

Easter Sunday

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On the afternoon of a Palm Sunday, while discussing the routes for the Holy Week processions, several neighbors in the town of Los Cortijos noticed the presence of a stranger standing near the main entrance of the Church. The man, of medium height and slim build, was between 40 and 50 years old. His attire was modest: Brown sneakers, a discolored blue jean, a white linen semi-guayabera, and an old black cap which he held in his hands. His white face tanned by the sun was framed by a hirsute beard and long hair, both dark brown. Ten years ago many of those present would have cataloged him as a member of the mountain guerrilla. Now, after the peace process, he looked more like a college student who never managed to finish his degree or a bohemian. There was something in his attitude that inspired trust to such an extent that none of the town neighbors who saw the outsider was wary of him. When a lady who was walking distracted inside the Church dropped a blessed palm that she had received, the stranger moved fast to pick the palm up and went after the lady to deliver it to her.

The man listened carefully to the routes and schedules for the Holy Week processions but showed no interest in participating in any of them. Nothing planned for Thursday, Friday, or Holy Saturday disturbed him. When the town priest mentioned the schedule for Easter Mass on Resurrection Sunday, from 3 to 4 pm, the stranger extracted pencil and paper from a pocket of his trousers and took note. Then he walked away and began to pace along the tall wall which surrounded the Church.

The man stopped at a place where the wall and a nearby street were separated by a distance of about three meters. At that point, there was a wide space free of rocks and scrub. He took a few steps to make sure the ground was leveled. The man smiled satisfied, it was the place he needed. With a cheerful pace, he walked away following a street that bordered the Church. No one in the town saw him again until Resurrection Sunday.

The events scheduled for the celebration of Holy Week in Los Cortijos occurred without any major incident. Just a passing rain, of the type which comes and goes, bothered during the celebrations of Good Friday. The people were possessed by religious fervor. There were all kinds of processions: Day and night, for adults, young people, and children. Representations of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ were staged. A good number of people paraded in white, black, or red hooded-ropes to atone

for their sins or to pay favors to Christ. A few went so far as to show their devotion by flogging themselves with strings and sharp metal objects.

On Saturday, after Christ's symbolic death on Friday, most people were gathered in mourning and prepared for an explosion of joy on Resurrection Sunday. On the dawn of that Sunday, the streets appeared decorated with beautiful flowers of diverse colors and shapes. The last processions toured the town and, amid jubilation for the resurrection of Christ, many neighbors exchanged Easter gifts. Towards the end of the afternoon, a solemn mass, with volleying bells and yells of joy, ended the celebrations of the Holy Week. That is when the stranger reappeared.

He came driving an old olive-green jeep. Next to him, in the front seat of the co-pilot, the man brought a child about eight years old. In the rear of the vehicle were a chair, drums, cymbals, and many other percussion instruments which formed a large bundle tied with mapey ropes. Under the inquisitive gaze of several neighbors, the stranger stopped the jeep a few steps from the wall of the town Church, near the site he had inspected the previous week.

Without saying a word, with the help of the child, he proceeded to unload the contents of the vehicle. He placed the chair next to the wall of the Church and in front of it positioned, in a complex array, the percussion instruments he had brought. The people of Los Cortijos have never seen before such an arrangement of drums, timbales, cymbals, triangles, piscas, and maracas. The stranger was probably a professional musician. The last thing he took out from the jeep was a bag where the man had drumsticks or baquetas with different lengths and thicknesses to play the instruments. He grabbed two drumsticks, sat in the chair, looked up at the sky for a few seconds searching for inspiration, and began to play.

His music was an exercise on pure percussion adorned here and there with notes derived from African folklore via candombe, salsa, and jazz. It was joyful music that delighted the ear and attracted the body. Gradually a large group of neighbors gathered around the performer. Marveled at the way he played, they began to ask a basic question: Who is this man? As none gave a satisfactory answer, one of them tried to communicate directly with the musician. It was useless. The stranger ignored the gestures of the town neighbor or maybe his ears didn't hear the questions. The performer was completely

imbued in a complex segment that combined the sound of drums, platillos, and maracas. 'Blessed is he who can play like that' said three old women who had managed to stand in front of the congregation of neighbors. They wore long white robes and in their aged hands carried rosaries with beads that vibrated with the notes of the drums.

Inside the town Church began to circulate a rumor where the stranger was a man who played to thank for the miraculous cure of his son. There was talk of a sick child with terminal leukemia saved by the direct intervention of Christ. The rumor spread rapidly among the population of Los Cortijos. Upon hearing it, the parish priest interrupted what he was doing inside the town Church and together with the sacristan rushed out to see such a prodigy. The two cut through the group of people who were surrounding the musician. When they reached a few feet from the stranger their eyes opened with amazement. The sacristan noticed the presence of the child who had arrived with the performer. He went over to talk to him:

- Hello, welcome to Los Cortijos. Are you the little boy who almost died of leukemia?

The child looked at him perplexed without knowing what to answer. He quickly retreated to where the old jeep was parked. The sacristan did not give any greater importance to the matter.

After that a couple of tourists, male and female, began to take pictures of the stranger. They wanted to capture his image in full action. He did not pay attention, the performer was in his own world, playing and playing. The speed with which he moved his arms and hands made it difficult for the two amateur photographers to work. They were forced to increase the shutter speed of their cameras. The male tourist decided to make a bottom-up frame where the stranger's chest, arms, and head would appear. With determination, the tourist approached the musician, put one knee on the ground, pointed the focus of his camera up, and fired. It was at that precise moment when a neighbor who had just arrived at the scene began to give excited voices:

- Cooño! ... This is Ramiro Menéndez. Yes, it is him ... Baaarbaro! ... When he was younger, many years ago, Ramiro left his work as a musician in the capital and went to La Sierra to set up a school in Santa Paula. That's where I met him. Ramiro began to teach people how to read and write. The cacique of the region, Eugenio Montero, didn't like that. Old man Montero accused Ramiro of being a communist

and told the paramilitaries to kill the young teacher. A very ugly affair. The priest of Santa Paula hid Ramiro in the town Church. Ramiro was saved but the paramilitaries killed the priest and an altar boy. A horrible thing! With the shock Ramiro fell into a depression and went crazy. He started to play his drums as an offering during Holy Week ... It seems that he got tired of playing in the towns of La Sierra and came down from the mountains. Ramiro Menéndez playing here at Los Cortijos! The world is really small.

General surprise. The story of the mad drummer caught the attention of the people. They started to dissect its details. Indeed, it was a very ugly affair. The three old women dressed in white robes prayed, asking heaven for the salvation of the stranger and the souls of the priest and the altar boy killed by the paramilitaries. However, before the story gained real believers in the population of Los Cortijos, a neighbor intervened:

- Look Felipe that tale is well done but you have others prettier of your time living in La Sierra. What an imagination! ... Every day you come out with something new.
- Don't give me that crap Juan José! What I told about Ramiro Menéndez is the truth. That's not a tale of my invention.

The damage was done. Most people decided to forget the sad story with the hidden schoolteacher and the clash of the priest and altar boy with the paramilitaries. They liked much more the tale of a man who played to thank Christ for his son's cure. None of this mattered to the stranger. He continued playing tirelessly, inventing different permutations of notes and repiques. His inspiration when it came to the generation of sounds with his percussion instruments seemed to be infinite.

An hour after the start of the stranger's concert, the sky above Los Cortijos began to fill with clouds laden with water. A soft rain had bothered the town celebrations during Good Friday but this was a much more serious thing. Neighbors put on a bad face. Was the stranger going to stop playing? Was his music worth a good wet under the rain? A thin drizzle began to fall, gradually there was an increase in the size of the water droplets, and the fine garua turned into heavy rain. People had no choice but to seek refuge. Many went home. The child accompanying the stranger ran searching for cover under the portal of a nearby store. There he was approached by a stray dog and soon both, human and animal, were playing. Only the three old women dressed in white robes remained close to

the musician ignoring the rain. One of them, full of religious fervor and impressed by the drops of water falling on the stranger's long hair and beard, began to yell:

- It is Christ ... Don't you see that he is Christ? ... No one should flee!

The stranger continued his performance. Obviously, it was not the first time he and his musical instruments suffered the impact of rain. The contact of water with the wood and leather of the drums changed their acoustic properties resulting in a new range of tones. A new universe of sound in which the stranger immersed himself enthusiastically. In the heavens, the sound of thunder began to be heard. First distant and sporadic, then close and continuous. The heavy rain turned into a strong storm. Overwhelmed by the thrust of nature, the streets of the town were almost deserted. The three old women trembled with fear.

- Hear the strength of the thunders! ... Rays falling down from the sky ...What if this man instead of being Jesus is the Devil in disguise mocking us?

- Holy Mary we need your wisdom, much uglier things have done the Devil.

- Let's go ... Santa Bárbara bendita protégenos!

The three old women ran towards the center of the town. The glare created by the light of the rays illuminated their path. They passed in front of the portal where the child and the stray dog were guarded against the rain. The dog could not resist the temptation to bark at them. For a second, the animal thought about going after the old women to bite their white robes, but the deluge of water falling from the sky changed its mind. Near the Church wall, the stranger continued playing his drums. He smiled, he was not afraid of the rays that cut the firmament. The musician had survived worse things. He was alive and thanked Christ for it.

With the noise of the big storm, no one in Los Cortijos knew for sure at what hour the stranger stopped playing. Many say that at ten o'clock in the evening he was still performing. Felipe, the neighbor who had previously lived in Santa Paula, swore that at two o'clock in the morning he heard the sound of a nice timbales solo. On Monday morning, when the storm subsided, many neighbors, full of curiosity, returned to the place where they had last seen the stranger. The man and his drums were gone. The child, the stray dog, and the old jeep also had disappeared. But, on the muddy floor, there were still a few human marks that the rainwater had failed to erase.