

# **Ways of Living**

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Where are the free wanderers of this world? Everywhere man himself is the worst nuisance for his destiny as a man.

Luis Cernuda

I do not know if I am right,  
the truth is that I am here,  
others for less have died,  
ways of living.

Rosendo

To sell, or not sell, that is your dilemma. You cross the exit door of the coffee bar. The afternoon breeze hits your face. Your eyes adapt to the sunlight. In front of you appears a partial view of San Jerónimo's Plaza. Your mind badly needs a distraction. For almost a week, you have been obsessed trying to decide whether or not to sell a piece of land shared in partnership with your brother. It is a family inheritance. The plot is located in an expanding area of the city. Your brother wants to sell it, he needs the money to get married. The idea does not appeal to you. You love that piece of land because it is a gift from your parents. Furthermore, its sale is going to be complicated. The land limits with a green zone of the city. The Town Councilman who handles land-sale permits wants 15% of the plots' value for him. Your brother agreed to pay. He is a man in love! To you the slice of the Councilman seems excessive. Look, what propels all those people moving inside the square? Your body gets in motion, you start to walk through San Jerónimo's Plaza.

With a precise dance your feet avoid stepping on the excrements, traces of life, dropped by birds and dogs on the cement which covers part of the Plaza floor. Three, two, five. On your left there is a garden. On the grass, in the shade of some elms, a group of people rests. You go to see what they do. The majority are young people between 15 and 20 years old. Students? You look the buildings in the area. The façade of a college is in the vicinity of the Plaza. The young people surround a mature man who wears an old two-piece brown suit with a white shirt and black tie. A professor. He speaks enthusiastically:

- ... For us today, it is difficult to understand the impact caused by quantum physics when man discovered its existence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Within classical physics, the idea that an electron could exhibit the properties of a particle and a wave was inconceivable. Do you mind a thought where an electron can be two different things at the same time?

It is an outdoor physics class. You do not know how to answer the man's question. At that moment your mind is caught in a dilemma of another type. A boy sitting on the grass next to two girls tries to impress them:

- Professor, if a person can be two opposite things at the same time, why an electron cannot be simultaneously a particle and a wave? I don't see anything strange in that kind of thought.
- An interesting observation Miguel. In the macroscopic world, it is evident the difference between a particle and a wave, but the electron is a microscopic entity, a subatomic particle. Many experiments have shown the double nature of the electron. This particle-wave duality can cause situations or phenomena which are difficult to understand using our common sense or everyday experience. How many of you have heard the paradox of Schrödinger's cat?

You have not. Or maybe yes, but since then it has been a long time and you no longer remember who Schrödinger was or if the man had a cat. You look at the group of students. None gives an affirmative answer. The professor continues:

- Schrödinger's cat is probably the most popular paradox in quantum physics. It was proposed in 1935 by Erwin Schrödinger, a Nobel Prize in Physics. It is a thought experiment, a mental exercise. Imagine a cat locked inside a sealed and completely opaque box. Inside this box, we also have an electron gun located in front of a detector connected to a hammer which can break a bottle full of poisonous gas when it falls. If an electron strikes the detector, the mechanism is activated by breaking the bottle with poisonous gas and then the cat dies. The logic of our everyday macroscopic world tells us that the cat can be alive or dead inside the box. But the laws of quantum physics are different. The electron that we shoot from the gun to the detector is at the same time particle and wave. It can go off like a bullet, striking on the detector and causing the death of the cat. But being a wave, the electron can also take a path opposite to the detector, leaving the cat alive. According to the laws of quantum physics the cat is simultaneously alive and dead. What do you think about this?

Again nobody answers. The students look at each other without saying a word. You forget the dilemma of selling or not selling your plot of land. You feel that you are close to hear a transcendental revelation. The professor resumes the class:

- Now, when we open the box, we will find the cat alive or dead. What has happened? When the system interacts with us, the macroscopic world, we force a reality and the cat cannot simultaneously be alive and dead. It must be one or one or the other. In 1957, Hugh Everett, another physicist, proposed an interpretation for this paradox of quantum mechanics. For Everett, the cat is always alive and dead: The living cat and the dead cat inhabit two branches of the universe that are equally real but they never interact with each other ... Form working groups and analyze what I just said.

Simultaneously alive and dead? Two branches of the universe that are equally real but never interact with each other? Thank God you are not a student in this physics class. Following the instructions of the professor, the students work in teams. You hear what they speak. Some use mathematical arguments which are hard to follow. That is life! But not everyone is interested in the complexities of quantum physics and Schrödinger's cat paradox. A girl and a boy move towards a small fountain located about ten meters from where you are. They go holding hands. The class teacher observes how they separate from the rest of the students. He does not make any complaint. The professor knows well the magnitude of the force that joins the boy and the girl. 'A first love?' you wonder. They smile when they see each other's eyes. They touch feeling that their bodies contain the vital essence of the universe. They seem to be in ecstasy. Your mind plays a trick on you. Places your brother on the site that the boy occupies. It is clear, he cannot live without her, he has to get married. Mon Dieu! Now, it is going to turn out that you are the bad guy in the game: The sentimental fool who does not want to sell the piece of land that his parents left him or the tough guy who refuses to give the Town Councilman the slice he asks for allowing the selling of the land. A weird feeling shakes you, time to go, your body starts moving again.

The path on which you walk leads to the heart of the Plaza. This has a circumference shape. In the center there is a bronze statue of San Jerónimo. It impresses you by its solemnity. More than two centuries ago, when they built the Plaza, someone had the bright idea of placing the statue in that place so that the holy theologian could enlighten the world with his wisdom. What would San Jerónimo say about your

dilemma? What would he think of the paradox of Schrödinger's cat? You read some words written on the base of the statue: Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Well? ... No, the words do not tell you anything. You do not know Latin. Your eyes examine the perimeter of the circumference at the heart of the Plaza. On one side there is a food booth selling empanadillas. Mama Isabel is famous for its meat patties. Beyond, at about fifteen meters, is the workstation of a draftsman or portrait artist. He has several persons standing around him. Your brain organizes an itinerary: First see what the portrait artist does, then try a couple of empanadillas, and finally go home.

The artist is sitting comfortably in a wicker chair. In front, the man has an easel that holds the paper where he draws portraits in crayon. To you, he looks like a wise fifty years old person. In his blonde hair and beard you see a good number of white threads. He dresses soberly in light gray tweed trousers with a blue silk shirt. Something in his gestures indicates that he is a cultured person. Under the chair where he sits, next to a set of colored pencils, you see an old book named *The Culture of the Renaissance*. The man draws the portrait of a lady and a child sitting motionless on a pair of stools. With precise strokes the artist captures on paper the essential features of the two beings he has in front of him. His work deserves the admiration he awakens in the people standing around him. You notice a certain tendency to lengthen the body and the faces of the portrayed people. An optical trick? His technique reminds you of an excellent painter of centuries ago. You think hard. That old artist, an extravagant type, became famous painting burials and martyrdoms of saints. His figures often had a ghostly character. He lived in the city of Toledo in Spain ... No, you do not remember his name. You have it on the tip of your tongue, but it does not break through. You decide to relax and enjoy the work of the maestro. You have always been fascinated by the ability of some human beings to represent the world on a piece of paper, a canvas or a wall. This is art! What if you ask the maestro for a portrait to give to your brother instead of selling the plot of land? No, that is not the solution to your dilemma. It would be an exercise in bad taste. Concentrate ... You note something curious. The artist, at the same time when he sees the woman and child who are being portrayed, observes, out of the corner of one eye, a couple of men standing next to the booth offering empanadillas. The same gesture again

and again. It is difficult to note the gesture but it is there. For a fraction of a second, when the portrait artist sees the two men standing at Mama Isabel's booth, his body fills with terror. What is he afraid of? From where you are, you do not see anything strange. The two supposed enemies seem completely harmless beings. Intrigued you decide to investigate. The time has come to go and try the meat patties.

Slowly you walk towards the kiosk of Mama Isabel. A sweet smell of food surrounds everything near the booth. You ignore it and examine in detail the two men standing next to the kiosk. One of them, the youngest and shorter, wears khaki trousers with a black flannel. A leather purse or bag hangs from his right shoulder. His dark brown hair is almost completely shaved military style. In the lower part of the left cheek, the man has an ugly scar. A knife cut? When you see the man, he winks at you and invites you to eat an empanadilla. The other man wears blue denim shirt and pants with a belt and leather boots. A cowboy junkie. On his shoulders and back he sports a wide brown mid-cut jacket. He wears his long chestnut hair in a ponytail. He is talking animatedly with the female owner of the food outlet. Take notes on a piece of paper. You approach and try to identify the subject of the conversation.

- The essential thing is in the meat stew - says the woman. Tell your wife to do the guiso with the ingredients that I mentioned to you. I usually prepare the the stew with the meat the night before making the empanadillas and leave it in a refrigerator resting.
- And how do you fry the empanadillas? - asks the man while taking notes.
- You should not fry them! - replies the woman. Your wife has to bake them in an oven. The juice from the guiso helps to cook the dough slowly and gives it a special flavor. If you decide to fry the empanadillas do not use regular oil, I can recommend a special manteca which won't fill them with fat.
- No, no, no. They will be baked! You have to prepare them the right way.

Satisfied the cowboy junkie keeps the piece of paper with his notes in the lower left pocket of his jacket. The movement causes the jacket to oscillate and for a moment the outside fabric of the lower right pocket takes the shape of a pistol. You get scared, you cannot avoid searching where the portrait artist is, but the attitude of the two men standing near you is, without a doubt, friendly. They talk in a relaxed way about the different types of empanadillas that they have savored in their wanderings around the country. Each region, each town, has its special way of doing patties. A clear example of human creativity. You ask for a medium portion of empanadillas to the mistress of Mama

Isabel. You taste one. Uuhhh! ... Something out of the ordinary. You eat another one. Suddenly you have the striking idea of setting up a kiosk for selling empanadillas. Your brother does not cook but his girlfriend is very good in the kitchen. If the kiosk produces enough money it may not be necessary to sell the plot of land. Of course, the food booth would have to be installed in another part of the city, far away from San Jerónimo's Plaza. Here, it would be impossible to compete with Mama Isabel's empanadillas. You are considering the logistics of such a business when you observe the arrival at the heart of the Plaza of a group of men.

They are four tough looking guys. In his clothes, black predominates. Jackets, caps and dark glasses, all selected to give anonymity and intimidate. Four members of a gang. Rinos! It is strange to see them in the middle of the afternoon in a public place. Something has caused them to leave their natural habitat. They stop a few meters from where the portrait artist is. The maestro works the portrait of an old man, he tries to ignore them. The Rinos do not seem to be in a hurry. They talk and joke. They feel safe. The tough guys are probably armed. 'Simultaneously alive and dead' you think. The two men standing next to the booth of Mama Isabel exchange glances. The one with the scar on his face says goodbye and walks away in a slow pace. He avoids crossing directly with the four newly arrived Rinos, walking behind them, turning around the circumference that marks the center of the Plaza. His partner, the cowboy junkie, asks for another portion of empanadillas and invites you to eat with him. His gesture reassures you. He and the female owner of Mama Isabel engage in a nice conversation analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of meat and cheese when preparing empanadillas. Your mind tries to absorb as much information as possible. Every time that you consider the possibility of setting up a kiosk for selling patties, it becomes more and more clear that it could be the perfect solution to your dilemma. Yes, your brother, his girlfriend, and you could be partners in the business. A yell takes you by surprise, cutting off your thoughts, loud words resonate inside your ears:

- "Greco" stop drawing ... Where is the van with the big money?

Scared your face looks to where the portrait artist is. The four Rinos have cornered him. They take out their weapons. Two shots in the air! The maestro is paralyzed by terror. People leave the Plaza in a hurry. Within the food outlet the owner

does not know what to do. She cannot leave the kiosk, she has worked very hard, everything she has of value is there. Filled with fear, the woman falls to the ground. You identify an escape route. But your legs do not move. 'Shit!' The cowboy junkie notices your predicament. Without saying a word, he turns around and with slow steps heads towards the place where the portrait artist and the Rinos collided. In his left hand he carries an empanadilla, the right moves freely in the air at the height of the lower right pocket in his jacket. He looks at the four Rinos. Behind them, without being noticed, the man with the scar on his left cheek is ready to take action. From the leather bag that hangs on his right shoulder, he extracts an automatic shotgun with a sawed-off cannon.

- Gentlemen, we better forget about this nonsense. Everybody goes home and here nothing has happened - suggests the cowboy junkie moving the empanadilla in his left hand with a cordial gesture, he does not want trouble.
- Go away asshole! ... Who are you? Who gave you a candle in this burial? – asks the head of the Rinos.
- Police Lieutenant Ignacio José Malpica, Special Forces.

Your eyes open amazed by the revelation. The four Rinos try to shoot at the policeman in front of them. That move is their death sentence. The second policeman's shotgun starts to work. Vomits fire. When the gun pellets hit their backs, the Rinos try to turn around. The cowboy junkie extracts a semi-automatic pistol from his jacket and lets it speak for him. Before your eyes there is a massacre. The shooting only lasts a few seconds. At the end, four men lie on the floor of the Plaza. You see how the blood comes out of their bodies and covers the cement. Gun in hand the cowboy junkie approaches the portrait artist. The maestro is on his knees. Tears come from his eyes.

- "Greco", good artist, lousy thief. What have you done this time? ... Where is that van full of money?
- Ignacio José ... Don't kill me ... Yes, Mariano, Luis and I stole the van but we didn't know what was being transported inside. I swear! ... Mariano saw that every Friday afternoon the van left the port area towards the center of the city. We imagined that it was carrying some kind of contraband introduced with the help of the customs people ... How could we know that inside the van were more than two million dollars paid in bribes to the Institute of Ports? Imagine that! ... Seeing all that money we realized what we had done and left the van abandoned. I swear! ... Ignacio José don't kill me.



The policeman puts the gun back into his jacket. With sadness he looks at the empanadilla in his left hand. He drops it to the ground.

- You are in big trouble "Greco". These four somehow learned of your role in the stealing of the van and that huge amount of money. With all that cash, your life is worth nothing. You have to vanish for a while and make those two million dollars disappear.
- How? ... It's a lot of cash Ignacio José.
- I don't know. That's your problem ... Who needs that much money? ... Run a rumor, tell the people of the poor barrios where the van with the cash is. Together, they can take all that money coming from bribes and give it some good use. Bye-bye temptation. Then, notify everybody that you are again a poor fellow. That is your salvation.

The portrait artist gets up and runs towards the part of the city where the slums are located. Once again you watch the four men lying on the ground of the Plaza. Only one of them moves. You realize what reality is. In the branch of the universe in which you live, Schrödinger's cat is dead, so are three of the four attackers, and you are going to sell the plot of land left by your parents because life is short and you have to enjoy it.