

When I left Providence (Rhode Island) in early December, the first fall of snow already lay buried beneath the second, and the second fall beneath the third. I didn't care what Henriette's mother said, or the child psychologist at her kindergarten. It would be easier for her to accept my absence for a whole month than to have me show up on the doorstep of what had once been our house, knocking at the door like a stranger on Christmas morning or Boxing Day or Christmas Eve, after calling to make and confirm the arrangements, not to mention the parting that would have to follow. The divorce was still recent, and a new routine was gradually and painfully taking shape. I didn't feel ready, in my new situation, to face the season's cloying formalities. A temporary withdrawal on my part would be the kindest thing, for me and for my daughter. When I returned, all smiles and gifts, we would re-establish our relationship on the terms laid down by the judge.

This, in revised and summary form, is what I was saying to myself as the plane took off. What the explanation doesn't convey, with its clear and reasonable wording, is the emotional turmoil that I had been going through for months, or the crisis that had led to my departure. Those feelings began to wane as the summer days went by in the beautiful city that I had chosen as the destination for my break. In

the absence of significant others, I had the liberating sensation of being absent from myself. Sunny and rainy days alternated within a changeless continuum of light, a light that was always fine and delicate, touching things with fingertips, and lingering . . . This impression might have been caused by the lengthy evenings, and the leaves on the trees, whose high branches met over the streets, and the air washed clean by daily showers.

I had chosen Buenos Aires almost by accident: I wanted to go somewhere far away and with completely different weather; it was the only city I could think of that satisfied both conditions and in which I had acquaintances. I called them before travelling. Although I didn't know them well, and hadn't even met some of them in person, they swung into action and came to my aid with the hospitality so characteristic of those latitudes. They arranged my accommodation, and soon after arriving I had settled into a pleasant guest house in a neighbourhood that was so quiet and yet so full of attractions that I felt no need or desire to leave it during my stay. I was grateful for that practical help, of course, but even more so – and I reaffirm my gratitude here, in these pages – for the company, the conversation, the time those people spent with me.

Habits of leisure and relaxed sociability, without any discernible goal and all the more charming for their transience, established themselves within a few days. They were habits in the full sense of the word, as placid and reassuring as any others, but without that aftertaste of life imprisonment that habits generally have. The most regular – and in a way it included all the rest – was the habit of conversing at a pavement table belonging to one of the numerous cafés in the neighbourhood.

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One morning it so happened that I was at a table outside El Gallego, chatting with a young woman named Leticia, a talented video artist I had met two nights earlier at a dinner in the same establishment. El Gallego was a charming little restaurant, run by its founder, owner and driving force, an old Spanish immigrant who had always been known simply as El Gallego. When lunch and dinner weren't being served and even when they were, since the place was run in a fairly informal manner, it functioned as a café, bar and club for a varied local clientele, which I had been able to join without difficulty.

At one point we saw El Gallego himself come out onto the pavement. He was a tiny man; an inch shorter and he would have been a dwarf. In spite of his eighty years, he was still very active and in excellent physical condition. And I knew from my conversations with him that he was as mentally sharp as ever. The previous night, after saying goodbye to my dinner companions (they were heading home; my guest house was just around the corner – I didn't even have to cross the road), I had stayed on, talking with him over a last drink until the small hours of the morning.

He came out onto the pavement, with his quick step and his purposeful air, to extend the canvas awning in front of the restaurant. At that time of day, nearly noon, the sun shone through a gap in the foliage, and a blinding band of light was advancing towards the tables and their occupants. Like a benevolent spirit, forever mindful of his customers' comfort, El Gallego would not let anything bother us.

Absorbed in conversation with my young friend, I didn't notice his presence until the incident occurred. It all happened quickly. As soon as El Gallego inserted the crank handle and started turning it, and the first fold of the awning

opened out, a mass of water fell onto the pavement. It had rained overnight and the water had pooled in the canvas. Luckily it came down well away from the line of tables, and didn't even splash us. Perhaps it wouldn't have splashed us even if we had been closer, because it was as if every last drop had been absorbed by the victim: a young man with a bicycle. He wasn't riding his bicycle but wheeling it; he had probably just got off and stepped up onto the pavement. The water doused him as if it had been expertly aimed. And it was no small amount. No shower of separate drops. It was a solid bucketful, gallons of it plunging with the force of gravity, right down onto him.

He stood there transfixed by surprise, fright and wetness. Especially wetness, which overpowered all the rest. He was drenched, down to the last thread of his clothes, the last strand of his hair and the last cell of his skin. He seemed to go on getting wetter, in a process that transcended the temporality of the accident. The water ran over his face and down his arms (eddying around his watch); smooth waves of it passed under his T-shirt, swelling and rippling the fabric; it flowed down inside his Bermuda shorts, formed little translucent curtains like glass tubes around his calves, and bubbled coldly all over his sandalled feet.

We stared in fascination, frozen like him. He was right there in front of our table. A moment passed, the briefest of moments, perhaps. Time is especially hard to measure in such circumstances. Perhaps no time passed at all, or only the infinitesimal fraction of a second required for the eye of the totally soaked young man to communicate with his brain. He didn't have to look around because chance, as I said, had put him right there in front of our table; the same chance that had placed him beneath that cascade at

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just the right moment. He opened his mouth, parting the veils of water that were still flowing over his lips, and cried:

‘Leticia!’

The young video artist who was sitting with me, and had seen it all happen, suddenly found herself having to make a psychological readjustment. I know, because I was looking at her and could see the mental process reflected in her face. The protagonist of this episode had been a stranger, like every victim of a mishap witnessed in the street. It’s never Juan or Pedro but the guy who tripped or was mugged or got run over. But now, with the help of memory, she had to reassign the stranger to the category of people whose names she knew. This too was a very rapid operation. It happened in a flash, before all the water had fallen from the awning, or so it seemed:

‘Enrique!’

She leapt up, went straight over and hugged him, oblivious to getting wet. Then they stepped back to take each other in, to finish recognising one another, after all that time.

They hadn't seen each other since the day they met, which was also the day that had marked the end of their childhood. It had been a meeting and a parting in one, precipitated by an accident or an adventure that, over time, had grown in their memories, taking on cosmic proportions, like a galactic explosion. That day was in fact a night, and only a brief part of a night, lasting perhaps just a few minutes, but so charged with entropic force that it remained indelibly etched. The incident had occurred fifteen years earlier, and could have left each of them with the impression that the other was an imaginary being, a figment of panic or of some obscure survival mechanism. Yet both of them had persisted in the belief that the other was real, and in something like the hope of recovering that reality . . . And now, suddenly, there they were, Leticia and Enrique, in the flesh, looking into each other's eyes. The reunion was amazing not only because of the absurd circumstances in which it had occurred, but also because of its material cause: water. The water enveloping Enrique's body, still flowing over him . . . As it happened, the cause of their first meeting and subsequent parting had been a fire. It was as if Destiny were working with primordial blocks. Fire had separated them; and now water had brought them together. Taking

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air for granted, or keeping it in reserve for a later stage of their shared story, all they needed to complete the classic quartet of the elements was the 'earth, swallow me up' of unexpected and unwelcome encounters. But this encounter, so unexpected, was by no means unwelcome to either of them. On the contrary: what they were experiencing in that moment was something like the blessed consummation of memory made real. They were real, and had been real at the time of the College fire.

When the sun had risen the following day, a handful of ashes was all that remained of what had been an elegant and progressive boarding school on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, run on European lines, in accordance with the pedagogical theories of a German theosophist. The emphasis was on developing individual autonomy through crafts, proximity to nature and spiritual development. An expertly balanced blend of primitivism and advanced technology promised to build characters that would ensure professional and social success as well as respect for the fundamental values of life. At the core of the whole concern was representation, the emblem and fulfilment of which was the building that housed the institution. Modelled on the mansions of Victorian England, with the same combination of the neo-gothic and the grandiose, it was a sturdy and rather imposing pile with its bow windows, towers and domes standing all alone in the middle of a vast, wooded park that contained a lake, tree-lined avenues, a rose garden, statues and playing fields. When Enrique first entered the College (he had just turned thirteen), he felt as if he were stepping into a fairy-tale castle that was also a never-ending labyrinth; and he had not come to the end of it when, some months later, in the middle of winter, it burned down.