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Recently I turned fifty, and in the lead-up to the big day I began to have great expectations, but not really because I was hoping to take stock of my life up to that point; I saw it more as a chance for renewal, a fresh start, a change of habits. In fact, I didn’t even consider taking stock, or weighing up the half-century gone by. My gaze was fixed on the future. I was thinking of the birthday exclusively as a point of departure, and although I hadn’t worked out anything in detail or made any concrete plans, I had very bright hopes, if not of starting over entirely, at least of using that milestone to shed some of my old defects, the worst of which is precisely procrastination, the way I keep breaking my promises to change. It wasn’t so preposterous. After all, it was entirely up to me. It was more reasonable than the hopes and fears pinned on the year 2000, because turning fifty is less arbitrary than a date in the almanac. In a reversal of the usual scenario, the hopes, however groundless, were working in my favour, because they could sustain a self-fulfilling
prophecy. And everything suggested that they would, or so I felt.

And yet nothing happened. My birthday came and went. The tasks to be completed, the chores to be done and the force of routine – which is so powerful by the age of fifty – vied with each other to ensure that the day went by like any other. It was my fault, of course: if I wanted there to be a change, I should have made it happen myself, but instead I trusted to the magic of the event, I took it easy and went on being the same old me. What else could I expect, in practical terms, if I had no intention of getting divorced, or moving house, or starting a new job, or doing anything special? In the end, I took it philosophically and went on living, which is no mean feat.

The mistake, if there was one, lay in not realising that changes come from the most unexpected directions, which is what makes them genuine changes. It’s a fundamental law of reality. What changes is something else, not what you were expecting. Otherwise, it would be business as usual. It’s not really a failure of planning or foresight, or even a lack of imagination, because even imagination has its limits. Expectations of change develop around a particular subject, but change always changes the subject. I should have known that from my experience as a novelist. But I had to wait for events to bring it home to me.

A few months later, one beautiful autumn morning,
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I was walking along the street with Liliana. I looked up, breathing the cold, bracing air. The sky was clear, a luminous blue; up there, to my left, the moon, half-full, with that porous white colour it has in the daylight; to the right, hidden from us by the buildings, the sun, still low. I was feeling euphoric, not unusually (it’s my natural state): buoyant and optimistic. I was chatting away about something, and then, with the vague intention of cracking some kind of joke, I said:

‘It can’t be true that the phases of the moon are produced by the earth’s shadow when it comes between the moon and the sun, because the sun and the moon are both in the sky now, the earth isn’t between them at all, but the moon isn’t full. They’ve been fooling us! Hehehe. The phases of the moon must be caused by something else, and they’re telling us it’s the shadow of the earth! Hehe. It’s rubbish!’

My wife, who doesn’t always appreciate my sense of humour, looked up too, in puzzlement, and asked me:

‘But who said the phases of the moon were caused by the earth’s shadow? Where did you get that from?’

‘That’s what I was taught in Pringles,’ I said, lying.

‘It can’t be. No one could have come up with that sort of nonsense.’

‘But how does it work then?’

‘There’s no shadow. The sun illuminates the moon, but only half of it, the way it is with any light source illuminating a spherical body. Depending on the relative
position of the earth, we see a portion of the illuminated half; it grows until we’re seeing it all, and that’s when there’s a full moon; then it shrinks down to nothing. Simple.’

‘Are you serious? So I was the only one getting it wrong all this time? Hehe!’

We left it there, in a comic haze, one of the many I generate in the course of a day. All you have to do is say it’s a ‘bad’ joke, and no one bothers to look for its meaning. Except that I didn’t forget this ‘joke’, and little by little the monstrosity of my ignorance dawned on me. I had indeed been getting it wrong, and it wasn’t as if, in this case, ‘it’ was something obscure that anyone might be excused for misunderstanding. On the contrary, ‘it’ was almost the model of the obvious and the visible. The fact that I considered myself an intellectual, an educated, curious, intelligent man, made the joke all the funnier. The moon is always suspended there in full view, lit up and conspicuous, each and every night, punctually running through the cycle of its phases twelve times a year. And the sun like a spotlight and the earth with its days and nights, the whole rotating system . . . Any eight-year old with a modicum of intelligence could have reached the correct conclusions. Or a savage, a primitive, the first man making a first attempt at thought.

Preposterous as it may seem, there is a simple explanation for my ignorance on this point of basic
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cosmology: distraction. A historical moment of distraction. At some point in my childhood, I must have come up with that explanation of the moon’s phases, perhaps in passing, without really thinking, using the narrow crescent of my brain that happened to be illuminated by my attention, and in all the years since then (almost fifty of them!) I had never given it another moment’s thought. It wasn’t a case of ‘I never thought about it’; I thought about it once, which is worse.

It’s ironic, because I was always being told that I was miles away, ‘on the moon’. If that had been literally true, I’d have been none the wiser, because the earth, seen from there, would have similar phases, and for the same reason. Although on the moon (and this was something I did think about), I wouldn’t have survived for more than half a minute, because of the lack of air. I wouldn’t have had the time or the peace of mind to invent crazy stories about the heavenly bodies. The fear of suffocation, which has haunted every minute of my life, would have given me an excuse for not thinking. Meanwhile, I was on the earth, breathing perfectly, but the excuse remained. All I managed to come up with in a whole half-century was a blank, a gap. The worst thing was knowing that my thought could have been full of gaps like that.

My only miserable consolation was to think that these moments of distraction were the price that I had paid for attending to other questions, that economising
mental activity in one area had allowed me to concentrate more lucidly in others. As an excuse, it’s flimsy, but perhaps there’s a thread of truth in it. Flimsy because the blind spot is so outrageous; but the truth might lie precisely in the exorbitance of the price. Maybe I had ignored too much in order to give myself the latitude for invention that I needed to cover up my ignorance in other areas. Since I didn’t even know how to live, it would have been a scandalous waste of my modest capacities to devote them to understanding something as useless and decorative as the phases of the moon.

The sole and ultimate aim of all my work has been to compensate for my incapacity to live, and the work has barely sufficed to keep me afloat. I have done a lot, but only just enough. Is it really so surprising that I’ve had to pay for my survival with scandalous gaps? To reach the age of fifty, a man with my abysmal defects would have to be a genius, and since I’m not, I’ve had to pretend, constructing a laborious and complicated simulation, which was bound to produce an unbalanced figure, with dramatic highs and lows in all the wrong places, that is, the silhouette of a monster.

This business with the moon has got me thinking. As I said, what bothers me is not so much that I was mistaken about what makes the moon wax and wane; it’s the way I came up with a hasty and fallacious explanation and never gave it another thought. This must have happened at some point in my childhood.
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when, exactly? On what day? At what time? In what circumstances? It would seem impossible to pinpoint. That faraway past is an inextricable blend of forgetting and invention, from which stray fragments emerge by chance. If I try to remember thinking about the moon, the only thing that comes back to me is the memory of a summer night in Pringles: I would have been seven or eight; we had gone out onto the pavement after dinner, as usual, and I was playing with Omar, one of the neighbourhood kids, while our parents chatted. Omar and I were inseparable; we were the same age, and he lived next door. The nights in Pringles were very dark: there were just a few weak street lamps suspended over the corners, and only where the streets were sealed; since ours was the last street with tarmac on that side of town, the great darkness stretched away behind us. Also, the houses were scantly lit. Electricity was still a new and strange technology for us, and the expense of it was a source of worry; no bulb was ever left on, not even for a minute, unless it was being used. When we went out onto the pavement for some fresh air after dinner, we were careful to switch off all the lights in the house. These conditions favoured the contemplation of the starry vault, which shone as I have never seen it shine anywhere else. The Milky Way ran in the same direction as our street. Looking up at the moon that night, Omar said: ‘The moon is good, don’t you think?’ Good? It seemed the least appropriate adjective. Why good?
Because it always kept him company, wherever he went. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘See it there?’ It was to our left and a bit behind us, as if peering over our shoulders. Omar ran off as fast as he could, and I followed him. After thirty yards, he stopped: ‘There it is, in the same place.’ Sure enough, it was still on our left and a bit behind, as if it had run along with us. Omar explained this idea of his as something that he had believed ‘when he was a kid’, that is, in some distant past, although he wasn’t even ten. I have noticed that children often measure their brief lives in this way, as if they were eternities. He was probably being ironic too – it wouldn’t have been unusual – and I guessed that there was something going on from the way he was looking at me a little too insistently. Perhaps he was setting some kind of trap; we were engaged in a constant battle of wits (this too is fairly common among children). I must have quickly reassessed the possibilities in play, because I connected this moon-game with another memory (unless I’m making the connection now).

Once I had gone with my parents to a furniture store in town, the biggest or maybe the only one. It would have been to buy something, but I can’t remember what. At some point my parents got into a conversation with the owner’s wife, a fat lady of a certain age, very smartly dressed, with a bouffant, a pearl necklace and a thick Italian accent. I think the store had just opened, and the lady was singing its praises and pointing out
its charms. She showed us a picture hanging on the wall; it was a portrait, of a woman, I think, though not of anyone in particular, no doubt a cheap reproduction, but the lady said that there was something very special about it: if you stood right in front of the picture, the eyes of the model looked straight into yours . . . But if you took a few steps to the side (she invited us to see for ourselves), the painted woman’s eyes continued to return your gaze. Wherever you went, the picture was always looking back at you; it was like a magic trick. The lady laughed contentedly and repeated that it was a very special, very ingenious picture. I should add that the painting was for decoration, not for sale, so this was not a pitch, and the lady didn’t actually work at the store, she just went there to keep her husband company and chat with the customers, out of sheer boredom, like so many of the storekeeper’s wives in town. Her praise was sincere. My parents expressed polite admiration, and I spent all the rest of the visit in front of the picture, moving to the side, coming up close, stepping back. When we left, my mother laughed at the lady’s ignorance: what she had taken for a unique and marvellous feature was common to every picture or photograph in which the model had been looking directly at the painter or the camera. I agreed, but whether it was something I already knew or had just learned, I honestly couldn’t have said.
I had the feeling that something similar lay behind Omar’s remark about the moon. Likely as not, he was trying to get me to lower my guard and confess that there was an aspect of the world whose workings I didn’t understand. Children are always testing each other like that, setting up complicated charades to extract involuntary confessions of ignorance. When they come across an adult who is ignorant in some way, like the lady in the furniture store, that person serves as a milestone in the child’s learning about life.

In any case, the two phenomena are quite different: the painting’s fixed yet mobile gaze on one hand and the phases of the moon on the other. And yet by using associations to bridge the gap, perhaps I could pinpoint the moment at which I made the error, triangulating it with two boys setting traps for each other, and myself at fifty in the role of the transtemporal adult with a particular gap in his knowledge. But I really can’t be bothered. It would take too long; and there would be no guarantee of success.

The past is not an imaginary construction like any other. I don’t know how some people – modern historians, for example – can say that it is. What happened happened precisely because it was real. The details of the past are of capital importance, not only for establishing a chronology but also because of the interplay of causes and effects. Although the present is overdetermined, it is attached by subtle threads to some atom of reality,
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which can only be identified by locating it precisely in the series of past events.

Everything that I have written so far leads me to suppose that my incapacity to live has its origin in the moment at which I made my error, or failed to pay attention, or came up with my hasty explanation of the phases of the moon. So if I were able to reconstruct the history of that instant, I would solve the mystery that has always haunted me.

It would be less dramatic, but much more plausible, to say that it wasn’t a moment but a process: the process of wasting time, which is long by its very nature. At my age, it’s impossible to contemplate the eternities of time that I wasted in my youth without a certain horror. The lack of method, the capricious detours, the waiting for nothing. The hours, the days, the years, the decades squandered. And it is poetically just, in a way, that the apparent victim should have been the moon, that poetic reminder of wasted time.