

The Book

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He looked good in the outfit: the blue autumn sky seemed reflected in his cowboy pants, he was wearing his black boots, and he put a white T-shirt on to go out, which dazzled the eye with a powerful -- almost mortal? -- shine. He was soon out in the street, one passer-by more with a mission to fulfill. The problem was that up to this point in his life, he did not know what that mission was, but the mere fact of interweaving these threads in his mind made him feel powerful.

The streets and avenues came and went, and he looked at the stores and shop windows that replicated themselves with dizzying speed as he approached the heart of the big city. The eyes of the salesgirls and the dummies met his own, and both showed a hint of insinuation and lukewarmness, the same that were with him the day of his birth that 29th day of February.

And the best of it was that he didn't feel old at all; he was still younger than any other man, the clothes he was wearing made his step more agile. He didn't feel as if he was walking, he simply moved along with a minimum of effort, floating with the air, worthy of a few transgressors of the monotony of movement required for a biped to get from one place to another.

- A very common name endorsed him: Juan López; he might just as well have been called José Pérez or Marco Díaz. His father and his grandfather had been, respectively, don Juan López de la Torre and don Juan López del Pielago. He was, indeed, a genuine López and proud to be one. His clothes were always the same, not that he had only one set of clothes of course, but Juan's appreciation of clothes referred to something he believed pure and personal relating to the full understanding of the time and the number of minutes that can be saved by having a dozen identical changes of clothes. In this case the man made the clothes, not the other way round as with so many despicably insignificant human beings; these observations, passing to a philosophical plane, are no more than the exacerbation of relativity since it would often be better to walk around in the nude and set ourselves free from those acquired masks and poses which (sometimes cruelly) dominate man's actions.
- Juan Pérez made his way to the library, he wanted to feed on knowledge. He decided to master the classics, the contemporaries and, his most nostalgic longing, those yet to come. At that time it seemed to him that his mission was to rub shoulders with erudition, then to embrace knowledge and merge into it; everything that was happening, was no more nor less than a call of Knowledge. He began looking at the old texts. The librarian was an ancient man; to stop to work out his exact age would be an oversimplification, he was already part of the décor, he was an open book, ready to be perused. His one eye seemed to have seen things undreamed of, numberless; perhaps the old man had been born there. His eye was like a fly's eye, not because of its shape, of course, but because of its high functional capacity, since it captured fragmentarily the slightest movement made in this house of reading, from the position of each book on the shelves to the smallest movement of some weary reader, pursuing vertiginously a flash here, a light there.

Juan took a somewhat dusty book down from a shelf, entitled "Mortal Manual of Human Relationships and Cohabitation," a title that did not surprise him, but which he considered wearily repetitive; there was a reason for his living alone. He suddenly set that book down, since another one to the left seemed to catch his attention more; its spine bore some letters of Celtic origin which cannot be translated literally, but which tried to say something about something that could be, was, perhaps will be, and, while not exact, they could have said something like: "How to Get a Man to Become More of a Man than he Could Be or than he Ever Will Be." What could this sinister and at the same time pristine title refer to? His eyes were impatient to read the book, and his fingers itched to open it. When he turned the first page, a strange feeling came over him; he thought then that he held in his hands the exhaustive story of his own life and also that of all other human animals. He hurried out of the library with the book under his arm; it was a very big book, but amazingly it was not at all heavy, and its light weight produced in him a great feeling of dismay. How could such a big book be as light as a puff of warm air? There was no immediate reply; when he got home and took a furtive look at himself in the mirror, just inside the front door, he could see that his features were beginning to change. This did not bother him, and he went to the reading table to make a start on reading, and maybe rereading this majestic book, which, curiously, one had to begin on the last page and read from right to left. López thought that perhaps this would be the trick that the most arduous knowledge had in store for him, but this hardness was part of the mission that had been assigned to him; fate called him, everything was falling into place, everything, absolutely everything boiled down to that. He read until he was quite worn out, took a few minutes rest, and then applied himself again to his task. Interrupting his reading again for a moment, he stood up and looked at himself in the mirror; his face was still changing. He took the mirror down from the hard wall and propped it up in front of himself. As he progressed in the reading, he gradually became aware of a great truth: he was able to perceive life, the metamorphosis of faces and spirits; he noted that his face was not the same, it comprised many faces and none at the same time. He felt that he had now grasped nearly all the knowledge given to man in the very intimate struggle to know everything; the work was almost finished, Juan was nearing the first page, that is, the page of his redemption and therefore that of all men. When he reached the last page and the first line, he felt a slow but piercing discomfort in his left eye; then, turning his bewildered head to the mirror, he could see that he had lost that eye. He didn't mind something so unfortuitous, because identity, in turn, is merely created by the ego, and in the end everything and everyone are the same.

He got up, leaving behind the complicity of the chair, and made his way to the library; paradoxically he found the old one-eyed man dead and buried under a pile of books; the dead man's clothes were as black as a starless night. It was as if he had been waiting for that day, because a somewhat sarcastic smile could be seen on the old man's pale skin; at that instant Juan López visualized himself in black and with only one eye; he was now the new librarian, his life and the mirrors would lie to him no more.