en esta "fotografía", en este punto de vista, que comparto con ustedes a modo de epílogo. Y, por supuesto, quiero finalizar reconociendo enormemente a todos los amigos, donantes y colaboradores que nos animan y ayudan a realizar nuestra labor, que nos permiten hacer cada vez más relevantes estos premios. Nuestro más sincero agradecimiento a todos ellos.

Carlos Mas
Madrid, agosto de 2019

Check all the info about the prizes at
www.fph.ie.edu/winners

Puedes ver toda la información de los premios en
www.pfh.ie.edu/galardonados

Direction Victoria Gimeno
Design..... Koln Studio
Texts edition..... Saily Marcos

This book was composed with the typefaces Druk and Plantin..

ISBN
DL

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