

## A Room Without A Book

I had knocked twice. As a calm dusk settled beneath the trees, I looked back toward the open gate. Engraved in the iron was a timeworn 343 – palindrome and perfect cube. That was no mistake. I smiled: the professor had always appreciated that trinity of sevens.

In the distance, rays from the fading sky hinted at the beauty of Galicia. Green hills encompassed the place, almost too smooth to be real. I thought I could see villas here and there, safely nested in the embrace of shadows. As I glanced at my watch, wind rustled the leaves overhead. By now, he must've known my train was late. Maybe he'd gone ahead with the dinner. Maybe that's why he hadn't heard the door.

I peeked in through the window, then took a step back. Nearby, the rusting fence posts peered through the ivy like moccasins in shaded grass. I felt a slithering breeze brush my neck. Turning my head to the left, I found it difficult to find the dimming boundary of the grounds. There was an immensity I couldn't grasp.

The doorknob turned.

A servant emerged from the doorway and with a flourished wave of the hand, beckoned, "*Señor, venga conmigo.*" He led me straight into the central courtyard. I noticed the outlines of the moon beginning to form in the soft ripples of the reflecting pool. A wisp of air stirred the open space.

On the opposite side of the courtyard, I saw the renowned professor step outside to greet me. Slowly drawing near, he commented, "I suppose you never can have trust in these trains. Better to pedal your bike or walk, no?"

I laughed warmly and shook his hand. His English wasn't wrong exactly. It had just fallen out of practice a bit. He'd grown up for a time in Switzerland and learned the language from a Brit, but that was many, many years ago.

He motioned me to sit down with him at a circular stone table. The chairs were solid and dark – probably mahogany. Lying on the center of the table was the professor's latest work. The black, leather-bound cover was entitled with golden indentations: *Un Tratado Filosófico del Sueño*. I was glad the title hadn't been ruined yet by an ailing English translation. The Spanish always felt more intriguing, perhaps less exact.

Having sat down, the professor gazed in my general direction and gently asked, "When you flew here from the states, Dr. Murdock, did you know what you were looking for?"

I shifted in my chair, slightly unsure. "I had an idea, I suppose." I thought for a moment. "Back home I couldn't focus anymore. Too many distractions, really. And my work, well that was beginning to tire me out – too constant, too endless. I needed a different pace." I was speaking too fast and my cheeks felt warm.

I conjured my cramped Boston office. I remembered the time when I cleared all the shelves in frustration and swept my desk clear of stray papers. I thought I would have more space to think, more air to breathe – but the bare room just rang hollow.

He nodded and gave a faint smile, "And they have begun to clear up, your mathematics?"

“Yes, certainly clearer. I feel sharper, and that Salamanca office is just how I’d imagined: tall ceilings and walls straight from the Golden Age.”

Breathing deeply, eyes shut, the professor almost whispered, “Still, I remember the first day I found myself in those halls. They contained something ancient yet fresh. There was more light in those days.”

I recalled my childhood summers at the ranch in Texas. Packed into a single day, there was enough light to last a year. Back then you could smell the heat, really smell the singed grass and taste the dusty air. Tucked away beneath the shade of a couple large mesquites was the cabin. The woodwork wasn’t polished so you had to watch out for splinters. Inside, it was just one big room: two beds on the left, stove on the right, and a little space between. Every night, I would try to read through Whitman’s Bible, that lone, massive volume *Leaves of Grass*. But every time, drowsiness overtook my heavy eyelids as the kerosene flickered out.

Looking up from the table, I saw the professor lost in memory. He used to be one of the best – game theory, group theory, topography: they all yielded to his deft touch. As he strayed into his thirties, however, he became less prolific, less proficient. The mathematician’s curse had hit him earlier than most expected, and from that time on, he spent his days in philosophical exploration, testing new modes of thought.

I wondered aloud, “Do you miss your numbers anymore? I couldn’t help but notice your classic three-forty-three on the front gate.”

He laughed with quick recognition, remarking, “*Casi el número más santificado*. Almost three sevens and almost three threes – but fate would not have it. Now though, I can hardly see that old gate. All I find are dark shapes interrupting the yellow.”

I had forgotten his deteriorating blindness. Cataracts had lent his eyes a milky constitution. They contained something undefined. I remembered hearing from my great uncle that becoming blind is like sitting on the porch, watching the sun set slowly ‘til there’s nothing left.

Continuing, the professor spoke, “Sometimes I miss my numbers, though I cannot say I miss writing those books about them. Each word of each book took me such pains, yet left behind only a few dead spots of ink.”

“I can’t imagine you truly feel that way. You were the one who taught me that ‘each elegant proof is timeless truth.’ Can’t each book still come alive? Can’t each one still reach out to grab you?” I didn’t understand where the words came from and I feared the disagreement. My words hung in the humid air.

After a pause, he returned with a quote, “*El cuarto sin un libro es como el cuerpo sin una alma*” – ‘The room without a book is like the body without a soul.’”

I failed to recognize the source though it sounded medieval, but that couldn’t be quite right. Books weren’t common enough. Either that or bodies without souls. “Which one of your authors wrote the comparison?”

“*Creo que Cicero al principio*. I feel that Chesterton, though, discovered the idea in a form more simple. Still, neither one can claim it since the idea is as eternal as you and I.” He looked up toward me as if to confirm my agreement. “In the past, the men in caves used crude symbols and in the future men will find new tools.”

I now recognized the lecture: cyclic theory of a historical nature. I replied with words that were not my own. “What was once, is now, will be again.”

Straying from our discussion, I gazed again at the outlines of the moon in the water. Whereas before they had shifted with subtle waves, each curve now lay perfectly still. It seemed like someone had pasted it there, and then forgotten. I began to notice the courtyard shadows. Without the sun, they just sat there, unmoving and unmoved.

The professor’s words found my ears. He seemed to have been speaking for a while. “Within the symmetries of the soul, one cannot help but notice a type of reflective quality.”

I replied automatically, “Yes, I recall that was the kernel of Augustine or Thomas – a mirror of grace which defines the soul.” The same dusty books must have educated us both at some point.

I now glanced at the hanging balconies and the statues which divided the walls into regular intervals. Each side was reflected in the other, needlessly multiplying the carved features. The courtyard seemed to shrink, to recede back into itself while simultaneously expanding toward some infinity. The effect paralleled that horror of dual mirrors hopelessly facing each other. I buried my head in my elbow for a moment. The humid night had seeped through my clinging shirt and now began to show in darkened patches. I could take a dry heat, but this humidity was brutal.

I heard one of the wooden doors open and close. A few moments later, a servant approached the table. This one was taller and bore a lighter complexion. He wore the combed blonde hair of my youth.

In a soothing voice, he informed us, “Dinner has been prepared in the upstairs dining room. Make your way up whenever you so desire.” He disappeared like an apparition, dispelled by the click of a latch.

I waited for the professor to move first. I didn’t know the way and I felt as if I would lose myself amidst the many stairs and corridors.

Standing up with a slight groan, the old man remarked, “If my age has taught to me a single thing, it is to never avoid a rich dinner. I may be slow, but follow my old feet and we may be there soon.” He grabbed his cane and began to walk.

We headed toward the stony double balustrade, each flight of stairs half spiraling up to another walkway. We took the one on the left and shuffled up the staircase. From the second floor balcony, I looked at the stone table below. The side where I’d sat was shrouded and I could only see the professor’s half. I now noticed the mosaic glass embedded in the stone around the dark book. All the pieces were some variation of that deep, vibrant blue – that beautiful color you only see splintered in the depths of the ocean.

I turned back around with a snap of my head. All I saw was careful masonry and quick gleams from windowpanes. The professor had vanished. I heard the clink and rattle of a doorknob, then saw him beneath an archway just a few feet away. Rushing over to him like a worried child, I pulled open the door. Collecting myself, I said, “After you, Professor.”

Before entering, I had resigned myself to wading through some clutter of old papers and piles of dense books. Instead, all the mess had been corralled into tall, neat bookcases set against the walls. Everything was well lit and well placed. There were just two brown leather chairs, a few lamps and a central table. An obsessive symmetry dictated the placement of each object.

The professor placed his cane in a bin full of other similar sticks which sat by the door. This bin was the only imperfection, the only object awkwardly out of place. It seemed to have been hollowed from the shaved trunk of a tree. It would have fit in at the ranch, but the canes would have been rifles or maybe switches. Unbelievable how far a hickory switch could bend and bend, but never break.

Before moving on, the professor peered slightly downward. The golden arabesques woven into the burgundy carpet seemed to lead him toward the opening on the left. Set in the middle of this next room was a table, long, but not too large. It was rather dark and indistinct. One wall was dominated by three large windows and on the opposite wall hung a lone mirror. The room felt strangely empty.

After helping the professor to his seat, I sat down facing the windows, glad that I wouldn't have to stare at myself in the oval mirror which hung on the opposite wall. Unfortunately, through the windows, I couldn't see much of the grounds. A few trees and hedges seemed fade into darkened paths of a maze, and the moon above appeared yellow and wary.

I can't say I recall much about the food or the conversation in between. I simply know that it happened, the same way you switch to cruise control on a country road and let the forgotten miles fly beneath your feet.

Now finished and seeming satisfied, the professor began to discuss his most recent ideas, the things he had not yet written. With precise awareness, the professor noted, "Of all the cultures on this 'terraqeous orb' – *la frase reconocida de Whitman* – only three concepts of the dream exist. There are those who dissect it, those who accept it, and those who reject it."

The now empty wine bottles had filled me with a sluggish regret. I could sense the verge of another lecture. Now though, I couldn't tell where he was headed. I felt the thick air slide like molasses through the half-open windows.

The professor continued his discourse. "You Americans always seem to be in a mood of dissection. What does this mean? *¿Por qué hay un laberinto aquí o allá?* I suppose now most Anglo-Saxons think in such a manner. It would be better to return to the Viking mind – to accept in awe the gods of sleep."

"Sure," I lazily replied, "But what about those who don't dream. I doubt I could even guess the last time I dreamt."

He gazed past me and carelessly mentioned, "There is no man who does not dream, and who does not do so continuously." The words dissolved like an exhalation in the heavy room.

Staring now toward the windows, I could see my face, or a version of one of my past faces, looking back. It stared back with different contours, shimmering behind the old, distorted glass. A faint writhing of the spine halted my breath.

New sounds approached my ears from the wrong angles. A constant rattle seemed to vibrate my chair. I sat still in attempted concentration. A ghost of my hand crouched beneath the mahogany finish of the table. In the reflection of the window, I saw that damned mirror, and turning around, noticed a pox of rust consuming the silver surface.

I felt as though the moon would crash through the glass at any moment, ready to pounce, to make itself known again. The rattle had become a metallic knock and a shrill horn sliced the viscous air. I now perceived the room in a quickening swirl. In the center, elements meshed and melded together, leaving bare fringes unperturbed. The shriek was deafening, the floor shaking. I shut my eyes.

Darkness swam around my head as I tried to focus. That rattle was still there as I blinked around the room. It was much smaller now, I thought. A black book rested on the plastic seat cushion beside me. I peered outside the window and saw a half-lit landscape slowing down. It felt like one of those solitary evenings that has the look of dawn. My windowed reflection smiled at me with a bewildered bliss, as the train horn sounded one last time.