

To My Twenty-Year-Old Self - In the Style of Jorge Luis Borges

I recently got an invitation from *StoryWorth* asking me to write a piece about giving advice to my 20-year-old self. Entirely by coincidence, a few days after receiving the invitation, I happened to re-read a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer of fantastical and surrealist fiction, entitled *El Otro, The Other*.

Borges wrote *El Otro* in 1972. The story did not exist before I immigrated in 1968, so I couldn't have read it, as I had read so many other stories of his. Yet it felt vaguely familiar. I must have read it years later, during a period in my life when I would revisit the great Latin American writers. I read Borges again in the 1980s, during a time of intense yearning for all things Buenos Aires, culminating in a visit that I paid to the city in 1989, after many years of absence. I might have read *El Otro* then, but the story faded from my memory until I read it recently, when, now in my seventies, I am again re-reading Borges.

In 1968-1969, Borges was on sabbatical at Harvard, delivering the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures in Poetry. In its March 1968 edition, *The Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper, said about Borges, "In the lectures - as in his fictions, essays and poetry - his eclecticism distills the literary experience of the past into his own distinctive brand of creativity." This creativity is nowhere better shown than in *El Otro*.

The story tells of a meeting the then 70-year old Borges had in February 1969, when he was still teaching in Cambridge.* In the story, the writer is sitting at a bench in front of the Charles River during a cold winter morning. Suddenly, he senses that a young man has just sat at the other end. The young man is whistling a gaucho song called *La Tapera*, by Uruguayan poet, Elias Regules. Borges does a double take when the young man starts singing the refrain, as he recognizes his own voice. He moves over, and asks the young man, "Sir, are you Argentinian or Uruguayan?"

* That year I was 20 and not yet living there; I would arrive in the city in 1971. I missed him by two years.

"Argentinian," is the answer, "but since 1914 I live in Geneva, Switzerland."
1914 was the year Borges had moved to Geneva with his family.

"And," continues Borges, after a long silence, "Do you live on 17 Rue de Malagnou, across from the Russian Church?"

"Yes," says the young man.

"Well, in that case, you are Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges," says the older man. "This is 1969, and we are in the city of Cambridge."

"No," answers the young man. "I am here in Geneva sitting in front of the river Rhone. Strange that you and I look alike, but you're much older, with grey hairs."

Borges tries to convince him that they are both the same man at different ages. To prove it, he describes the young man's Geneva bedroom, the books in his library, their father's puns and stories. The young Borges is starting to believe it, when he says, "If you have been me, how come you've forgotten meeting with an older man in 1918 who told you that you too were Borges?"

"Maybe I tried to forget it," says the older Borges.

"How's your memory?" asks the younger one.

"Well, not as good as it once was," replies the older one.

As they converse more easily, the younger man talks of his romantic vision about a brotherhood of man, and the older man reveals his doubt about the existence of even a single man.

At the end, the elder Borges concludes that the meeting is a real episode for him, but a dream for the younger one. That's why his older self has forgotten the meeting; young Borges's dream went quickly back into amnesia. The older Borges doesn't remember it anymore.

Borges muses about the meeting, "Half a century does not pass in vain. Even during our conversation of literature and books, and different tastes and philosophies, I realized that we could not understand each other. We were too different, and too much alike. We could not fool each other, which makes dialogue difficult. Giving him advice was useless, because the inevitable destiny was that *he would be me.*"

It is a classic Borges ending.

The request from *StoryWorth* that I give myself advice baffled me, but the Borges story gave me the answer. *El Otro* takes place in 1969, when I was 20. It takes place at Harvard when Borges was 70. Now, at 71, I am being asked to play an older Jorge to a younger one, a reversal of the story. That was the key to the puzzle.

So, on a foggy winter morning, I go to Great Falls Park, and sit at a bench by the Potomac River. Ice floes are slowly moving downstream. My 23-year-old-self is sitting at the same bench, except he is by the Charles on an equally foggy Cambridge morning; his river is partly iced over. He is a second year graduate student and is reading a chemistry book. I start a conversation.

“Excuse me, young man,” I say, “are you a student at Harvard?”

“Yes,” he says, looking up from his book, somewhat irritated by the interruption.

“I see that you are studying chemistry.”

“Yes,” he says.

“And did you arrive in Cambridge from Troy, New York?”

Now he looks surprised, affronted almost that I would know this detail.

“How do you know that?”

I don’t answer, but move on. “And, you came to the United States in 1968, after your father died, right?”

The young man closes his book and looks at me puzzled. “Who are you?” he asks.

“I am you, Jorge. I am sitting at a bench in a park by the Potomac River in 2021,” I answer, trying not to freak him out.

“No,” he says, “this is 1972, and we are Cambridge.”

“Well, let me tell you some things that only you and I know, and maybe that will convince you,” I reply. He remains silent, but I have his full attention.

“Your least favorite children’s story was *Der Struwwelpeter*, *Shaggy Peter*, right?” His eyes seem to get bigger. “We lived on Bebedero 3984 in Buenos Aires,

our favorite toy was a Meccano building set, our maid Nilda made ravioli to die for, and our best friend to this day is still Micky.

“How am I doing?” I ask.

He seems convinced. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I’m supposed to give you advice,” I answer. “But, to be honest, I am unable to do so. What am I going to tell you?”

“Don’t marry the first woman who crosses your path? It’ll end up in a divorce?”

“If I gave you that advice, you’ll never have the most loving three daughters the world has known. So, no, go ahead and marry Laurie. Pain is part of the package.

“How about, Don’t study chemistry, but go straight to law school?”

“If I gave you *that* advice, you’ll never become an expert in biotech patent law, and be known around the world. So, keep going with your Ph.D. Mixing it up is a good thing.

“What if I said, Don’t marry the first woman who crosses your path after the divorce from Laurie? That it will end up the same way?”

“If I gave you that advice, you’ll never meet Sandy, the love of your life. So, sorry to say this, go ahead and marry Susan, but be sure to get your lawyer to write a good pre-nup agreement. It’s always good to have a clever lawyer.

“Nah,” I say. “I have no advice, Jorge. Just keep doing what comes to you – and it’ll all work out in the end.” I reflect for a moment, and add, “I’m afraid that you are dreaming this, and that’s why, fifty years from now, you won’t remember that you met me.”

Then I have an afterthought: *I love this guy, and I want to protect him from at least one of my mistakes.* “If I have one regret,” I say, “it has to do with stocks. I should have bought Google not Yahoo in 1997. But even as I tell you this, you will have forgotten my tip when the time comes.”

And with that, I get up and walk away. I look back one more time. The young Jorge is looking at me quizzically, and says, “Google? Yahoo? What’s that?” Then, following my better advice, he opens his chemistry book, and continues reading.