

The Box

By Theodore Tadros

To this day, all Argentinian nationalists celebrate the day of an obscure naval battle, the battle of Puerto Belgrano, in which a narrow victory was won in the summer of 1863 against our distant cousins, the bastard Colombians. Thousands of men died that day, monstrous metal balls slamming ships and sending the body parts of frenzied crews flying into the unfathomable waters. On this day, spirits now run high and the rum flows free.

Apocryphally, one sailor alone survived the battle of Puerto Belgrano, Dexter Martinez; ironically, a crewman on the first ship to go down. I was named after this great hero of ours, mostly due to the fact that he was my great-grandfather, a family legend, and in my father's view, a genealogy to be preserved for future generations. Now it fell to me to protect a great family treasure, a box, that had been passed on from generation to generation, ever since the death of Dexter Martinez many years after the war.

The small wooden box could be likened to a vagabond's donation box, however looks can be deceiving: it concealed something of special importance to not only the family, but to the whole of Argentina. The box was our own little Ark of the Covenant, guarding a prize never to be seen by other common folk. With the recent passing of my father, and being the next oldest male in the family, the box was bequeathed to me with an exhortation to sustain our family's physical and spiritual connection to these national treasures. Blood was shed by soldiers like my great-grandfather to lay the brickwork for the next generations of our country, a sacrifice embodied in the contents of our box.

My mother had arranged to deliver it to me at noon. She had always been an erratic woman, but since the loss of my father she had spiralled alarmingly. Within months, she would be diagnosed with early onset dementia, and one of the spurs that led us to finally get her assessed was her reckless treatment of the box on this day. I arrived home, finding the family box sitting on my front porch, exposed for any curious soul to lay his hands on. Mercifully, I must have arrived home mere minutes after she had deposited it, and quickly secreted it inside. Peering

through my sun-bleached venetian blinds, though, I saw my ancient neighbour, the recidivist Sebastian, eyeing the box like a hungry vulture waiting for his prey to collapse. If he'd been quicker on his feet the box would have been gone. Luckily, though, prison takes a toll on ancient bones. He was a senile eighty-nine year-old, who had once seen himself as an aspiring drug lord... He was not one to let opportunity slip. The details were sketchy, but he'd done the time in jail for the bungled robbery of a homeless woman that had resulted in her death. His time in jail had cured him of his delusions. Nonetheless, I quickly secreted the box underneath a loose wooden slab at the back of my squalid little apartment.

Being the anniversary of the Battle of Puerto Belgrano, a party was all but mandatory that day, and my free-spirited roommate had invited thirty of his most patriotic friends to metaphorically re-enact the carnage, with flowing rum as the munitions. Our apartment is the size of a modern-day Americans lounge room, so take a good long think. You may wonder how it's physically possible to fit all of these people in our tiny thirty-six square flat; well, we've managed forty before. You see, in our part of Buenos Aires, eighty percent of the residents are unemployed, so they swarm uninvited anywhere there is a prospect of booze and free food.

It's eight pm, and the flat is bustling with new faces. I would estimate nearly a hundred have crammed in. People are spilling out of the flat onto the tiny backstreet. All is going well, I'm slowly sipping on a Malbec spritzer whilst keeping an eye on that singular wooden panel... Habitually, gunshots rip through our neighbourhood, it's a common occurrence, although one can never get used to it. Without warning, a very proximate volley triggers a minor stampede and I am very nearly trampled by a frantic sea of confused drunks, scrambling in all directions. Losing my footing I briefly careen towards the ground, intent on shielding the bottle I am nursing. Then, nothing: complete darkness.

I wake up mildly concussed. My head feels as if someone is constantly beating large bongo drums nearby. "Hey *compañero*, are you alright?" I quickly swivel around, my dirty jeans squeak against the wooden floor. No bongo player, only my roommate, at least as drunk as I am. He passes me a cup of water and assures me that it was a false alarm. The favela in the next neighbourhood is rife with gangs, and territory is a major issue in illegal settlements like those.

People nowadays are like sheep, as soon as one person runs they all trample over each other, all sense gets immediately thrown out of the window. My thoughts then get drawn immediately back to my newly entrusted box. Relieved, I see the wooden panel is still intact and so is the box.

The rest of the evening unfolds like countless others, just sitting around waiting for new job opportunities. For months, none of us have had any flow of income and desperation looms. The last of our money was used in that horrid party. Looking back at it. I don't think it's worth it. No, definitely not worth it. Well the Malbec was nice.

“Hey Dexter, you know we're tight on money, what's in the box?”

I tell him that it's just some of my father's old clothes, but suspicion passes across his face. I sleep restlessly that night, listening for the common creaks and groans that accompany anyone trying to cross our wooden floors. The build up of paranoia becomes unbearable, to the point where I dare not sleep nor even leave that damned flat.

By the next week I had reached an agreement with not only myself but my conscious, I will give the treasure to the National Museum of Argentina, imagining it as the centrepiece in a shrine to a woebegotten sea battle that nonetheless showed the bastard Columbians what is what.

The century-old family tradition will be broken, but poverty is a cycle and one cannot easily escape once it takes hold. To move on, we must renounce that which truly holds us down. In my case it was the box, carved from the helm of Dexter Martinez's ship and inside, a sailor's most important tool, his telescope. He was the one which was first to fall but the last to ever be forgotten.