

New York, scraps of sky

I went to New York a year before the Twin Towers collapsed. I was a child and I did not care about New York at all, I was only interested in the journey.

I still keep a few relics of that long crossing. First among them is the grey Lufthansa blanket, given to passengers to rest under a fireproof material, a kind of flannel that for a long time retained the smell of the meals served by the flight attendants at lunch and dinner. I remember they served salmon-filled ravioli. That smell on the blanket is still, to this day, my most vivid memory of the trip to New York. It is the scent of America, another madeleine, my transoceanic madeleine. It is not easy to remember a smell once it is gone, and yet there is a tiny fraction of a second in which, if I focus, I can feel exactly that scent of salmon ravioli on the grey blanket.

Other important details of my trip relate to the sense of claustrophobia caused by the skyscrapers. On a street made only of buildings, perspective comes alive mainly when you look up. I remember clearly that the portion of sky visible beyond the skyscrapers was very small, a scrap.

Another very significant moment for me is that in New York I saw love from the outside for the first time. Until then, I had only known my own, which echoed back on itself so tightly that I could never have understood it. During that trip, however, a love story began between two people traveling with us on the bus that took us from one city to another. A portable and perfectly comprehensible love. The two lovers allowed me to experience the entire arc of their relationship, from love at first sight, are there any other kinds of falling in love, to a decisive quarrel that seemed to bring both the relationship and the journey itself to an end, because she left, abandoning the caravan of Italians traveling through the States.

The trip lasted about twenty days. We visited several cities on the East Coast such as Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, and then we went to Canada.

I remember the lobsters in Baltimore, the Gizmo toy from Gremlins that my parents gave me in Boston, probably after a long bout of complaining, and the Philadelphia hockey team with its black and orange uniform, of which we bought a jersey that became my sister's uniform throughout her adolescence.

In Philadelphia I also remember the Liberty Bell. On July 4, 1776, its sound gathered the citizens of Philadelphia for the reading of the Declaration of Independence and thus became a symbol of the United States' freedom from British rule.

The bell is an object I am particularly fond of because it is a symbol that does not primarily involve sight but sound. I love churches because they have bell towers, and among the most extraordinary things human beings have ever invented, for me, is a small church lost in the middle of nowhere with a bell to be rung.

Writing has undoubtedly made me more spiritual. Years spent contesting crosses and then suddenly, just like that, being enraptured by candles and bells.

My favorite bell towers are the open ones, usually found in somewhat secluded places, where there are smaller churches, real refuges. Moreover, the small bells of these open towers have the quality of not being heard from afar, as if to say that this ritual, this sense of the sacred, must be sought out. Bells can also be very irritating.

Bells, however, are found elsewhere too, such as around the necks of grazing animals that I wish were pets, goats above all. Hearing the bells of animals in the mountains also has something sacred about it, a different rhythm, to be received as it comes, dissonant yet liturgical, a sounding body. I could open a very rich digression on bells, but the title of this chapter brings me back to the order of reality. And since reality is very tiring, I will go on with bells and how I discovered that they must be rotated every so many years so they do not crack at the point where they are struck. Rotating a bell is very expensive, 5,000 euros, I was told, and this is a fact of reality, especially for small communities that organize communal lunches and dinners to raise funds to rotate the church bells. I have often wondered what would happen if, in our towns full of churches, the bells suddenly stopped ringing. A certain peace at noon, and a considerable sense of disorientation.