

Zmajski Most

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Mythological beasts from thousands and thousands of legends. Their mere mention borders the path of dreams and takes us into fantasy. They exist around the world, often ignored; they travel and mix between cultures until becoming guardians of stories.

In Egypt, the dragon became wisdom and rebirth, although its grandeur was often tarnished as it provoked fear and desolation, like the one defeated by Saint George... It is true that some dragons embrace cultures while others destroy them. Their attempt to impose themselves by force is surprising. There is an excluded group, one that always lived in conflict with its origins. Its simple existence represents *the clash* after the conquest.

In South America, the miscellaneous Andean dragons were never the same after the meeting of cultures and great wars. Their nature mutated into something undefined. Ashes of the past merged together, petrified ... they were the foundations and starting point for their rebirth.

...Jason brandished his sword and rescued the princess. The dragon became a symbol enveloped in countless urban whispers.

A smile and a face of astonishment. That's how my granddad finished reciting the legend I never tired of hearing.

Today, on this bridge with four bronze dragons, those words are distant echoes. A few days ago I received the email from a friend. He had finally got me the job in his newspaper office. A dream realised after a long wait. Something that took me back to certain times...

My childhood was like anyone else's. My mum was the daughter of Slovenians who met after leaving their country at war.

I was born in Buenos Aires, a city that was no longer cosmopolitan, yet many communities tried to maintain the traditions of their grandparents. A fundamental rule was to marry within the community of which my family didn't form part. Perhaps because my mum married my dad: an Argentinean not of Slovenian descent.

I was a boy when my grandfather died and very distracted when my grandmother went with him. I never knew much about them, only that she adored Marshall Tito and he hated him. Incomprehensible but they married in Argentina, although their past was always taboo, even for their most intimate circle.

When I grew up and finished my journalism studies, this Slovenian-Argentinean legacy somehow stayed with me. The only conflicts were the community festivals, which only mum and I attended. My dad never felt comfortable in those surroundings. Children and grandchildren of immigrants appeared extravagantly dressed (the work of generations) and asserting their "Slovenianness". Many, not even seeing themselves as Argentinean, regarded their place of birth as a simple accident. They amused themselves criticising the new Latin immigration, without thinking that many of their progenitors were present. Listening to them, it was easy for me to understand why my family kept themselves at a distance from the community. But they weren't all like that, some held back a more humble side for conversation.

In the last event I attended, I was seeking solitude, eating a canapé or two, but my mum insisted on telling everyone that I had finished university and, among other things, that “on Monday he’s dancing at the tango hall in San Telmo.” Hearing her comments I wanted a shell to hide in. Those attitudes were irritating. I didn’t understand why we still went to those events. She could have travelled to Slovenia when it became democratic and stopped living this pretence of patriotic reality. But I never understood why she stayed.

Luckily, Ivan arrived, my grandfather’s best friend, who could hardly move. He was with his wife Mara. I walked over to him and the first thing he did was to congratulate me:

–Your mother told me...

–...

He whispered that he was writing a letter of recommendation for a scholarship in Ljubljana. Sometime in the past I had told him that I wanted to continue my studies there but he suggested that I should first improve my Slovenian. I understood the language but it was not something I used every day. I thanked him but I was no longer planning to travel, the crisis was not getting any better and the euro was stronger every day.

–And a friend promised to find me a place at his newspaper – I told him.

–Who? The lad who’s going to Spain?

–No. It’s Gonzalo who’s travelling, a former university mate who got citizenship through a law that offered compensation for the Civil War. And he took the opportunity...

–You’re joking! That’s called political opportunism to get more votes – replied Ivan, as Gonzalo’s grandfather had done, a Republican by birth. But Gonzalo didn’t care; he’d already gone to try his luck in Girona.

Ivan said sharply:

–Crises are eternal, they’re always there. If you wait for it to end you’ll be old before

you’ve seen anything. If I were your age... – he smiled and wore one of his tired expressions.

A few days later the phone rang, Ivan had been admitted to hospital. Only my mother visited him and advised me not to go in. He died the next day.

After the funeral, we accompanied Mara home. She was calm as if she’d been prepared for some time. We had coffee and before leaving she gave me a document Ivan had signed before going into hospital. It was the letter of recommendation for the Slovenian college grant in Ljubljana. I applied for the language course and the grant that covered accommodation costs, as the requisites included Slovenian citizenship and a letter of recommendation from a member of this community in Argentina. I obtained it without problems and, although I wanted to go, I did not feel very sure.

There was a new crisis in the farming sector. Inflation rose, everyone spoke of the corruption and the advent of the new 2001. I was qualified and unemployed; planning a future in the middle of economic disasters shifted the balance. How long would I have to wait for things to change? I sold my car and bought all the euros I could. I had neither plans nor certainties but I still dreamed of the promised land.

My family tried to stop me going but I had decided to try my luck. I was qualified and they were my only tie to Argentina.

At the airport dad said I had to be ready for anything; mum kept crying and hugging me. She repeatedly told me to “take care” and all those things mothers usually say when their children fly the nest.

It was traumatic. I was leaving my home in the hope of finding independence in the unknown. Far from their faces, as I passed through immigration, anxiety choked my throat, gradually turning into a living ter-

ror. Far away now, one stop before Ljubljana, in Frankfurt, I shed some tears which I immediately wiped away in the toilets. This gigantic airport was very different to the one I knew in Ezeiza.

At the college, we had classes in the mornings and in the afternoon there were outings I never went on. I used the time to find an apartment. The owners usually asked for proof of citizenship, as my accent sounded very different. I often found that when I spoke to natives in Slovenian they automatically answered me in English. I never knew if it was laziness or to help communication, but I preferred the latter option. My English improved a lot.

For the first time, I could no longer define myself. Far from my home, my identity was Slovenian or Argentinean. I suppose a piece of paper said something that in my head seemed more complex.

At the college I got to know people from Serbia, Peru, Italy and Bosnia. Most of them were descendants of or married to Slovenians.

A fellow student from Peru helped me find a place near the centre and, although it was a basement, it was fine.

I started spending time with lots of immigrants in the city, and got to know many Spaniards looking for work, fleeing the crisis in their country. Juan, a literature teacher, was one of the *Indignados*. He asked me a lot about Argentina, human rights and memory.

–Some politicians cover up problems like the mega-mining, in the north of Argentina. It's funded by foreign companies that make pacts with the government. For an ounce of gold they destroy mountains, poison the water... – I told him – I'm pessimistic. Despite human rights ... progress is slow.

–Even though there may be social policies, in Spain we were inactive. And although

there were wake-up calls because of the terrorists, I think we said enough too late. I don't know if the damage can be repaired, there are also environmental problems because of construction ... but the reality is that today politics is failing ... the crisis is spreading like wildfire everywhere ... even my qualification has been devalued.

–I don't know, I'm relaxed and experiencing a different crisis here, very different from my memory of 2001.

–...

Finally, Juan went to Argentina.

In order to survive I tried to save every cent while looking for work, but nobody wanted a journalist who wasn't fluent in the language.

It is true that any kind of work dignifies. You forget the inherent prejudices and hunger makes you do anything. I lowered my employment expectations. I worked as a road sweeper, a removal man, clothes packer ... mostly manual work, although speaking Spanish was an advantage. I had to dress up as a dragon in *Zmajski Most* for a tourism agency and explain the legend of Jason to groups of Spaniards. One day, while the Spaniards were threatening to throw me into the river to see if dragons also swim, a girl with ruffled hair passed by and stopped when she heard the uproar of the tourists around me. She handed out some papers she was holding and disappeared while those to whom I was trying to explain the legend stuffed the papers in my mask.

After nightfall, cleaning the dragon costume, I found one of those papers. It advertised free Slovenian language classes for foreigners. I went without hesitating. Studying languages without a grant was expensive.

The classes were taught by students of the Faculty of Philosophy and among the organisers was the ruffled hair girl. They gave us a level test and separated us into groups after an individual interview. I was the first.

I was alone in the classroom, sitting and drumming my fingers on a table. The door opened and she came in. Time stopped while a ballad played in the background, like in those films where the camera slowly follows the girl without allowing us to blink. She sat down softly like falling autumn leaves when there is no breeze. After a few seconds I recognised her, her hair was combed, her features worthy of admiration and detailed, but that's just me. I took my exam. She took off her glasses and looking at my double surname asked where I was from... She put me in advanced level and said my problem when speaking was due to nerves. And why wouldn't I be nervous next to her? Before leaving, I asked her name: it was Vita.

Spanish became useful again when my teacher, a Hispanic philology student proposed we exchange an hour of Spanish for an hour of Slovenian. A good deal.

I communicated with my family by Skype, always leaving out the most depressing details, which is perhaps why the conversations were brief. Although just hearing them relieved my nostalgia for Buenos Aires, I wondered what those days would be like without me.

It was the final classes. After two months, Vita started greeting me normally although we hadn't spoken since the slow motion interview.

When it snowed without respite, the basement was filled with a humidity that blackened the walls, and I got sick. Some friends came to take care of me from time to time. This group of Mexicans, Spaniards, and three Chileans, Sara the girl from Serbia and Peter, a Slovenian lawyer, were a great help to me, my adopted family. I spent Christmas and New Year with them, unwell but happy.

New Year's Eve. Peter arrived with Noelia, his girlfriend, an Argentinean who would study at the university for three years. Turned

out she also danced tango but had no dance partner. When I got better, we went dancing and she was very good. We decided to offer tango classes as, in this world, my everyday existence could be as exotic as it was for me to live in a city with a castle.

We started having many students. Her boyfriend helped us with the papers as we were foreigners, and this was when I brandished my citizenship at the town hall as if it were a sword.

In one of the classes there was an Argentinean couple of Slovenian descent. They said they were Argentineans and asked:

–How did you come to Slovenia?

–My mother is Argentinean-Slovenian.

–What's your surname?

–...

–Ah, so you're not pure...

Noelia heard the comment, unaffected, ended the class and we never saw them again.

The last Slovenian lesson. In the evening we went to celebrate in a bar. Sara met a boy and was the first to leave. Among the shouts of Erasmus students I tried to talk to Vita. She indicated she couldn't hear ... and we left the bar. Words flowed effortlessly, we talked and talked ... and walked to the Robba fountain. There we found Sara crying ... the boy had called her *čefurka*.¹ We took her home, trying to calm her down until she went to bed. Later, I accompanied Vita to the flat she was sharing with other students. We said goodbye until Wednesday and, exchanging nervous looks, we kissed each other goodbye on the cheek. People usually shake hands there and reserve kisses for special occasions.

In the basement, I had a message from Argentina. My friend had finally found me a post in the newspaper office. I'd wait until

¹ Scornful expression used in Slovenia to refer to natives of the southern Balkans.

Thursday. A mixture of feelings choked in my throat again, and only two images were clear: Vita and the job. I sank in a sea of confusion and abandoned myself to the *pros* and *cons* as ever.

Pro: it's a safe clean city, I made new friends, I teach tango.

Con: I miss my traditions, my old friends, I don't earn my living from journalism.

Con: she doesn't live there.

As I am waiting on this bridge where I had seen her for the first time, dusk is falling ... surrounded by four dragons with their backs to me. Vita arrives walking like a princess, we meet in the middle of the bridge and

before saying *Živjo*, I embrace her and she shivers slightly. She relaxes. We go to a *kavarna*, hard to find on a Wednesday evening, and talk about anything...

–Did you know that *Zmajski Most* was built after an earthquake destroyed the old bridge...? It was more than a century ago and it continues without a scratch ... people didn't think it would remain standing for so long.

–Must be because of the dragons...
– I smile at her and, when I look into her eyes while she's sipping coffee, I understand "who" my mum had decided to stay for. On those pages of family history, what I saw as taboo was in fact a hopeful rebirth.