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I was brought up the old-fashioned way, and could never have dreamed that I would one day be ordered to kill a woman. You don't touch women, you don't beat them, you don't do them any physical harm and you avoid all verbal violence, although in that regard they themselves don't always hold back. More than that, you protect and respect them and give way to them, shield them and help them if they're pregnant or with a child in their arms or in a pushchair, you offer them your seat on the bus or in the metro, you even safeguard them when walking down the street, keeping them away from the traffic or from the effluvia that, in the olden days, used to be tossed over balconies, and if a ship founders and seems likely to go under, the lifeboats are for them and their little ones (who belong more to them than to us men), at least the first spaces. When a group of people are about to be shot en masse, the women are sometimes spared and allowed to leave; they are then left without husbands, without fathers, without brothers and even without adolescent let alone grown-up sons, but they are allowed to go on living, mad with grief like tormented ghosts, for whom, nevertheless, the years pass and thus they grow old, chained to the memory of the world they have lost. They are obliged to become the depositories of memory, the only ones left when it seems no one is left, and the only ones who can tell what happened.

Anyway, this is what I was taught as a child, but that was then, and it wasn't always followed to the letter. Yes, that was then and was

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applied in theory but not in practice. After all, in 1793, a queen of France was guillotined, and before that, countless women accused of witchcraft were burned to death, as was the soldier Joan of Arc, to give just a couple of well-known examples.

Yes, of course, women have always been killed, but it's something that goes against the grain and causes great unease, it isn't clear whether Anne Boleyn was given the privilege of being put to the sword rather than beheaded with a crude, bungling axe, or indeed burned at the stake, because she was a woman or because she was the Queen, or because she was young and beautiful, beautiful according to the tastes of the time and according to reports, although reports are never to be trusted, not even those of eyewitnesses, who see and hear only vaguely, and who are often wrong or else lie. In engravings of her execution she is shown on her knees as if she were praying, her body erect and her head held high; if they had used an axe, she would have had to rest her chin or cheek on the block and adopt a more humiliating, more uncomfortable posture, to have grovelled if you like, and this would also have offered a clearer view of her backside to those who could see it from where they were standing. It's odd that she should be so concerned about comfort or composure in her final moments in this world, and even about elegance and decorum; of what possible importance could this be to someone who was about to become a corpse and disappear beneath the earth, and in two separate pieces. These depictions also include the swordsman of Calais, as he is called in various accounts, so as to distinguish him from any ordinary executioner – brought over *ex profeso* because of his great skill and, possibly, at the request of the Queen herself – and he is always shown standing behind her and out of sight, never in front of her, as if it had been agreed and decided that she would be spared having to see the coming blow, the trajectory of the heavy weapon which, nevertheless, advances swiftly and unstoppably, like a whistle once it has left the lips or like a sudden strong gust of wind (in a couple of the

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images she has her eyes blindfolded, but not in most of them); so that she would not know the precise moment when her head would be cut off with a single clean two-handed blow and fall onto the dais face up or face down or on one side, on the neck or the top of the head – who knows, she certainly would never know; so that the movement would catch her by surprise, if there can be any surprise when the person knows why she has come and why she is kneeling there, without a cloak about her, at eight o'clock in the morning on a still-cold English day in May. She is, of course, kneeling to facilitate the executioner's task and not call into question his skill: he had been so good as to cross the Channel and offer his help, and he probably wasn't particularly tall. It seems Anne Boleyn had insisted that one blow with the sword would be enough because she only had a little neck. She must often have put her hands about it as proof.

She was, at any rate, treated more considerately than Marie Antoinette two and a half centuries later, for it is said that she was treated far worse in her October than her husband Louis XVI in his January, for he had preceded her to the guillotine by about nine months. The fact that she was a woman was of no interest to the revolutionaries, or perhaps they considered treating women differently to be in itself anti-revolutionary. A lieutenant called de Busne, who had treated her respectfully during her time in prison, was arrested and replaced by another, surlier guard. When it came to the King, they had simply tied his hands behind his back when he reached the foot of the scaffold; he had been transported there in a closed carriage, which belonged, I believe, to the mayor of Paris; and he was allowed to choose the priest who attended him (a nonjuring priest, that is, one who had not sworn loyalty to the Constitution and to the new order, which changed on a daily basis and which had condemned the King to die). His Austrian widow, however, had her hands bound before the journey, which she had to make in an open cart, thus leaving her far more vulnerable and exposed to the unbridled loathing on the

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faces of the rabble and to their insults; also they only offered her the services of a constitutional priest, which she politely declined. The chronicles say that although, during her reign, she had been said to be lacking in manners, these returned to her in her final moments: she went up the steps to the scaffold so quickly that she stumbled and trod on the executioner's foot, for which she immediately apologized, as if this were her usual response (*'Excusez-moi, Monsieur,'* she said).

The guillotine had its inevitably undignified preliminaries: the condemned man not only had his hands tied behind his back, he would also have his arms tightly bound to his sides, like a foreshadowing of the shroud; once rendered rigid and ungainly, almost immobilized, two assistants would have to pick him up like a parcel (or as they used to do with dwarfs in circuses before firing them from a cannon) and manoeuvre him into position, face down, prone, completely horizontal, so that his neck fitted in the designated space. In that, Marie Antoinette and husband were equals: they both found themselves objectified at the end, treated like sacks or bales of cotton or torpedoes in some archaic submarine, like bundles with a protruding head that would suddenly tumble off in no particular direction, until someone stopped it by grabbing the hair in full view of the crowd. Not one of them did what St Denis did, according to an astonished French cardinal, who described how, after St Denis' martyrdom and decapitation during Emperor Valerian's persecution of Christians, the saint-to-be picked up his head and walked with it under his arm from Montmartre to the place of his burial (thus considerably lightening the porters' load), where the abbey or church that bears his name was later built: a distance of five and a half miles. This marvel left the cardinal speechless, he said, although actually it so fired him up that a witty lady listening to his account interrupted him, cutting the incident down to size with a single sentence: 'But, sir!' she said. 'The distance is nothing, it's only the first step that is difficult.'

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Only the first step is difficult. Perhaps the same could be said of anything, or of most things that require some effort or that one does with displeasure or repugnance or with reservations, for one does very few things without some reservations, there's almost always something that prompts us not to act and not to take that step, not to leave the house and not to move, not to speak to anyone and to avoid others speaking to us, or looking at us, or telling us something. I sometimes think that our entire lives – including the lives of ambitious, restless, impatient, voracious souls, eager to intercede in the world and even to govern it – are merely the prolonged, postponed desire to go back to being as undetectable as before we were born, invisible, inaudible, giving off no heat; to being silent and still, to retrace our steps and undo what we have done and what can never be undone, in short, to forget, if we're lucky and no one tells on us; to erase all evidence of our past existence which is, alas, at least for a time, still present and future. And yet we are incapable of fulfilling that desire which we fail even to recognize, or only certain very brave, strong, almost inhuman creatures are capable of doing so: those who commit suicide, those who withdraw and wait, those who disappear without saying goodbye, those who truly hide themselves away, that is, those who really do their utmost never to be found: anchorites and hermits in remote places, the impersonators who shake off their identity ("I am not my former self") and take on another which they unhesitatingly embrace ("Don't imagine, fool,

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that you know me’). Deserters, exiles, usurpers and the forgetful, those who really do not remember who they were and convince themselves that they are not what they were when they were children or even when they were young men or young women, still less when they were born. Those who do not return.

Killing another person is the hardest thing anyone can do, a platitude largely endorsed by people who have never killed anyone. They say this because they can't imagine themselves with a pistol or a knife in their hand, or a rope to strangle with or a machete, most crimes take time and require physical effort if they involve hand-to-hand combat, they also imply a degree of danger (the other person might seize our weapon in the struggle and then we would be the ones to give up the ghost). However, people have long been accustomed to seeing characters in films using rifles with telescopic sights, then you only have to pull the trigger to hit your target and job done, a clean, aseptic task with little risk, and nowadays someone can operate a drone thousands of miles away from the target and end one life or several as if it were all a fiction, an imaginary act, like in a video game (you watch the result on a screen) or, for the more archaically minded, like on a pinball machine where you're in deadly combat with a fat steel ball. Then there is absolutely no chance of ending up spattered with blood.

It's difficult too, people think, because of the irreversible nature of the act, its finality: to kill means that the dead person will never do anything ever again, nothing more will spring from him, he won't argue or have ideas, he can't rectify or amend or right any wrong nor be persuaded; he will cease for ever to speak or act, no one will expect him to reappear, he won't even breathe or look; he will become utterly inoffensive, or worse, useless, like a domestic appliance that

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has gone wrong and become a mere nuisance, a piece of junk that gets in the way and has to be removed. Most people see killing as too drastic, excessive, they tend to think that anyone can be saved, they basically believe that we can all change and be forgiven, or that some human plague will cease without us having to eradicate it. Besides, in the abstract, other people fill us with pity, so how could I possibly end another person's life? Pity, though, can slacken when confronted by reality, and can even vanish, sometimes instantly. If, that is, we ourselves don't brutally suppress it

I remember an old Fritz Lang film, made in 1941, right in the middle of the war, when the United States had not yet joined in and when it seemed impossible that England could resist alone against Germany, with the rest of Europe having either submitted or willingly fallen into line. And it began like this: a man, played by Walter Pidgeon, dressed as a hunter, in hat, breeches and gaiters, and armed with a precision rifle, arrives at an outcrop or embankment or precipice in a leafy part of Bavaria. It is 29 July 1939, just thirty-six days since the beginning of the war, and the place turns out to be Berchtesgaden, where Hitler owned a villa to which he frequently retreated, even in mid-conflict, and while he was there it was the most closely guarded place in Germany. Spotting something on the other side of the embankment or precipice – or perhaps it was more like a moat surrounding a castle – the hunter lies face down in the scrub and peers through his binoculars. He looks surprised and excited by what he sees, and then he removes from his jacket pocket a telescopic sight, which he attaches to his rifle and adjusts to a distance of five hundred and fifty yards. He is staring at the Führer himself, who is strolling up and down a terrace, talking to a subordinate, a high-ranking Gestapo officer. I still remember his strange half-English name, Quive-Smith, played by George Sanders wearing a monocle, a white jacket and dark trousers, a uniform very similar to that worn in the 1970s by Franco's Falangist henchmen, who never could resist Nazi fashions.

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At first, Quive-Smith blocks our view of Hitler, and the hunter, unable now to see Hitler through his front sight, nervously wipes the sweat from his brow. Shortly afterwards, though, the officer leaves and the greater criminal is left alone. Now he is within reach, the bullseye. The hunter places his finger on the trigger and, after a moment's hesitation, he fires. All we hear is a click but no explosion, the weapon is not loaded. Walter Pidgeon laughs and touches the brim of his hat in a gesture of farewell. The viewer is aware that there is an armed soldier nearby, patrolling the area, but he has not yet seen the hidden hunter.

I don't know what explanation is given in the novel on which the film is based, but what the film shows us is that Pidgeon, after that first pretend shot, suddenly realizes that he *can* kill Hitler, and that he has just done so in jest. He then hurriedly slides a bullet into the chamber and again takes aim. The Führer has not changed position, he is directly opposite him, he has not yet gone inside and his chest is still within range. When the hunter is subsequently caught and interrogated, he assures Quive-Smith or Sanders that he had never considered actually firing, that the challenge lay solely in discovering that he *could* do it, that he had succeeded in reaching Hitler's lair without being detected or intercepted. It is what he calls 'a sporting stalk'. Bringing down the prey is a mere mathematical certainty once you have it within range and in your sights. There's no merit then in squeezing the trigger, indeed he has long since given up shooting anything, even a rabbit or a partridge. However, if you're playing the game seriously and not just pretending, the rifle must be loaded. 'Your judgement of distance is uncanny,' Quive-Smith tells him, for he, too, is a keen hunter: he has checked and, given how the sight was adjusted, Pidgeon was only ten feet short of the exact range. 'Such a man cannot be allowed to live,' Sanders adds. And yet Sanders' remark remains ambiguous to the viewer. Pidgeon plays Captain Alan Thorndike, an internationally famous hunter, indeed, his

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interrogator knows and admires him, has read about his exploits in Africa. It's possible that the tiny error of ten feet was deliberate and that Pidgeon is telling the truth, and he really didn't intend putting a bullet through Hitler's heart.

The way in which the film develops is equally laden with ambiguity: we cannot be sure whether Thorndike happened upon the Führer by chance or if he went looking for him, however unlikely the former may seem. He gives the impression, in any case, that it only actually occurs to him to kill Hitler when he sees him in the flesh, when he realizes who he has in his sights. No, he acts much more slowly than that. After pretending to shoot, after that dull click with his weapon unloaded, after first touching the brim of his hat in a farewell gesture and after giving a cheerfully self-satisfied smile, he makes as if to leave, he sits back like someone who has fulfilled his mission and has nothing more to do there, on that outcrop overlooking the famous villa in Berchtesgaden. And it is then that the expression on his face changes, becomes grave and impatient, as if he were running out of time, more determined too (not overly determined, but more so). That is the moment when it occurs to him that what has been a rehearsal, a pantomime, an amusement – a sporting stalk – could become a reality and change the course of history. That it is in his hands, in his finger, to do his country and half the world an enormous favour, and on 29 July 1939 no one could as yet imagine just how enormous that favour would prove to be. It doesn't matter what happens to him, it would be very hard for him to escape, what matters is the excitement. And so he slides a bullet into the chamber, just one, certain that he will easily hit his target, and that he will not need to fire a second shot. He again strokes the trigger and is on the point of squeezing it, this time with consequences, both personal and historical. An instant later, the Führer will be lying there dead and bloodied, erased from the face of the earth that he is about to dominate and destroy, sprawled on the terrace, a useless piece of junk, an obstacle

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staining the ground he lies on, mere detritus. He would have to be removed like a squashed cat, what a brief distance there is between everything and nothing, between vigorous life and death, between panic and pity.

As I said, I haven't read the novel the film is based on, but the film never makes clear what Thorndike's intentions really were, because nothing is done until it is done completely and cannot be undone, until there is no turning back. A leaf falls from a tree and covers his rifle sight. Pidgeon rather bad-temperedly brushes it away and, for a moment, loses his line of sight and has to recover his position. He must take aim at Hitler again, he must again have him clearly in his sights or the mathematics will not agree with his infallible calculations and the cat will remain alive and on the loose, will plot and scratch and tear. It's too late now, a falling leaf is enough to end time: the patrolling soldier has found him and hurls himself upon him, and in the ensuing struggle between the two men that one bullet is fired into the air.

Who would not have done the same in his situation, who would not have hesitated and stroked the trigger and felt the temptation to fire a shot in cold blood – ‘Yes, a murder, nothing more’ to quote a character in a classic novel when playing down the importance of such an act – if, in 1939, he had had Hitler’s chest within easy range, whether by chance or after pursuing and stalking his prey? And even long before that date, and not in a fiction. Because this other case is not fictional, unlike Fritz Lang’s film: Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen was in no way a left-winger nor was he a Jew or a gipsy or a homosexual, he had six daughters and a son from his two marriages. He was born in 1884, and so was five years older than the Führer. His father was a Prussian politician and landowner. He studied Medicine in Innsbruck and served as an officer in the Prussian army, but had to abandon his military career when diagnosed with diabetes. He worked briefly as a doctor on a ship in American waters. He then moved to Stuttgart where he worked as a journalist and theatre critic, and later moved to Pasing near Munich. He wrote adventure stories for children, and one of them, *Bomben auf Monte Carlo*, proved so popular that it was made into a film four times. These facts would lead one to think him a harmless enough fellow, little given to stirring things up or to subversion. However, he was an educated man and clear-thinking enough to despise and detest the Nazis and Hitler as soon as they appeared on the horizon. And so in May 1936 he began a secret, indeed clandestine diary, which he continued to write until

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October 1944, even though, from 1937 on, he took care to hide it away in a wood and to change its hiding place frequently, just in case the authorities were spying on him and keeping watch, because its discovery would have meant certain death. The diary was only published posthumously, in 1947, under the title *Tagebuch eines Verzweifelten*, and at the time it attracted little attention in Germany, perhaps because it was still too soon to remember what had only just ended. Almost twenty years later, in 1966, it was reprinted as a paperback, and that led to it being translated into English in 1970 as *Diary of a Man in Despair*, which is the version I read.

Reck-Mallezewen considered the Nazis to be ‘a horde of vicious apes’ by whom he felt imprisoned, and, despite having converted to Catholicism in 1933, he confessed to being filled with loathing. ‘My life in this pit will soon enter its fifth year. For more than forty-two months, I have thought hate, have lain down with hate in my heart, have dreamed hate and awakened with hate,’ he wrote. He saw Hitler in the flesh on four occasions. On one of these, ‘behind the fence of his mamelukes’ he seemed to him not to be human, but ‘the Prince of Darkness himself . . . a figure out of a ghost story’. On another occasion, when he saw him at an inn, ‘his oily hair falling into his face as he ranted’, a sight that prevented him from eating his own sausage and veal chop in peace, he said that Hitler ‘had the look of a man trying to seduce the cook’ and gave an impression of ‘basic stupidity’. When Hitler left and nodded a goodbye, he reminded him of ‘a head-waiter closing his hand around the tip’. Of his ‘melancholy jet-black eyes’, he said that they were ‘like raisins’ set in ‘a jelly-like, slag-grey face, a moonface’. On the first occasion, as early as 1920, after hearing Hitler deliver an inflammatory diatribe in a private house to which he had more or less invited himself, he and his friends, once they were free of that self-styled orator (the servants had become alarmed, thinking he was attacking his hosts, and rushed in to defend them), felt an immediate need to open a window so that the fresh air

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could dispel ‘the feeling of oppression’. And Reck points out that ‘It was not that an unclean body had been in the room, but something else: the unclean essence of a monstrosity.’ Despite Hitler’s meteoric rise, in the twenty years that passed between that first occasion and the last, ‘there is absolutely nothing that has happened . . . since I first saw him to make me change my first view of him. The fact remains that he was, and is, without the slightest self-awareness and pleasure in himself, that he basically hates himself . . .’

The most relevant comment also dates, like the others, from 11 August 1936 (that day’s entry is a long one), and in it Reck-Malleczewen describes a day in 1932 (he doesn’t give the exact date) when he visited a Munich restaurant, the Osteria Bavaria, and happened to coincide with Hitler, who, strangely, arrived alone, without his usual escort of heavies and bodyguards (for, by then, he was already a celebrity), walked across the room and sat down at the table next to the one occupied by Reck-Malleczewen and his friend Mücke. Feeling himself observed and critically examined, ‘he became uncomfortable. His face took on the sullen expression of a minor bureaucrat who has ventured into a place which he would not generally enter, but now that he is there demands for his good money “that he be served and treated every bit as well as the fine gentlemen over there . . .”’ Reck adds that because the streets were already quite unsafe at the time, September 1932, he always carried a loaded revolver with him whenever he went into town. And that devout Catholic, that peace-loving father of seven, that author of books for children and young adults, that educated, bourgeois man from northern Europe, writes the following words without his pen trembling or hesitating: ‘In the almost deserted restaurant, I could easily have shot him. If I had had an inkling of the role this piece of filth was to play, and of the years of suffering he was to make us endure, I would have done it without a second thought. But I took him for a character out of a comic strip, and did not shoot.’

On 11 August 1936, he had still seen very little suffering and

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horror in comparison with what came later, and, nevertheless, Reck-Malleczewen thinks that he would not have hesitated to kill in cold blood a ridiculous man sitting down to eat lunch alone in 1932, had he known then what he knew four years later and eight and a bit years before he died, at the age of sixty, in Dachau concentration camp. On that date in his diary, when Hitler is now completely beyond his grasp and beyond that of almost every other mortal, he consoles himself for that missed opportunity in the Osteria Bavaria with an attack of fatalism which proves prescient: 'It would have done no good in any case: in the councils of the Highest, our martyrdom had already been decided. If Hitler at that point had been taken and tied to railroad tracks, the train would have been derailed before it got to him . . . There are many rumours of attempts to assassinate him. The attempts fail, and they will continue to fail. For years (and especially in this land of successful demons) it has seemed that God is asleep.' A conservative Christian must have been very desperate indeed to feel able to scold God for not crowning with success man's attempts on the life of one of His creatures, rather than waiting for the Final Judgement. That he had not permitted, no, what am I saying, had not facilitated a premeditated murder.

Reck-Malleczewen, who came from a long line of military men, or so he said, was finally arrested on 13 October 1944, accused of 'undermining the morale of the armed forces' (a crime punishable by guillotining) for claiming to be suffering from angina when he was called up to the ranks of the pathetic civil militias being improvised by Goebbels out of a motley crew of adolescents and old men before the Russian advance in the east and for answering 'Blessed be God' rather than the mandatory 'Heil Hitler!' (even whores were obliged to shout this out twice per session, during the preamble and with each fake orgasm) and for some other very grave triviality. After spending a few days in prison, fearing the worst, and after attending a simulacrum of a court hearing, he was freed thanks to the inexplicable

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intervention of an SS general who gently reprimanded this man ten years his senior (Reck was already sixty by then), and to whom the diarist refers in his final entries as 'General Dtl.'. This is why he could return to his home and have time to set down this experience in his diary's very secret pages. Had those pages been discovered, he would have gone straight to the gallows or the guillotine without delay or remission.

However, he was rearrested on 31 December, and this he was unable to describe in his diary, for the even more grotesque crime of 'insulting the German currency', apparently because of a letter to his publisher in which he had complained that the inflation rate was eroding the value of his royalties. This time no mysterious 'General Dtl.' appeared and he was not released, and on 9 January 1945 he was transported to Dachau, an extremely insalubrious place, where he soon fell ill. A Dutch prisoner who was there at the same time left a statement in which he described him as a sad, confused old man, weakened by hunger and trembling with nerves, who had learned nothing from his experiences. From that brief portrait one trivial detail has lodged in my memory, just the kind of detail one always remembers best: he was wearing grey linen trousers that were far too short for him and a green Italian military tunic with one sleeve missing.

A death certificate declares that Friedrich Reck died of typhus on 16 February, but another source states that, on that date, he was shot in the back of the neck, perhaps the shot he had failed to use on the piece of filth, the low-ranking bureaucrat, in September 1932. The shot from which a hungry Hitler escaped because his lazy, scornful executioner thought he was like a character out of a comic strip.

We must not be lazy or indifferent, we must not fail to take advantage of an opportunity because it will probably never come again, and we might end up paying with our own life for that scruple, that hesitation, that moment of pity, or that fear of marking ourselves indelibly – ‘I killed someone once’ – the ideal would be to know beforehand what each individual is going to do and what he is going to become. But if we do not know for certain what happened in the past, how can we possibly be guided by what is to come? If Reck-Malleczewen found it impossible to shoot the Führer in that restaurant, how much more impossible would it have been for him to run over an Austrian boy called Adolf as he was leaving his school in Linz or Steyr, or to throw him into a river in a sack securely tied and weighted down with rocks – yes, as if he were an unwanted cat – when he wasn’t even a schoolboy, or to suffocate him with a pillow in his cradle or his carrycot, in the village of Braunau where he was born, had we had the chance and been old enough. He would not have considered the possibility however many ‘inklings’ he’d had, not even ‘the councils of the Highest’ would have provided him with a full view of what that child would bring and disseminate. To kill a child or a baby from a tiny, obscure place in Austria, on the frontier with Germany, which he would, besides, have found it difficult to leave; to suggest that, if he lived, he would exterminate millions and subjugate and bloody the world as no one had ever done before: everyone would have taken him for a madman and a maniac, an

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aberrant assassin, as would he himself, despite having surveyed the scene and known the horror that the defenceless creature harboured in his veins and intended to unleash from Munich, Nuremberg and Berlin.

As you see, killing is not so extreme or so difficult or unjust if you know who you are killing, what crimes he has committed or announced he is going to commit, how many evils you would save people from, how many innocent lives would be spared in exchange for a single shot, a strangling or a few knife thrusts, it lasts only a matter of seconds and then it's done, it's over, it's finished and you carry on – you do almost always carry on, lives are sometimes very long and nothing ever stops entirely – there are cases when humanity breathes easier and even applauds, and feels that a great weight has been lifted from its shoulders, when it feels grateful and lighter and safer, cheered and set free by an assassination, briefly happy.

And yet that first step is still difficult: neither Thorndike in fiction nor Reck in reality squeezed the trigger when they had the chance, even though both knew perfectly well that they would be eliminating something wicked and malign, a pestilence, a putrefaction with his 'slag-grey moonface', his body oozing consternation and oppression, 'the unclean essence of a monstrosity'. Yes, they knew, but the unimaginable worst had not yet happened. We never learn, and the abominable must be beyond abominable before we decide to act, the horror has to be actually happening and already unstoppable before we make a decision, we have to see the axe raised or already slicing through a neck before we skewer those wielding the axe, we must establish that those who appear to be the executioners really are the executioners, and that they are, moreover, executing us. What has not yet happened lacks prestige and force, the already foreseen and the imminent are not enough, clear-sighted words always go unheard, everything has to be corroborated by the terrible facts and deeds, when it's too late and nothing can be done or undone.

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And what happens then, paradoxically, is punishment and revenge, which complicate matters still further and are a very different thing; because it's no longer a matter of avoiding an imminent calamity or possibly even more abominations, which really helps when justifying a murder, the act of killing (the idea of averting a new offence, of preventing a repetition and any further misfortunes). No, someone who has committed a crime, or has betrayed or denounced someone, may well have no intention of harming anyone ever again and will therefore not be a permanent danger, his punishable behaviour the product of fear or weakness or some psychological disturbance, an exception. As for revenge, what leads someone to destroy another individual is rancour or the need for redress, enduring hatred or overwhelming grief; as for punishment, it's more a chilling warning to others, the desire to set an example, to teach others a lesson, to make it perfectly clear that such acts have consequences and will not be permitted. This is how mafias work, incapable of forgiving the slightest error or the smallest debt so that there can be no dangerous precedent, so that everyone understands that no one can get away with failing to show them due respect, that no one can steal from, lie to or betray them, that they are to be feared. This, after all, is also how the State and its justice system work, with ceremony and solemnity, or without either if necessary and when everything has to be done in secret: they discourage others from doing the same, they dissuade them by condemning the bold person who preceded them. The proud or optimistic person, or perhaps the innocent who tried his luck and got in first.

My mission was of the punishment or revenge variety, not the avoidance of an individual crime or a killing (not at least immediately), and so it would be harder for me to carry out. And if it was an act of revenge, it wasn't mine. It had been delegated to me, I had been ordered to put it into practice, and, in hierarchical organizations, you get used to obeying orders without question – indeed you go along with it from the start: you sign up for it – even if you have your doubts or you find those orders repugnant (you're perfectly at liberty to feel both, but not to show those feelings or give in to them). Nowadays, we happily condemn the lowliest soldier in the story and those who do the condemning either know nothing about or else blithely ignore what would have happened to those soldiers had they refused to carry out orders. They would have suffered the same grim fate as their victims, especially in time of war, and would have been instantly replaced: another pawn would have taken their place and carried out the task, and the result would have been the same, there are deaths that are 'decided' in heaven or in hell, as Reck-Malleczewen said of the martyrdom of the Germans. Viewed calmly, from a time of peace or a period of truce, from the point of view of the present which always views the past with utter scorn, from the now that believes itself superior to any before, it is very easy to proclaim proudly 'I would have refused, I would have rebelled,' and thus feel noble and pure. It's easy to vilify and condemn the person who strangled or pulled the trigger or stabbed, and no one stops to think just who he

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eliminated or how many lives he saved by his actions, or how many lives the victim of the assassination would have ended or caused by his instigations and provocations, by his sermons and his moral pestilence, it comes to the same thing or worse (the person who only talks and eggs others on does not stain himself with blood, he leaves the dirty work to his followers, he instils them with venom and that's enough to set them going and for them wildly to outdo themselves), although that isn't how everyone sees it.

I had been retired for some time or 'burned out' as people say of someone who was once useful and no longer is, who has exposed himself to danger over many years and exhausted himself in the process, or of someone who has had no alternative but to remain in dry dock and who has thus lost all his abilities, reflexes and skills, or else they have rusted up. They had let me go and I had agreed. This had coincided with my discovery of the original deception (the one that got me into this life and this work, when I was too young to question it) practised on me by the person who was my recruiter and my most visible boss, Bertram Tupra, later Bertie, also called Resesby and Ure, Dundas and Nutcombe and Oxenham and other names unknown to me, just as I adopted several names during the long years when I was active, I was Fahey and MacGowran, and Avellaneda and Hörbiger and Riccardo Breda, Ley and Rowland and, very briefly, Cromer-Fytton, and a few other names that have been erased from my memory, I could recall them if I tried, because everything bad comes back and my wanderings were full of bad things which, later, once they were over, I missed as one misses everything that no longer is and once was, happiness and sadness, enthusiasm, suffering, everything that forces us to move on, that abandons us.

I had returned to Madrid, to my remote origins and to my wife and my children, whose childhood I had missed and in whose early youth I was very tentatively involving myself, as if asking their permission. She, miraculously, had not entirely rejected me after a continuous absence of

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about twelve years, not just a continuous absence but a continuous silence too: while I was in hiding, I could not risk being detected if I re-established contact with her, it was best if everyone thought I was dead and therefore out of the game and unreachable, and that is what Berta came to believe with some degree of earnestness but no certainty, that is, intermittently. Even more miraculous, and despite having considered herself to be a potential or de facto widow and later officially a widow and so even freer if you like, was the fact that she had not remarried or established a lasting relationship with someone else, and so she had not buried me in the depths nor had she really replaced me, although the word 'replace' was no longer appropriate. Not because of a lack of will or purpose, for she would doubtless have made a few attempts, but for one reason or another none of those relationships survived, not that I ever asked her about them, I didn't feel I had the right to feel curious and, besides, it was none of my business, just as it was none of her business what relationships I had formed during my adventures. I had even had a daughter whom I'd left behind in England. I have never seen her again nor told anyone of her existence, although her name and her face, which for me remains unchanged and will always be that of a little girl, often appears to me in my daydreams or dreams, Valerie or Val is her name, Valerie Rowland, I suppose, unless her mother has changed it as a posthumous punishment for my abandoning them, then again, James Rowland was a temporary, transient ghost, the sort who does not linger and only turns up in false documents.

Berta and I do not live together now – it's hard after such a long separation and such a long apparent death, one grows accustomed to not having witnesses to one's awakenings or one's habits – but very close, she in our old apartment in Calle de Pavía, and me on the other side of the Teatro Real, in Calle de Lepanto, I don't even need to cross the road to go from one place to the other. And she allowed me over to her place sometimes as a trusted visitor, and even invited me to stay and have supper with the children or without, and she and I

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even went to bed together from time to time, as ex-lovers sometimes do, more out of familiarity or lingering affection than a revival of old passions, and because there's no need to toil away at courtships or engage in arduous seductions with no guaranteed result. I still didn't discount her throwing me out and replacing me with another man, any day, tomorrow even, for she led a life in which I played no part and she would feel no less free because I had returned. As for myself, the truth is that I hadn't even considered the possibility of starting anything of that sort anew. It was as if my long years of utilitarian relationships with women had left me with no real interest in them (too much time spent seeing them as purely instrumental), oblivious to anything apart from the physiological and mechanical, a mere release. Emotionally numb and desiccated. I regarded those illusions – I could see them in my children, more in Elisa than in Guillermo – as something that existed, but only in other people, a race to whom I had once belonged in some remote, innocent time, in a life so different that it seemed to me imaginary and that I found hard to recognize as mine. I was not yet forty-three when I returned to Madrid in 1994, at least I think it was 1994, I have an ever looser grip on dates, but it was as if I were a hundred years old in that regard, or more as if I were the kind of dead person who refuses to disappear or turn his back on life. I'm referring solely to emotions and expectations, not to the sexual or instinctive. Or perhaps it was simply that I was so pleased to have regained some kind of relationship with Berta (a poor imitation, a parody, a painting, a shadow, or whatever) that it did not occur to me to expect anything more or to look further than her eyes and her person. At the time, I did not dare to express myself in such clear terms, but that is probably what I felt.

Yes, I had been let go and I had agreed to that, the decision had been entirely reciprocal. I had become thoroughly fed up and disillusioned and had announced my defection or my desertion or whatever they call it in MI6 and MI5 or in the secret service of any republic or realm, and they felt they had recouped their investment and that I had performed well for them: 'We won't miss you as much as we would have years ago, you've been out of the loop for a long time now, and there's never been anything to stop you leaving,' had been the response of Bertram Tupra, who was, all in all, a pleasant, easy-going fellow, and because of that, I think, quite detached. He did whatever he liked and considered nothing to be of any great importance, the sort of man who wears his coat draped over his shoulders and walks along letting it float or flap about him like a cloak, not caring if its loose, unchecked skirts strike some passer-by. He left a trail of accidental victims and never gave them so much as a backward glance. He assumed this was the way of the world, or at least the part of the world in which he carried out his work.

I wasn't expecting to see him again, or hear his voice, when I said goodbye to him in London, preferring not to shake the hand he blithely offered me as if there were no problem at all (the party doing the deceiving or the offending tends not to see any problem; more than that, they often act as if it were all of no account, because one downplays one's own grievances while storing up and magnifying those of others). Tupra elegantly removed his hand and lit a cigarette,

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as if he had never held his hand out to me in the first place; he wasn't in the least offended by my scornful attitude, my snub. I had been under orders to him for two long decades, and now that this would no longer be the case, I would be cancelled out, erased, I would become instead a dull civilian, or, rather, a stranger whose behaviour didn't even merit his notice, still less his scrutiny. With a retired agent, it's only a question of keeping an eye on him to make sure he doesn't talk too much or say things he shouldn't and can't say. Knowledge of this prohibition is nearly always enough to dissuade retirees, but some do let themselves go and set off along a path of self-destruction: they take to drink or drugs, they fall into depression, they repent and seek expiation or punishment, they start gambling and run up massive debts, they take refuge in traditional religions or in new gimcrack versions, all of them absurd; or else they start to brag, they need others to know they did something worthwhile in life, they cannot bear the fact that their deeds have gone unrecorded, and in the end, their secretive existence begins to weigh on them. They feel that secrets only make sense if, one day, they cease to be secrets, and that they should be revealed at least once before they die. And often, when someone is close to death (and many are convinced they are before their actual time comes), he doesn't care about the consequences of his final words or deeds, nowadays we put little trust in funeral eulogies or in how we will be remembered. We know that, in reality, no one is remembered beyond the first sad hours, during which there is more shock and panic than recapitulation and remembrance.

And so I was hugely surprised when I received a phone call in my office at the embassy in Madrid, where I had easily slipped back into post after many years away. A more distinguished post in fact, a reward for my past sacrifices. I still have a good memory, but it isn't what it was while I was on active service and had to dovetail lies and false identities and sustain them without contradictions or mistakes. And so I had completely forgotten something I had heard Professor

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Peter Wheeler say when I was very young and studying at Oxford and used to return to Madrid in the vacation to be with my family and my girlfriend, Berta. Wheeler was the first to see that I could be useful and to sound me out about working for the Secret Service, the first to predict the potential in my ability to learn and speak languages and to imitate different accents and ways of speaking – everyone thought it a gift, but that’s rather a grand word for a gift you’ve had since childhood. He was also the one to put me in touch with Tupra, at which point he immediately stood aside and placed me in Tupra’s hands, like a gundog bringing a rabbit or a bird to its master. On the day when he first sounded me out, and when I mentioned the rumours I’d heard about his former activities as a spy during the Second World War, and how he still helped out when asked – perhaps in the recruitment of talent, of students who stood out for some particular reason – he had said the following: ‘Once you’ve been involved with the Secret Service, they’re the ones who keep in touch with you. Rarely or frequently, as they choose. You don’t abandon them, that would be an act of betrayal. We always stand and wait.’ When I recalled those last words, they came to me in English, the language in which he and I usually talked: despite being a brilliant Hispanist and Lusitanist, he felt more comfortable in English and could be more precise. ‘We always stand and wait.’ At the time, this had sounded to me like a quotation or a reference to something else, and I am now well read enough to realize, on remembering it, that it was an allusion to the famous line in the poem by John Milton, although the two verbs have a very different meaning in the poem to the one given them by Wheeler in that context, on that afternoon in his house, adding: ‘They barely ever contact me now, but, yes, there are occasional exchanges. You never completely retire if you can still be of use to them. It’s a way of serving your country and not becoming an outcast. It’s within your grasp not to become a complete, lifelong outcast.’ I had sensed in Wheeler’s voice a mixture of sadness, pride and relief.

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I did feel that I had retired completely and definitively. I believed myself to be free, useless, rejected, banished and even something of a pariah on my return to my first country, Spain, not realizing that, each morning, when I went to work and to my office, I was in fact moving back into British territory, after all, I received my orders and my salary from the Foreign Office, and had for many years given priority to my second country: I had fought in its ranks with passion and without scruples, and had become a patriot, something I had never been in my first country, which had long been contaminated by Francoism. And had I not forgotten those antediluvian words of Wheeler's, Tupra's voice would not have caught me off guard, more than that, it would not have surprised me in the least. Because that is what his phone call was, a reminder that no one is ever a complete pariah nor is anyone ever let go completely if he can still be of service to the country, to the cause, to contribute to what Tupra called 'the defence of the Realm', something so wide-ranging and diffuse that it could include anything, even something that apparently had nothing to do with his country or his wide but shrinking Realm. 'You don't abandon them, they're the ones who keep in touch with you. Rarely or frequently, as they choose.' What Wheeler had said was that the Secret Service dispensed with its active agents whenever it suited them or when they were burned out or became a burden, but not the other way round. If they were needed again, they would re-recruit them so to speak; they summoned and dismissed them with a click of the fingers, or at least tried to.

Thinking it over that night, and having reluctantly arranged to meet Tupra in the next few days, I thought how closely our organizations resemble mafias, which you enter and from which you can be expelled – normally that expulsion is final and tends to come hand in hand with your expulsion from the world and from life – but which you cannot leave voluntarily; and if you do go by mutual agreement, as had been my case, you end up discovering that you were only on leave or an extended leave of absence, however long one or the other

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lasted. Those you have served have unlimited information about your past, they know what you did on their instructions, and therefore have the capacity to distort those deeds and present them in an ugly, incriminating light. You only have to introduce a little truth into a lie for the lie to seem not just credible, but irrefutable. We are in the hands of people who know us of old, those who can most harm us are precisely those who knew us when we were young and who shaped and moulded us, not to mention those who have employed and paid us or have been kind to us and done us favours. No one escapes this, what others know we experienced or did, the insults received, the unconquered fears and the acts of vengeance we've committed in the presence of witnesses or with their actual help. That is why many people loathe and cannot bear their former benefactors, and view those who got them out of trouble or rescued them from poverty, or even saved them from death, as their greatest danger and their greatest enemy: they are the last person they would want to meet. Tupra was definitely my greatest enemy, the person who had done most for me and against me, and the person who knew most about what I had done in the world, infinitely more than Berta, than my dead parents, than my living children, who knew absolutely nothing. And Bertram Tupra was, moreover, a past master of calumny.

I found it odd that he should be so willing to fly to Madrid, that he didn't even try to persuade or order me to travel to London, to go and see him in that building with no name where he had suggested we meet when we said goodbye and where I assumed he was working, and where I had my suspicions about what he was doing or plotting: he had taken me there once, he had put me to the test by making me watch videos, a test that, in his view, I had failed, he had spoken to me about gifts that I, of course, lacked and which very few people possessed, 'interpreters of lives' he called them, or 'interpreters of people', individuals capable of predicting someone's behaviour just from a glance, or by chatting to them or even observing them on videos, taking for granted that he himself was one of those geniuses. He wanted to gather together a group of such people and resuscitate a division dating from the war years, I think, and to rebuild it as he wanted it; perhaps he had put in an official request for such a division and been given permission in the years when we didn't see each other, my years in dry dock or enforced exile in a provincial English town, the years during which almost everyone thought me dead. And there would be many who still thought I was dead, and we tend not to hear much news about the departed.

The day we met again before my return to Madrid and when I reproached him for his by then ancient deception, I didn't ask him and he didn't tell me what he was up to, why would he? Tupra was very good at getting information out of other people, but rarely gave

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anything away, he wanted to be given all the information without providing any himself, or only the bare minimum so that his various schemes and machinations would meet with success. Besides, at the time, I really didn't care what he was doing or what happened to him; indeed, just in case, I had gone to that meeting with, in my overcoat pocket, my Charter Arms Undercover, the small revolver they had allowed me to keep while in exile and which had accompanied me at all times, in that town with a river. At that moment – and only at that moment, and after each moment come hours and days and sometimes very long years – nothing would have pleased me more than to have put a bullet in him. But that would have condemned me for the rest of my life, and what I most wanted was to leave that world behind and return to the one place left to me, Madrid. Madrid meant my wife, forgotten and remembered, and my children who were now strangers to me. Somehow or other, I had found them where I left them, and they had reluctantly allowed me in, well, at least they hadn't rejected me outright. In those passable circumstances, I really didn't want Tupra to reappear; nothing easy or simple would ever come from him, only murky dealings and complications, entanglements and knots. And I thought I had left all that behind me for ever, and that he would have left me even further behind, and more than for ever.

Of one thing I was certain, though, some other matter was bringing him to my city apart from the desire to talk to me, to think otherwise would have been pure vanity and believing myself to be more important than I was, and no one was of much importance to Reresby or Dundas or Ure. On the phone he had sounded polite and almost ingratiating, without, however, being obsequious, something he would never be: 'I know we didn't part on the best of terms, Tomás Nevinson, but I need you to do me a huge favour, for old times' sake.' That is how he addressed me, not as 'Tom' or by my surname, as he used to, but by my full name and in Spanish too, Tomás Nevinson was the only name that had, in a way, remained intact and uncontaminated,

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the name I had never used during any of my obscure exploits, or his assignments. Perhaps he did this as if to acknowledge that I had now gone back to being that person and no other, the original person, brought up in Madrid, the son of an English father and a Spanish mother, and, above all, a boy from the Chamberí district. 'So now he's come asking me for a favour,' I thought, and I couldn't help feeling a little thrill of satisfaction. 'Now he's depending on me and giving me the opportunity to pay him back, to refuse and tell him to go to hell and slam the door in his face.' But Tupra knew how to turn the tables, and immediately transformed his request for a favour into a favour he would be doing for me: 'Well,' he said, 'you won't just be doing me a favour, but a Spanish friend of mine as well, and in the country where one lives it's always useful to have people who owe you a favour, especially important people or people who are just about to become important. Now that you're living in Madrid, it would suit you down to the ground. Let's just look at the matter coolly and with an open mind. Let me explain the assignment, and then you can decide whether to take it on or not. I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't sure you were the ideal agent; more than that, you're the only one who could possibly succeed. We made a good team, you and me. You hardly ever let me down, and I couldn't tell you how often your colleagues did, the few who lasted that long, after all, you and I worked together for more than twenty years, didn't we? Or was it less? I don't know. But almost no agent ever lasts that long. They get burned out horribly fast or else make mistakes. You didn't, you lasted a long time. A very long time.'

The fact that he still referred to me as an agent seemed to me the highest possible praise, I had been retired for nearly two years and was sure that my retirement was permanent and irreversible, that what had been such a large part of my life was over and would never come back, leaving my memory in a semi-vegetative or somnambular state, simultaneously forgetting and remembering: during the day I would try to forget everything I had done and that had been

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done to me and that I had been obliged to do, and especially what I had done off my own bat and on my own initiative (often there is no way you can receive orders and then you have to make your own decisions); while I slept, though, my head would fill up with the past, or perhaps that was a way of driving out the past when day dawned, and I woke up.

I had ended up feeling disillusioned and thoroughly sick of it, and Tupra no longer considered me to be useful, or felt he had squeezed every last drop of juice out of me. I wanted to leave, and they let me leave with no regrets. I had discovered that I'd initially been recruited thanks to a deception. But who remembers the beginning of anything, after so much time has passed? In a long love relationship, what does it matter who took the first step or made the first approach, who worked hard to build the relationship or who first noticed who, let alone who gave the other person the come-on, thus inoculating the other with the idea of love or sex, causing the other to see him or her in an entirely new light? Time suppresses time, or whatever comes next erases what moves over to make room for it and is gone; the present does not join forces with the past, but supplants it or shoos it away, and in that almost memoryless sphere continuity disperses whatever went before and whatever came after, and everything becomes an indistinguishable magma, and you can no longer conceive of the existence that was once possible but did not happen, was rejected or sidelined, to which no one paid any attention or that failed in the attempt. Whatever does not happen lacks brio and even distinction, becomes lost in the vast mist of what isn't and will not be, and no one is even remotely interested in what did not happen, even we don't care about what didn't happen to us. Thus preambles don't count. Once things have happened, these wipe out how that happening happened, just as no one wonders why they were born once they're striding smartly down the path. Or indeed, once they first start walking.

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Tupra hadn't changed at all, and, besides, not that much time had passed, although to me it had seemed endless: when you think a matter has been resolved, when you cut a thread that has stretched out over decades – a love affair, a friendship, a belief, a city or a job – everything that was holding that thread in place suddenly moves off with astonishing speed and completely muddles up our idea of time. For me, Tupra was one of those men who accept the toll of the years quite early on, then keep age at bay for many more years, as if that initial acceptance of the passing years served to postpone indefinitely all the subsequent ones, as if he were in total charge of any changes in his appearance, and as if these depended on his will or agreement, his consent. As if one morning he had said to the mirror: 'The time has come to look more respectable or more authoritative or more experienced. So be it.' And as if later, on another day, he said: 'All right, enough is enough. Hold things right there, until further orders.' I had the impression that he controlled not only everything to do with his machinations and obligations, but also the way he aged or matured physically. Perhaps he shared it out among his many names, of which I could recall just six. The effect was disconcerting and disquieting, as if you had before you someone whom time obeyed, at least as regards his face. I had first seen him twenty or so years ago in Oxford, I couldn't be bothered to make an exact calculation, and he certainly didn't look weighed down by a quarter of a century, at most, by a decade, and not the cruellest of decades either.

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It is also true that he dyed the grey hair around his temples, something I had noticed when I was in England.

I had left it to him to choose a meeting place even though he was the one asking to see me, it's hard to abandon hierarchies even when the subordinate has lost all respect for the subordinator and thoroughly despises him, feels resentful and insulted, and would once willingly have put a bullet in him. I found it odd that he should choose a park in winter (it was 6 January 1997, Epiphany, but he had no time for Spanish feast days, he didn't know about them and they were, besides, no excuse for not meeting) much closer to my apartment or attic in Calle de Lepanto than to wherever he would be spending his brief stay, doubtless somewhere near the British embassy. He told me only what I needed to know, and hadn't given me a phone number or the name of his hotel, or perhaps he was staying in one of the rooms in the embassy reserved for influential guests, or else had invaded the apartment of some British Council employee or one of the teachers at the Instituto Británico, where I had studied until I was fourteen, before moving on to the Colegio Estudio, where Berta had spent all her school years, and where we met as adolescents.

Tupra was definitely influential, and not only in his particular sphere or in his own country, where he was above almost all visible authorities, certainly the police, as I had found out early on in Oxford with Sergeant Morse or whoever he was, and possibly above uniformed soldiers too, I never knew his rank or ranks as he rose (he would have risen on merit), he was always in mufti. As for those invisible authorities, those who rarely leave their carpeted rooms, it's possible that he often dodged them or decided not to consult them when he could foresee raised eyebrows and long silences equivalent to a tacit no. What's more, it often suits those same authorities if some underling does take the initiative or disobeys orders or doesn't ask permission, so that if things go wrong or cause a scandal, they

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can honestly say they knew nothing about it. Tupra was also influential in most of Europe and the Commonwealth, possibly in the United States and in allied Asian nations. It was typical of him to prefer not to be locatable, that is, not to be found out or taken by surprise, so that he could thus impose his own conditions and times, to be always the one to make contact and to appear, the one deciding on what the next steps should be and always taking the initiative. He hated anyone asking him a favour or bringing him problems, and yet he never stopped asking favours of others and putting them in tight spots, demanding they perform semi-heroic deeds and giving them instructions.

I arrived first and sat on one of the stone benches in the little park where he had arranged to meet me, a small, secluded spot next to Plaza de la Paja, a tiny scrap of greenery right in the middle of old Madrid or the Madrid of the Habsburgs. It couldn't have been the Príncipe de Anglona garden, because that wasn't opened to the public until a few years later, but in my already faltering recollections it's as if it were (my memory keeps playing terrible tricks on me: there are names, events and dates that I can reproduce with photographic exactitude, while others from the same period are lost in a mist). It was a cold day, so I had put on my peaked cap, more Dutch or French than Spanish or British, and which, according to Berta, gave me a certain sailorish air. At forty-five, I wasn't yet bald, although my hair was definitely thinner, but my receding hairline still qualified as 'interesting' and, fortunately, had stopped receding. I kept my cap on for the moment, after all, I was out in the open, for I haven't yet lost the polite custom of taking off my hat when indoors, unless I'm pretending to be someone of coarser habits. Given the date and the temperature, I wasn't surprised to find no one else there, in fact, I was surprised to find the place open at all, and I doubted Tupra would have checked beforehand. Families were strolling about in the nearby square, children were trying out or showing off their new toys, and

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some grown-ups were eating cakes that we traditionally eat at that time of year. A couple of the cafés had put out chairs and tables, although it wasn't really the right time of year for that, but the old *madrileño* delight in being out and about led many to sit down and, well wrapped up, enjoy a late breakfast or an aperitif. Epiphany in Spain is a quiet, late-rising day. Madrid cannot bear being stuck indoors.

After a couple of minutes, a woman dressed for winter came into the garden, she was wearing a woollen hat and, at first glance, I reckoned she was about thirty. She looked briefly across at my bench and, seeming slightly annoyed to see me there – as if I were invading her territory – went over to another one, a short distance away. I noticed she had blue eyes and I watched as she took a book out of her bag, a Pléiade edition, instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever handled one. Out of curiosity, I tried to identify the book, and before she settled down to read I saw what I took to be a picture of the author, which was undoubtedly a portrait of Chateaubriand as a young man with wild, romantic hair, which meant that the book was probably *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. I couldn't but suspect that Tupra had sent her, perhaps as a chaperone or a distant witness; he was cultivated and pedantic despite his brisk, often abrupt and even violent manner: it was not in vain that he, like me, had studied at Oxford (History Ancient and Modern, he had told me once with great precision and a touch of pride that he could not entirely repress: getting to that university would have been quite something in his youth, given where he came from; and he had added, so as not to take credit where no credit was due: 'It helped me to know men better, because, in ordinary life, and in normal, civilized times, men now are different from men back then, but at certain key moments they're no different and can turn savage in a matter of seconds, and we witness such moments far more often than most people. However, I never took up history professionally, I wasn't good enough') and he had studied under Professor Wheeler, not in the strictly educational sense, but in the

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broader, deeper sense of education, the actual shaping of a person. A woman on her own reading Chateaubriand in French near the Plaza de la Paja in January (she had taken off her right woollen glove, for no one can turn the Bible-paper pages of a Pléiade edition with their gloves on) smacked of scene-setting, of some carefully prepared *tableau vivant*, or perhaps it was an obscure, convoluted warning, intended to turn my thoughts to beyond the grave before Tupra arrived, a state in which I had existed for years and years, at least as regards those closest to me and those I had offended against, those who would have liked to eliminate me out of revenge or a sense of justice (in the eyes of the condemned man these are barely distinguishable), those pursuing me. If it was some improbably abstruse warning, I had nonetheless understood it, because the concept of *outré-tombe* had already lodged in my mind. The young woman settled down to read and did not look at me again while I continued to wait.

Tupra appeared seven or eight minutes late, as was also typical, keeping others waiting, never to the point of abuse or exaggeration, but always a little bit late. He wasn't wearing his dark overcoat draped over his shoulders as he used to, but had put it on and buttoned it up, for Madrid is usually colder than London. With his mid-calf-length coat, as was the fashion in the 1980s and 1990s, a light-coloured scarf around his neck and black leather gloves, he and I were dressed very similarly. He still had the same simultaneously resolute and indolent walk, as if he never hurried and as if the world had to wait until he had absorbed all the facts that concerned him directly. And why would he have lost that energetic gait? He was, after all, only a few years older than me, although, when I first met him, I had the distinct feeling that he had lived several more lives than I had. Perhaps I had now caught him up somewhat, because, since that far-distant time, I had accumulated lives of my own, and even lost one or two, I had been declared dead *in absentia* and Berta

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had officially become a widow, and been duly compensated. When he entered the garden, he glanced at the young woman on the other bench. The fact that she did not look up to inspect this new intruder on her territory confirmed my suspicion that Tupra had invited her. Although who knows why. Perhaps he didn't trust me, I might have changed. He sat down beside me, undid the bottom buttons of his coat so that he could cross his legs, took out a cigarette, lit it without a word of greeting (he gave only a slight lift of his chin), as if at most a week had passed since our last meeting. That is, as if he were as used to seeing me as he was the people he continued to work with on a daily basis. I had ceased to do that in 1994, for good.

'I do like to observe the tropes,' he said. 'Have you noticed that in every spy movie, there's always a scene in which two men sit down on a bench as if by chance, as if they had just happened to coincide? Even though there are five empty benches nearby. It's quite ridiculous. Here at least, that is not the case.'

II

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‘What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?’ that line from a popular 1917 poem suddenly came into my mind, popular, that is, in England, and written by one of those young men who cease to exist when they’re only twenty or so and who die in droves. Tupra’s presence almost always heralded death or suggested or recalled it, a death from before or after, past or future, to be suffered or inflicted, sometimes, but rarely, by one’s own hand, more often indirectly thanks to a few murmured words. His dead did not die like cattle, in our world that occurs only sporadically in times of peace and we were living in a time of apparent peace, although for him the world was in a permanent state of war, something most people were unaware of. And in order for people to remain unaware of that or almost anything else, in order that, day after day and night after night, they could continue with their minuscule cravings, their daily tasks and tribulations, they need individuals like him or like me in my former life, sentinels or watchmen who never sleep and are constantly on the alert. He did not hold with that line from the Psalms: ‘Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.’ He knew that there was no Lord and that he doesn’t watch over anything, and that even if there was a Lord, he would be drowsy or distracted, for this reason, the essential watchman never dozes and never even rests, because he is the only one defending the Realm, he and his fellow watchmen.

No, the dead that Tupra carried with him were individuals, they

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all had faces but not, of course, names, or not the name they had received at birth; they came marked long ago by an arrow or a bulls-eye, sentenced to death in an office or an inn, and because they died alone, they deserved passing-bells to be rung for them, and bells did toll for them, for each man in his own land, in his own house, wherever he was loved despite any crimes he had committed or precisely because he had committed them, as perhaps they tolled for Hitler in his native village of Braunau, or in Steyr or in Linz where he went to school, someone would remember him as a child in those places and would mourn him in secret. And so they were the dead who were not forgotten and were not to be confused with those one had known in life and whom one had even befriended and not always on false pretences, with whom one had exchanged jokes and the occasional true or false memory. ‘The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall’ was another line in that same poem, and it ended with this, the other line I remembered: ‘And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.’

What blinds did Tupra – or Ure or Reresby, it made no difference – want to draw down in Madrid, which window or balcony was he aiming at? I was inevitably wondering what brows would he order to grow pale on that cold January morning? Would he still be the same inside as outside, for the sentinel cannot allow change, if he does, the city will fall and be conquered, he would not have aged in mind or character either, or not yet, the day he ceased to be alert, he would know how to step aside. The fact that he wanted to see me and had arranged to meet me where no one could overhear us suggested that he must have some kind of mission in mind, that he wanted me to cease being an absentee, as they called agents who had retired, but who still benefited, financially I mean, from the institution that had expelled them or that they had abandoned, and so were not entirely set adrift, and over whom, hypothetically at least, the institution still exercised a distant degree of control: those who received pensions if they were of retirement age or burned out, or were assigned to less

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stressful jobs, well paid enough for them to get by, if they were, objectively speaking, young but had become too unbalanced or demotivated and were no longer right for the job. (The British Secret Service prided itself on never leaving anyone behind, not even traitors entirely, if they had fulfilled the loyal part of their duties efficiently, or before they became traitors.) Because, subjectively speaking, no one was young after a decade or two in active service and working at full capacity: there were people who had trodden every inch of the territory and were so worn down that they had been relegated to an office, and at the age of thirty-five or forty would suddenly burst into tears at their desk, in front of their colleagues, for no obvious reason and without anyone having said anything, as some older people often do, some of whom become tearful over the slightest thing, a film or a piece of music, some hidden emotion indecipherable to others, or a secret memory or the mere presence of a child, when they must think: 'Enjoy not knowing anything and not having had time to do anything, to harm anyone, even though others could easily harm you, that comes with being born and only the first step is difficult. You don't know that the time will come when you'll be old like me, you don't even understand what "old" means or else think it won't happen to you if, that is, you've already started to get some idea of its meaning by seeing me or your grandparents or others with ash on their sleeve and sitting in parks. And the last thing you can imagine is that the passing-bells will ever toll for you or that there'll be a drawing-down of blinds, if such ancient customs are still being observed then, which is unlikely, for even now they are probably only observed in small places, with so few inhabitants that each and every one is important and is missed when they cease to be. Make the most of the fact that you're fresh and ignorant and that few people can make use of you, that any orders you're given are very simple and needn't trouble your conscience. Make the most of not knowing who you are, nor what kind of man or woman you're going to

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become, make the most of not having a conscience or only a rudimentary one, still under construction, and which, alas, will grow unstoppably. However, a conscience is forged very slowly, and so enjoy, albeit unwittingly, this long period of time during which you are not accountable to anyone and when you cannot as yet hear any cries and laments.’

‘I assume they do it so that they can’t be overheard,’ I said. ‘There are no concealed microphones in the open air, unless one of them is wearing one, but we wouldn’t lay traps for each other, would we, not when we’re working together towards the same objective. It’s different when one of the two isn’t working, when he’s reluctant.’ I wasted no time in alluding to that first deception, but he did not react, he kept silent, for him it was a matter of no importance; however hard he tried, he could never give it the same value I did, for him it was just one episode among many. ‘There could be devices in any interior space. In a bar or in a café, that is, if you know beforehand where you’ll be meeting. I presume that’s why you chose this very central, virtually unknown place. It’s very near where I live and yet I didn’t even know it existed, I’ve never been here before.’ I indicated the young reader with a nod of my head. ‘She’s the only danger here, but she’s some way away and, besides, she appears to be absorbed in reading Chateaubriand, at least I think so. She only looked over at me because she would rather we weren’t here, so that she could sit on our bench. Although her bench does get the sun, which is no small thing in January. She’s either a woman who likes to have her own way or a slave to habit.’

I wasn’t sure if I had used the word ‘we’ on purpose, to make it clear to him that I would brook no deceptions, no half-truths, or whether it had just slipped out involuntarily. It’s difficult to avoid sliding back into old habits when you’ve spent your whole life

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following them, a life in which I had always felt we were ‘we’, wherever I happened to be and even if I was alone. That ‘we’ instils courage, breeds patience, provides imaginary company and banishes scruples, or at least shares out responsibilities. Tupra had been part of that ‘we’ from the first day to the last. The truth is, I had spoken the word as if I’d never left and was not a total ‘absentee’, as if I hadn’t spent two years being a miserable ‘I’, exhausted and bewildered and nostalgic too.

‘You managed to make out what she’s reading? With no binoculars either? That’s a good sign, it means you haven’t entirely lost all your skills. That’s what I like to hear.’

‘No flattery, Tupra. Anyone could do that. Who is she anyway? You must know her.’

‘Me. Don’t be absurd, Tom, that’s a sure sign you’re out of practice.’ It didn’t take him long to put me in my place, and it served me right. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea. She’s clearly a highly cultivated local, there must be plenty of those around.’

I looked at him and I looked at the woman. Then back at him and again at her, the briefest of glances. Of course they knew each other. Besides, she had the kind of physique Tupra found attractive. True, he was attracted to many different female physiques – although not all, he could be scornful too, woundingly indifferent – his very unEnglish blue or grey eyes, immodestly pale, communicated his verdicts all too clearly. He had always seemed to me more southern than northern, with his all-embracing gaze, his full, soft lips, his thick eyelashes, his eyebrows like black smudges, his lustrous, beer-coloured skin and thick hair, curly at the temples like that of a flamenco singer. He had never explained to me the origin of his strange surname, assuming it was his real name.

‘Tell me what you want. What is this favour you’re asking? Who is this Spanish friend, the father of our reader over there? Her husband, her boss, her lover? Look, I really have nothing more to say

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to you. Probably not even that. In fact, I really don't know why I came.'

I found it hard not to like him, it was a struggle. What he had done to me in my now distant youth was unforgivable, especially so for the youngster I was then, the student, into whose skin I could no longer put myself. It was a very long time since I had stopped being him, the main – irreversible – thing was that I had become a different person, someone dedicated to my task, diligent, highly skilled, almost a fanatical member of that 'we'. An English patriot I told myself, despite being or having been more Spanish than anything. I wasn't sure how or when or why that change, that conversion, had taken place, it was probably the natural result of my activities, it happened with no previous thought on my part. You begin to serve a cause reluctantly, and then, after a time, you feel valued and useful and never again question the cause, you embrace it unthinkingly just as you greet each dawn, because that is what gives meaning to your life or to your daily existence. Everyone has some sense of loyalty to something or place: even those who have renounced it for reasons of duty or principle still reserve a small space for it, normally such a very secret space that even they might not know of its existence and will discover it unexpectedly and belatedly only when it's revealed to them. It could be loyalty to a single person, to a habit, to a place, to a town; to a business or an institution; to a body whose memory lingers and refuses to leave; to the past, so as to preserve continuity, or to the present, so as not to lose sight of it; to your comrades-in-arms, to those who trust you; to your superiors, to those who feel proud of you although they never tell you so and never will. Berta had long embodied my particular scrap of loyalty, in terms of affection and perhaps sexually too. Tupra had embodied it professionally, he was for me the ultimate representative of England, just as the ship's captain is for a sailor. Now that I had him there before me again and could feel his presence, I could confirm that he was a very pleasant

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man except when he became cutting or disdainful or violent or lecturing. Although even when he adopted that latter stance, it was still always interesting to listen to him, he never spouted nonsense or trivia and I rarely heard him utter a platitude, which is all that one hears these days, and reads too, which is even worse. He could be cordial when he wanted, he often laughed heartily, and his mere presence was enough to lift the spirits, and mine had been very low since returning to Madrid, or perhaps since long before that, ever since my years of hibernation in that English town where I had left a daughter. Tupra made one feel that the real party, the life and soul of it, was to be found wherever he happened to be, or that what really mattered was whatever he was pointing at, or focusing on through his rifle sight, wherever he was fixing his gaze or his attention.

He stubbed out his cigarette with his foot and immediately lit another, probably as a way to fend off the cold, which was starting to make itself felt. He still smoked those Rameses II cigarettes that come in a small, elaborate cardboard packet with colourful Egyptian motifs, one could apparently still buy them in London, in Smith & Sons or in Davidoff's perhaps, or in James J. Fox. Even in those pretentious or eccentric shops it was impossible now to find the Marcovitch cigarettes in their small metal box, the ones I had smoked in my distant youth and which had contributed indirectly to my fate. They are no longer made, but then everything stops being made before we die, without the slightest consideration for our habits, tastes and loyalties.

He indicated the reader with the tip of his cigarette, without actually looking at her.

'She's reading Chateaubriand you say. *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, I suppose,' he gave the title in English. 'I don't think anyone reads *The Genius of Christianity* any more.' And then he responded to my last comment. 'You came because you're bored and there are days when you don't know what to do with yourself. You came out

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of curiosity, defiance and vanity. You came in order to find out if you're still useful, because none of us is essential. You came because, even though you think you don't give a damn about anything, it's unbearable to be outside once you've been inside. You didn't leave entirely of your own will. We opened the door for you and we let you go, at the time you weren't much use to us, now, on the other hand, you are. You came because, having once been on the inside, you find it intolerable being on the outside not knowing what's going on, what plots are being hatched. Admittedly what you knew was only partial, the part you needed to know at any one time. And it's hard not to intervene, not to have some impact in the world. Not being able to stop any more misfortunes or at least try to. Once you've engaged in that life, it's very hard not to want to carry on being engaged.'

This was one of his favourite mottoes, at least with me, perhaps he offered different ones to different people. The first time we met, in Oxford, he had explained the nature of his work thus: 'We both act and don't act, Nevinson, or, rather, we don't carry out the actions we carry out, or the things we do are done by nobody. They simply happen.' In my youth, that had sounded to me like something out of a Beckett play.

'After having been Someone,' he added, 'it's very difficult to go back to being no one. Even if that Someone was invisible and almost no one would recognize him. That's why you've come, Nevinson, that's why you're here and not at home with your wife and children opening presents.' So he did know that in Spain we exchanged presents on 6 January rather than on Christmas Day. This time he addressed me as he used to do, by my surname. He usually either called me that or 'Tom'. 'To find out if you would become Someone again. Bear in mind, though, that, as usual, only you and I will know it; as well as some possible go-between should that prove necessary.'

'What, like that Molyneux fellow with his stupid Napoleonic

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forelock?’ I asked so as not to respond at once to his assertions, which he had strung together with such confidence. ‘What an impertinent fool you sent me that last time. In the end, I had to put him firmly in his place.’

Tupra laughed. He laughed like someone confessing to a prank the thought of which still amused him.

‘Ah, yes, young Molyneux. Well, believe it or not, he’s making a good career for himself. Of course, we don’t make great demands on people nowadays. For the first time in our history, we’re having difficulty recruiting agents, and many veterans are drifting away or working part-time, combining their work for us with working for someone who pays them better, big British companies, multinationals with headquarters in the territory and who knows what else. They ask permission and we give it to them, because remaining inactive is the worst possible thing for an agent: they’re better off helping to expand our economy, that at least is our bosses’ patriotic-pragmatic reasoning. If it’s for the benefit of the Realm, they don’t frown upon a little light industrial espionage. The problem is that there are more and more agents with two masters, and that always affects discipline and, of course, concentration. But that, I fear, is a sign of the times, and will continue. It won’t be long before I myself will have to think about what to do, I’ve had plenty of offers. The truth is that it’s just impossible to find talents like yours these days. Strangely, the fall of the Iron Curtain has made us less attractive.’ He had gone back to flattering me, openly this time. Then he immediately returned to Molyneux. ‘That’s right, I packed you off to that town where you were hidden away for a while, where was it now? Ipswich, York, Lincoln, Bristol, Bath? I don’t remember. I know it was somewhere with a river. The Avon, the Orwell, the Witham, the Ouse?’

Tupra couldn’t resist being irritating, or undermining your morale when he was supposed to be raising it, or playing down any sacrifices you had made. He was as likely to encourage you as to offend you,

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and both were ways of spurring you on. He knew perfectly well in which town and next to which river I had remained buried for several long years, not as he put it 'for a while'. That isn't how it had felt to me, but perhaps it had for him. For me, it had been a long, languishing eternity, I had even formed a small, short-lived family in order to survive it, the nurse Meg and the little girl Val. What, I wondered, would have become of them, I hoped they were all right, and that Meg had even found another husband and another father for Val. I sent them money every month from Madrid, and although Meg never acknowledged receipt and certainly never thanked me, the cheques were always cashed, one of my English accounts, the one in the name of James Rowland, which was how they had known me in that town. Dignity and scorn have their limits, those imposed by necessity. Tupra was playing with fire if he really did want a favour from me. I was tempted to get up and leave him there in that garden, and go and open some useless present or other in Calle de Pavía, which had long been my home and was now my wife's.

Yes, I was tempted, but I didn't leave. I took it on the chin, doused that flash of bad temper, and after a few seconds found myself feeling almost amused by Tupra's malice, his desire to stick his finger in your eye, only a little, not too deep, just enough to irritate. Except, that is, when things got serious, then he wouldn't use his finger, but something far worse. I hate to say it, but he knew me well, or perhaps he knew us all well, those from the past and those still to come. Perhaps we weren't so very remarkable once we had chosen to follow a path that was remarkable only as regards the world's apathetic masses, those who had no idea what was going on and didn't want to, those who simply wanted everything to work and to be in its proper place, every morning and every evening. He had hit the nail on the head, he had put it very well: 'It's unbearable to be outside once you've been inside.' I recognized myself in those words. And in his other words too, but I didn't need them. However weary of it all I had felt in the end, however retrospectively disillusioned, however resentful and even sickened, I missed the excitement . . . no, that's a stupid thing to say: I missed the *sense* of activity, of having orders, missions and operations to carry out, the sense of waiting, of being involved in the one-eyed or blind defence of the Realm (because I was always left slightly in the dark, never seeing the complete picture, perhaps even Tupra didn't either, although he would have had a wider view). What had at first been a trial and a curse, one that even used to keep me awake at night, like a knee pressing into my chest, with the

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