

Nacho Blanco
A New Friend



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It was a sad summer night with nothing to do. I decided to take a walk. I had no clear destination in mind, perhaps just the sole purpose of hearing my own footfall against the ground.

Until that lonely night nothing seemed to have gone right for me. The meaning of my life was fast losing its strength. Sadness surrounded me and kept me company. Only grieves inhabited my body and soul till that moment. My mind was set on matters other than my feet and I was not directing them.

I was like a machine — my movements were sharp and short. My legs functioned in a careless way, not knowing the direction they would take. I was being driven to an isolated place nearby, a place that many couples visited quite often because quietness dwelled there. Love needs peace and solitude and the site granted those things. So, love could grow and spread its petals happily and without chains in this lovely place.

A few benches were scattered all over the place for people to sit down and enjoy the beautiful view of the town full of lights, resembling a starry night. I don't clearly remember if that was the spot where I sat talking with the man because everything that happened on that particular night is only dimly recorded on my brain. But by small clues left behind in memory, I can affirm that it was a place called Tinker Hill. Town history has it that a long time ago, gypsies had chosen that very spot and settled there for a season, without disturbing anyone. They made the place one full of magic, and even today it is believed that it brings good luck to anyone coming to Tinker Hill.

I went and sat on one of the benches. I had been sitting there looking at the wee city lights for a few minutes when a man, perhaps seventy years of age, appeared beside me. I had not heard him approaching and his sudden presence caused me to start. He wore a colourful tie and a smoky suit. He looked like a real gentleman. He resembled the kind of men of whom, like my grandfather, good manners and education had formed real heroes. The

kind of people who put more weight on love than money. He was clean-shaven and combed as if going to his own wedding or about to dine with his eternal sweetheart.

Suddenly he said: “Wonderful place, this. Peace is all over and you can even touch it, don’t you think so?”

I did not feel like talking and I made a noise sounding like ‘yes’, said very wearily, without the force required to let it come out. A few minutes passed and nothing else was uttered. The two of us sat staring at nothing in particular — only staring blankly.

I noticed a smile was etched on his face letting his happiness fly free. It was as if he had been touched by a happy memory, one that was now exteriorised on his face. He seemed on the verge of bursting out laughing, but he did not. How pleasant it is to see someone feeling good in any way! By the way he smiled anybody would have thought him mad. But judging from his power of speech and the things stated during the conversation, it was an unfounded observation and should not dwell in your head.

“Do you mind me sitting here, next to you?” he asked purporting to start a dialogue. It was the kind of question one gets from a person who wants to build a bridge of words and feelings between two different people. It was obviously a stupid question after having sat there for a while, but I answered it by simply saying: “No, of course not.”

After a moment of silence he continued the conversation-- it wasn’t even a proper two-person conversation, as I was not taking much part in it-- by asking: “What grips your heart so tightly that it cannot search for the blue skies of happiness and love?” I was amazed at being asked such a question from a man totally unknown to me. I, nevertheless, answered him: “Everything seems to be going wrong at the same time. All my friends decided to leave me when I most needed their help. That is the reason I feel down and depressed.”

He then spoke thus: “You must get used to that. Life is not easy at all. Sometimes the sky is blue and for others that same blue sky you felt so comforted by is threatened by a herd of black clouds — messengers of sadness.”

I, who had been taught to keep my life to myself and not to let out my feelings and miseries, started to notice how something inside me was undoing all those past years of grief. It flashed upon me that to give what was most precious was the greatest joy. That there was no notice with 'No Trespassing' written on my heart; everyone was free to enter. My entire being was pouring out and a sense of freedom was invading me like a flood — Oh, God! — I had never felt like this before.

The old man was saying: "Don't ponder over your troubles; don't pay attention to them. You'll see how, battered by time, they vanish like fairytales from the imagination. I learnt this once when I was young: 'Don't give them a thought'."

"It is very difficult to stop feeling sad and not think about the things which pull you down," I said. I was beginning to be attracted to this man, starting to feel his friendliness.

"If happiness is something you want to obtain at any price, you must fight hard for it, and surely you'll have it," he said with certainty. He then began to speak of wonderful things: "In every one of us there is at least the capacity to dream. We are all made of dreams, and our lives are aimed at their total achievement. Love itself is a dream — and a glorious dream indeed. Whenever you reach your hand to touch it, happiness flows all over your body like a river anxious to get to the vast ocean. So dream, my little friend, dream. Everything is a dream until you touch it, and then, at that moment, your eyes can see it and your hands can feel it."

"But," I said timidly, "it's terribly difficult to put one's hand around the dream object."

He said: "Only your wish can make it happen; only your desire can make it come to you. The dream isn't outside, you have to close your eyes and seek it in your own personal world, your own reality. For, nothing surrounding you is real if it is not brought out from your mysterious world. Nothing, friend, nothing."

"And how do I know that I have found the dream? Maybe the dream I perceive is not the real one for me," I asked him barely containing my enthusiasm. He answered, kind as ever: "You'll know when a smile crosses

your face. It is the symbol of pure happiness — the indicator that will help you find a dream.”

Never before had I met a man like him. One who spoke so enthusiastically about happiness, love and dreams. Nobody in my family had ever said a word on such things, nor when mentioned, had they lingered over it. Here was a man who aroused my interest, whose words transported me to a new fantasy world. A world that was more convincing than all the things I had learnt by heart at school.

A squirrel scampered from a bush near our bench to another bush a few steps further. The noise confused the man and his gaze searched for the origin of the sound. I then realised that he was blind. He didn't carry a stick. He moved in a way that did not betray his problem; he did not walk at a slow pace and his steps were so sure. He talked about birds and things as if he could really see them as we do. Never would I have guessed his handicap. Sheepishly, I dared to ask him, “Are you blind?”

“Yes. I've never seen the things the way you do. I see everything in a way that is different from yours. Beauty, for you, is material and touchable. But I feel it as a kind of magic blanket that surrounds the object. It emanates right from its heart and thus I have a better image of the thing. The outside, my friend, is a mere disguise. I've never felt disabled. I can do as much as you. At some stage in our lives we all should be blind, sensing more the feelings than the poor façade. That way, the more you'll learn to value things. In my world of darkness I wander around happily, and everything is as I want it to be. I am the creator of my own surroundings and the beauty in it.

He sounded as if he was really proud of being blind. In fact, listening to him I could appreciate his superiority to others. He was right when he claimed that he was not disabled— he was normal. There are so many *normal* people in the world who are not worthy of being called humans. They are the one who should be termed as the real *disabled*.

It had occurred to me that he could be a criminal or an outlaw trying to draw me in. All the descriptions of bad people as related by my mother, grandmother and close relatives ran through my mind. But a quick scrutiny of his features assured me that the man could not have been a criminal. Yes, he was a stranger to me but his way of talking was not that of a poor thief. My mind searched feverishly for any indication of him being evil, but soon

these notions fell to the ground from where they had appeared. I'll admit he was a bit odd, but that's a label given to anybody who does not fit into our special group. I decided not to worry thinking of such things anymore. He was a good person, who could, and in fact did, teach me many great things never learned within the dirty walls of a town school.

Little by little I grew more interested in everything he said and happiness coursed through my veins by simply listening to words like 'imagination', 'love', and 'comprehension of our selves'. I was consumed by curiosity and it pushed me to ask him for his name. I asked: "What can I call you, Sir?" I was very polite because in my family they always ordered us to be polite to everybody.

"You can call me Lonely Star," he answered and continued: "The names we have like Harry, Mark or Sally are only instances of superficiality. These don't take cognisance of the wonderful and personal world of each one of us. Our real names are within us; by just looking within we may be able to discover that name." After this wise speech he stopped and then asked: "And yours? May I know your name, my friend?"

"Yes, my name is Bob. We don't share your custom of giving rare names; we only use those boring, conventional names assigned to us when we are little."

"But look deep into your labyrinth world and you may find your own name, a valuable name with the power to tell you who you are. Never in my whole life have I met someone without such an important thing. Surely, you have it hidden somewhere. What do you say to this?"

"Well, when I'm with my friends at school they usually call me 'Idealistic' because I see beauty everywhere and a bright future always waiting at the end of a dark night. But I'm starting to change now; nothing seems to be as bright as it was before." This man who looked like a gentleman was becoming a true friend. I felt as if all my problems could be explained to him and would find in him sympathy and understanding.

He proceeded: "Then, if you agree to it, that'll be your name from now on—Idealistic. You are the first one with that name. We all have different names, and it's quite difficult to find two similar names. I love your name!"

Love! That was the first time I had heard that word said by an adult, a grown-up, and it made me shudder with happiness. It emerged from him, so free and without chains that it surprised in me. “I love your name”— it would always stay in my mind as the best memory.

“Are you in love, or have you ever been before, Idealistic?” He probed with particular interest. He was anxious to know something about my private life and not merely about the monotonous routine part. He dared to go deeper than others; he was a real adventurer.

I answered him as I had never done before — I was being totally sincere: “Yes, but it disappears just when you think it’s caught. When you think it is in your possession, then it flees from your hands.”

“It’s a wonderful moment when you are in love, and you should enjoy it and struggle to keep it next to you. If I were you I’d not feel sad for losing someone beloved because there are always more chances, not just one. Always find a reason to be up and alive—never down and dead!”

His words rose from his human warmth. He did not sound like a father or a preacher; he sounded more like the perfect friend I had been waiting for since I was a little boy. At the time of my meeting with Lonely Star, I was immersed in a frenzied world of problems. It had become nearly impossible to give my opinion in the family because they’d call me immature and accuse me of not knowing what I argued. I just wished to get away from that tedious place and find peace elsewhere. And here was an old man who was helping me see a better world and hope for a brighter future. It is something I still keep with me.

His splendid speech seemed to emerge from the depths of his soul, a place nobody could enter without permission. “When you touch the core of another person’s being, thousands of stars can be seen jumping from this coming together of two hearts, without the hindrance of clothes. That is the time one understands the pure and real meaning of life. You discover a light at the end of this dark and endless tunnel.”

“The moon, the stars, everything around us is seen differently when love makes for our hearts. They begin to talk to us and they are no more mere objects for a scientist to study; they become alive.”

He transmitted these feelings to me with such intensity that I could but believe everything he said and think it immensely wonderful. When somebody puts force into the things believed by him or her, then it enters my own world and becomes a part of my belief. I do not know if this is something normal. I only know that it happens to me quite often, and my ideas about different matters have been shaped by several people.

He did not stop talking about love; he was like one in a trance, trying to evoke the one happy memory that lights our whole life, making us like candles crying for fire: “Love is the greatest treasure one can obtain from life. There are many things a human needs, but love is *that* thing most essential for our living. Without it, and you’ll agree with me, the future will be pitch-black. It will not be possible to see the beauty contained in the sea or the other creations of nature. Love is like a proud seagull flying along the clean harbour, searching for the upper dome of delight.”

Having listened to his feelings on the subject, I decided to ask him whether he had ever loved a woman. He did not answer immediately; a few minutes passed before he did so. He was very peaceful and unwavering as he spoke:

“I have fallen in love once. It has ended now, but the memories are still alive with me. I still smell her perfume, feel and hear her crystal voice. Those were the most wonderful moments in my life. Everything was special; I saw goodness all around me. It was as if somebody had covered my eyes with a cloth and was guiding me to see everything right. It was a magic spell cast on me by a sorcerer and reality faded to nothing. I was before the greatest work of art ever made, astonished at how it could thus change my whole self. At how two become one, and how bridges of tenderness transcend both the world and its realities. Love ties you with tenderness and a mutual understanding seems to work between the two of you.”

Having voiced his views, he paused for a few minutes. He then gave me advice on overcoming sadness: “When I was not as old as I am now everything went terribly bad. Friendship hid behind a thick curtain of lies, and the tender movement of our private sea slowed down— nothing worked as I had planned. Nevertheless, I waited and wrong become right.”

A few couples came to sit on the benches near us. But they kept to themselves, revelling in the personal solitude everyone looks for when they feel like studying themselves and exploring their emotions. It was something

tender to behold—two or three couples sensing togetherness as near as their own skin.

“See that rose?” I do not know how he could have known that there was a rose in front of us. Perhaps by the scent of it. He was more than a simple person, I could tell. I can even argue that he was not from the Earth; nobody here would talk and act as he did. I affirmed that there was indeed a rose that I saw and he continued: “Tonight it is closed. When the sun lights the globe it will open its petals and beauty will come out of it like something kept captive for a few hours.”

Gradually, I was being dragged down to a wonderful place where imagination governed everything. He was saying: “Allow me to guide you, enter with me into this unthinkable-on-earth-dream. I will be your personal guide through all its passages and secret caves, inhabited by hope and love. Come with me if you wish!”

I wanted to learn all the things he said because with it I could be someone better and I could tear down the walls of sadness that closed me in. So I sought something that by the sheer dint of its goodness would help me ease my cares: “What do I have to do to think like you? I want to share your wisdom and be like you, just the same.”

He directed his gaze towards me though he was blind, trying to put emphasis on what he was about to say. “Nothing, my friend,” he said. “Life is not meant to be learnt by heart. You must build your own fortress and fight hard for it. Ideas are created and destroyed only by their creator. You become the perfect captain of your boat after you have set sail more than once. Don’t copy anyone, copy your ideas and believe them although people try to tell you they are unbelievable. Sometimes I fail too, I’m not perfect!”

I still wonder why he said that and what it really meant. Perhaps you could decipher his words and it would be of great help to you. He added something else: “You have the freedom to fall and learn from the mistakes. Never forget this.”

Poets are said to be crazy because they talk about things that are non-existent in this world of ours, which are impossible. He was one such poet who still dared to believe in vanishing dreams like touching a person’s heart. He

would fail trying to kiss the sky of imagination. Yes, he was determined to die if that was the cost he had to pay for believing in happiness.

I was full of joy and I could not be sure that the old man was for real. With him I got to understand poetry and its marvellous world. All the years of studying at school had not taught me anything. Poetry and art did not attract me as much then as it did after that starry night. The teacher was to blame in part for he was not enthusiastic about the things he taught. He did not convey to us the beauty contained inside those poems. “And Byron was one of the greatest poets of the Romantic period characterised by...” and the teacher would keep on talking expecting us to learn everything he said. Never mind if we thought the opposite. But after that night, I have been devouring thousands of books and I find a new fantasy house in each of them. To me they are like friends who keep you warm and give you a hand whenever you feel down. I will always thank Lonely Star!

A gentle breeze began to rise and it touched our faces softly; it was like a caress. It lifted his hair and set it back again. This passing breeze seemed to steal all the words ready to be said and take them far away from the two of us. I do not remember how long we remained thus, for he had transported me to a completely different world where no time exists and the heart draws no limits.

Sometimes tears may appear after one’s discovery of the secret passage leading to that huge, brightly-lit room where everything is locked. Memories can set aflow a river of tears, and perhaps he was feeling that sacred river running through him. I didn’t dare ask him.

All of a sudden, a distant sound crept to our ears. It was an old, old song being played by someone nearby and the sound came to us feebly. He began to sing along:

*“Every night the nightly moon came down
to visit our home
and to whisper goodnight to our romance.*

*United forever we swore that night,
our hearts united by moonlight,
our bodies united by hands.”*

The moon, the stars and a hundred little angels came down to witness this wonderful event. Elves, unicorns and fairies eavesdropped behind the trees. Everything at that moment was magical. The stars were not mere stars anymore — they were twinkling eyes in the dark sky, looking down on what was going on in that corner of the Earth.

For a short while I felt myself flying higher and higher until I was playing with all those stars. Then the music faded away leaving us deathly quiet. But it had left us with timid smiles of pure delight on our faces. I understood then how a song can be a vessel of our inner world, the door which lets the feelings escape and run freely around us, playing with our ears. This was another thing I learned from our conversation that night—I would love music, and I have done so until this very day.

He vanished without a word of farewell. I realised this only after I had called his name for several minutes and had received no response. It was quite impossible for him to have gone away so quickly and without me noticing it. He had vanished in the few seconds it took to turn my head towards him and discover he was not there anymore.

Since that event I have pondered a lot over his words, over the things he said to me. I have desperately puzzled over his mysterious departure. Now and then his image appears vividly to me and I start wondering who he really was and where he had gone to. I would have liked to meet him again but it seemed nearly impossible. I was left in possession of only the memories. He had filled me with knowledge that I immediately used. And I tell you all this because I wish to make you feel what I felt and learn what I learnt.

That night was very quiet and the sky was crowned with millions of stars that had followed our conversation. That night I learnt to appreciate how dreams and things grown-ups do not believe in could greatly change one's life. How it could make you sense all the beauty contained within and outside you. Dreams, I saw, were the homes of love. He had revealed to me that every adult has a little child concealed within the grown-up that he was, who was kept in a cage and was relentlessly crying for that sweet reward called freedom. A child who was craving to get out and spread his wings, waiting for the time he could touch the naked sky.

Many years have passed since that night, and I am-- that which was so terrible when I was a boy-- an adult. I talk to my little child inside and

sometimes, I'm proud to say, tears come rolling down my cheeks and I encounter the nothingness beyond them. Once in a while I unlock that small cage door and let him walk out of it. If everybody did this, wars wouldn't be constant companions and the world would turn into a warmer place to live in. We are not fully-grown until we can believe in a dream and can read letters in the sky. We can perhaps be intelligent but joy does not live on serious things and intelligence.

I stood up and set out in the direction of my house. While I walked my thoughts were full of my incredible experience. I could think of nothing else. My mind unconsciously brought me back to the same place. I felt new with the name he'd given me, it sounded so right that I repeated it to myself several times.

His words of advice rang in my ears: "Break down the barriers which surround you. Flee from your ordinary jail. Build your own world and never allow it to be destroyed by anything human, my friend".

I have developed a town inhabited by fairies inside me, where only I can dare to enter and discover light and darkness. I am formed by day and night and both are beautiful. Every single thing in the world has its own magnificence, no matter how ugly it seems to our eyes that see only its cover. Even darkness contains more than sadness.