

The only real conquistador

Ever since I sat foot on this planet I felt lonely. When my father told me it was time to move on and pursue happiness, I knew he just wanted to get rid of an unwanted burden. “The boy is stupid - give him to someone who knows how to treat a creature like him”, people told my parents openly on the streets when we passed them. They were convinced I was not being able to comprehend a word they said, yet inside of me a bomb of emotions exploded shattering my organs with breathtaking pain. I remember the arguments of my parents vividly: “Give him away to an orphanage - he’s of no use to anyone”, my dad screamed at my mum cynically. Soon I was being told that I was entitled to go on the adventure of my life. My father tapped me on the shoulder while my mum hastily prepared a bag with what she supposed to be my favourite belongings. She did not pack a single thing right. It was humiliating. The way they spoke to me kept reminding me of the person I was perceived to be all my life. It was ironic that, having always been so crucially and dishearteningly honest to me, they now tried so hard to sell me this new passage of my life as a great adventure. Yet for the first time, there was no need to convince me at all of their lies. I was dying to get out of the place.

When I boarded the vessel my legs were shivering. I had never been at sea before let alone for a journey into the unknown. I seemed very out of place. The people around me were busy packing provisions into labelled wooden boxes. Fit young men, packed with muscles carried barrels of pungently-smelling liquids down into the storage rooms. A cacophony of spices, foods, spirits, sweat and forgotten dreams entered my nose when I stood there, staring in awe at the adventurers around me. Some with arms, some with armours, some in shackles and all of them a pinch of obsessive madness in their eyes. My parents must have spent a fortune to get me on board of this ship. I was obviously of no use to anyone here. I looked down on my skinny body, then closed my eyes feeling overwhelmed with shame. I instantly entered the infinite space of reverie-land, the place in my life where I could be free to be. And I realised something in that very moment. I was ready to emancipate myself from the shackles of this prison called life. I was ready to take this opportunity and transcend the person I used to be. Something in my eyes had changed.

A man approached me. He had a grim aura around him and his whole appearance embodied determination. His long grey beard harmonised with a black hat and a black cape which he kept adjusting vainly. The man wore his armour at all times, more contemptuously than proudly

displaying the crest of the foreign king. “What is your name, friend?”, he asked me in a high-pitched voice that contradicted his outward appearance almost as if *dios* had a day of contempt for toxic masculinity when he created him. I looked at the still-frightening man and slowly pointed at all of my limbs from head to toe, dwelling a little bit longer where I believed my heart to be: “I am more than you can see with your eyes”, I wanted to tell him but - as always - nothing came out of my mouth. I vigorously pressed my lips together to form what I had seen a million times but the words remained all in my head. “I see”, the strange man said, “You may not be familiar with this concept but on my ship everyone is equal. We are all on a path to riches and glory in a lawless land. We are together in this. I don’t care who you are and where you come from. I don’t care if you speak or not. But I care about loyalty and devotion to the cause, *amigo*. You can call me Hernán - welcome on board of my ship.”

The journey across the big sea was tough. The crew was working 12-hour-shifts alternating on deck and in the holds. Never before had I worked as much as on board of Cortés’ ship and never before had I felt more alive than during these five or six weeks. The crew was accepting me. I felt wonderful amongst these thieves, outlaws and marginalised fractions of society - the scum of Porto’s ghettos. I was listening while the others were dreaming of silver, pearls, exquisite spices, exotic women, glory and gold. GOLD. GOLD. GOLD. They were telling each other the most wondrous tales of a foreign land, where people swam in rivers of gold and built the most pompous golden temples for the gods they worshiped. The crew was like a primal horde of hairy, oversized and leathery-looking children who were talking each other into states of ecstasy fantasising about something that seemed vague and absurd to me. Hernán, however, had been in the foreign land before and he promised all of us to return home as rich men without batting an eyelid. His tales were much less wondrous, though. He spoke of an archaic wilderness, packed with primal hordes of hostile men, women and children who would try to kill and enslave us if they just had the opportunity. Cortés aligned us to be ready to fight for our lives when the time was right. I got incredibly scared of this prospect. It became clear that the crew would not hesitate to kill in order to achieve their golden goals and if I got in the way they wouldn’t hesitate to put an end to my life as well. The unity of comradeship I felt over the past weeks burst on the unforgiving rock of reality.

Just before we reached shore I prepared a big bag of provisions, a blanket and my machete. I thought good-bye to every single member of this condemned crew in my own way. Once again, their eyes had adopted an obsessive madness that made them blind for basic human sympathy.

When I sat my first foot on the infinite beach of the new land, I utilised the chaos of arrival and threaded my way through the majestically-looking horses just to disappear in the dark thicket of a forest so lush and sublime that I almost forgot to pursue my soon-to-be-noticed-betrayal. The air became hotter and muggier the further I worked my way through the greenery. I was hypothesising what would happen to me. I knew I had to leave the crew that would have killed my body and my soul but I also knew that death was almost certainly awaiting me if I continued to go deeper and deeper into this merciless forest. The nights were unbearably quiet. It felt as if a vicious invisible energy was invading my body through all the senses it could find. I expected to be attacked by a wild animal from every corner of my dilettante camp and couldn't close an eye. For three days and three nights I walked with bloody feet through the relentless green nothingness until, overwhelmed with exhaustion and pain, I fell over and landed on a mossy rock, which in that very moment felt more like a cosy, snug pillow sent straight from heaven.

When I woke up for the first time from a mere endless streak of horrific dreams, I was petrified. My entire body felt numb and an instant rush of terrible pain ran through my spine and entered my head in the form of a sledgehammer camouflaged as innocent electrical signal. I literally could not move an inch to escape the pain, to run away from it. In the few moments of consciousness and clarity my eyes caught glimpse of an army of dark pervading eyes sitting on obscure faces adorned with beautifully shaped metals and tattooed with alien geometrical forms from out of space. Was this the end or was this my salvation? Overwhelmed with pain and uncertainty, the veil of unconsciousness surrounded me once again - guiding me into the transcendental world of my unforgiving dreams.

I woke up for good when I felt the ground shaking. My wobbly legs were visual proof of the fact that I must have been wasting away in this immobile state for weeks. Slowly I gained back some confidence in my own body and managed to walk to the exit of the bamboo hut in an awkward stroll. Outside of what I supposed to be my new home (as I hadn't been killed by any of the dark eyed folks) a celebration was in full swing. Children with feathers in their hair played oversized drums with passion while naked women and men danced around a bonfire that heated a massive pot of some unidentifiable stew. The air was filled with a humid mixture of the sweet, unusual scent of sweating bodies and an ever-expanding exhilaration. I felt weirdly excited about the prospect of being with these people. There was a magical atmosphere embodied by every single person and mirrored in actions I had never seen before in the old world. Graceful movements, surrealistic

gestures, exquisite facial expressions - these people were living proof of the creative virtuosity of nature and its capacity to invent and reinvent itself in a myriad of ways.

In the first weeks after my recovery, no one communicated directly with me. No one was impolite or mean to me either. I was given water, food and my own little hut to sleep. People would stare at me for hours and I would stare back. I thought it was fascinating how little their lips moved in comparison to the all-moving entirety of their faces. It was fascinating how much expression there was in every little interaction between two or more people. I didn't know what they were communicating about but they touched some archaic source inside of me that filled my whole body with pure emotion and moved me to tears. I loved these mutual days of encountering each other. The bliss of the inability to communicate with words lies in the ability to perceive and comprehend the inherent freedom of unadulterated communication rooted in human connection. Because we were faced with each other's foreignness, a total ignorance of each other's conventions of speech, of cultural norms, of all the nonsense that haunted me all my life and because we were accepting and respecting each other on the most fundamental level, a uniquely beautiful situation unfolded. Stares of curiosity instead of loathing, a body language that was open and welcoming instead of hostile and refusing and smiles of the utmost genuineness rather than hypocrite, forced and infantilising expressions. I felt home. A lifetime of misery was driven into a corner in an instant.

When these little people started integrating me into their little cosmos and assigned first little tasks to me that they could entrust me with despite the potentiality of my failing, I began to learn. Living in the forest community, I quickly understood that placing your right middle and index finger between your eyes while passing another person meant blessings and good luck. It was the most widely used form of interaction and I saw and did it hundreds of times a day. By shaking one's head vigorously with a squeezey grimace, one could express disgust for another person's smelly fart, which always led to the whole crowd bursting with laughter. In general, I felt as if humour was inherent to these peoples' way of communicating. Because everything could be made into a joke, life was light-hearted. Of course, there were some signs for danger, which children would learn at the very beginning of their lives. Tigers, specific snakes and some insects could be identified in an instant by hitting two fists together in different forms over one's head and rolling the eyes upwards as if possessed by some evil spirit. Yet the centre of life was pure joy and unity and I couldn't believe I was finally able to open my heart and soul to the world. After 17 years of existing

miserably, my first own attempts of communication in this extraordinary language were met with benignity.

It took Cortés crew nearly two years to find me but when they did, they did it the proper Spanish way. When their translators realised the pointlessness of the endeavour to try to communicate with my people, they burnt it all down. Everything. Most of the men were hungry for what they called *carne fresca* so they forced every woman and girl they could find into the ceremonial hut, ripped their clothes off and indulged in their bestiality. Some men were killed in an instant, others were put in shackles ready to sell on the closest slave market. I will never forget the horror in my friend Zalulu's eyes when he was burnt alive - tied to the canoe he was fixing for his neighbour who wanted to teach his daughter how to fish on the river on her 5th birthday. When I looked into Zalulu's eyes, I wanted to die by his side. I wanted my life to end on the soil where my heart was bound, with the people I loved, in dignity. The reek of burnt flesh was the last thing that dwelled in my whole being when I fell into a long, dark sleep. I can still smell it as if it was yesterday.

Rocking back and forth. I was back on deck and when I saw the indifferently looking man, host to a long grey beard, a black hat and a black cape, I instantly knew where I was and what had happened. He did not need to open his mouth to make me realise my betrayal, my weakness, my gutlessness.

"You're very lucky young man"

I should have fought with everything I had.

"It's a miracle you've survived for so long amongst these savages"

I should have died by their side.

"We're going home - and you deserve a good tankard of wine"

I should kill these beasts.

I just nodded and went down into the kitchen. In hindsight I still don't know why I acted so shamefully. Everything was screaming inside of me. Yet outside of my soul, my emotions, my thoughts, there was just intimidation, suppression of guilt, survival instinct, fear of losing safe ground, human weakness. This is why the only expression I added to the rich repertoire of signs I had learned amongst my friends in the lush wilderness of the new world was to place my right hand perpendicular to my forehead while closing the eyes for a good three seconds (as this is the time it takes for the mind to settle and connect to truth) - it means despairing in the light of an apparent yet insurmountable paralysation of the soul. It is a human weakness that everyone is able to comprehend and whenever I am teaching it to my students I am inevitably thinking about the loved ones I have lost following the happiest phase of my life. They are the reason sign language exists in our realms yet no one knows they have ever existed and those who know could not care less.