

Mirrors

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I don't know who I'm writing this for. Maybe I'm writing it for myself (for nothing); maybe I'm writing these lines to sort my ideas out, so that I can reject them; or run away from them; or maybe just accept them? Or so as not to think, so as not to think anymore. Or maybe these lines are for you, old man, for you, someone who is never going to read this, for you on the other side. Or perhaps what is really important is to understand; to understand or to understand you? To understand me? Or just to understand that sometimes it takes forty years to understand your folks. Or perhaps it doesn't matter who I'm writing this for; sometimes all you need to do is imagine that someone is there to listen to us, someone else who allows us to be aware of ourselves. The thing is we all need someone to listen to us; or at least, to listen to ourselves in someone. Communication is odd: sometimes it seems that you are communicating with someone else, when in actual fact, in the most profound sense of this action, you are talking to yourself. It is as if the other person were a mirror where you can see your reflection and recognise yourself. And while I read through what I've just written once again everything gets mixed up and I get all muddled; myself, the other, the mirror, the reflection, and sometimes I think that each one of us are ourselves, the other and the mirror at the same time.

I got home around nine. Ana was still at her French course and would get home later. María told me that Nicolás had eaten all his dinner, had done his homework and was watching television; then she picked up her bag, said goodnight and left, not without first saying: “*lately you've been looking really tired, you should work less*”,

and when she was already at the door, she added: “*Oh! I left the mail for you on the desk*”. With a thoroughness that was rather untypical for me, I placed the packages that I had brought on the worktop in the kitchen and began to arrange the flowers I had bought. I cut off the stalks, which were too long, removed a couple of leaves that had turned ugly and put them in a vase with water. And while I applied myself to this task, I was bombarded with metaphors: we go to so much trouble for a few flowers that are only going to last a couple of days! - I thought. And if they lasted weeks, would it make more sense? How long does something have to last for it to be worth devoting any time to? However much effort I put in, the flowers were going to die in a couple of weeks; did that stop them from being beautiful? I left the flowers (and my doubts and metaphors) in the kitchen and went to the living room to see Nicolás who immediately threw his little arms, his huge arms, around me, and for a moment, for just one fleeting moment, my confusion vanished and I felt happy and forgot about everything and was only aware of his presence and mine, and nothing else. We exchanged a couple of kisses and then: back to reality.

I told him that I had brought him some picture cards; “*the ones you like*” – I added, trying out a phrase that sounded slightly unfamiliar to me. He couldn’t hide his surprise; he was good at pretending, but he couldn’t; and he immediately began to tear off the wrapping in search of the cards while I delved into my conscience in search of answers. I was torn between whether to talk to Nicolás or not; or to talk to Ana or not; or to talk or not. Would it do any good? And while I was lost in deep thought, Nicolás finished tearing apart the envelope with the picture cards. Then he looked at me again and asked me:

“Dad, why have you put a tie on?”

“I had an important meeting. How did school go today?”

“Fine.”

“What did you do?”

“We learnt about living beings. Do you know that living beings are ones that are born, grow, reproduce and die?”

“What a depressing definition!” I thought to myself, but I put on the most cheerful expression I could and carried on with the conversation.

“So we’re living beings,” I asked.

“Yes, of course!” he answered. “I have already been born and I’m growing.”

And he failed to realise, he couldn’t realise, what his answer meant for me. How poor definitions are! I thought once again; they leave out almost everything that is vital about the thing they are defining. *They are born, grow, reproduce ...* and while I was thinking about this I happened to notice a smile on Nicolas’s face that looked familiar yet at the same time unusual; a smile that I was perfectly familiar with, but which I wasn’t used to seeing on anyone else’s face. I realised, not without a certain degree of concern that the smile that Nicolas had on his face was the one I used to have when I was a child.

“I bet you can’t guess what we’re going to do on Saturday,” I said suddenly to get back to the conversation and banish these demons.

He thought about it for a moment and as his expression turned to utter joy, he said:

“At last! At last you’re going to take me! Can I bring Diego along?”

“Of course you can” I replied “and we’re going to take the camera with us and take loads of photos.”

And Nico jumped up and down for joy, and for a moment, for just one fleeting moment, I felt really happy. I would have given anything to make that moment last forever. But reality, lousy reality snatches you from Eden just when you least expect it and tosses you out there somewhere; God knows where, somewhere or other. I tried to get a hold on myself and I told Nicolás that I’d have a word with Diego’s parents and that we were going to have a great time on Saturday.

“And who are those flowers for?” he said, pointing to the vase in the kitchen.

“They’re for Mum.”

“Is it her birthday?” he asked rather puzzled.

“No, it isn’t, they are... they are... some flowers that I brought her,” I said wavering. “Right, it’s time to go to bed!”

I left the briefcase in the study and went to his room to kiss him goodnight. He held me so tight that for a moment I thought that he sensed something. But no, he couldn’t have noticed anything. When he let me go, I looked him in the eyes again.

“You’ve got a glazed look in your eyes, Dad,” he said.

“I must be tired,” I replied without the slightest conviction.

“When Mum gets in tell her to come and give me a kiss, OK?”

I managed to say “*yes, I will*” and left the bedroom before I cracked up once and for all.

Ana didn't get home till about eleven. I sat in the study and began to drum on the desk with my fingers while I looked at the bookcase in search of God knows what. I looked along the spines of the books, books I'd read, books I hadn't, books I wasn't going to read. I looked through the titles: all of them now seemed to be really threatening... In search of lost time; Journey to the end of the night; The book of illusions; The unbearable lightness of being... I got up out of the chair and picked up the book by Kundera. When I read the first page again a slight smile came over my face: Nietzsche and eternal recurrence. I'd give anything today for this night to be endlessly repeated: coming home, putting Nico to bed, opening the mail, waiting for Ana, that delightful routine I had rejected so often and that was now as desirable as it was impossible. I left the book in its place, because every book in this library had its place, everything in my life had its place. How awful! I'm already talking in the past tense. And I sat down to look at the mail. To look at the mail! And it is at this point that I remember the prisoners on death row who on the day of their execution (and the day before and the day before that) carefully brush their teeth, and then put the top back on the toothpaste and put their toothbrush back in its place; and a mobile phone bill, bank statements, junk mail and nothing else to distract me; and then I have no alternative but to deal with that huge padded envelope with the unmistakable handwriting. I turned the envelope over with my fingers; on one side it said my name and lower down Burgos, Spain; on the other side it said Carmen Oviedo, and lower down Buenos Aires, Argentina; addressee and sender, an odd couple who continually alternated as I turned the envelope over; this side and the other side (where had I read that?) and in between,

an ocean, a mirror, that reflects us in time and space; a story of comings and goings to one side and the other of the mirror, cyclically repeated over the years. But now I was on this side and I feared that the contents of the envelope would place me once again in the mirror and I wouldn't know when I came out which side I was going to end up on; letters from Mother were always a Pandora's box; but even so I made up my mind and opened the envelope very slowly; inside there was a brief note that I left on the desk and then I very slowly pulled out a large photograph of mine from when I was eight years old. I leaned back in the chair and I gazed at the photo long and hard. The child (well, in actual fact, it was me; but I thought: *the child*) proudly held a leather football, he sported a striped t-shirt and his hair was slightly dishevelled. A bit further back, already out of focus, you could make out a poster of Boca Juniors players that I had on the wall in my room. The child stared directly at the camera, that is, at me, with big round eyes and that innocent expression that pervades our faces when we look at life through the eyes of an eight-year-old. However there was something there in that gaze that wasn't as innocent as it should have been; or at least that's how it seemed to me now; it was as if this little boy had a feeling that something inexplicable was going to happen; that was the last photo that my father ever took of me. I took a deep breath and focused my attention again on that gaze that had been watching me since the depths of time, from the other side. Suddenly his eyes sparkled and twinkled; I held my breath and swallowed hard; the air became denser and my hand began to sweat; without taking my eyes off him and without him taking his eyes off me, I began to sense his presence, a powerful presence that immediately filled the entire room; and I felt insignificant and tiny by his side; I left the ball and went up to my father who was looking at me with his glazed eyes.

“Dad, why have you put a tie on?” I asked him.

“I had an important meeting,” he replied without looking me in the eyes. My father never wore a tie, only when he went to the doctor’s.

Then he asked me what I had done at school and how things had gone in my language exam. It was then that I noticed that my father had a package in his hand and I asked him what it was.

“It’s a present for Mum,” he replied.

That was odd; Dad never brought presents for Mum. And he must have noticed something in my expression, in the way I was looking at him, because he quickly changed the subject.

“I bet you can’t guess where we are going to go on Saturday?”

I hesitated for a moment and then my eyes nearly popped out of my head; I couldn’t believe that at last he was going to take me to the circus, it was definitely the happiest day of my life.

That Saturday my father took me to the circus. He behaved towards me like the father that I had always dreamed of having. For the first time ever he seemed really happy, I couldn’t have explained it at the time but I felt that we really hit it off. On the next two Saturdays after that he took me to play football. He never took me anywhere on Saturdays, he always had to work; but those Saturdays were different, really special. He was really happy and he took photos of me, lots of photos; he enlarged some of them and framed them and hung them up all over the house. After playing football we went to have an ice-cream and he kidded about and we laughed a lot; he clowned around and people looked at us and I felt proud of my father. Then we walked back home through the park and we watched TV and played Risk until it was late and then he put me to bed

and read me a story; later on I heard him chatting away with Mum and they laughed and I drifted off to sleep immersed in the murmur of happiness that had spread all over my house.

A few days before the following Saturday everything changed: a phone call, a look of horror, tears, crying, more calls, more crying; and then flowers, my first suit, more tears, a black dress, more crying, and people I didn't know kissing me and stroking my hair. There weren't any more Saturdays after that.

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