

The Other – Jorge Borges

The incident occurred in February 1969, in Cambridge, north of Boston. I didn't write about it then because my foremost objective at the time was to put it out of my mind, so as not to go insane. Now, in 1972, it strikes me that if I do write about what happened, people will read it as a story and in time I, too, may be able to see it as one.

I know that it was almost horrific while it lasted — and it grew worse yet through the sleepless nights that followed. That does not mean that anyone else will be stirred by my telling of it.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning. I was sitting comfortably on a bench beside the Charles River.

Some five hundred yards to my right there was a tall building whose name I never learned. Large chunks of ice were floating down the gray current. Inevitably, the river made me think of time ... Heraclitus' ancient image. I had slept well; the class I'd given the previous evening had, I think, managed to interest my students. There was not a soul in sight.

Suddenly, I had the sense (which psychologists tell us is associated with states of fatigue) that I had lived this moment before. Someone had sat down on the other end of my bench. I'd have preferred to be alone, but I didn't want to get up immediately for fear of seeming rude. The other man had started whistling. At that moment there occurred the first of the many shocks that morning was to bring me.

What the man was whistling — or trying to whistle (I have never been able to carry a tune) — was the popular Argentine milonga La tapera, by Elias Regules. The tune carried me back to a patio that no longer exists and to the memory of Alvaro Melián Lafinur, who died so many years ago. Then there came the words. They were the words of the décima that begins the song. The voice was not Alvaro's but it tried to imitate Alvaro's. I recognized it with horror.

I turned to the man and spoke.

"Are you Uruguayan or Argentine?"

"Argentine, but I've been living in Geneva since '14," came the reply.

There was a long silence. Then I asked a second question.

"At number seventeen Malagnou, across the street from the Russian Orthodox Church?"

He nodded.

"In that case" I resolutely said to him, "your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges. We are in 1969, in the city of Cambridge."

"No," he answered in my own, slightly distant, voice, "I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône."

Then, after a moment, he went on: "It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair."

"I can prove to you that I speak the truth," I answered. "I'll tell you things that a stranger couldn't know."

In our house there's a silver mate cup with a base of serpents that our great-grandfather brought from Peru. There's also a silver washbasin that was hung from the saddle. In the wardrobe closet in your room, there are two rows of books: the three volumes of Lane's translation of the Thousand and One Nights — which Lane called The Arabian Nights Entertainment — with steel engravings and notes in fine print between the chapters, Quicherat's Latin dictionary, Tacitus' Germania in Latin and in Gordon's English version, a Quixote in the Gamier edition, a copy of Rivera Indarte's Tablas de sangre signed by the author, Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, a biography of Amiel, and, hidden behind the others, a paperbound volume detailing the sexual customs of the Balkans. Nor have I forgotten a certain afternoon in a second-floor apartment on the Plaza Dubourg."

"Dufour" he corrected me.

"All right, Dufour," I said. "Is that enough for you?"

"No," he replied. "Those 'proofs' of yours prove nothing. If I'm dreaming you, it's only natural that you would know what I know. That long-winded catalog of yours is perfectly unavailing."

His objection was a fair one.

"If this morning and this encounter are dreams," I replied, "then each of us does have to think that he alone is the dreamer. Perhaps our dream will end, perhaps it won't. Meanwhile, our clear obligation is to accept the dream, as we have accepted the universe and our having been brought into it

and the fact that we see with our eyes and that we breathe."

"But what if the dream should last?" he asked anxiously.

In order to calm him — and calm myself, as well — I feigned a self-assurance I was far from truly feeling.

"My dream," I told him, "has already lasted for seventy years. And besides — when one wakes up, the person one meets is always oneself. That is what's happening to us now, except that we are two.

Wouldn't you like to know something about my past, which is now the future that awaits you?"

He nodded wordlessly. I went on, a bit hesitatingly:

"Mother is well, living happily in her house in Buenos Aires, on the corner of Charcas and Maipú, but Father died some thirty years ago. It was his heart. He had had a stroke — that was what finally killed him. When he laid his left hand over his right, it was like a child's hand resting atop a giant's. He died impatient for death, but without a word of complaint. Our grandmother had died in the same house.

Several days before the end, she called us all in and told us, 'I am an old, old woman, dying very slowly.

I won't have anyone making a fuss over such a common, ordinary thing as that.' Norah, your sister, is married and has two children. By the way — at home, how is everyone?"

"Fine. Father still always making his jokes against religion. Last night he said Jesus was like the gauchos, who'll never commit themselves, which is why He spoke in parables."

He thought for a moment, and then asked: "What about you?"

"I'm not sure exactly how many books you'll write, but I know there are too many. You'll write poetry that will give you a pleasure that others will not fully share, and stories of a fantastic turn. You will be a teacher — like your father, and like so many others of our blood."

I was glad he didn't ask me about the success or failure of the books. I then changed my tack.

"As for history ... There was another war, with virtually the same antagonists. France soon capitulated; England and America battled a German dictator named Hitler — the cyclical Battle of Waterloo. Buenos Aires engendered another Rosas in 1946, much like our kinsman in the first one. In '55, the province of Córdoba saved us, as Entre Ríos had before. Things are bad now. Russia is taking over the planet; America, hobbled by the superstition of democracy, can't make up its mind to be an empire. Our own country is more provincial with every passing day — more provincial and more self-important, as though it had shut its eyes. I shouldn't be surprised if the teaching of Latin were replaced by the teaching of Guaraní."

I realized that he was barely listening. The elemental fear of the impossible yet true had come over him, and he was daunted. I, who have never been a father, felt a wave of love for that poor young man who was dearer to me than a child of my own flesh and blood. I saw that his hands were clutching a book. I asked what he was reading.

"The Possessed — or, as I think would be better, The Devils, by Fyodor Dostoievsky," he answered without vanity.

"It's a bit hazy to me now. Is it any good?"

The words were hardly out of my mouth when I sensed that the question was blasphemous.

"The great Russian writer," he affirmed sententiously, "has penetrated more deeply than any other man into the labyrinths of the Slavic soul."

I took that rhetorical pronouncement as evidence that he had grown calmer.

I asked him what other works by Dostoievsky he had read.

He ticked off two or three, among them The Double. I asked him whether he could tell the difference between the characters when he read, as one could with Joseph Conrad, and whether he planned to read on through Dostoievsky's entire corpus.

"The truth is, I don't," he answered with a slight note of surprise.

I asked him what he himself was writing, and he told me he was working on a book of poetry to be called Red Anthems.

He'd also thought about calling it Red Rhythms or Red Songs.

"Why not?" I said. "You can cite good authority for it — Rubén Darío's blue poetry and Verlaine's gray song."

Ignoring this, he clarified what he'd meant — his book would be a hymn to the brotherhood of all mankind. The

modern poet cannot turn his back on his age.

I thought about this for a while, and then asked if he really felt that he was brother to every living person — every undertaker, for example? Every letter carrier? Every undersea diver, everybody that lives on the even-numbered side of the street, all the people with laryngitis? (The list could go on.) He said his book would address the great oppressed and outcast masses.

"Your oppressed and outcast masses," I replied, "are nothing but an abstraction. Only individuals exist — if, in fact, anyone does. Yesterday's man is not today's, as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps the proof of that."

Except in the austere pages of history, memorable events go unaccompanied by memorable phrases. A man about to die tries to recall a print that he glimpsed in his childhood; soldiers about to go into battle talk about the mud or their sergeant. Our situation was unique and, frankly, we were unprepared. We talked, inevitably, about literature; I fear I said no more than I customarily say to journalists. My alter ego believed in the imagination, in creation — in the discovery of new metaphors; I myself believed in those that correspond to close and widely acknowledged likenesses, those our imagination has already accepted: old age and death, dreams and life, the flow of time and water. I informed the young man of this opinion, which he himself was to express in a book, years later.

But he was barely listening. Then suddenly he spoke.

"If you have been me, how can you explain the fact that you've forgotten that you once encountered an elderly gentleman who in 1918 told you that he, too was Borges?"

I hadn't thought of that difficulty. I answered with conviction.

"Perhaps the incident was so odd that I made an effort to forget it."

He ventured a timid question.

"How's your memory?"

I realized that for a mere boy not yet twenty, a man of seventy some-odd years was practically a corpse.

"It's often much like forgetfulness," I answered, "but it can still find what it's sent to find. I'm studying Anglo-Saxon, and I'm not at the foot of the class."

By this time our conversation had lasted too long to be conversation in a dream.

I was struck by a sudden idea.

"I can prove to you this minute," I said, "that you aren't dreaming me. Listen to this line of poetry. So far as I can recall, you've never heard it before."

I slowly intoned the famous line: "L'hydreunivers tordant son corpse caillé d'astres."

I could sense his almost fear-stricken bafflement. He repeated the line softly, savoring each glowing word.

"It's true," he stammered, "I could never write a line like that."

Hugo had brought us together.

I now recall that shortly before this, he had fervently recited that short poem in which Whitman recalls a night shared beside the sea — a night when Whitman had been truly happy.

"If Whitman sang of that night," I observed, "it's because he desired it but it never happened. The poem gains in greatness if we sense that it is the expression of a desire, a longing, rather than the narration of an event."

He stared at me.

"You don't know him," he exclaimed.

"Whitman is incapable of falsehood."

A half century does not pass without leaving its mark. Beneath our conversation, the conversation of two men of miscellaneous readings and diverse tastes, I realized that we would not find common ground. We were too different, yet too alike. We could not deceive one another, and that makes conversation hard.

Each of us was almost a caricature of the other. The situation was too unnatural to last much longer.

There was no point in giving advice, no point in arguing, because the young man's inevitable fate was to be the man that I am now.

Suddenly I recalled a fantasy by Coleridge. A man dreams that he is in paradise, and he is given a flower as proof. When he wakes up, there is the flower.

I hit upon an analogous stratagem.

"Listen," I said, "do you have any money?"

"Yes," he replied. "About twenty francs. I invited Simón Jichlinskito have dinner with me at the Crocodile tonight."

"Tell Simón that he'll practice medicine in Carouge, and that he will do a great deal of good ... now, give me one of your coins."

He took three silver pieces and several smaller coins out of his pocket. He held out one of the silver pieces to me; he didn't understand.

I handed him one of those ill-advised American bills that are all of the same size though of very different denominations. He examined it avidly.

"Impossible!" he cried. "It's dated 1964."

(Months later someone told me that banknotes are not dated.)

"This, all this, is a miracle," he managed to say. "And the miraculous inspires fear. Those who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus must have been terrified."

We haven't changed a bit, I thought. Always referring back to books.

He tore the bill to shreds and put the coin back in his pocket.

I had wanted to throw the coin he gave me in the river. The arc of the silver coin disappearing into the silver river would have lent my story a vivid image, but fate would not have it.

I replied that the supernatural, if it happens twice, is no longer terrifying; I suggested that we meet again the next day, on that same bench that existed in two times and two places.

He immediately agreed, then said, without looking at his watch, that it was getting late, he had to be going. Both of us were lying, and each of us knew that the other one was lying. I told him that someone was coming to fetch me.

"Fetch you?" he queried.

"Yes. When you reach my age, you'll have almost totally lost your eyesight. You'll be able to see the color yellow, and light and shadow. But don't worry. Gradual blindness is not tragic. It's like the slowly growing darkness of a summer evening."

We parted without having touched one another. The next day, I did not go to the bench. The other man probably didn't, either.

I have thought a great deal about this encounter, which I've never told anyone about. I believe I have discovered the key to it. The encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which was why he could forget me; I spoke to him while I was awake, and so I am still tormented by the memory.

The other man dreamed me, but did not dream me rigorously — he dreamed, I now realize, the impossible date on that dollar bill.