

MONKEY'S DREAM

NOTES FROM A NON-EXISTANT DIARY

Lagartofernández

Life is a bridge. Cross over it, but build no house on it.
Indian proverb

S U M M E R I N T H E S T E P P E S

Ulan Bator, Mongolia, 16th august 1999

Boarding pass and a seven hour wait at Moscow Airport. The air-con doesn't work and they say its 32 degrees outside this afternoon. Sausages and mash potato on the menu. Those Iranians have been waiting five days for a plane which will never arrive: we know in which direction the Mecca is, second corridor, before the lady's toilet.

Ulan Bator is seven hours flight' away, refuelling in Siberia and microwaved fish at 5AM. The Russians are born sad, and they cover their fate by wearing melancholy...those eyes...

Sunrise and landing in the Green Country. The land is unbroken: no fences, no fields, just endless rolling hills, waves of green moving out to the horizon. Falcons playing hunting games in the silence of twilight: it's summer in the Steppes.

Mongolia, where the bones of dead animals have a soul, and the ghosts of the lamas play around the old stupas.

A cow comes out of a building, the Theatre of the People, in the main square. A concrete sculpture salutes the workers of yesterday. The Great Khans had been gone a long time when Stalin arrived, with the hammer of ideology and blood. Now the Mongols awake again free, embracing Buddhism and Capitalism as the two religions leading into an unknown future. The blind beggar throws the coins outside the temple, and with a touch of his fingers he will read your luck. Give him thousand togrogs and let's go now: open the bottle, c'mon...Genghis Khan is the name of a rough vodka, drink your hero, break the bottle and think of the Lost Empire...The skeleton of a mare shows the way the last horseman took in autumn. My thoughts are disconnected now; I must be drunk already...

In the bus station a beautiful girl, an old soldier, a sick woman, a proud teen are selling boiled eggs, probably the same those Chinese businessmen are eating while waiting for flight 385 to Beijing. They slurp water from a small dish: noisy thirst, shiny suitcases.

INDIA · FEVER IN VARANASSI

Jaisalmer, 16th. September 1999

No energy to move too far from the spinning fan. Exhausted after a bad night in the bus and a diahorrea playing with my guts. I've decided to take it easy and rest.

Fourteen days ago I was in Varanassi, where the dead and the alive mix at the riverbanks of the Ganges. "Call me Chandra, come with me" My new companion is an old rickshaw driver whose eyes are red and nervous. He takes me to the ghat, one of the thousand holy staircases that end in the river. I reached Hell, or maybe just Purgatory, if the Hindus have one... Five bodies are burning in the dark night, and then I discover the smell of death: flesh is sweet when the soul has abandoned the body and is in search of the next reincarnation. I don't feel really together now, Chandra keeps talking really fast and I can only watch his lips, a soundless speech about rituals and beliefs. His profile is sharp against the burning river, flames reflected on the water.

The smell is luscious, I want to get away but I can't escape the vision of the human bonfire. I decide to stay and I discover the people around us. It was a vision of lost angels, all waiting for the next morning, to dissolve in the mist of dawn, not moving, with no faces: just the sparks of their eyes looking through me, beyond the substance of the world and the weight of my mortality. They wear white and mourn for their lost relatives. Their clothes reflect the red of the fire, and the moving shadows dance around their tired shoulders. They don't notice me, because they are the sentinels of another world, where sorrow is an illusion, and the spiritual balance is reached by detachment: no crying, death is a celebration of Freedom. I try to understand...and I feel I haven't been invited.

I'm sick, Chandra points at the heads and is talking about the vision of exploding skulls, and I don't know how to make him to shut his wobbly and greedy mouth.

I begin to walk away and my arm is held by the guard of the site. Not a word, and I know now is the time to pay for my curiosity. "The wood is expensive, I am sure you can help the family". A bunch of rupees comes out from my pocket and I feel I have been here for thirteen hours, thirteen years. Sweat is an emotional estate, and the smoke a condition under which time and space change their de-finitions: blessed ash and a dog crying. I run away and in the first lit street I meet Chandra up on his rickshaw. "I'll take you back to the hotel, Sir". I am powerless, and I can't even say no. "Do not look at me like that, Sir. I knew you wanted to see it, and it is what I did. But nobody said it would be a pleasant scene. You westerners have strange ideas about Death, and many of you can't stand its closeness. Yes, Death has a smell, a flavour, even a sound."

...Am I inventing the dialogue, or was it like that, when I finally reached the Hotel? The heat and the fever make me dream my own reality, past and present and the impossible clash and encounter, like the changing feelings of repulsion and attraction I experimented that night of the Black Ganges.

...I'm thirsty wannawather wannasleep ...

L E A V I N G A G R A

He asks me for a cigarette, and when he lights it I know there aren't any plans after the last puff. The smoke will stay forever in the mouth of the young Prince, the old Beggar. He will carry on cleaning the sticky floor, but I'll never see his teeth, the cloud of nicotine won't let me see through, and I can only imagine his bitter smile when I ask him what he wants to do, to become. "When, now, tomorrow, in ten years time? Will you tell me?" ...I feel stupid when the Taj-Mahal disappears in the steam of this hot afternoon: the river is filthy, the water is boiling and the cows aren't holy when searching for food in Wasteland.

THE MOTHERS OF SILENCE

Acteal , Chiapas, Mexico, February 2000

The army surrounds their land. They say that now their coffee crops can be sold to a big, faceless corporation: nothing new after five hundred years of domination. Look at their eyes and discover a resistance without ideology.

Ideology: it is a modern word, which hasn't got anything to do with seasons, with harvests, with faith.

This is not a time for heroes. These people have endured and survived the time of clever speeches, of words without meaning, of cross and sword . There isn't any perfect reality, but nobody wants that perfection in the land of the tzotzils.

At dawn, you recognize the smell of the silence among those women. It's a silence thousand years old, it tastes like the slowness of the rotation of the Earth, it sounds like the forgotten song which tells us about surviving: no need to remember the words, you'll know the lyrics by waking up and trying to feed your family, to hold up to your land.

Dusk. The fire is warming up the kitchen again.

They walk quietly, they carry kids and wood, coffee beans and tortillas, their gaze is deep and black. Old. They are the owners of their dreams.

There is no room for contradictions when life is about birth and death: an endless cycle which feels, sounds, taste, looks like the pre-sense of the Mother.

[Maria is breastfeeding her younger Son. She is singing to Him now]

The rest is just noise.

CUBA · NOTES FROM THE NON-EXISTANT DIARY

Mexico City, 27 of March 2000

Che Guevara was dying of asthma in the Bolivian jungle, in the French documentary I saw the first night back here. I've just arrived from Cuba, I am alone again, amazed and tired after that explosion of vitality and energy: "The Caribbean have African blood, hermano!". I have been locked in this room for two days, I have to digest what we saw there. Life's good and bad, but in Cuba the extremes are difficult to cope with when nobody warned you before. Exhaustion.

"Venceremos!" (We'll win!) In the country of "Aqui no se rinde nadie!" (No surrender!), the day by day fight against the USA's embargo. The Fight, la Lucha, as they call what you do everyday to bring bread and milk back home.

The decadence has its beauty, and in La Havana the old mansions are the most beautiful in the world, it's the Dust of Socialism, "we're six families living here, corazon". Come in, come in, please. The old owners are in Florida now. They are saying mass, praying for the death of Castro, and hoping that God will listen to them before they die or forget how the streets of Vedado looked like.

The laundry's hanging in the balcony, the kids play baseball and give kisses to the air, salsa plays on the radio of the coffee maker: this is the last cigarette and no more to come, Negro. Havana Vieja; Gordo takes me around and then we smoke a joint besides the Factory: Aguila street, number 318. "I'll keep one and smoke with my girl, ok?"

"Don't forget us, please": the visitors are the only hope for them to keep in touch with the outside world. Here things are clear: they are all poor, and you are NOT. This is a position you are placed in as soon as your plane lands on the island; the difference is obvious, a plane ticket to get out of here defines your freedom. They can see the sweet, they can't taste it. Not funny. You are someone to be desired, you embody the temptations that turn the Perfect Socialist Society into a land of dissatisfaction. Is it true? Hmmm, have I upset you? Don't worry, you can always hide away in the Paradise built for foreigners on the north coast, the purpose built tourist resort at Varadero, Club Red.

"But stay with us, please, I'll find something for dinner, our house is your house": Julia, the Mother, her husband in prison, her niece in age to marry and her son talking about

his brother in Miami. Julia, the women of huge breast that one day fed five, the eyes that know of necessity and talk of generosity.

The Cubans know that the capitalism won't save them either, they just want the same as you and me...and they might know more than you and me: go to La Havana to learn about sensuality and beauty, about equality, about pride and surviving, about hospitality and fate.

We almost get our cameras stolen. " This is Cuba, Daniel, the real Cuba" says Jorge from the far corner of the big red car. He hates the system but doesn't have the guts to leave, anyway. He's not happy, no: did you think that the Caribbean was only this beautiful young woman approaching you now? Many dream of escaping, "I don't want to talk about politics, darling, marry me and take me with you, c'mon, I'll make you happy, didn't you like last night?"

Three in the morning and they only sell rum in the bar; rough spirit in your throat, dark tobacco in your lungs. Here is a place where they don't see many tourists. Curiosity mixed with drunkenness, high temperature outside and inside the dark skin, tales of false adventures, of strong convictions, but maybe everything is fake, rum is a drink which will change the taste of your sweat, and you can make new friends whom will be forgotten the next morning: the luxury of the westerner, Look at her: young and tight flesh ready for Germans, Spanish, Italians, pockets stuffed with the dreamed dollar's bills.

If you meet some musicians between Zanja Street and the Capitolio, buy them some boxes of cigarettes and a few bottles of rum and you're gonna see what happens. No matter if there's nothing for breakfast next morning. It's not about sweet drugs, my friend, listen to their heart, they are strong. The strength comes from necessity: do you know what sexy means? Not yet, I tell ya! Six in the morning and the musicians haven't had a rest since midnight, those big bums, the movement of their hips, it's about their blood, "one picture one dollar, two pictures two dollars,... ten pictures five dollars, I do a price because of your pretty face, love. Eh, do you want to buy a box of cigars?"

Inventing, everybody's inventing the next gallon of petrol, the evening's meal, the new front door, the spares of the car...

Rolando has been crying. It is something that he cannot hide. He doesn't want to talk, but we promise that he will feel much better after. We listen a story of shame and guilt, of hiding his friends and his feelings: what's left, then? Being gay in Cuba meant prison until a few years ago. He takes us to visit some friends; Maria and Angela had to marry Jorge and Fidel. Lesbians and gays sharing roof and fake weddings to keep the Party's rejection away. Now, when the heat is gone and the night of Santiago de Cuba allows true feelings to come out, Rolando wants to tell us his story of despair; a suicide attempt. Now the faith of a better future has come back, and the tears are part of a healing process, far from the desperation of the past.

Santiago de Cuba, the Hot Land, la Tierra Caliente.

... ..

I fall asleep before the documentary finishes: I know the end, when Che gets hunted down by the Bolivian army, a man alone with his dream. Everyone turned their backs to the Revolution. He was a visionary who couldn't help but succumb to his own beliefs. "Companero Che Guevara, presente!" The kids remember him every morning in their school's songs. Forty years after the Revolution, Cuba is a country where ideals live on. They are proud of a system where the education and the healthcare are still free for everyone: Fidel is a terrible and magnanimous father, his shadow can kill you, but nobody could love you more: punishment and care, laugh and tears, exuberance and hunger. That's life, you'd say, but there aren't many places I've felt it so close, so real, so bitch, so beautiful...