

THE BALCONY

MY BALCONY OVERLOOKS THE SQUARE.

I sit here for hours sometimes, just watching.

There is always something to be seen, from first light, when the water lorry arrives to wash down the square, until the last bar closes in the early hours of the morning.

Today, for example, a husband and wife had an altercation, directly below me, as I was reading a magazine. Every word was discernible, how she hated his filthy habit of spitting in the street, his rebuttal, how he would continue to spit as long as he continued to breathe, how she hoped his breathing would soon end, and so on.

I have no need of an alarm clock in my apartment. Birds, impatient for the morning light, begin singing before the darkness has lifted. I like to lie there for a while, listening, pretending to understand them. Then I go out in the hallway and along to the lavatory. At this time of day there is no chance of meeting my neighbour who shares this convenience on our landing. Next, I go to the kitchen and warm up the coffee. After washing and dressing, I take my drink (in a chipped but precious mug) out onto the balcony and am just in time to see the darkness being chased off down the four streets that egress from the square.

Gradually, the form of the huge acacia emerges in the centre. Its yellow flowers take on a soft radiance as the early

morning sun peeps over the ridge of dark red tiles. By midday, these flowers will be burning bright.

The birds reach a fever pitch and then suddenly they are gone. I presume they go off in search of food, or perhaps they go to the river to quench their thirst. I cannot be sure. By eleven o'clock they will have returned, cacophonous as ever.

So, with the birds gone, the flowers alight, the square washed down, it is time for the shopkeepers to appear.

My neighbour, the one I mentioned, the one who shares the toilet facilities, will soon appear below my balcony. His name is Luis. He is the baker, or rather the owner of the bakery shop, for he no longer bakes the bread nor makes the cakes he sells. This particular duty has been passed on to his son-in-law, and thankfully, I might add. For Luis' bread was never much and only loyalty has kept me from buying elsewhere. However, his son-in-law Nicolás, makes the most excellent bread and his little cakes are something I look forward to with relish each afternoon. Incidentally, I find I now have to buy these little patisseries in the morning, for Luis has taken to enjoying long siestas of late. He closes his shop at one-thirty now. I know, for I see him. Sometimes he will shut the door behind him while an irate customer remonstrates. But to no avail. Luis is both obstinate and rude. When he has turned the key and removed it, his habit is then to look up to me on my balcony, wave his left hand, shrug his shoulders, shake his head (as if he no longer understands the world) and then set off towards his apartment. He will not return until four-thirty.

Shop blinds are now being raised all around the square, as if one has triggered off the rest. The row of stalls by the acacia tree will remain covered today, for it is Wednesday. At least, I believe it is Wednesday. Let me think. Yes, I'm sure. I find it more and more difficult to gauge the days, even though I

read the newspaper every morning (except Sunday, of course). I'm not sure whether losing track of time is a good thing or a bad thing.

Speaking of time, there is a church in the square, over to my left, where, many years ago a clock was inserted directly above the entrance. It caused much controversy in the town. They say some families have not talked to each other since, but this I think sounds rather far-fetched. People love to exaggerate, don't they? Anyhow, it was a wasted exercise really, for the clock has never worked properly. I believe the last time was on Ascension Day, some four years ago, and (it's a silly, unfounded suspicion to harbour, I know) even then I believe it was turned by hand from inside the church, for it stopped as soon as the service was over. Why am I speaking of this? Ah, yes, it was to do with losing track of time, wasn't it?

Well, here they come, as punctual as ever, the little round ladies, all dressed in black, each with a basket hooked over their arm. They're always the first. Their husbands will be along later to sit on the benches, to smoke a pipe or cigarette and put the world to rights.

I often wonder if on their way these men meet their wives, who by then would be returning with laden baskets, and I like to imagine their greetings to one another. Nothing more noticeable than a twitch of the eye perhaps, or the slightest nod of the head. And I suspect not a single word exchanged. This is pure conjecture. I could be very wrong.

The sun has now reached my balcony. My small, round, green, metal table will soon be too hot to touch. I step inside and fetch my straw hat and return to settle in my rattan chair. This chair is like me, old and precarious, but I am loathe to part with it.

By this time of day, one has forgotten just how silent it had been only a few hours before. Delivery vans and cars now

crowd the square. People are talking, shouting, singing, cursing, calling, laughing. Music is coming from the cafés and bars. Not loud or intrusive, but it is evident. To me, at least.

Within a few minutes, I will go down to Ramón's café to enjoy a crusty roll, drink fresh coffee and read the daily paper. From there, for I always sit outside, I have my balcony in view. Which reminds me: I once looked up and I swear I saw myself looking down at me. I remember how a cold shiver swept through my body. The me on the balcony leaned forward, smiled, waved, stood up and went inside. I was frozen to the spot for a while until I finally drew up enough courage to go and look inside my apartment. But, of course, I wasn't there. I mean, I was there, naturally, but this other me was not. I was so relieved.

That was some two years ago and now I have to ask myself whether I really saw anything at all. Who knows? This is a strange world full of strange happenings. I have been reluctant to tell this story to anyone. I would feel foolish if the listener laughed.

By the time I have finished my crusty roll, my fresh coffee and the daily paper, the café is bearing the full force of the sun. It is too hot for me to sit here any longer.

My balcony is also now in full sunlight, so I will not be able to sit out there for a while. I have tried, on several occasions in fact, but each time I have come over dizzy and felt unwell for the rest of the day.

So I return to my apartment and enjoy a little midday nap. It is mercifully cool inside and my bedroom has only a small window, so it is also quite dark. Sleep comes easy. And when I awake, some ninety minutes later, I always distinctly remember what I have been dreaming. But then, the odd thing is, that later in the afternoon I have completely forgotten

the dream. Why is it so difficult to remember dreams? I suppose Señor Freud might know, but I'm not sure I would understand his answer.

Before returning to the balcony, I make use of the lavatory again. The hallway is the coolest part of the building and those few feet I must walk are most enjoyable. There is still no chance of meeting Luis out here, for he will be sleeping a while yet. Today I cannot hear him, but many times his snoring is quite audible. And it really does sound as if someone is sawing wood.

It is my custom to take a glass of water out onto the balcony. The water is wonderful. I always open the tap for a full minute until the water runs cold. We have no need of that bottled variety here, for ours comes directly from the nearby mountains and visitors often comment on its purity and taste.

This is my favourite time of the day. The balcony is now cast in shadow and the square is very quiet. It will be another hour before life returns here. I use this opportunity to write a letter. Having so many relatives, I find I can write a letter almost every day and still they will only have one letter from me every month. Sometimes I even receive letters, but not very often. This is no longer the age of writing. Ramón, the café proprietor, complains of this at least once a week. He says, the telephone has made people lazy and that is why they no longer write. I have no telephone, but still they do not write, or at least only very occasionally. I did receive a letter last week however, from my cousin, who was asking if I might put him up for a few days next month as he would be paying a visit to this town. I replied the very same day, explaining how my apartment was tiny and there was not even a couch for him to sleep on, but that he was of course very welcome. I proposed the possibility of borrowing a mattress and have yet to hear from him.

Three dogs are asleep beneath the acacia. Always the same three dogs. A large off-white one, a smaller greyish bitch with a white muzzle and a black dog of roughly the same size as the grey. Pariah dogs of course. I like to call them the three musketeers. They are always together and are fed and tolerated by the shopkeepers. It is uncanny just how much these creatures sleep, yet on the other hand, what would they wake for?

Now look at that! What an unusual sight. A large, white cloud has appeared, solitarily moving across the sky. There! It has blocked out the sun. All is shade for a moment. But as the cloud moves on, so a razor-sharp line of sunlight appears and runs with great speed across the square. The cloud is gone. I do not expect to see another today. Nor, I would think, for some time.

I had a garden once. It was a pretty patch, but when I sat there I always felt lonely and bored. A balcony overlooking a square is another matter. I never feel lonely sitting out here, and there is almost always something going on, so it is impossible ever to be bored.

For instance, over to the right, there on the upper floor. I don't know her name but I do know her husband is a tax collector. She always hangs her washing out in the afternoon, when the sun has finally reached her balcony. I have, here in my head, a complete inventory of all their clothes, bed-sheets, towels and tablecloths. When I see either of them on the street I look and think, yes, you washed that item on such and such a day, or perhaps, that other item is long overdue for washing. And so on.

Myself, I am hopeless at washing and ironing. I employ the services of Señora González for such things. She also cleans the apartment twice a week for me. At first she would always ignore the balcony, no matter how often I pointed out my wishes. You see, it becomes very dusty after only two or

three days. Finally I had to resort to threats of looking for a new cleaner. It worked wonders. Now my balcony is always spotless. But I must add that since that time, the apartment itself never seems to look as clean as when she first started to work here. Perhaps I am mistaken.

When Señora González arrives to clean and wash, I leave her alone, for two simple reasons. First, she is an incessant chatterbox. I found I was paying her to talk to me instead of cleaning. Second, she has the unfortunate tendency to smell rather bad. A sour, acrid kind of odour that would leave me feeling sick. On those days I could not eat my crusty roll. So now when she comes (Monday and Friday mornings) I go directly to the café and bide my time there. As soon as she leaves, I return, open all the doors and windows (of which there are few) and return to the café for half an hour while a draft expels all traces of her visit.

While I was discussing Señora González, I fetched another glass of water. Today it tastes better than ever.

A dreadful moped has just entered the square, its loud, grating sound echoing off all the walls. The black dog has risen and is barking furiously. Taking off his helmet, the youth is about to attempt to enter the tobacconists. Surely he knows that nothing opens until three-thirty? Except Luis' shop, of course.

Well, it appears it is I who am mistaken. The shop is open. I'm leaning back and turning my head but I can only see the outline of my clock from here, it is too dark in that room to read the face. Excuse me a moment, I must get up and look ... I don't understand it! The time is three forty-five. I can't believe how fast the hour has gone, for it usually creeps along at this time of the day. The clock is not mistaken, for look, the square is alive again. How peculiar. Perhaps I dozed off for a while, that is a possibility.

Have you noticed the railing of my balcony? It is like no other in this square. My predecessor lived here for over twenty years before pleurisy took up residence in his body. He told me the railing came from a city, but which city he couldn't be sure, and that a great revolutionary, whose name had escaped him, once stood behind this railing and had made an important speech, the subject of which he could not be positive any longer. During the speech, apparently, a shot rang out and a bullet penetrated the revolutionary's magnificent forehead (this was one part of the story of which he was certain). The man then slumped over this very railing and died in that position. Later, one of his followers was to return and cut out this section, for it was of course a much larger railing. He brought it to this (then his) apartment and set about removing the old one and replacing it with this portion. As you see, it is wrought out of sturdy iron and is quite decorative. The story is unfortunately too vague for me to attach much importance to it, but I feel it is not an unattractive piece of craftsmanship.

I find the cracked and peeling walls of this square only add to the character. There has been much talk of the town council wishing to 'refurbish' the square (their word, not mine). In an official report, seen by no-one I have ever spoken to, they apparently consider it an eyesore, a disgrace to the town, unrepresentative of today's future (whatever that means?) while those of us who actually live here find it the most charming place on earth. And it is so, for I have lived in many other streets, in many other towns, in many other provinces. However, there is no great cause for concern as the town council has no money. It is also caught up in a scandal and is due for a court hearing this autumn, so there will be no redecorating for a long while. Why, just imagine if these charming old men who spend their days on the square's

benches were to have their interesting faces and features lifted, as they seem to do so often in America. How would they then look? Well, they would all look the same, with stiff, unmoveable expressions, like embalmed corpses. We would never want our square to appear like an embalmed corpse!

Four o'clock. I will now take tea. And of course, I shall also enjoy Luis' little cakes. You see what would have happened had I depended on Luis opening at three-thirty?

Tea must be in a glass to be enjoyed to its full. That way, its rich colour can be appreciated properly. That is, unless some philistine has chosen to add milk and sugar to blur out both taste and appearance.

A glass of hot tea is the most efficient way of cooling oneself, certainly a paradox of sorts. In between sips of this excellent brew, I slowly nibble my way through these three little cakes. A creature of the strictest habits, I always buy a lemon, a walnut and an amaretto cake and eat them in that order. The crumbs I lay along the rail and within seconds the sparrows are there, leaving it spotless some moments later.

On my balcony, on the wall, the one furthest away from where I am sitting, is a hanging basket. It is filled with beautiful flowers. I only know their name in Latin, and that only occasionally, for, like today, I have typically forgotten it. The name just will not register properly. They are most uncommon flowers and especially in such circumstances. I had the greatest difficulty in locating them at first. They are there to serve a memory. It is something I cannot discuss. It is too painful.

The square is extremely busy now, for many people in this town have yet to own a refrigerator and therefore shop every day for fresh meat and vegetables. Some even shop twice a day, if their husbands return home for lunch. But the majority are to be seen here around late afternoon. Shopping is very much a social occasion, a time to catch up on the latest

gossip. In such a sleepy town as this, one might suppose there wouldn't be that much to talk about, but you should see these women. They gather in small groups, set their shopping baskets on the floor, and talk, and talk, and talk. Their shrill laughter reaches me here on my balcony, but not their conversation, which they keep up in a low, conspiratorial exchange. What could they find to talk about each day? Enough, it seems. My cleaning help, Señora González, is also one of these gossips, although I only ever see her talking to one individual, never a group. I imagine the old woman she talks to, for it is always the same woman, has an impaired sense of smell, for how else could she tolerate the proximity of this person?

One by one they gradually saunter off to the various shops and the square is again left to the old men on the benches. During the time the women are gossiping, the old men are all ears. They pretend to be dozing, but I know better. The moment the women have scattered there is a buzzing from their direction, as they exchange snippets they have overheard. So gossip, already second and third hand, now gets passed on yet again, with a little more embellishment and a little less truth than ever, I would suspect.

Only two of these ancients have no regard for these goings on, for they are concentrating on their chess games, which they play all day long. And anyway, they are probably too deaf for such things, for when they converse, which is a rare thing, they tend to shout a great deal.

It is time for another glass of water. There is much dust in the air at this time of the day. Most of it is kicked up by the cars that drive around the square in the hope of finding a parking space. It is so unusual for a space to be free, that I wonder why they bother at all. But bother they do, and particularly me!

I have never owned a motor vehicle and now at this age never shall. It would be a pointless exercise anyway, for I have never learned to drive.

There, a light breeze has just reached my balcony. An exaggeration, perhaps, not much stronger than a dove's breath, but it has registered. The slightest movement of air is always received with gratitude in these parts. There it is again, yes, I felt it on my forearm. I even felt it touch my stiff, grey hair.

Ten minutes have elapsed since that first dove's breath and now it has built up into a gentle cooling caress. Look how it has begun to play with the leaves of the acacia, lifting them to show their much lighter colouring underneath. Oh, if only I had the talent to paint, I would capture this very moment.

The new waiter at the café is setting out the tablecloths. Red and white checked. This is for the evening trade. During the day, the wooden tables remain bare and are pulled close to the premises, but now, with the traffic retreating, the tables are boldly spread out almost into the street, in preparation for dinner.

I have a regular table, it is not held for me, but as I tend to dine early there is rarely any difficulty in procuring it. The table is close to the door, for I like to see those who enter and those who leave. Also, I love to hear the activity from within. Ramón, the owner, is a loud, gruff man, who dishes out both food and orders in military style. A stranger would find him intimidating and feel that his staff were almost as badly treated as the customers, but it is not so. He has a heart of gold within his heart of stone.

Ramón cooks all the food, which is simple fare, but always delicious. He takes great pride in its presentation. 'If it doesn't look good, it cannot taste good', he is fond of saying, following a customer's compliment.

Tonight I will have an omelette. I shall leave its contents up to Ramón, for he is extremely creative if left to his own devices. I only make one condition, that it is free of tomatoes. Not that I do not like tomatoes, no, rather it is they that do not like me. They cause my skin to break out in a terrible rash that itches badly.

My drink requires no order, for I have a glass of beer every evening and already the new waiter has become aware of this custom. There have even been several occasions when I was spotted leaving my front door, so that before I have sat down at my table, the beer was already there waiting for me. It is a small gesture, I know, but I regard it as a great compliment.

As I sit there at my table in the early evening shade, the acacia tree becomes the focal point for the young men. They are of course still boys, but do not be so careless as to call them such! Underneath the tree they stand, striking absurd, coquettish poses, while the girls (who would not yet like to be called women!) sashay around the edges of the square, pretending not to be interested in these Romeos. It is the same every evening. They circle for some ten to fifteen times, each lap drawing them inexorably closer, until finally they are together, laughing, giggling, teasing, flirting, hoping, praying, needing, wanting. I love to watch these scenes, they remind me of my youth, and it makes me feel younger, even gladder to be alive. Their smooth, unblemished skin, the way their black hair shines with health, those large, dark, romantic eyes, the lightness of their movements, the ease of togetherness, the camaraderie. One day, these very youths, or at least many of them, will be lonely creatures in worn out husks, watching other, newer generations laughing under the acacia. This tree has seen many comings and goings of youth and has still many yet to witness. But for the moment, theirs is another world where time stands still. They too will one

day see the hands of the clock rush around in a blur. Time, that great, smirking thief, will heartlessly make off with many, many years before it stands still for them again, as it now does for me.

My time is no longer measured by some slow ticking clock, but by the cycle of the square, from before dawn, on through until the early hours of the morning.

On Sundays, I wind and wear a timepiece, a pocket watch. I slip it into my waistcoat before setting off for church. It is a form of decoration nowadays, no longer a form of information.

All but one of the outside tables are now occupied. They are always the first to go, for who by choice would miss being out here under beautiful stars?

There was a time when I would be joined by another diner, a quiet, polite man who called himself Eugenio rather than by his parent's choice of Pedro. Eugenio passed away over a year ago, and despite sharing many a pleasant evening here, I have little to report on him. For although he spoke much, he said very little. I discovered nothing of his work, his home or his hobbies. In fact, I found out nothing of note at all. I don't believe he was necessarily secretive, just not forthcoming. I, in turn, disclosed none of my privacies, so we spoke only of matters affecting other people or other things. These were third party conversations. I do miss him, though, for they were congenial evenings we whiled away together. I had no idea he was ill. Apparently he suffered badly during his final year, yet he never showed his pain. Eugenio must have been a very brave man indeed. It should be a lesson to those of us who tend to complain at the first sign of ill health.

Here they come, the first stars have arrived, and these will be the brightest of all once darkness has set.

An espresso and a small anisette have been placed before me. The strong smell of anise mingles with the coffee. The

combination of these aromas is something I never tire of, or their taste.

My bill will not be presented to me. Ramón feels it puts something between him and his regulars (as he calls us) and that a weekly payment is far more civilised. I agree with him entirely.

My evening meal is followed by a short stroll. My legs are very slow nowadays and so I do not stray too far. I leave the square by the street adjacent to Ramón's, take a parallel route and re-enter the square at the opposing end from my apartment. There is nothing particular to view or enjoy on those streets beyond here, but I feel I must leave the square once a day. Why? I am not too sure, to be quite honest. Perhaps it is to show myself how pretty it is here, for when I return from these narrow, noisy streets, it is like stepping into an oasis. The beautiful acacia greets me, along with the charming shops and bars with their colourful awnings, and every balcony bedecked with brilliant flowers. It is all truly so soothing to behold.

My return journey takes me along past the hardware shop, the toy shop (which of late only seems to sell model cars and aeroplanes), the shoe shop, a newsagent (whose owner, Felipe Mendia, has been arrested at least three times during political rallies), along past various entrances to the many other apartments and then finally the butchers. Miguel is a man whose face matches those of the pig's heads displayed trophy-like on the plates of his window counter. Miguel never smiles. Never. I put it down to spending a lifetime with the smell of death ever present.

The stairs to my apartment seem to steepen every year. Sometimes I find I need to stop at the second floor in order to catch my breath, but tonight I feel stronger and reach the third floor without resting.

'You must lock your door, Señor!' I am often thus scolded by Señora González. 'These are different times. People have different values now, and some have none at all!'

She is right, of course, I know, but I have never locked my door and I'm not about to start now. And besides, what would any thief wish to take from me? There is nothing of value here. I own no television, I possess no antiques or jewellery. My books are my only treasured possessions, which are themselves quite worthless and would be no temptation for these illiterate criminals. Besides, in an age when it is difficult enough to give books away, there is certainly little danger of any being taken. So my door remains unlocked. And I have no enemies who would wish to murder me while I sleep, at least, none to my knowledge. So my door remains unlocked, Señora González!

The glorious moment has arrived when I settle down to a glass of port on the balcony, but first I switch on the radio. Ah, I hear you say, he has a radio, he does have an item worth stealing. Hardly. It is an inferior Bakelite model. A valve radio that takes some time to warm up and then crackles throughout its entire reception. They would only bring it back, I am sure.

At night, from up here, the square is so delightful. The acacia is lit up by the many coloured lights hanging within it, candles glow and flicker on the outside tables and interior apartment lights appear so warm and inviting. In the darker corners of the square, tips of cigarettes can sometimes be seen, their embers flaring each time air is drawn through them.

And so here I sit, enjoying the natural lights of God above me and the artificial lights of Earth below me.

As the twinkling silver pinpricks in the deep canopy of black sky surround the illuminated gibbous moon, so a guard of yellow, glowing lamps surround the acacia tree.

How could a man ever tire of such sights?

Above me, below me, ahead of me, there is so much to see, so much to savour. I am a fortunate man, for to find such peace on earth is an uncommon thing. Luis has reminded me of this on many occasions.

‘Luis,’ I always reply, ‘when I am sitting out on my balcony, I am certain there is not a more contented man in the whole wide world.’

This, I truly believe.