

September 6, 2014

E1 - MY HAPPY 18TH BIRTHDAY

I'd been planning this day for years. My friends and I, the Fantastic 4, had epic ideas for our 18th birthdays. We imagined our friends throwing a surprise party, a wild bash at a house with a pool, packed with friends, girls, and vodka. Just like in those American college movies, with red cups and passing out right before dawn.

So, my mom made this huge dinner tonight with my favorite dish—breaded chicken fillet stuffed with cheese and ham. All my family came over: my two older brothers, my sister-in-law, and my nephews. My friends had planned to meet up at the local bar after dinner. They said everyone from school would be there, and probably their friends too, so the place would be packed with every single teen in our tiny hometown of Girona.

But that never happened. Instead I am spending the day of my 18th birthday sitting alone in a night train, fleeing at 200km/h towards the rest of my life.

Well, at least one could say it was more of a surprise than the pool party would have ever been. This silly thought makes me laugh quietly for the first time in a while. I am alone in the compartment, so I allow myself to talk to myself aloud:

“Happy birthday, Sebas!”

But I do not feel happy. I shrug in my seat, my clothes are wet and I feel cold from the train A/C, even if outside it is the end of the summer.

I look at my suitcase and wonder if I should try to find a sweater. I packed so fast that I don't even remember what I stuffed in. On top of that, it is covered with filth as I dragged that suitcase with its broken wheels all over Girona, my home city.

I raise my head and the train compartment looks so empty it is even sad. I guess no one needs to travel that late on a Saturday, it is almost midnight. We stop at some small town station for a few minutes. An orange fading light falls heavily over a dirty looking man who fell asleep on a bench at the platform. “He probably decided to stop going forward” I say aloud in an effort to articulate a very profound thinking. But I fail, my thin teenage voice in the lonely train sounds weak and pathetic.

The train continues and I shrug again. My t-shirt is moist and my skin is cold underneath. I try to forget I am wet and scared by looking out of the window. Like a metallic unstoppable monster, we cut through the fog and the thin rain. We pass by small towns but we do not stop. I see the light from many house windows, sometimes I even distinguish human figures from their inhabitants. People spending the last hours of the day with their families or by themselves, living their own lives, going through their own problems or even their own birthday parties. I see so many of those lights that it makes me think how big and complex the world truly is.

I am not getting warmer so I finally decide to open my suitcase, covered with moisture and mud. As I release the lock, a wrinkled mess of clothes jump out, released from the pressure. Underwear falls on the floor and I put it quickly back inside. Some water went in and most of my clothes are wet. Luckily I packed a sweater, a red ugly old one that is miraculously dry.

I put it on and feel really cozy. I close the suitcase and sit. The warmth of the sweater makes me feel like I could fall asleep anytime. It is so warm and cozy. But I cannot do it, I don't want to miss my stop, I need to get off in Barcelona.

In order not to succumb to a nap, I open my laptop and decide to start a Diary. I need to write down all the emotions and feelings, this is the first time in my life I am truly alone and I want to remember in the future as I feel this is a moment when my life has made an irreversible U-turn. Also, if I get murdered tonight, something that would not surprise me, at least someone will be able to know who was inhabiting the corpse.

I guess I should have started my Diary introducing myself. In fact, it sounds idiotic to introduce yourself to your own Diary. But just in case: my name is Sebastian Isaac Valls.

Yes, Sebastian. It is a name that sounds very glamorous in English, in French, even in German... so sensual, even erotic. Unfortunately, in Spain it doesn't sound like that. Here, Sebastian is an old-person's name. It would never occur to anyone, absolutely anyone, in the 21st century to name a child like that!

No one except my parents, of course.

And if Sebastian was not old-fashioned enough, they added a second name, something we don't really do in Catalonia, but they did. So my whole name is Sebastian Isaac Valls Gonzalez. Gonzalez is my second family name and one of the most frequent and ugly family names in the country. It also sounds very very very "Spanish", meaning very very very "not from Catalonia". In Girona we are proud Catalans to the bones, so we do not like to have names that sound too Spanish. This is why I never use this second family

name; I am just Sebas Valls for my friends and Sebastian Isaac Valls for my mom when she would get angry and yell at me. And that happened too often.

What else can I say? As I mentioned before, I was born, raised and recently expelled from Girona.

Girona is beautiful.

It is a small city in the north-east of Spain, very close to France. It has everything an idyllic town needs: one of the biggest rivers in Catalonia, Ter it is its name, crosses it, together with an smaller one: river *Onyar*. Like in Florence, old houses are still inhabited on the borders of river Ter and its bridges are packed with shops. Girona has an amazing cathedral that sits on the top of an uphill slope so it looks even more majestic. Its name is *Santa Maria de Girona* and the entire street in front of it is a flight of stairs that leads to its main front entrance. Girona has many green areas, but the most important one is the huge park of *La Dehesa* with ancient trees so tall your eyes can't reach the top. And the food... Girona has the best food in Spain. Our food markets are exuberant with the best products you can find in the region. Girona is indeed a small universe by itself, it is a city that offers anything and everything you might imagine and need to live a fulfilling happy life.

And now I am running away from it.

Oh man...

In such a beautiful city, my childhood went fast running up and down its ancient streets. I had lots of good friends. I was always the guy who got along with everyone, too silly to be taken seriously and too smart to be nobody's fool.

A sound suddenly broke the silence. A gloomy-looking man enters the compartment wearing a uniform.

- Ticket please - he takes my ticket without looking at me in the eyes
- Excuse me, Sir - I ask the ticket inspector trying to sound like a polite well-educated young man - could you turn down the A/C a little, it is very cold
- I don't have access to the A/C control panel
- Does the driver have access to the A/C control panel? I am really cold
- I don't think the driver has access to the A/C control panel - he replies with a dull voice - here is your ticket. Good evening.
- Good evening - I reply and wonder if I should have snuck in the train just to see some human reaction on that emotionally-dead man.

But I never sneak in trains or buses. I am too afraid to be caught. In general, I think I am afraid of authority, that is why I have always felt tension at home. My father is very authoritarian. A living example of a dictatorial asshole. He undermines my brothers and me, like if we had to be thankful to him for our existence. But there is a difference in the way he treats them. He respects my older brothers. With Jose, my oldest brother, he has a good relationship because Jose has children. In fact, he had them quite young, his oldest son, Joel, was born when my brother was 22. I still remember overhearing the conversation from my bedroom: my mom shouting at him, asking questions in a loud voice “How are you going to raise the baby?”, “How could you be so careless?”, “I didn’t even know you were having sex, you are still a child”. That last sentence made me laugh so loud in my room that my mom could hear it from the living room and yelled at me “Sebastian Isaac Valls, poor of you if get there. This is a conversation with your brother. Close your door and stay away from matters that don’t concern you!”. But it did concern me because not only I was finding out I would become an uncle at the age of 14, but also I thought I would not be the failure in the family anymore.

But I was wrong. I wouldn’t get rid of that title so easily.

When Joel was born, my mother, who until then was full of remorse and anger, became a joyful grandmother drooling for her first grandson-baby. Joel was a sweetheart, and all the family just loved him with devotion. Even me. I honestly don’t like babies, for me they are annoyingly noisy snot-bags, but Joel... he was special. Such a cute little thing, it was hard to believe he had the genes of my brother and of my father.

And from that time on, my father’s admiration for Jose started. To his eyes, Jose is a responsible man who supports his family. He is forgiven for not having finished his University studies; for having a stupid job as a factory operator, which by the way, he hates. He is forgiven for all that because he could create a human being. In fact, he created three so far: Joel, Gael and Unai, the last one only one year ago. Now he has a life ahead leashed to the responsibilities of raising children together with his spouse Esther. Oh yes. I so want to be like him!

And then there is my middle brother, Ignacio. A 23-year old nerd who studies Medicine. Yes, Ignacio will soon become Dr. Valls, the first doctor in the family. Normally parents are discreet and even if they have a favorite son, they don’t show it too openly. Well, my father was not built with the gene of discretion and in every family reunion, Ignacio takes most, if not all his attention. He constantly asks about his studies, he wants to hear every detail of the classes he is taking, the exams he needs to pass, the interests he has. About his personal life, on the contrary, he never asks a thing. Probably he doesn’t even care if Ignacio is truly happy, the only thing that matters to him is that he will

become Dr. Valls someday. And, of course, he has millions of questions about medicine to ask him. My father reads stuff about medicine in books, magazines and, especially, the internet. He completely misunderstands what he reads and goes to Ignacio with solutions to solve any medical problem. Both spend all family reunions going over stuff that my father heard or read or simply imagined and that Ignacio clarifies for him with a long explanation on medical issues.

Ignacio spends all day locked in his bedroom studying from big books, so he will become a good doctor someday and spend the rest of his life sticking his finger up the ass of old men, so dad will be proud. Oh yes, I also want so much to be like him!

And then it's me: I love being outdoors, I think I know every brick and every stone in Girona. But, as a child, I was rarely allowed to do that. All I was allowed to was to be in my bedroom, doing my homework or reading for my next exam. My father has an obsession with having his kids locked in his bedrooms, with their heads down on the books and being quiet, very quiet, submissive and still, so we do not cause too much annoyance and we graduate fast with prestigious degrees. And he demands high grades, as high as possible. If you get a high grade in a test, he immediately asks why you still did not get a higher one, and if you do so, then a higher one. And then, even if I like studying and I do my best to get good grades, the feedback from my dad is "you could do better", "you failed to get this grade", "look at your brother, he is going to be a doctor, what are you going to be, a waiter, a postman, a house-cleaner?" or, my favorite is "look at your oldest brother, he has children and still manages to run a family, even if he has to do it with such an exhausting job as he has". It seems that any life-choice my brothers have taken is ok with him: either be a library rat or a baby-factory, but then being a human being teenager trying to grow up happily, that means being a failure.

And today the *failure* turned 18 and all the family congregated in the living room for dinner, with dad sitting at the end, presiding over the event. It all started nicely: my hyperactive mom bringing over more and more food from the kitchen. My brother Ignacio explaining the functions of the thymus to my father, my oldest brother and his wife, Esther, yelling at my over-excited nephews Joel, Gael and Onai. A regular dinner with my family.

Then the birthday cake came and Sebas, the star of the event, decided to make a brief speech. More like a comment. I raised a glass full of coke and said something like I was glad of being an adult and that from now on I was free to run my own path, make my choices and be myself.

- Ladies and gentlemen and little kids still with nonfunctional sex - I started
- Who is non-fun, mom - Joel asked his mom

- He is kidding, sweetheart - his mom Esther replied
- Today I am raising my glass of coke to my metamorphosis to a man - I continued
- Metamorphosis didn't work, Sebas - my brother Ignacio interrupted - you still look like a worm to me
- Ignacio! - my mom shouted - let your brother talk, it's his party and if he says he did a menopause, a menopause he did
- Metamorphosis, mom! - I shouted - anyways, back to my birthday speech: I am 18 now which means I am a full adult, legally allowed to do anything I want and free to make my own decisions, drive my life and conquer the damned world!

A pretty lame speech, you might think, when it comes from someone who is economically dependent on his parents, never has had a job and knows nothing about the world. But lame as it was, I could have never foreseen the reaction it would trigger. My father, almost interrupting it, burst into a grumpy talk

- Look you little *metamorphosized* butterfly, you being 18 does not mean you are entitled to anything or that you will be able to make more decisions that you were making with 17, which basically consisted on being lazy and doing nothing with your life. Not like your brother Ignacio who is working for his future or Jose rising 3 kids on his own
- Of course, by his own, like I do not exist - whispered Esther
- As long as you are living under my roof and eating the food I pay for, do not even dream of being treated as an adult.

Judging by everyone's face, the speech was out of place, and then, when everyone thought he was going to leave it there, he wrapped it up with a grand finale:

- What I can see - he continued - in 18 years of life you have achieved close to nothing, you did not even manage to enter college, which was the only thing for me that matters. Being 18 does not change the fact of being a *failure*.

A general rumor or discomfort arose in the background but nobody had the nerve to say anything. The comment hurt me very deep, as my school grades were not high enough to get accepted at the University school I wanted. I had been feeling like shit since I found out, my summer had been quite depressing because of that, and the only emotional support I received was from my best friends, the Fantastic 4.

Being told a *failure* triggered a wire that overcame the fear I feel towards my father.

What happened afterwards is not completely clear to me. My memories are confusing and cluttered. I remember "go to hell" leaving my lips at some point and then, a sudden

movement, almost a spasm, caused by the anger, accumulated throughout many years of being belittled. The movement was so strong, so badly calculated that it made the birthday cake, with its eighteen burning candles on the top, be propelled from my mom's arms to the center of the table.

Upside down, of course.

The precious tablecloth, a very fine piece bought during a trip to Portugal in the 90s, got covered by chocolate frost and decorated by a few burns. An expensive wine glass broke somehow, everybody screamed, and my nephew Joel cried hysterically. His two younger brothers immediately followed.

My response at the sight of the dramatic scene that unfolded in front of me was to run.

I always run.

Sprinting to my bedroom, I packed a few things and left while my parents were busy yelling.

The suitcase I had jumbled together in ten minutes rattled on the wet pavement as I pulled it towards the train station. It was an old one and the wheels were stuck, so it made a sound that reminded me of a chorus of drummers announcing my execution. My face got moist from the very thin summer rain, giving me the opportunity to deny it was my tears that made my cheeks wet.

My first thought when I left home, trying to ignore the sound of my mother bickering at me and my brothers trying to calm her down, was to go to David's place. He is my best friend, and his parents adore me. They would host me with no complaints for a night, or two, until I would find a place to stay.

But... what then?

My home city, Girona, is so small it is impossible to go unnoticed: everyone knows everyone. I would remain somehow closely observed by my parents and sooner or later end up where it all started.

No, I have to leave the city. I have to go to Barcelona.

I need a place where I can become lost to the world. A place where I can start over and be surrounded by people who do not see me as the kid who failed getting accepted at his college of choice.

Barcelona appeared to me as a colorful blend of very diverse styles and personalities, with people always moving, always fast, doing important stuff or going to places where they need to do even more important stuff. I want to move with that flow, I want to run towards important places too and find what I am looking for. And, although I am not sure what I am specifically looking for, something tells me Barcelona is the place to find it.

And that was the whole extent of my plan. What to do when my train would arrive, where to sleep or how to afford a living... those were tiny details still to be figured out.

38 euros and 65 cents is everything left in my pocket. I do not have savings to rely on, I do not even have a bank account because I have never had a job in my life. My parents would give me an assignment every Friday that would normally be almost gone by Sunday.

Until today I had lived in a neighborhood on the east end of the city, up on a hill, so it was a twenty minute walk to the train station. Walking through the cold humid evening, I used the chance to ponder on my first night strategy. I guess it was the fear that made my brain work at full speed, going through my memories scrutinizing everyone I had met for the last few years.

Until I finally remembered that guy.

Italian, he was.

Older.

Fat.

With a ridiculous goatee.

I met him through David.

They dated for a brief time during summer, two years ago. I remember it very well because, as David's best friend and confidant, I used to go all the way to Barcelona with him so they could meet.

We had not turned 16 yet, and were stupid, childish and our heads were brimming with teenage fantasies.

How would we, otherwise, spend more than almost two hours forward and then backwards on a train to Barcelona so David could spend a few hours at that man's

apartment while I waited outside, sitting on a bench and reading my book or walking around the neighborhood?

The reason was that David was simply crazy about the man. I never really understood why. For sure it was not because of his looks, maybe it was because he was indeed rather friendly, street smart, literate, always eager to provide an interesting conversation.

He came a few times to Girona just to see David.

We showed him around.

It was weird to see an Italian grown-up man, probably in his 30s or 40s, hanging out with two teenagers in Girona, the city where gossip was invented.

Scrolling like crazy, reading names and names through the cracked screen of my old cheap crappy phone, I could not find him among my contacts.

I forgot his name.

It was something that sounded very Italian.

Dragging the wheeless suitcase with one hand, I was tapping the phone with the other. I must have looked like a maniac.

I was about to reach the station and his name was still a mystery.

I could not find him on Instagram, so I checked Facebook instead, testing my luck.

I barely use Facebook, it is ancient social media for old people, but I do have an account. I logged in and went to David's profile.

Common friends.

Come on.

They must be Facebook friends, they were dating after all.

Come on!

I scrolled through David's friend list, but there still was not a hint of him.

Come on! Come on! Come on!

My heartbeat accelerated. That guy is the only person in all of Barcelona that I know. What am I going to do if I cannot reach him? Where would I sleep? I cannot ask David, he would not like me spending the night at his ex's place. I know their relationship had an unpleasant ending. And this just got confirmed by their Facebook estrangement. Unfriending each other on Facebook was serious stuff.

I decided to put my phone away for a while and keep on walking.

I looked up at the dark cloudy sky and took a deep breath of stiff air. "It is going to be alright, Sebas," I mumbled to myself. I crossed the river *Onyar* that separates the old city from the modern neighborhoods until I was walking along long narrow streets boiling with people and traffic. I dodged umbrellas walking across me and did not mind too much of the local shops at the windows of which a squalid figure tilted down his head not to be recognized by some random acquaintance. I stopped at the traffic lights of Barcelona street, one of the main avenues for vehicles and saw the train station looming in the distance, at the west side of the street behind the red traffic light. Between my destination and me, a modern style statue dedicated to the old age (*A la vellesa*) resisted, rigid and ignored by every citizen, the slow pass of time. I had walked a thousand times next to that statue but had never observed its meaning: an old man sitting on the top of a monolith with images of previous stages of life carved on, watching the world change around him while he stayed unaltered. I never noticed how tremendously ugly and boring that piece of art really was until I paid attention to it today below the gloomy sky.

And then, out of a sudden, his name popped into my head like a slap on my forehead..

Matteo Perego.

Of course! I said aloud and reached out to my phone, still warm from massive use, that was resting in my jeans side pocket. I ignored the green pedestrian light turning on as I typed his name in the search bar.

There are many Matteo Perego-s in the world but luckily enough Luis, another Fantastic 4 member, who met Matteo, friended him. I immediately sent Matteo Perego a friend request.

Proud of my first worthy success of my adult life, I arrived at the station and spotted the next connection to Barcelona in thirty minutes. I plummeted down on a seat in the hall. I was, for some reason, exhausted and went back to my phone.

"Come on, Matteo Perego, come on. Accept my friend-request! Come on."

I was neurotic. What if Matteo Perego never sees my request, or does not accept it in the next 30... now 25 minutes? Should I still take that last train of the day? My brain was making connections, trying to elaborate a plan B. The options were clear: stay or leave. I stood up and dragged my suitcase up and down the hall, trying to find some inspiration from the few passengers that waited for their transportation.

Refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

No response from Matteo Perego and it was already past 9 pm, the last train leaving in only 5 minutes.

It was now or never.

Rushing to the ticket machine, I bought the one way pass to freedom or doom - who knows.

I ran to the platform.

The train arrived on time, I jumped on and occupied a window seat.

I looked at the train's open door. I still had time to get out, stay in my city, go to David's place or even to my parent's home. A safe resolution was still a faint possibility, but once the doors would close, then there would be no return.

The alarm beeped. Grabbing my seat, I forced myself to stay on the train.

The doors finally closed with a squeak and instantly knew that was the sound of life giving an irreversible turn. The decision is final now.

And Matteo Perego had not accepted my friend request.

At this point I am considering reaching out to David and extorting Matteo's number. But I cannot do it! He is his ex!

I should not even be adding him to Facebook to begin with.

And the worst is that I do not know how the story exactly ended. I know it did not end pleasantly because David used to talk about Matteo all the time. He would drag me to Barcelona to visit Matteo, where I would always end up killing time outside while he had his few hours of romance. We would then take one of the evening trains back home together on the same day.

We would go together to Barcelona and I would kill time outside Matteo Perego's apartment while my best friend had a few hours of romance. He always left the apartment with a huge smile and would jump on me and hug me, sometimes he would kiss me on the cheek and I would hug him back, shake him or slap him on the chest and say "hurry up, jackass, you finished too late again and we will lose our train". Then we would run like burglars. On the way back, David would chat all the time and he would tell me everything that happened in the apartment with a boyish smile of pure happiness. As we did not tell everyone about our trips to the city, not even our parents or the Fantastic 4, I wanted to go with him so I made sure he was safe. I admired David for being brave and chasing what he wanted, but at the same time me and the other Fantastic 4 members felt, for some reason we could not describe, that David was someone who needed our protection and care.

Friend request accepted!

Yes!

After checking Facebook for the 100th time during the last 30 minutes, I finally got the confirmation I was craving for: Matteo Perego and I are now friends on Facebook.

Great! Now there is a pinch of hope after all.

I opened a chat window and began typing but before I had decided how to break the ice, I received a text message from him:

- Hello Sebas! – Matteo said
- Hello Matteo. I am not sure if you remember me. I am David's friend from Girona
- Of course I remember you. We met two years ago when I visited your beautiful city. I can see from your pictures that you have changed a lot.
- Have I? – I replied.

I was surprised Matteo had already been checking my pictures and that he remembered me. He was mostly paying attention to David when he visited, I was just company on the background

- Yes, you have changed – Matteo went on over the chat – you have grown up. You are not a teenager anymore, now you look like a grown man. How old are you nowadays?
- Well, in fact, I turned 18 today.
- That explains, then you must have been 16 when I last saw you. No wonder you look different.

The conversation was flowing a bit awkwardly with observations from Matteo about my transition from adolescence to whatever phase of life I was going through now which, in my view, was far from adulthood. Something in that conversation was a bit off, it looked as if the man was exploring all my Facebook pictures and commenting on them as we spoke.

- The picture where you are sitting on the rocks with David

He was referring to an old picture where David and I were at the beach wearing only swimming suits, me half covering my face because I didn't want to have a picture taken and David with one arm on my shoulder while saying hello with the other.

- That picture is so beautiful. Both of you look adorable. And you can tell there already you would become an attractive adult...
- Matteo – I interrupted him because I was not interested in discussing how well my hormones did their job during my teenagehood – I know we have not talked for a while but you always seemed like a nice guy to me. I would like to ask you for a favor.
- You always seemed like a nice boy to me too, Sebas – he replied, finally abandoning the growing up topic – you can ask for anything you want and me, as a good old friend, will try to help as much as I can
- The thing is that – I continued – I just ran away from home literally with only a suitcase and 38.65 euros in my pocket. I am on a train on my way to Barcelona and I do not have a place to sleep. I was wondering if you could recommend a cheap hostel or somewhere I can spend the night... - I did not have the courage to ask him to stay at his place but I was praying for him to invite me over
- Of course I do. I know some cheap hostels where you can stay for 15 euros a night, so with 38, you will be able to spend at least 2 days in Barcelona

Oh no! My approach did not work. He took it very literally that it was only advice that I was asking him for. Well, I am not surprised, I don't really know the guy at all, why would he invite me to stay with him unless I really beg him to?

- Thank you, Matteo. That will be of great help – I replied to him
- You are very welcome – he replied and paused for a while. Then he continued – You can go to a hostel and share a room with 9 other guys or you could also spend the night at my place if you wanted to.

Bingo! It actually worked! He asked me to go to his place and I didn't even have to ask for it! I thanked him trying not to sound desperate and told him I would be happy to go to his place. He gave me the address and indications on how to get there. "Get off in *El Clot* station, then take metro line 2, the purple line, and get off at a station called *Tetuan*. My apartment is only a few blocks away from that". I wrote everything down and thanked Matteo for being so kind. I could not believe I had a place to sleep and I believed even less I was so excited for having a place to sleep, something that, until today, was too obvious even to think about it.

A heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I finally leaned back on my seat and I felt so relaxed that I dozed off for some time until I was luckily awoken by a group of young men jumping on the train at Badalona station. They were drinking beers and talking very loudly. They were clearly going to party.

Anyway, I am about to reach my stop: Barcelona *El Clot*, so I better close my laptop and get ready.

Shit, I am so excited and afraid. I cannot believe I am doing this: I cannot believe I left my home. For the first time in my life, I feel I am in command of my destiny.

And that makes me shit my pants.

September 6, 2014

E2 - HELLO BARCELONA!

I finally managed to find some peace and open my laptop again! It is 2 am, I am safe, I am indoors, and I have a place to sleep.

So, let us go back a few hours when I left the train in *El Clot* Station and unwrap the post-it note where I had written down Matteo's address in Barcelona.

It is one of the last Saturday nights of the summer and the weather is so much nicer than in Girona. It is warm and the city is boiling with people going out to party. Young guys in the subway are dressed well, they smell like fragrance and talk loudly. Older

people head home with their families probably after spending the afternoon at the center and few tourists try to find their way among the locals.

I came out of the metro at *Tetuan* station, exactly as Matteo recommended over Facebook. "I remember this area" I told myself as I walked through the huge street. I did not even have to check the post-it note, it was easy to remember the way because that area of Barcelona, called "*Eixample*", is basically made of square-shape blocks and perpendicular streets. Once I found out towards which of the four possible directions I had to walk, I was on my way. I arrived at the building. Yes, I remember waiting right here for so many hours a few years ago. The bench where I used to sit, waiting for David to finish his date with Matteo was still there. I went to the door and breathed deep.

I pressed the buzzer and soon I heard the noise of someone picking up the receiver "Hello?" he said. "This is Sebas" I replied, and Matteo buzzed me in "Come upstairs, sixth floor".

I stepped in and waited for the elevator. I realized I had never crossed the main door's threshold before. Inside the lift, a shy boy was looking back at me from the mirror.

"I look so exhausted" I thought to myself. My hair was messy, my clothes were untidy, and my expression reflected my situation. My eyes were round open, I looked lonely and scared, like a puppy who was left out alone in the rain. I forced a smile, I did not want Matteo to see I was scared, but it did not work, the fake smile made me look even more frightened.

I arrived at the sixth floor and found one of the three doors opened. I pushed it and the smell of food immediately hit me. It was a familiar smell, like fried onion, garlic, pepper and tomato. I closed the door behind me and stayed in the small corridor with my suitcase. A mirror in front of me confirmed how scared I looked.

"Hello?" I said

"Come on in, Sebas!" a voice came from another room and immediately a big middle-aged man came to greet me. It was Matteo, I recognized him. He had gained some weight since I saw him last time and his strong Italian accent had not decreased even a bit.

"Wonderful! You are just in time for dinner!" Matteo said and came to me. He still had that goatee that I found so ugly. I extended my arm offering a handshake as I said "Hello, I am Sebas" but Matteo ignored it and threw himself on me, he hugged me and kissed me on both cheeks. I was a bit shocked because the only men I kiss are those in

my family (we kiss on the cheeks as a way to greet in Spain) but I would never do that with friends.

“Come on, leave your luggage here, we will take care of it later” Matteo said and dragged me to the living room where a table was set for two. “I hope you like pasta. I prepared some homemade *Bolognese*. I feel like having some meat this evening, if you know what I mean” and he winked at me. I did not really know what he meant until I found out later that *Bolognese* is a sauce made with meat.

“Please be kind and take a seat, Sebas” he said and poured some red wine into my glass. “Enough, enough” I said since he was almost filling the glass. “Come on, Sebas, it is Saturday night” Matteo replied with a smile. We sat down and he served the pasta, then the sauce on the top. “*Parmesano?*” he asked. I did not know what “*parmesano*” was but I said yes anyway. Then Matteo took a big block of cheese and grinded it over my plate. The dish smelled very good, and I was starving. I would have eaten it at once in a few seconds but I had to be polite with my host who insisted on making a toss before we started. “For my young handsome guest!” he said and we drank a bit.

I was going to grab my fork and start eating that food that smelled so good it made me drool when he raised his wine glass again “Oh, I almost forgot! And for your 18-year-old birthday, that is today!” We drank again.

I did not see the time to put some food in my mouth because my stomach would soon start to make funny noises, but Matteo raised his glass for a third time “And all and most important, Sebas: a toss for one of the most important days in your life: the day when you stop being a child and you become an adult! You are not an underage, a minor anymore, now you are a man, a fully legal entity, you have ownership of your body, your flesh, your decisions. Now you can be trash or a star, it is all up to you, now you own your soul and you own that beautiful body God gave you. Let us drink for that in this very small private celebration for which I have the luxury of being the only guest! For you, my child! For you my beautiful man, Sebas!” I felt his speech lasted forever. We raised our glasses, drank more wine and finally I was allowed to eat.

The dish was so delicious, definitely the best pasta dish I have had in my life and I would say one of the best meals. The sauce was extremely good, and the pasta had nothing to do with the pasta dishes my mom cooks. It was so tender, so tasty with such an amazing texture.

“Do you like it?” he asked and I could hardly reply because my mouth was full with that wonderful meal.

“It is incredible” I uttered.

I finished the dish quickly and I would have eaten the second one Matteo offered me, but I was too shy to accept it. I was feeling awkward enough to be at some stranger’s place eating for free, even if Matteo insisted that he wanted me to feel at home. “I hope you like dessert” he said and brought some cake he called *tiramisu* that looked messy but also tasted amazing. He served it with a shot of a dark liqueur “my friend prepares it, it is made with coffee, I hope you like it, it is quite strong”.

I drank it and it was indeed strong. After the wine and that coffee liqueur I started to feel more relaxed, more comfortable with the whole situation. I noticed I was laughing more easily, and I did not feel so afraid as when I stepped in the apartment.

“I want you to feel like this is also your place. Welcome to my little palace, Sebas” he said and poured some more liquor into my shot glass.

Although he called it his “little place” but apartment was not small at all. It had a decent living room with a small balcony and nice views of the city, a small kitchen, well-equipped bathroom with a stand shower and two bedrooms: one with a king size bed and mirrors in almost all the walls, where Matteo sleeps, and the other is his “home-office” where Matteo keeps his computer, his book collection and a guest single bed.

He was showing me this last part of the house when he said “You can stay in this room or share the big bed with me. It is your choice” he told me.

I assumed he was joking; I do not think he was really offering me a choice to sleep with him. Probably he was trying to treat me so well he was afraid I would feel he was leaving the smallest bed in the house to me while he was sleeping in a huge one by himself.

He was being kind enough to host a stranger in his house, having the stranger take part of the big bed would be too much invasion.

I thanked him for his courtesy and accommodated my suitcase in the guest room. “Thank you, Matteo. This bed is good enough for me, I also sleep in a single bed at my parents’ place. I will be very comfortable here, there is no need to share the big bed” I told him.

Matteo laughed, “You are so cute, Sebas” he answered.

We spent the next few hours sitting at his balcony. The night was warm but midnight brought a slightly cold breeze and Matteo brought blankets and the coffee liqueur bottle with two small glasses. It is easy to talk to Matteo, he seems like a very warm type of person, while he talks, he keeps on touching your knee, like if he wanted to make you feel you are his friend.

The moment was quite magical, the balcony overlooked the city giving an amazing view of the buildings and the Mediterranean Sea in the distance.

We chatted a lot. I told him about my departure from home.

- Your dad really called you a *failure*? What a brute man he must be, you did well to leave.
- My speech was meant to be all good vibes and everyone in the family got that it was mostly a joke - I continued - But my dad totally missed the memo and got super mad.
- And why all that anger? Why did he treat you that way on the day of your 18th birthday? - Matteo asked
- Maybe because I was happy, very happy. He does not like when people are happy. Happiness is freedom, a happy person is unpredictable and, hence, difficult to control - I replied - I was too happy and I mentioned I was an adult now and I was legally free to choose things. I think that made him angry and he exploded. He kept on repeating I had failed to enter college. Funny thing is that I do not even want to go to University. Studying a bachelor's degree would already be tedious for me. I want to live, I want to find myself because I do not have a clue of what I want to do in life"

Matteo nodded.

- You need time to grow up a bit and to find who you are. Nowadays you are so young, 18 is baby-age. Explore around, see the world, meet people out of Girona, expand your experiences and enjoy your beautiful body. Why would you like to stay at your father's place trying to fulfill a dream that is not yours?.
- Exactly - I replied - I do not see myself becoming a doctor like my older brother, I want to see the world, make my own decisions, I want to live in Barcelona, see the nightlife... and the day-life, have tons of friends, new experiences.

Matteo eyed me up, low to my legs and up to my face again.

- You are 18 and youth is giving you energy to succeed on anything you really want to achieve and exuberant beauty - Matteo took a long sip of the coffee

liqueur we were drinking and continued - Now you remind me of your friend David, he was sitting exactly on the same chair where you are sitting now. I remember the view exactly as if he was sitting in front of me right now, even if it was over two years ago - Matteo smiled at me maliciously - The only difference is that, contrary to you, David liked sitting here completely naked.

I could not believe what he just said and looked at him with a confused expression. He must have noticed I was blushing but he was blushing a bit too, probably because the beverage we were drinking had the effect of making your face reddish and your body warm. He continued as if he had said nothing unusual.

- Naked-David told me almost the same as you just told me. He did not want to go back to *Girona*. He sounded like he hated every corner, every house and every person of that beautiful city. He wanted to stay here, with me, and do what you just told me: the nightlife and the day-life.

I was shocked and felt uncomfortable about the way he was talking about my friend David. For starters, I didn't know he hated Girona or that he was desperate to leave and move to Barcelona. I also did not enjoy picturing him naked with Matteo. I started to wonder how that scene came up in the conversation we were having. It had been a very long day, I was very tired and the liquor and the wine was making me feel like I was watching the whole thing in a movie. But it was not a movie: I was right there, in a stranger's apartment in Barcelona listening to some fat old man saying things I had never suspected about my childhood friend. It seemed that Matteo enjoyed talking about David, he seems to be proud about having known him and being able to tell those stories about him.

- Well, David must have liked Girona at least a bit since he went back - I replied to Matteo - He actually never told me the idea of moving to Barcelona had crossed his mind.

Matteo smiled, I could see in his eyes he had a wild card up his sleeve and was about to reveal it.

- I know - he continued - He did not have the balls to do it, not alone. He wanted to stay with me, live with me, sleep with me every night and walk hand-in-hand with me every day. He asked me if he could stay over, just like you asked me today, but I had to say no to him. He was way too young, so I promised we could talk about it again when he would become 18. He obviously said it was too long a way to wait, at that age one year feels like a century - Matteo stopped talking and looked at the distant buildings in the night skyline of the city we had in front of us.

- Of course, he was angry, he felt betrayed, he said something about me only wanting him for his ass
- And was it true? - I replied - Were you only friends with David because he was young and handsome?

Matteo laughed.

- Sebas, innocent and beautiful Sebas, you are so young. I think Barcelona will surprise you in many aspects you cannot imagine. This city has a lot to give to young boys like you, but you need to open up and be smart. Much smarter than David ever was. But now let us have some rest for tonight, it is past 2 am and I am about to fall asleep. Don't worry, some day you will get more answers and will understand everything.

He never answered my question, instead he left me like that, wondering what it was that I would understand "some day". Was he talking about David? The person he was describing was not my friend. In Matteo's words David sounded like a different person. And the *naked* thing... seriously? Did he have to tell me that? I was relieved he wanted to go to sleep because I wouldn't have liked to know more about whatever happened between David and him.

Matteo went to bed, I went to my bedroom and unpacked. Matteo had freed a lot of space in the closet for me, space of which I filled less than a 5 or 10 percent.

When I was finally done, I washed my teeth. I went back to my bedroom and took off my clothes. Before putting on my pajamas I looked at myself in a full-body mirror in the room. My body looked slender, well-structured, nice shoulders, smooth skin, brown nipples with a dim shape of pecs, absence of fat or belly, a chain of brown hair going down from my belly button to my pubes that grew abundantly around my sex. A pale penis with a lot of foreskin protruding, not really hanging, out of the hair-forest, long legs with some hair below the knees, firm bottom. Am I really handsome? Matteo pointed out several times that I was. But was he being honest? Would he find my naked body as attractive as he found David's?

I do not know why I was having those stupid thoughts. Who cares what that ugly old fat man thinks of me? I wonder if the things he said about David were true. If they were, the question was why David hated Girona. Did he hate me too? Did he hate his parents? And did he love Matteo that much? Or was he using him so he could get out of his home city and move here?

I put on my pajamas and open the laptop.

It was time to put this weird evening into words.

Dear Diary, you are my friend tonight. I wonder what will happen tomorrow or in a week. It is impossible for me to foresee the future. A week in the future sounds like an eternity to me.

I wonder what I will think of myself when I read these pages then.

And where will I be.

Time to sleep now.

Tomorrow will be my first day in Barcelona.

First day of the rest of my life.