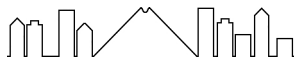


Börkur Sigurbjörnsson

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Gave His Guitar Away



Urban Volcano

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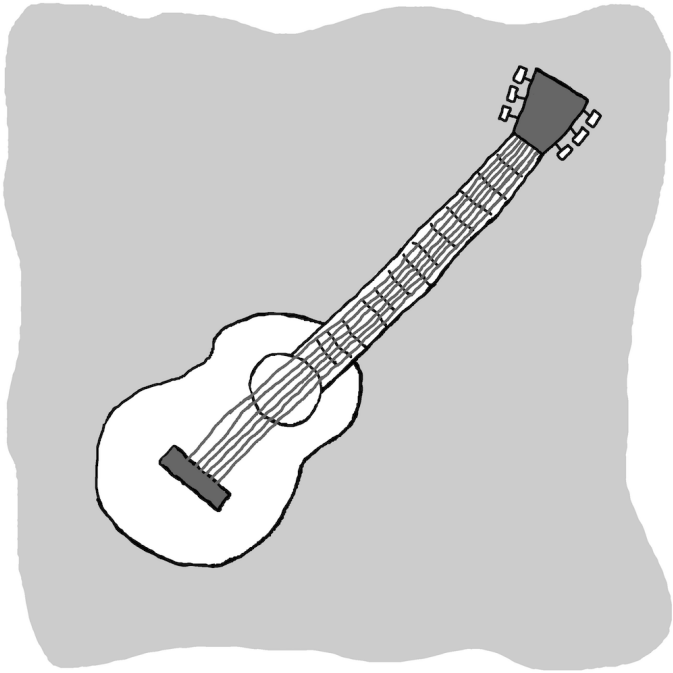
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THE BUSINESSMAN WHO GAVE HIS GUITAR AWAY

“Señor Manuel Sánchez, please contact a member of the staff at gate number fifteen,” a slightly irritated voice sounded through the loudspeaker system.

My eyes wandered toward the desk at gate number fifteen. A middle-aged woman sat in her chair, surveying the waiting area like a prison guard in her watchtower, waiting to detect any unexpected movement in response to her call. Nobody stood up. No one came forward.

It was the tenth time or so that this same person had been asked to contact airline personnel. What was going on? I had spent quite some time waiting at airports in my life, but I had never been requested to speak to the staff at the gate. Not through the loudspeaker system, at least. I did not quite get why people needed to be called to the gate before boarding began. Was there anything more to be said about the reservation? Was the transaction not already complete? The passengers were most likely already checked in. Was there any reason to check them out further?

Neither did I understand why people recurrently did not show up in time—why their name had to be repeated over and over again. Was there a connection between the two? Did the people called to the desk have a reason not to show up? Or did I merely pay attention to the ones who did not answer the call since their names were repeated continuously? I had no clue. The behavioral patterns of missing airline passengers were not among my specialist subjects.

I reached for my leather Burberry briefcase and took out my Moleskine notebook and my favorite Montblanc pen. I decided to make good use of my time and prepare a list of things I needed to do upon returning to the faculty. I should write a short report for my colleagues, describing my experience at the

conference. Also, I needed to take a good look at the paper by the group from Cornell. Their talk had been very interesting, the research appeared to be remarkably solid, and the presentation style was highly entertaining. It seemed so easy for those Ivy League scholars to produce one masterpiece after another. They had access to resources far beyond what I could ever dream of in Madrid. If only there were a way for me to collaborate with such a highly regarded institute. I could imagine myself attending a first-class conference as a speaker rather than merely playing the role of spectator as I had done in Santiago.

I looked up from my notebook and over the waiting area, imagining I was scanning a crowded conference hall, filled with an audience excited to hear me present my groundbreaking research. I visualized myself onstage, dressed in a gray suit, a light-blue shirt, and a crimson tie. I was wearing black shoes and the stage lights reflected off the well-polished leather. I held my head up high and cleared my throat. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” I began. “It is a great pleasure for me to be here today to present my joint research with my colleagues from Cornell University.”

“Señor Manuel Sánchez, please contact a member of the staff at gate number fifteen.”

The announcement brought me out of my daydream, knocked me off the podium and threw me

back into my seat at gate number fifteen of El Dorado International Airport. Once again they were calling out for the mysterious passenger, Señor Manuel Sánchez. If bets were to be taken, I would say he was sleeping at some other gate after having had too much to drink. How could people otherwise go missing at airports? It was not as if we were in the middle of a great wilderness. At least not here in Bogotá. Maybe people got lost at the big airports with their numerous multistory terminals and long corridors that wound round like snakes in a desert, like Heathrow or Barajas, but not at El Dorado.

“I wonder what happened to Señor Sánchez!”

I looked at the man who had addressed me. He sat to my left and leaned forward over the two empty seats between us. A short fellow with a small round face, tan skin, and thin black hair that was combed back but failed to properly cover a bald patch at the rear of his head. A sparse but neatly trimmed mustache decorated his upper lip. He was wearing a ragged dark-blue tracksuit a size or two too big for his slender body. The hoodie was unzipped, revealing a crumpled T-shirt that might have been considered white a few hundred washes ago. The same could have been said about his shabby running shoes of somewhat indeterminate color. His smile gave him a boyish look, barring a line of crooked, coffee-stained teeth.

“You know Señor Sánchez?” I asked.

“Everybody knows Señor Sánchez,” said the man, grinning. “Sánchez is a very common name.”

“But do you know this particular Señor Sánchez? Señor Manuel Sánchez?”

“I doubt that I do. As I said, Sánchez is a very common name.”

I nodded and waited for a few moments to see if the man intended to continue the dialogue that had, until now, been rather meagre. As he showed no sign of proceeding, I returned to writing my to-do list.

I noted that I should ask Alba to return my copy of John Locke’s *Second Treatise*. I found it strange that she had not already given it back to me. She was a bright student, and given that the book had a chapter on property, it was especially ironic that she had not respected my ownership of the book and had kept it for several weeks.

“Going to Mexico City?” the man asked when I had barely touched my pen upon the notebook paper.

“No,” I replied, faking a friendly smile in order to hide my irritation at being disturbed once again. “I’m on my way to Madrid. My flight is the next one leaving from this gate. The one after Mexico City, that is.”

“White blood in my veins, pure football in my heart, ¡Hala Madrid!” the man chanted. “Did you like Colombia?”

“I haven’t really been to Colombia,” I confessed. “My business here in Bogotá is merely a stopover. This morning I flew in from Santiago. Santiago de Chile.”

“Ah, Chile. Serious people, the Chileans. They do serious business. You know? You can grasp a lot about how people do business by looking.” The man nodded his head and pointed at his eyes. “I’ve been looking at how people do business here in Colombia. Observing people’s behavior. Looking at how they go about their dealings. The Colombian style of trading is completely different from how we do things back home in Mexico. Are you a businessman yourself? Were you doing business in Chile?”

“Yes and no,” I replied. “I’m a professor. My main research area is in the field of business administration, but I don’t practice business, as such. My interests are mainly of a scholarly nature. I was attending an academic conference in Santiago.”

“Ah, a scholar,” said the man, raising his eyebrows and nodding his head. “I was never much of an academic. It was hard for the teachers to shove knowledge into my head. It was full of its own ideas, that mind. There wasn’t much room for the teachers’ wisdom. Always been more interested in action than books. My son, however, was a computer science student in Mexico City. A good one. Clever kid. Top grades. Maybe a bit too clever for his teachers’ liking.

Created a gambling site and ran it on the campus network. The professors didn't appreciate that sort of entrepreneurial ambition. They expelled him. Can you imagine?"

"I'm sorry to hear that," I lied, thinking that I would certainly have sided with my Mexican colleagues. An academic institute was no place to run a dodgy business like a gambling site.

"Life is too short to be sorry. It was just as well they expelled him. He was too clever to waste his time attending classes. The affair gave us a chance to start doing business together. Father and son."

"What sort of business?" I asked, trying to imagine the genre of enterprise a man in this outfit could possibly be involved in. "Maybe an off-campus gambling site?"

"No," the man replied, laughing. "We're building a finance website. With financial advice, investments, and insurance. A simple site. Rich in content but succinct and up to date. There's a gap in the market for that sort of thing in Mexico."

I nodded and gave him an encouraging smile even though his description had failed to impress me. For a moment I thought about explaining to him that maneuvering in the financial market was anything but a simple affair. All research indicated that it was not possible to explain the topic on a simple website.

However, I was eager to get back to planning for my return to the Old World and decided to leave the discussion at that, hoping he would do the same.

“Colombia is a really nice place,” the man said, wiping out my hope of terminating the dialogue. He reached into his pocket for a bulky point-and-shoot camera and moved one seat closer.

“This is the main square in Chiquinquirá,” he continued, turning the camera display toward me, flipping through the photos. “And this is a cat I saw on a side street.”

I could not see much of the photos as the camera was not quite the latest model and the display was small. I could only guess I was not missing all that much.

“This is yours truly in his fancy suit,” he added, handing me the camera so I could confirm for myself the incredible wardrobe statement, “before it got stolen.”

The photo was taken in a square and the man posed in front of a fountain. He was wearing a blue suit over a truly white shirt. Like his tracksuit, the attire was worn and way too big for his skinny body. In one hand he held a black fake leather sports bag with a gold-colored Adidas logo. From behind his back the neck of a guitar stuck out.

“How did your clothes get stolen?” I asked as I gave the camera back. Having seen the man wearing

garments that went in the direction of being possibly considered somewhat decent, I could almost relate to him. Maybe he was a businessman after all, albeit not of the caliber I was used to mingling with.

“I was taking a shower at my hostel one morning when they stole my suit,” the businessman explained, putting the camera back into his pocket. “Fortunately, I always take my passport, wallet, and other valuable essentials with me to the shower.”

“It must have been quite an inconvenience, having your suit stolen,” I sympathized, feeling truly sorry for the man having to resort to this hideous tracksuit.

“Nah. They were not that fancy. Not that I need fancy clothes. Or much clothing, for that matter. I like to travel light. I started my trip with a bag and my guitar. This is all my luggage at the end of the trip.” The businessman lifted a crumpled white plastic bag that looked practically empty.

“They stole the guitar too?”

“No,” the businessman said, smiling. “The fate of the guitar... that’s quite another story.”

As hopeful as I had been a few minutes ago that the man would shut up, I had to admit that now I was rather curious to know what had happened to the guitar and hoped the businessman would continue his story. And so he did.

“I was walking along the main street in a village near Chiquinquirá when a tramp came up to me. ‘Señor, you want the best food in town? Señor, come with me to have the best food in town.’ I followed him across the street to a small family run restaurant, sat down, and ordered a *bandeja paisa*. Can you imagine? Myself with a massive *bandeja paisa*? Anyway... the vagrant sat down at the next table and the waiter brought him a beer. I guessed that was the deal. He brought in customers and got paid with a drink. I imagine that’s what you scholars call remunerative incentive, or something like that.”

“We might,” I confirmed, rather surprised by his knowledge of economic terminology, although I would not have used as lavish a phrase for such a cheap exchange.

“As I was waiting for my food to arrive, I grabbed my guitar and played a *ranchera* my father taught me when I was a kid. When the food arrived I put my guitar aside and the tramp looked up from his beer and clapped. ‘You sing very well, Señor.’ I thanked him and offered him my guitar while I ate. The vagrant reached out for the guitar, closed his eyes, and started playing. He sang about his life. He sang about his sorrows. His voice was soft and his tune had good harmony. I ate my meal with pleasure. The tramp was right, it was

undoubtedly the best feast in town. To top it all off, it was accompanied by excellent musical entertainment.

“The waiter brought me coffee, and the tramp attempted to return the guitar. ‘Keep it,’ I insisted despite his resistance and arguing it was mine and he was going to give it back. ‘Play on,’ I encouraged him, ‘play for me while I drink my coffee.’ The tramp closed his eyes again and continued to play the sad and beautiful songs. Meanwhile, I took a big sip of my coffee, put money on the table, and stood up as quietly as I could. Tiptoeing out of the restaurant, I left the guitar in the hands of the tramp.”

“You gave your guitar away?” I asked, slightly surprised to hear how careless he was of his possessions. First the suit and now the guitar.

“Sure I did. The tramp deserved the guitar much more than I do. He had so many more sorrows to sing about.”

“Flight AV44 to Mexico City is now ready for boarding,” airline staff announced, and people started queuing to get on board.

“Well, that’s it then,” the man said and prepared to leave. “My business here in Colombia is over. It’s time for me to head back home.”

We saluted each other and the businessman walked slowly in his oversize tracksuit, crumpled plastic bag in hand, toward gate number fifteen and mixed in with

the crowd that had lined up for their flight to Mexico City.

Börkur is an avid storyteller with a keen eye for quirky characters, funny dialogs and vivid scenario descriptions. Much of his writing falls within the genre of realistic fiction and his stories are more often than not based on real events in the author's life. Although the tales contain grains of truth, they are melded with fiction, making the reader curious to know the line between reality and fantasy.

Books

Among Other Things, flash fiction (2024)

Talk To Strangers, short stories (2019)

Flash 52, flash fiction (2017)

999 Abroad, short stories (2012)

Links

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