

I hadn't given another thought to the Invisible City. Or perhaps I had in my dreams.

But then, a few weeks ago, I received an envelope with no return address containing a lengthy manuscript written in an elegant script of sinuous letters, a succession of staffs and loops. It immediately drew my attention. I am not accustomed to reading calligraphy, but after a first, slow perusal of the document I discovered that it was a journal by an eighteenth-century architect, someone by the name of Andrea Roselli. It was written in Italian and began with the heading: *Memoirs of the Invisible City*. I couldn't be certain that the title was written by the same hand as the text. Good Lord, the Invisible City! Quick as a flash, the name ploughed through my memory, and I recalled the first time I had heard those words, many years ago.

We used to play at the old quarry – an open, colossal pit that perched on a hill in the Montsià Mountains and reluctantly emptied into the sea, down by the bay. We would race through the rocks and dirt canals, dwarfed by the size of the quarry, stopping when we came across basins of damp, greenish mud, where we gathered clay and

fashioned figures with wild grimaces. Sometimes one of the group would slip and fall into the mud and his coat would turn a rusty colour.

Then someone would shout:

“We’ve found another entrance to the Invisible City.”

“No! These are the rocks they were going to use to build the Invisible City, but instead they threw them in the sea. That’s when they built the port.”

“That’s a lie! The Invisible City exists. My brother told me that some friends of friends discovered it: it’s under the town. A tunnel leads from the Palau del Canal to the square, and another—”

“Rubbish!”

“You idiot!” And a ball of mud would be aimed at the sceptic. Yet in this way things returned to their course, the group once again on friendly terms.

“The schoolmaster showed me the plan of the Invisible City,” the pharmacist’s son blurted out in a low voice, his glasses greasy, lopsided like the scales we saw at the fair every year.

When I got home, I repeated the news to my grandfather, who glanced up from his football pools long enough to announce:

“If you mention the Invisible City one more time, no more playing with these friends of yours. Wasn’t what happened at the canal enough for you?”

I never again spoke of the Invisible City at home, but our group continued to uncover evidence of its existence, or its disappearance. With time I came to realize that only what we lose exists, whether that be cities, lovers or parents.

One day, disobeying family rules, we headed south along the beach, and after quite a while we reached the rocks and grottoes. We combed the area beneath the finger-like fronds of the palm grove, and behind the dancing leaves of a fig tree we discovered the mouth of a cave. We could only make our way a few dozen yards into it, but that was proof enough that we had stumbled across another passage leading out of the Invisible City. This gallery must have linked the beach to the Casa de l’Hort del Rei, the House of the King’s Orchard, which was never actually built. Or perhaps it was destroyed, who knows? It all happened during the King’s reign, about which so little is known.

The passage must have also led to the Palau del Canal, where Jonàs and I made our great discovery: the Invisible City! We had crossed the canal that divided the fishermen’s neighbourhood from the rice fields and then ventured further, walking between the white limestone walls and pale-orange tiles that separated the fields. The high walls were Cyclopes, or perhaps we were dwarfs. We followed the edge of the canal until we reached a spot covered by grass and cane where the terrain bulged and cleaved. Branches emerged from the crevices – fig, palm, agave – that had to be moved aside in order to squeeze our way into the belly of the earth. Trees had shattered the arched roof of a storehouse that had been built parallel to the canal and was now hidden by dense undergrowth. Once inside, we discovered yard after yard of impenetrable silence with only faint traces of light filtering through the foliage above.

Our discovery and the mystery enveloping it resonated among our friends. Rumours of the Invisible City spread.

One by one, Jonàs and I began to accompany a few privileged friends to our den of extraordinary proportions, the amazing, abandoned nave. The legend grew: during the war planes were assembled and hidden here; not so, said another: the ships that set sail for America were built here; yet another: the endless passages connecting the main sections of the Invisible City started here.

These subterranean galleries lay at the foot of the equally ruinous and forgotten Customs House, the elegant neoclassical building which presided over the area: the beautiful image of a dream that was thwarted before it could be realized. We played among the ruins of a dream.

On rainy days when it was impossible to play football on the street, a select few of us would race to the Invisible City, where our screams and the sound of the ball ricocheting off the walls and columns echoed in the half-darkness creating a beastly, cavernous scene. At times, when we had exhausted the afternoon and needed to get home quickly, we would untie a fisherman's boat that was docked nearby and the whole troupe would pile in and we would glide down the canal, speechless with fatigue. When we reached the sea and the shallow waters of the bay, we would hide the boat among the canes, assuming that sooner or later the fisherman would discover it.

One day, however, the owner was on the lookout and caught us in the act. Our families were alarmed and began to investigate, and our secret was disclosed. From then on we were forbidden to go anywhere near the Palau del Canal, and our brotherhood lost its identity, its flame extinguished. The aura of mystery remained: we had only to pronounce

the enchanted words and the provocative, menacing shape appeared in our minds. The Palau del Canal. The Invisible City.

Why did we stop exploring? Why didn't the schoolmaster show us the map that the pharmacist's son said he'd seen? Why were the adults silent, why did they silence us? Sooner or later time does what it's supposed to do and the change in generation occurs. The moment arrives when the days that had once been ruled by fear, uneasiness and pleasure vanish, transported to the territory of dreams. Where they remain.

As an adolescent, the memories would only resurface while I was swimming. As I did my laps in the sea I would make plans to return and explore the remains of the Invisible City, but as soon as I left the water, I would forget, or just let it drop, embarrassed at the idea of continuing with my childhood games.

From time to time, my grandfather himself or my mother or aunts, even a teacher – all having warned us not to visit the quarry or the Palau del Canal silos or the distant bay – would murmur, “Of course, the King's Orchard,” “Right, the King's Beach,” “Down by the King's House.” It was almost a litany, as if they were using words they did not understand themselves, words whose meanings they had forgotten years before. What king, what city, if ours was a coastal town filled with life but excluded from all the great events of history, with no trace of its past? We seemed more a town that had always been without a king, without a thing.

A few years later as we stood in the bright, freezing school corridor – the sound of the howling wind whipping through the trees, blending with the clamour of youth – Armand Coll burst out laughing when I suddenly spoke of the Invisible City.

I had met Armand the day I arrived at boarding school. I was twelve years old, and my grandfather and my mother had just dropped me off at the door of a stern edifice that resembled El Escorial. The school was set on one of the hills that surrounded Tortosa, the regional capital and episcopal see, far from the familiar streets of my town – which I would now visit only on the weekends – farther still from the Invisible City, the banished giant of my childhood. I stood alone in the quiet afternoon under a ravenous sky. Fortunately, I did not know then what a young boy could not possibly know: that he will grow up, acquire new friends and play football, learn the periodic table of elements and Latin declensions, travel and fall in love. But the new experiences would not safeguard him from the danger of being forever alone, of waking up on a stormy night in an unknown city, a young body lying a few inches away, and realize that he is in fact alone – and he will remember finding himself abandoned before the school door one late-summer afternoon.

On that September day – the sky streaked with reddish clouds that announced a wind from the mountain – as I stood before the impenetrable building, making an effort to seem natural, trying my best not to know what I should

not know at that age, Armand Coll strode past, bouncing a basketball. He didn't seem to be aware of my presence and was almost out of sight when he stopped, held the ball a moment, bounced it once and threw it furiously at me, pointing to the basket.

“Come on, I'll challenge you to a game of twenty-one!” he shouted in a manner that suggested that he would not take no for an answer. Basketball was just beginning to be popular at home – “twenty-one” I'd never heard of. Both were incomprehensible.

Coll became my guide through this palace of Cartesian architecture, which offered the empty solemnity of great pavilions. He was older than me – a student of what was called the “Minor Seminary”, an institution located in the same building as the school – and, as such, he had the authority to spare me the consequences of some of the bullying which was so frequent in boarding school.

On one occasion, some classmates and I climbed into the attic under the gable, above the room where thirty sleeping boys would come to life as soon as the lights were switched off. We had sneaked out to conduct an experiment in combustibility: we were going to set fire to the gas from an aerosol insecticide. The flame lit up our faces, making them wonderfully strange. Everything went well until one of the boys carelessly stepped on the wattle-and-daub false ceiling of the dormitory, rather than on a solid joist, and was on the verge of taking the direct route to the floor beneath. A huge commotion ensued. I still recall confessing, one by one, all the details of our rebellion as we were summoned to the teachers' room.