

A MEETING AT THE MALL

FM et al.

I had packed my three-day luggage early that morning, albeit my plane was leaving late in the evening. In a few months I would retire from my job, having reached my age limits, and with my job also my trips to the United States would be over.

Some years earlier such trips, or “missions,” as we used to call them in Europe, were welcome, thrilling me as a privilege that my colleagues envied. However, for one year or two, things had been gradually changing: the worry to pack all the right things and documents, the fact that I often traveled alone, with nobody to talk to. And the jet-lag and the sleepless nights in the hotels. In one word everything had been making my “missions” less and less exciting.

Still, probably this would have been my last trip to the US, and I wanted to say goodbye to the City I had seen so many times. I wanted to give a silent farewell especially to the anonymous people, who always gave me the “feel” of the cities I had visited in my life of travels. Thus, I checked out of the Hotel and decided to go to a Shopping Center. I selected on the map a large one. I went there by taxi. I walked up and down in the Mall and bought several perfectly useless electronics gadgets, which I would never use and would inevitably end their glorious career as unplanned presents. Then, I had some Mexican food, a Mexican beer, and suddenly the jet-lag hit me in full. I saw a deserted bench, I sat down at one of its ends with my trolley next to me and the half-open bag of my purchases on the seat, almost as a barrier against intruders. I started dozing. But I was not going to sleep long that afternoon.

The first character who came to sit next to me was a young male, black, maybe 18 or 20, handsome, who started staring at me. Suddenly I realized that I, a foreigner, probably was sitting in the wrong place. Only then did I

notice that we were very close to the men's room, and all the benches in the Mall were full, while the one where I was sitting was empty. I also realized that the young black man had come from a group of boys of all ages, who seemed to hang around in the vicinity and to know each other. O, Hell, I thought. I am a foreigner. I have rights. In particular, I felt I had the right of not knowing. I closed the eyes pretending to be tired (not an arduous pretense indeed, after a long trip and before an equally long return trip), and soon I felt that the black boy was going away. After a while (perhaps I dozed), I realized that someone else had come to the bench.

Now a different, younger boy was sitting next to me. He was perhaps fourteen years old, slender, dark-haired, with deep blue eyes, and exceedingly good-looking, although dressed in worn out, not so clean clothes, like his companions. I looked at him, and this time I kept my eyes open as if I was waking up. After a few minutes, the boy said: "Hey, man, could you spare me a fiver?" "What do you mean?" I asked, stressing a bit my already distinct accent. He looked at me frowning. Then, he seemed to understand, and, clearly articulating the words, said: "I am asking if you can give me five dollars." "What for?" I asked. He looked at me with a malicious smile: "We can discuss that." With a minor arrangement of his posture, he had made himself quite provocative, with his feet on the seat, legs crossed. "Don't sell yourself so cheaply. You are worth at least fifty dollars". He looked nonplussed. Then, he said: "OK, can you spare fifty dollars?" I sighed, looked into my wallet, extracted a fifty dollars note, and handed it to him, all this without a word.

During these proceedings, the boy, as if absentmindedly, had quietly introduced his small hand into the bag and had taken the package containing the miniature digital camera I had just bought and placed on the bench with the other gadgets. The boy was not very talented in stealing and turned red while doing his act. Then, the package disappeared. He was skinny and lightly dressed, but I could not make up where he had concealed the camera.

He took the banknote I gave him. He looked dumbfounded: "Are you nuts?" I said: "That's beside the point. You are a nice boy, and you need fifty dollars, I gave you what you need". He stared at me for one minute as if studying me. Then, he made up his mind. He pocketed the money. "OK, he said. Take me to your place. I will show you what I can do for fifty dollars." "I have no place of mine in the US. I live in Rome, Italy. My plane takes off from *** Airport in about five hours. A taxi will collect me in one hour thirty. I already checked out of my Hotel. However, never mind, I just ask you to stay here and talk to me until my taxi comes. Is that too much to ask for fifty dollars? (and a camera, I thought, but I did not say that)". "For fifty dollars I can stay here one day. Do you know what? We wait that there are no cops, and we can go into the toilets. My friends there will warn us if anybody is coming." "No, I said. Just talk, and certainly not in the toilets." He looked at me once more without understanding. Then, again, he seemed to come around.

"OK. What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything. Do you know where Rome is?"

"You just said it is in Italy."

"Never heard about it?"

"Not really."

"How about Italy? Do you know where it is?"

"In Europe ... I think."

"Ever heard of Caesar, Julius Caesar?"

There was something like a flash in his eyes, but it died out almost immediately. So much for Shakespeare. He shook his head. "Have you studied history?" "Of course, history of the United States. But it was a drag." "Well, I said; also other Countries have their history. Even Italy." "Swell!" he said, absolutely without enthusiasm. It was obvious that history, in particular of Italy, was not the main focus of his interests. "Is there anything, which you find interesting?" I asked. "Such as?" "Such as history, geography, novels and poetry, philosophy, sciences, mathematics, art, music, movies, religion." "Music, a bit." "What kind of music?" "Rap." "How about the Beatles?" "That's old, he said. Classics." He said "classics" almost as if it was a dirty word. "There is even older music," I said. He

collectively waved away Beethoven, Mozart, Bach and whomever else as if they were but a single pesky fly. I told him "Sex is not the only thing in life, you know?" "That I know, he said. Work and sex. Which to me amount to the same." "Oh God," I said. I touched his forehead with my index finger, looking into his non-comprehending eyes. "You have a brain in here. And you have a heart. You must not let your brain and heart go to waste. Your mind was made to understand and learn, to appreciate beautiful things, to solve problems. And it is for love and friendship that you have a heart. Sex is nothing, or anyway, very little." "Boy, you talk like a priest. Are you one?" And then, laughing in a rather forced way: "Are you a pedophile, like the others?"

"You two, follow me," said a dry, unpleasant voice. A policeman had suddenly popped out of nowhere, and in one minute we were walking toward his office. I was dragging my trolley with a penitent expression. The boy was surprised that I did not try to resist. He was saying: "We were doing nothing, Chief. There is nothing against us." "This is what we will see," answered the officer. In his office, he said to a second policeman: "Here is our friend Mike. Check him out a bit." Then, he let me into a minute office and motioned me to a chair. I sat down with a tired expression.

He said: "So, you like young boys, don't you?"

"It depends on what you mean. You hate young boys?"

By then, he had understood that I was a foreigner: "Your documents, please." Without a word, I handed over my passport and my plane ticket.

"What are you doing in this City?"

I explained my business. I said I was finished with it. I had an afternoon to spare, had come to the Mall to buy a few things, which I listed, and I had arranged for a taxi to pick me up at three thirty PM.

"And you use the remaining time to proposition young boys?"

"Not really," I said.

"Yet, you have given him money. Don't deny it; we will frisk the boy."

"No reason to deny anything, I said. I gave the boy fifty dollars."

"What for?"

"To chat."

"D'you think I am stupid? Fifty dollars just to chat? You ..."

"Don't tell me that I could chat with others for free. Simply it is not true. The boy was the first person in three days since I arrived in this City, who talked to me."

"OK, said the policeman. You are the mind reader. Still, fifty dollars is a lot. You can have Mike for ten dollars, and you could get way more than words for that."

"I am too old for that sort of thing."

"Still I don't believe it."

"Look, officer. He asked me if I had fifty dollars to spare and I gave him fifty dollars. However, if I knew for sure that it would be of any real help, I would give him a thousand without thinking twice, here and now."

"Why should you want to help the little creep? Because he is good-looking?"

"No. I believe that destiny dealt the boy all the bad cards and I think that it is hard to bear. Especially for a kid of that age. I have observed these kids, and it is like I saw in a flash all their pitiful lives. And you know? They help each other, with a dignity you would not suspect, against society, which does nothing but crushes them."

The policeman became less aggressive and muttered: "And you said that you were here only a few hours ..." Then he added, with some sadness in his voice: "It's always the fault of the society. Anyway. Occasionally we intervene to protect them from gangs who want to kidnap the best looking ones among them, but it's a waste of time. Those engaged in the sex business are all throwaway kids. There are many others around, boys and girls. Many of them will end up in the morgue or merely vanish before they are twenty. The balance, well, the balance by that time will be in jail."

"But there is nothing one can do for them?"

"Nothing that I know. There are well-meaning associations, but they are just a drop in the sea. Personally, I don't know of one single boy or girl who could get out of the sex business and make something acceptable of his life."

"What a waste!" I said. "What a horrible waste."

Now there was silence in the small office.

We could hear screams in the other room. The boy was pleading with a crying voice: "No, please, don't send me back there! It was a present, man. I tell you! And I don't know why that weirdo gave me fifty dollars." I could not make up the answers the policeman was giving him. Finally, the door opened. The policeman shoved into our room the boy, who was obviously scared. Anguish contorted his gentle face. The cop said: "This creep says that you presented it to him. Funny, isn't it?" He did not say what was it, probably saving that for questioning me later. However, my script had already been written in France, almost two hundred years ago (1). Thus, I quietly extracted something from the bag of my purchases, and said "Oh, I see! There is a misunderstanding, officer. The boy is right! The digital camera was a present! Only, I am getting old and stupid, and I forgot to give him the rechargeable batteries. Without them, the camera would not work. Here they are." And I handed over the batteries to the kid. The new policeman looked at me with an odd expression. He muttered: "With this kind of attitude, these kids will never learn." But his elder colleague said: "Learn what, Bill? This Italian gentleman is perfectly aware of the situation. However, if he does not want to press charges against Mike, we cannot force him. Can we?"

The two cops were silent, each apparently following his train of thoughts. I started collecting my papers from the table. Neither policeman made a move. I said: "Can we go then? Can I go on talking to the boy until my taxi comes - if he does not mind?" The boy was quiet. He seemed not to know what to do. As neither officer said a word, I turned to him and said: "Come along, Mike. It is alright, now."

We went out. The boy could not believe that he could get away without any further problem. He looked questioningly at the officer who had brought him in, and the policeman shrugged and averted his eyes. As soon as we were out of the Police Office, the boy ran away. I saw why. His friends were standing not far, obviously apprehensive for him. They seemed overjoyed to see him back, and all hugged together. In a second Mike was laughing again. I was once more surprised by the support these poor boys gave to each other. Philosophically, I went alone to the same seat as before dragging my trolley, and I reclined my head closing my eyes.

After a while, I heard a gentle coughing near me. There were two boys. One was Mike, and the other was a younger boy, apparently a close friend of his. I did not understand, what was happening. The second boy was even cuter than his friend, with a head of curly white hair. Probably he bleached them. The older boy addressed me: "Say, I wanted to thank you for what you did. You saved my ass. Here is your camera and here are the batteries".

"You cannot refuse a present," I said sternly, shaking my head.

He smiled. "I win a fiver because I made a bet with Charlie here that this is what you would do."

"What would I do?"

"You would not take back the camera."

"Then it is your lucky day."

The younger boy gave five dollars to the older boy. He did not seem to mind, and I was sure that most likely they kept their money together. Then, I turned to Charlie and said: "Let's make it a lucky day for you too. Would you accept a Touch iPod?" "Is it Christmas? Charlie asked in utter disbelief. Boy, are you screwed up!" "Possibly. Still, here is your iPod." I put it on the seat next to him. He did not take it. "And what am I supposed to do?"

"Just stay here forty-five more minutes, and chat with us."

He took the iPod carefully, almost religiously. He seemed to expect that I would stop him, which I did not do. "Take it, said Mike. He is weird, but you can trust him." And he gave me such a look of trust that it melted me inside. I said to the boys: "OK, let's not talk about music, history, sciences, humanities. Let's do some math. A secretary takes two hours to do a job; another takes three. How long will it take if they work together? You two can work together on this problem if you want." Mike burst out laughing and said: "Look, man. I can do a lot of things for a digital camera, but sure I cannot solve math problems. I never could." "Give it a try. If you succeed, you'll make me happy, I said. Here are paper and a pencil."

Immediately the two boys set to work and started chatting. The younger boy had a childish voice. He laughed often. It was unbearable to think of his future as described in a few words by the policeman. First, selling himself with less and less success. Then, either the jail or the morgue, in seven or

eight years. And there would be no escape. I knew only too well that to vanish was not to escape. Nobody ever protects runaway kids. One dark encounter is enough, and the kid just disappears.

Charlie said without thinking: "Two hours plus three hours, it takes five hours." Mike said: "You silly child. Do you think that if they work together, they take longer?" Charlie blushed to his ears. Now he made a real effort. He said very quickly: "One secretary does one half of the job in one hour. The other, one-third. Together they make the sum, that is ..." "That is?" Mike scribbled something and announced: "One half plus one third equals one fifth." Charlie's eyes suddenly brightened, as from an interior light. Without writing anything, he said: "No, silly. One-third plus one half that's five-sixths, and therefore working together it takes six-fifths of one hour..." Almost without stopping he added, "... which makes seventy-two minutes." I was astounded. "How did you do that?" Now I felt really sorry for Charlie. He had a talent. God, what could one do for him?

We walked to the main entrance of the Mall. My taxi was just outside. I said: "Goodbye, kids. Be good." They looked at me as if they could not believe that I was leaving them. I stepped into the car and waved goodbye. They waved at me without words. And I left them there, on the sidewalk next to the main entrance of the Mall. When the car turned into the highway toward the airport, looking back, I could see that they were still there. Mike had passed his arm around the shoulders of Charlie, the last image I have of them.

NOTE

(1) The reference is to "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo (Vol I. Fantine, Book II.12)

"Ah! here you are!" he [the Bishop] exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two

hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

POST SCRIPTUM

RUNAWAY KIDS

Runaway kids,
Nobody knows their fears,
Nobody cares about their silent tears.

Kids who run away...
To become throwaway,
A few bitter steps, and it's the end of the way.

Mike and Charlie
are two good friends:
under a bridge their nights they spend.

Mike, fourteen;
Charlie, twelve.
They survive selling themselves.

Around the men's rooms,
Down in the park,
they hang around. It's stinking and dark.

On Christmas night,
Cold and no charms,
But Mike holds Charlie tight in his arms.

It was a good dinner:
leftovers they found,
like hungry puppies scavenging around.

No Santa will come,
Just shadows of friends
That the holy night together will spend.

There will be Bucky:
he went to the jail.
He is still there. Who would pay his bail?

There will be Kenny:
He once met a monster,
Only God knows how much he had to suffer.

There will be Kevin:
dead he was found,
never again will they see him around.

When they'll see God
What will He say
to their little souls, on that fateful day?

What will they ask?
"O God who sees all from above
Were our lives a sign of your love?"

Runaway kids,
Nobody knows their fears,
Nobody cares about their silent tears.

Don't close your eyes,
Don't close your ears
Remember that those are also your tears.

NOTE

The present short story was published in English in mid-August 2017 on a website I have recently closed. From the statistics I had of the visitors to my site, I can conclude that less than ten American or English users read it. This is interesting, because the problem of runaway kids, under-age boys, and girls, who end up in the sex business is not negligible, especially in the US. According to statistics of the National Runaway Safeline (Formerly the National Runaway Switchboard), it appears that between 1.6 and 2.8 million boys and girls, some as young as ten, run away from home. The vast majority goes back home, but it is estimated that about 100,000 youth below the age of consent are presently engaged in the sex-business in the US.