

Divertimento: a Fairy Tale

For Robert Irwin

De desus ot un mireor
iluec poent tres bien veor
quant l'an les vendra aseor
ou fust par mer ou fust par terre
bien veoit an el mireor
qui ert asis desus la tor
lor enemis vers aus venir
donc se pouvoient bien garnir
aparoillier aus a deffandre
n'erent legier pas a sorprendre.

- J.J. Salverda de Grave,
Eneas, roman du XIIe siècle, adaptation normande de Virgile

Once upon a time, in the old days of conflict, in a place called Abundance, there lived a nervous ruler who wished his kingdom protected from invasions. He wandered around the palace at night worrying about his neighbors to the South. When he went to bed at dawn, he tossed and he turned, and in the morning the rings under his eyes told his advisors that, once more, their sovereign had not slept. After many moons of insomnia and with his robes hanging loosely on his bony frame, he found himself unable to focus on matters of state, was even indifferent to the pleasure of ordinary things. One morning he consulted the Grand Wizard who listened to his ominous dreams about the southern wind and left the royal chambers saying he needed to consult his divinatory mirror. Three days later he returned and announced:

__ Build a wall at the edge of the kingdom.

__ A wall? asked the King. But the southern edge is long and the terrain arduous.

__ 2000 miles long, added the Premier.

__ How can we? Even the Emperor of China never...

__ It's the only way, said the Wizard. The Mirror Spirit so ordains it. Start right away.

Send your strongest foot soldiers, your best engineers, your most skilled craftsmen and laborers. Give them materials. One more thing--the wall must cover the entire length of the border from one ocean to the other, and it must be beautiful and reflective so we can see the enemy from a distance. You will need to send the Royal Architect with the troops. Don't question him. Give him what he wants.

King John ordered General Nova, his most trusted soldier, to organize and lead the great feat of constructing what the lords and ladies of the Court knew would be the architectural marvel of their time. After months of cutting through forests, climbing mountains, crossing deserts, General Nova and Robert, the Royal Architect, arrived with hundreds of soldiers and thousands of welders, stone cutters, mirror makers, carpenters, and bricklayers at the southernmost frontier, the edge of the civilized world, and the same day built their temporary quarters.

Robert unpacked his drafting table, rulers, t-square, compass, quadrant, transept, pins, pens, knives, brushes, colors, paper, drawing pads, and architectural books on medieval fortresses, renaissance cities, the Pyramids of Egypt, Machu Picchu, Tenochtitlán, Mitla, Monte Albán, the Pharos of Alexandria, the Colossus of Rhodes, even the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The next morning, awakened by the first rays of the sun, he dressed and started towards the river. The light reflecting off the water blinded him with its brilliance, and he had to cover his eyes. Walking west, he realized after a few

minutes that he was hearing bird calls he had not heard before. The fresh scent of sage filled his nostrils. Farther down the road, the scent became lavender, then rosemary. After an hour, he took off his jacket. The balmy March breeze caressing the hair on his forearms brought a smile to his crinkly face. The vegetation was sparse: mezquite, *chapparros*, tamarinds, low desert brush cover, and wild flowers, thousands of wild flowers in all shapes and hues. Once in a while, he saw saguaros, ocotillo, chollas, prickly pears, chamiza, acacia thickets, even jungles of salt cedar. Following the river bend and admiring the mountains in the distance, he lost track of time. Every time he became conscious of the dry air entering his lungs, he was filled with a sense of well-being he had almost forgotten. He decided to start his wall on this spot, in the middle of the two-thousand mile border. Later he would extend it west to the Pacific and east to the Gulf. He returned to camp pleasantly tired, his head bursting with ideas. He enjoyed a lunch of sautéed chicken, which he later learned was freshly-killed rattle snake, with a salad of green prickly pear *pencas* mixed with the juicy, fuschia fruits of the cactus, and by early evening he was busy at work on his first blueprint.

In the meantime, General Nova had spent the morning surveying the terrain, counting his men, and warehousing his supplies. He realized that it would take years to build the wall, that his supplies would not last, and that his men would need to plant crops for the next year.

Strolling around the camp that evening, Robert was dazzled with the lit-up desert. Looking up at the brightest moon and stars he had ever seen, he realized he had not even imagined such beauty existed.

The next morning, showing General Nova his first blueprint, Robert explained that he thought the wall should follow the path of the Red River and that it should be made of flowers. The General thought he had heard wrong, but Robert repeated and expanded his thoughts. The best protection against any invasion would be a two-thousand-mile-long garden where the hardiest trees and bushes and the prettiest and most exotic flowers would bloom in a forever-changing season of riotous color and song, for the garden would attract the birds and butterflies of the entire continent.

__ But, this is the desert, and flowers are not impenetrable.

__ We will create the habitat, and that will alter the weather so that different sections of the garden will be in bloom year-round. It will be the best protection. I promise you.

General Nova thought Robert had gone mad. He wondered whether he should take him prisoner and return to the Palace right away. Then he remembered King John's orders to provide Robert with whatever he requested and to protect him while he built his wall. The Wizard had told the King to trust the Royal Architect and never doubt he would build the wall that was necessary to protect the far corners of his kingdom.

For the next three days, Robert locked himself in his tent, coming out only for meals. General Nova wondered what was happening. On the fourth day, Robert came out with a bag full of letters he wanted the courier to deliver to the palace. He explained that he was asking for the books, stones, trees, and seeds he would need to build his wall. While they waited for the supplies to arrive, he spent his days reconnoitering the terrain, taking notes, filling hundreds of pads with drawings.

A few days later, some people from the south arrived, introduced themselves, asked what the newcomers were doing. They had baskets filled with unusual-looking fruits they offered the newcomers. They called them *mamey*, *guayaba*, *guanábana*, *zapote*. While the soldiers looked on with suspicion, the welders, bricklayers, carpenters, and stone cutters extended an unsure hand and took a bite. When the flavor of the sun burst in their mouths, they smiled. They tried to repeat the words they heard, but each vowel made their mouths feel as if they had sprouted new *guanábana* seeds. They burst out laughing. Joining in their merriment, the soldiers took fruit from the baskets. The next day the neighbors approached again with thin, round bread they called *tortillas* and bowls of pork meat, rice, beans, and a spicy red sauce they called *chile*. The workers smiled and again extended an unsure hand to try the new offerings. They found that the sauce burned their tongues and the roof of their mouths, but they liked the other flavors. The soldiers then smiled and tried the new foods.

Each morning the neighbors arrived with new offerings, and after a few days, started addressing the newcomers as *amigos*. The *amigos* liked the sound of the word. They found they could say it better than *guanábana* or *frijoles*, so they started calling the neighbors *friends*. After a while, the *friends* brought gourds filled with a clear liquid they drank with lime juice. They called it *tequila*. The *amigos* liked the flavor and even the sound of the word, and they learned to say it. After a couple of glasses, the *friends* started playing the instruments they had brought. They taught their *amigos* their songs. Although they did not know what they were saying, the *amigos* liked the sound. That night, they all sang, cried, and embraced each other.

As the weeks passed, the *friends* taught the *amigos* how to make *adobe* houses and helped them plant *maíz, papa, tomate, chile, frijol, aguacate, cilantro*. Seed by seed they learned each other's language. When they finished their first *casa*, they had a *fiesta*. They all brought food to the party. The *amigos* brought whisky; the *friends* brought *tequila*. The musicians from the north played their violins, banjos and accordions, the ones from the south played their violins, *marimbas*, and *maracas*. The *friends* brought their *mujeres*. They danced with their wives; their *amigos* danced with their *hermanas*.

After many months, when the courier returned from the palace, he brought back hundreds of new men and wagons filled with stone, marble, trees, saws, shovels, axes, the seeds of hundreds of different plants and flowers, as well as books on horticulture, ornithology, and entomology for Robert. He also brought foods, armaments, and medical supplies for General Nova. For the men he had bags of mail. In their letters, their mothers and sweethearts had written about the rumors the lords and ladies of the court were spreading about Robert's strange requests.

The courier was surprised by the changes he found on his return to the southern border --the *adobe* houses, the planted fields, the new foods the army cooks prepared, the friendships with the neighbors, the songs the soldiers sang, the smiles on the men who had fallen in love with their friends' *hermanas*. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he sensed a subversive presence in the camp.

Robert, excited with his new supplies and intoxicated with ideas, could not wait until morning to start the wall he had already finished in his mind. In the courier's absence, he had had time to study the play of light on the water, the canyons, the

mountains, and the native vegetation at different times of the day during the monsoons and across the other seasons. He had studied the mating habits and the natural habitats of the coyote, the javelina, the lizards, snakes, frogs, crickets, birds, and butterflies of the desert. He knew which grasses would sing in high season, then disappear and which ones had a graceful quality to their feathery plumes even when they were dry. During the months of waiting, he noticed that one of the neighbors learned English with ease and seemed to be well versed on the flora and fauna of the region. His name was Ricardo Naranjo, and when the new supplies arrived, Robert asked him to be his assistant.

Up at dawn, he ordered his foremen to organize the laborers into different crews and start moving color-coded rocks and boulders to the places he had marked on the maps he had given them. The centerpiece of this section of the wall was to be a gurgling creek. At the top of the mountain he planned to have water coursing down the slope in the form of a creek, girdled by rocks and boulders to emphasize the sound of its gurgling. At the bottom, he was going to raise up a curved embankment and create a bowl to receive the water. In the center of this pool he had a large maze of three intersecting circles fashioned out of flamboyant fuchsias, purples, and pinks or fiery reds, yellows, and oranges. The species would change with the seasons, but the plants would be embedded in semicircular planters to form the nucleus of the pool and make the blossoms look as if they were floating upon the water. The rest of the pool was a liquid mirror. He would not need the mirror makers.

When the centerpiece was finished, the men were fascinated with the changing scenery the mirror reflected. During the day, they saw themselves and their friends when

they looked into it, and on Sundays, when they rested, they spent hours looking at the brilliance of the sky and the moving clouds. At night, it became a starlit mirror where lovers peered into each other's souls.

Robert and Naranjo had long discussions about the placement of the rocks. Robert had ordered California Gold Country green chert and Montana Kinnesaw boulders, South Dakota carnelian granite, slabs of Tennessee Blue Ridge sandstone for the footpaths, and decomposed granite for the terraces. He had asked for teak for the river bridges, arbors, and benches, specially treated rebar for the bougainvillea bowers, and bronze for the railings and drains. Later, Naranjo convinced him to substitute mesquite for the bridges and wrought iron for the railings.

The laborers spent months spreading gravel, laying slabs of Blue Ridge sandstone, jimmying trellises, digging holes. They created lakes, built terraces and fountains, planted gardens. The soldiers had nothing to do, so General Nova agreed to let them help. The friends from the south watched, then offered to help. Robert was pleased to discover they were gifted craftsmen. At noon, their wives would arrive with baskets of hot food, and the *amigos* from the north developed a taste for *tacos*, *burritos*, *mangos*, *horchata*. At night, they would sit around, drink *cerveza*, and sing. After a while, other peoples from the south approached, and they were welcomed. During the day, under Robert's and Naranjo's guidance, they worked, at night, they danced and made love.

Together, they planted lime, avocado, orange, pecan, and pistachio trees. They planted palo verde, Chilean mesquite, Texas ash, Arizona rosewood, crepe-myrtle, Texas mountain laurel, pomegranate, yellow bird of paradise. After the trees were in the ground,

they started with the bushes and vines. At last, they selected the flower seeds. They planted bougainvillea, cape honeysuckle, Mexican bush sage, hibiscus, red bird of paradise, velvet-pod mimosa, sweet acacia, lantana, jolly gomphrena, periwinkle, salvias, orange-red hummingbird bush, Baja fairy duster, summer lilac, Blue Nile and China Doll roses. They reserved some areas of the garden for cacti and succulents. In flower pots, they planted pincushions, small hedgehogs, Easter lily cactus. The following spring, there were cactus wrens on the cholla patch. Mockingbirds and thrashers feasted on the desert hackberry, wolfberry, and pyracantha. Goldfinches loved the desert marigold, the brittlebush, the Mexican sunflower, and the feathery bunchgrasses. The tiny verdins with yellow heads and red shoulder patches made their nests in the palo verde. The hummingbirds swooped to the penstemon and salvia, Baja fairy duster, cape honeysuckle, and the blooming aloes. The butterflies followed; the garden filled with Black Swallowtails, Empress Leilia, Snouts, Giant Swallowtails, Painted Ladies.

With each succeeding wave of newcomers from the south came acrobats, story tellers, dancers, jugglers, poets, magicians, fire eaters, puppeteers, mimes, wandering mariachis, stilt walkers, gypsies who read palms, young girls who offered amulets and love potions, old men with birds trained to read the future. There were young boys who fashioned angels out of straw and old men who fashioned them out of tin, women who wove *rebozos*, men who painted on tree barks, others who made blown glass unicorns. Some families carved fanciful and mythological creatures with a machete, decorated them with a syringe, called them *alebrijes*; others set up their potters' wheels and their ovens and made exquisite flower pots, bird baths, water fountains. There were women

who set up their *comales* to prepare dark, sensuous sauces, light-as-breath sweets, intoxicating beverages. An old, old, woman, a centenarian, spent her days crafting tiny fish of gold and her nights melting them down. She wouldn't sell them; she wouldn't give them away. They called her Ursula.

The desert took on the air of a medieval pilgrimage or a lent carnival with round-the-clock singing and dancing. It breathed delirious, uncontrollable life. Soldiers and bricklayers fell in love with the sisters of their southern *friends*. There were group weddings, and a year later the first green-eyed, copper-skinned baby was born. They named her Aura.

Robert and Naranjo moved on to build another section of the wall secure in the knowledge that they had built a strong and beautiful border. They knew that both the *friends* from the south and the *amigos* from the north could see themselves and each other reflected in the double-sided mirror of the garden. They were sure that with the new culture created and the new families and friendships formed, King John would never have to spend another night worrying about an invasion from the south.