PAULO COELHO

The Zahir

A NOVEL OF OBSESSION

Translated from the Portuguese
by Margaret Jull Costa

O Mary, conceived without sin,
pray for us who turn to you. Amen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Brazil, PAULO COELHO is one of the most beloved writers of our time, renowned for his international bestseller *The Alchemist*. His books have been translated into 59 languages and published in 150 countries. He is also the recipient of numerous prestigious international awards, among them the Crystal Award by the World Economic Forum, France's Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, and Germany's Bambi 2001 Award. He was inducted into the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2002. Mr. Coelho writes a weekly column syndicated throughout the world.

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What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?

LUKE 15:4

ITHACA

When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,
pray that the road is long,
full of adventure, full of knowledge.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,
the angry Poseidon—do not fear them:
You will never find such as these on your path
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine
emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,
the fierce Poseidon you will never encounter,
if you do not carry them within your soul,
if your heart does not set them up before you.

Pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many, when,
with such pleasure, with such joy

you will enter ports seen for the first time;
stop at Phoenician markets,
and purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and sensual perfumes of all kinds,
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
visit many Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from scholars.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for many years;
and to anchor at the island when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have set out on the road.
She has nothing more to give you.
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
you must already have understood what Ithacas mean.

CONSTANTINE CAVAFY (1863–1933)
translated by Rae Dalven

DEDICATION

In the car, I mentioned that I had finished the first draft of my book. Later, as we set out together to climb a mountain in the Pyrenees which we both consider to be sacred and where we have already shared some extraordinary moments, I asked if she wanted to know the main theme of the book or its title; she would love to, she said, but, out of respect for my work, she had, until then, asked nothing, she had simply felt glad—very glad.

So I told her the title and the main theme. We continued walking in silence and, on the way back, we heard a noise; the wind was getting up, passing above the leafless trees and coming down toward us, causing the mountain once more to reveal its magic and its power.

Suddenly the snow began to fall. I stopped and stood contemplating that moment: the snowflakes falling, the gray sky, the forest, the woman by my side. The woman who has always been by my side.

I felt like telling her then, but decided to let her find out when she read these pages for the first time. This book is dedicated to you, Christina, my wife.

According to the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the idea of the Zahir comes from Islamic tradition and is thought to have arisen at some point in the eighteenth century. *Zahir,* in Arabic, means visible, present, incapable of going unnoticed. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered either a state of holiness or of madness.

FAUBOURG SAINT-PÈRES
Encyclopaedia of the Fantastic (1953)

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I AM A FREE MAN

Her name is Esther; she is a war correspondent who has just returned from Iraq because of the imminent invasion of that country; she is thirty years old, married, without children. He is an unidentified male, between twenty-three and twenty-five years old, with dark, Mongolian features. The two were last seen in a café on the Rue du Faubourg St-Honoré.

The police were told that they had met before, although no one knew how often: Esther had always said that the man—who concealed his true identity behind the name Mikhail—was someone very important, although she had never explained whether he was important for her career as a journalist or for her as a woman.

The police began a formal investigation. Various theories were put forward—kidnapping, blackmail, a kidnapping that had ended in murder—none of which were beyond the bounds of possibility given that, in her search for information, her work brought her into frequent contact with people who had links with terrorist cells. They discovered that, in the weeks prior to her disappearance, regular sums of money had been withdrawn from her bank account: those in charge of the investigation felt that these could have been payments made for information. She had taken no change of clothes with her, but, oddly enough, her passport was nowhere to be found.

He is a stranger, very young, with no police record, with no clue as to his identity.

She is Esther, thirty years old, the winner of two international prizes for journalism, and married.

My wife.

I immediately come under suspicion and am detained because I refuse to say where I was on the day she disappeared. However, a prison officer has just opened the door of my cell, saying that I'm a free man.

And why am I a free man? Because nowadays, everyone knows everything about everyone; you just have to ask and the information is there: where you've used your credit card, where you spend your time, whom you've slept with. In my case, it was even easier: a woman, another journalist, a friend of my wife, and divorced—which is why she doesn't mind revealing that she slept with me—came forward as a witness in my favor when she heard that I had been detained. She provided concrete proof that I was with her on the day and the night of Esther's disappearance.

“She asks him if he will marry her. He is taken aback; after all, she is young enough to be his granddaughter, and so he says nothing. At sunset, in the small living room, she asks if she can stroke his head before he goes to sleep. He enjoys another peaceful night.

“The following day, the subject of marriage comes up again, this time in the presence of her parents, who seem to think it a good idea; they just want their daughter to find a husband and to cease being a source of family shame. They invent a story about an old man who has come from far away and who is, in fact, a wealthy trader in carpets, but has grown weary of living a life of luxury and comfort, and has given it all up in order to go in search of adventure. People are impressed, they imagine a generous dowry, huge bank accounts, and think how lucky my mother is to have finally found someone who can take her away from that village in the back of beyond. My father listens to these stories with a mixture of fascination and surprise; he thinks of all the years he has spent alone, traveling, of all he has suffered, of how he never again found his own family, and he thinks that now, for the first time in his life, he could have a home of his own. He accepts the proposal, colludes with the lies about his past, and they get married according to the Muslim tradition. Two months later, she is pregnant with me.

“I live with my father until I am seven years old; he sleeps well, works in the fields, goes hunting, and talks to the other villagers about his money and his lands; and he looks at my mother as if she were the only good thing that has ever happened to him. I grow up believing that I am the son of a rich man, but one night, by the fire, he tells me about his past and why he married, but begs me not to tell anyone else. Soon, he says, he will die, and four months later he does. He breathes his last in my mother’s arms, smiling, as if he had never known a moment’s sadness. He dies a happy man.”

Mikhail is telling his story on a very cold spring night, although it is certainly not as cold as in Stalingrad, where temperatures can plummet to -35°C. We are sitting with some beggars who are warming themselves before an improvised bonfire. I had gone there after a second phone call from Mikhail, asking me to keep my part of the promise. During our conversation, he did not once mention the envelope he had left at my apartment, as if he knew—perhaps through the voice—that I had, in the end, decided to follow the signs and allow things to happen in their own time and thus free myself from the power of the Zahir.

When he asked me to meet him in one of the most dangerous parts of Paris, my first reaction was one of alarm. Normally, I would have said that I was far too busy and tried to convince him that we would be better off going to some cozy bar where we could safely discuss important matters. I was still afraid that he might have another epileptic fit in public, even though I now knew what to do, but that was preferable to the risk of being mugged when I was wearing an orthopedic collar and had no way of defending myself.

Mikhail insisted: I had to meet the beggars; they were part of his life and part of Esther’s life too. I had realized while I was in the hospital that there was something wrong with

my own life and that change was urgently needed. How best to achieve that change? By doing something totally different; for example, going to dangerous places and meeting social outcasts.

There is a story about a Greek hero, Theseus, who goes into a labyrinth in order to slay a monster. His beloved, Ariadne, gives him one end of a thread so that he can unroll it as he goes and thus be able to find his way out again. Sitting with those people, listening to Mikhail's story, it occurs to me that I have not experienced anything like this for a long time—the taste of the unknown, of adventure. Who knows, perhaps Ariadne's thread was waiting for me in precisely the kind of place that I would never normally visit, or only if I was convinced that I had to make an enormous effort to change my story and my life.

Mikhail continued his story, and I saw that the whole group was listening to what he was saying: the most satisfying encounters do not always happen around elegant tables in nice, warm restaurants.

"Every day, I have to walk nearly an hour to the village where I go to school. I see the women going to fetch water, the endless steppes, the Russian soldiers driving past in long convoys, the snow-capped mountains which, I am told, conceal a vast country: China. The village I walk to each day has a museum dedicated to its one poet, a mosque, a school, and three or four streets. We are taught about the existence of a dream, an ideal: we must fight for the victory of Communism and for equality among all human beings. I do not believe in this dream, because even in this wretchedly poor village, there are marked differences: the Party representatives are above everyone else; now and again, they visit the big city, Almaty, and return bearing packages of exotic food, presents for their children, expensive clothes.

"One afternoon, on my way home, I feel a strong wind blowing, see lights all around me, and lose consciousness for a few moments. When I come to, I am sitting on the ground, and a very white little girl, wearing a white dress with a blue belt, is floating in the air above me. She smiles but says nothing, then disappears.

"I run home, interrupt my mother's work, and tell her what I have seen. She is terrified and asks me never to repeat what I have just told her. She explains to me—as well as one can explain such a complicated concept to an eight-year-old boy—that it was just a hallucination. I tell her that I really did see the girl, that I can describe her in every detail. I add that I wasn't afraid and came home at once because I wanted her to know what had happened.

"The following day, coming back from school, I look for the girl, but she isn't there. Nothing happens for a whole week, and I begin to think that perhaps my mother was right: I must simply have dropped asleep and dreamed it all.

“Then, this time very early one morning, on my way to school, I again see the girl floating in the air and surrounded by a white halo. I don’t fall to the ground or see any flashing lights. We stand for a while, looking at each other; she smiles and I smile back; I ask her name, but receive no answer. At school, I ask my classmates if they have ever seen a girl floating in the air. They all laugh.

“During class, I am summoned to the headmaster’s office. He explains to me that I must have some mental problem—there is no such thing as ‘visions’; the only reality is what we see around us; religion was merely invented to fool the people. I ask about the mosque in the city; he says that only the old and superstitious go there, ignorant, idle people who lack the necessary energy to rebuild the socialist world. Then he issues a threat: if I repeat the story about the little girl, I will be expelled. Terrified, I beg him not to say anything to my mother, and he agrees, as long as I tell my classmates that I made the whole thing up.

“He keeps his promise and I keep mine. My friends aren’t much interested anyway and don’t even ask me to show them the place where I saw the girl. However, she continues to appear to me for the whole of the following month. Sometimes I faint first, sometimes I don’t. We never talk, we simply stay together for as long as she chooses to stay. My mother is beginning to grow worried because I always arrive home at a different time. One night, she forces me to explain what I do between leaving school and getting home. I again tell her about the little girl.

“To my surprise, this time, instead of scolding me, she says that she will go to the place with me. The following day, we wake early and, when we arrive, the girl appears, but my mother cannot see her. My mother tells me to ask the girl something about my father. I don’t understand the question, but I do as she requests, and then, for the first time, I hear the voice. The girl does not move her lips, but I know she is talking to me: She says that my father is fine and is watching over us, and that he is being rewarded now for all his sufferings on earth. She suggests that I remind my mother about the heater. I do so, and my mother starts to cry and explains that because of his many hardships during the war, the thing my father most enjoyed was sitting next to a heater. The girl says that the next time my mother passes that way she should tie a scrap of fabric and a prayer around the small tree growing there.

“The visions continue for a whole year. My mother tells some of her closest friends, who tell other friends, and soon the tree is covered in scraps of fabric. Everything is done in the greatest secrecy; the women ask about loved ones who have died; I listen to the voice’s answers and pass on the messages. Usually, their loved ones are fine, and on only two occasions does the girl ask the group to go to a nearby hill at sunrise and say a wordless prayer for the souls of those people. Apparently, I sometimes go into a trance, fall to the ground, and babble incomprehensibly, but I can never remember anything about it. I only know that when I am about to go into a trance, I feel a warm wind blowing and see bubbles of light all around me.

“One day, when I am taking a group to meet the little girl, we are prevented from doing so by the police. The women protest and shout, but we cannot get through. I am escorted to school, where the headmaster informs me that I have just been expelled for provoking rebellion and encouraging superstition.

“On the way back, I see that the tree has been cut down and the ribbons scattered on the ground. I sit down alone and weep, because those had been the happiest days of my life. At that moment, the girl reappears. She tells me not to worry, that this was all part of the plan, even the destruction of the tree, and that she will accompany me now for the rest of my days and will always tell me what I must do.”

“Did she never tell you her name?” asks one of the beggars.

“Never. But it doesn’t matter because I always know when she’s talking to me.”

“Could we find out something about our dead?”

“No. That only happened during one particular period. Now my mission is different. May I go on with my story?”

“Absolutely,” I say. “But can I just ask one thing? There’s a town in southwest France called Lourdes. A long time ago, a shepherdess saw a little girl, who seems to correspond to your vision.”

“No, you’re wrong,” says one of the older beggars, who has an artificial leg. “The shepherdess, whose name was Bernadette, saw the Virgin Mary.”

“I’ve written a book about her visions and I had to study the matter closely,” I say. “I read everything that was published about it at the end of the nineteenth century; I had access to Bernadette’s many statements to the police, to the church, and to scholars. At no point does she say that she saw a woman; she insists it was a girl. She repeated the same story all her life and was deeply angered by the statue that was placed in the grotto; she said it bore no resemblance to her vision, because she had seen a little girl, not a woman. Nevertheless, the church appropriated the story, the visions, and the place and transformed the apparition into the Mother of Jesus, and the truth was forgotten. If a lie is repeated often enough, it ends up convincing everyone. The only difference is that ‘the little girl’—as Bernadette always referred to her—had a name.”

“What was it?” asks Mikhail.

“‘I am the Immaculate Conception.’ Obviously that isn’t a name like Beatriz or Maria or Isabelle. She describes herself as a fact, an event, a happening, which is sometimes translated as ‘I am birth without sex.’ Now, please, go on with your story.”

“Before he does, can I ask you something?” says another beggar, who must be about my age. “You just said that you’ve written a book; what’s the title?”

“I’ve written many books.”

And I tell him the title of the book in which I mention the story of Bernadette and her vision.

“So you’re the husband of the journalist?”

“Are you Esther’s husband?” asks a female beggar, wide-eyed; she is dressed garishly, in a green hat and a purple coat.

I don’t know what to say.

“Why hasn’t she been back here?” asks someone else. “I hope she isn’t dead. She was always going to such dangerous places. I often told her she shouldn’t. Look what she gave me!”

And she shows me a scrap of bloodstained fabric, part of the dead soldier’s shirt.

“No, she’s not dead,” I say. “But I’m surprised to hear that she used to come here.”

“Why? Because we’re different?”

“No, you misunderstand me. I’m not judging you. I’m surprised and pleased to know that she did.”

However, the vodka we have been drinking to ward off the cold is having an effect on all of us.

“Now you’re being ironic,” says a burly man with long hair, who looks as if he hasn’t shaved for several days. “If you think you’re in such bad company, why don’t you leave.”

I have been drinking too and that gives me courage.

“Who are you? What kind of life is this? You’re healthy, you could work, but instead you prefer to hang around doing nothing!”

“We choose to stay outside, outside a world that is fast collapsing, outside people who live in constant fear of losing something, who walk along the street as if everything was fine, when, in fact, everything is bad, very bad indeed! Don’t you beg too? Don’t you ask for alms from your boss to pay the owner of your apartment?”

“Aren’t you ashamed to be wasting your life?” asks the woman in the purple coat.

“Who said I’m wasting my life? I do precisely what I want to do.”

The burly man interrupts, saying:

“And what is it you want? To live on top of the world? Who told you that the mountain is necessarily better than the plain? You think we don’t know how to live, don’t you? Well, your wife understood that we know *exactly* what we want from life. Do you know what we want? Peace! Freedom! And not to be obliged to follow the latest fashions—we make our own fashions here! We drink when we want to and sleep whenever we feel like it! Not one person here chose slavery and we’re proud of it, even though you and people like you may think we’re just a lot of pathetic freeloaders!”

The voices are beginning to grow aggressive. Mikhail steps in:

“Do you want to hear the rest of my story or shall we leave now?”

“He’s criticizing us!” says the man with the artificial leg. “He came here to judge us, as if he were God!”

There are a few more rumbles of complaint, someone slaps me on the back, I offer around my cigarettes, the bottle of vodka is placed in my hand again. People gradually calm down, and I am still surprised and shocked that these people knew Esther, apparently better than I did, since she gave them—and not me—a piece of that bloodstained shirt.

Mikhail goes on with his story.

“Since I have nowhere to go and study and I’m still too young to look after horses—which are the pride of our region and our country—I become a shepherd. During the first week, one of the sheep dies and a rumor goes around that I’m cursed, that I’m the son of a man who came from far away and promised my mother great wealth, then ended up leaving us nothing. The Communists may have told them that religion is just a way of giving false hopes to the desperate, they may all have been brought up to believe that only reality exists and that anything our eyes can’t see is just the fruit of the human imagination; but the ancient traditions of the steppes remain untouched and are passed by word of mouth across the generations.

“Now that the tree has been felled, I no longer see the little girl, although I still hear her voice. I ask her to help me in tending the flocks, and she tells me to be patient; there are difficult times ahead, but before I am twenty-two a woman from far away will come and carry me off to see the world. She also tells me that I have a mission to fulfill, and that mission is to spread the true energy of love throughout the world.

“The owner of the sheep is worried by the increasingly wild rumors. Oddly, the people spreading these rumors and trying to destroy my life are the very people whom the little girl had helped during the whole of the previous year. One day, he decides to go to the

Communist Party office in the next village, where he learns that both I and my mother are considered to be enemies of the people. I am immediately dismissed. Not that this greatly affects our life, because my mother does embroidery for a company in the largest city in the region and there no one knows that we are enemies of the people and of the working classes; all the factory owners want is for her to continue working on her embroidery from dawn to dusk.

"I now have all the time in the world and so I wander the steppes with the hunters, who know my story and believe that I have magical powers, because they always find foxes when I'm around. I spend whole days at the museum of the poet, studying his possessions, reading his books, listening to the people who come there to recite his verses. Now and then, I feel the warm wind blowing, see the lights, and fall to the ground, and then the voice tells me concrete facts—when the next drought will come, when the animals will fall sick, when the traders will arrive. I tell no one except my mother, who is becoming ever more anxious and concerned about me.

"One day, she takes me to see a doctor who is visiting the area. After listening attentively to my story, taking notes, peering into my eyes with a strange instrument, listening to my heart, and tapping my knee, he diagnoses a form of epilepsy. He says it isn't contagious and that the attacks will diminish with age.

"I know it isn't an illness, but I pretend to believe him so as to reassure my mother. The director of the museum, who notices me struggling to learn, takes pity on me and becomes my teacher. With him I learn geography and literature and the one thing that will prove vital to me in the future: English. One afternoon, the voice asks me to tell the director that he will shortly be offered an important post. When I tell him this, all I hear is a timid laugh and a firm response: there isn't the remotest chance of this ever happening because not only has he never been a Party member, he is a devout Muslim.

"I am fifteen years old. Two months after this conversation, I sense that something is changing in the region. The normally arrogant civil servants are suddenly much kinder and ask if I would like to go back to school. Great convoys of Russian soldiers head off to the frontier. One evening, while I am studying in the little office that once belonged to the poet, the director comes running in and looks at me with a mixture of alarm and embarrassment. He tells me that the one thing he could never imagine happening—the collapse of the Communist regime—is happening right now, and with incredible speed. The former Soviet republics are becoming independent countries; the news from Almaty is all about the formation of a new government, and he has been appointed to govern the province!

"Instead of joyfully embracing me, he asks me how I knew this was going to happen. Had I overheard someone talking about it? Had I been engaged by the secret services to spy on him because he did not belong to the Party? Or—worst of all—had I, at some point in my life, made a pact with the devil?

“I remind him that he knows my story: the little girl, the voice, the attacks that allow me to hear things that other people do not know. He says this is just part of my illness; there is only one prophet, Mohammed, and everything that needed to be said has already been revealed. This, he goes on, does not mean that the devil is not still abroad in the world, using all kinds of tricks—including a supposed ability to foresee the future—to deceive the weak and lure people away from the true faith. He had given me a job because Islam demands that we should be charitable, but now he deeply regretted it: I am clearly either a tool of the secret services or an envoy of the devil.

“He dismisses me there and then.

“Life had not been easy before and it now becomes harder still. The factory for which my mother works, and which once belonged to the government, falls into private hands, and the new owners have very different ideas; they restructure the whole business and she, too, is dismissed. Two months later, we have nothing to live on, and all that remains for us is to leave the village where I have spent my whole life and go in search of work.

“My grandparents refuse to leave; they would rather die of hunger on the land where they were born and have spent their entire lives. My mother and I go to Almaty and I see my first big city: I am amazed at the cars, the huge buildings, the neon signs, the escalators and—above all—the elevators. My mother gets a job in a shop and I go to work at a garage as a trainee mechanic. Much of the money we earn is sent back to my grandparents, but there is enough left over for us to be able to eat and for me to see things I have never seen before: films, fairs, and football games.

“When we move to the city, my attacks vanish, but so does the voice and the little girl’s presence. It’s better that way, I decide. I am too fascinated by Almaty and too busy earning a living to miss the invisible friend who has been my companion since I was eight years old; I realize that all it takes to become someone in the world is a little intelligence. Then, one Sunday night, I am sitting at our small apartment’s only window, which looks out onto a small dirt alleyway. I am very worried because, the day before, I dented a car as I was maneuvering it inside the garage and am so frightened I might get the sack that I haven’t eaten all day.

“Suddenly, I feel the warm wind and see the lights. According to my mother, I fell to the floor and spoke in a strange language and the trance seemed to last longer than usual. I remember that it was then that the voice reminded me of my mission. When I come to, I can feel the presence of the little girl again, and although I cannot see her, I can talk to her.

“A change of home has meant a change of worlds too, and I am no longer interested in all this. Nevertheless, I ask her what my mission is: the voice tells me that it is the mission shared by all human beings—to fill the world with the energy of total love. I ask about the one thing that is really worrying me at that precise moment: the dented car and the owner’s reaction. She tells me not to worry, just tell the truth and he will understand.

“I work at the garage for five more years. I make friends, have my first girlfriends, discover sex, get involved in street fights; in short, I have an entirely normal adolescence. I have a few fits and, at first, my friends are surprised, but then I invent some story about being in possession of ‘higher powers’ and this earns me their respect. They ask for my help, consult me when they have problems with their girlfriends or with their families, but I never ask the voice for advice—the traumatic experience of seeing the tree cut down all those years ago has made me realize that when you help someone you get only ingratitude in return.

“If my friends probe further, I tell them I belong to a ‘secret society.’ After decades of religious repression in Kazakhstan, mysticism and the esoteric are now very fashionable in Almaty. Books are published about people with so-called higher powers, about gurus and teachers from India and China; courses of self-improvement abound. I go to a few, but realize that I have nothing to learn. The only thing I really trust is the voice, but I am too busy to pay attention to what it is saying.

“One day, a woman in a four-wheel drive stops at the garage where I work and asks me to fill up the tank. She addresses me in halting, heavily accented Russian, and I respond in English. She seems relieved and asks if I know of an interpreter who could go with her into the interior of Kazakhstan.

“The moment she says this, the little girl’s presence fills the whole place, and I understand that this is the person I have been waiting for all my life. She is my way out, and I must not miss this opportunity. I tell her that, if she wants, I can be her interpreter. She says that I obviously have a job already and, besides, she needs someone older, more experienced, someone who is free to travel. I say that I know every path in the steppes and the mountains, and I lie, saying that the job I have is only temporary. I beg her to give me a chance; reluctantly, she arranges to meet me later in the city’s most luxurious hotel.

“We meet in the lounge; she tests my knowledge of English, asks a series of questions about the geography of Central Asia, wants to know who I am and where I come from. She is suspicious and will not say exactly what she does or where she wants to go. I try to play my part as best I can, but I can see she’s not convinced.

“And I am surprised to realize that, for no apparent reason, I am in love with her, with this woman I have only known for a matter of hours. I control my anxiety and once more place my trust in the voice. I plead for help from the invisible girl and ask her to enlighten me; I promise that, if I get this job, I will carry out the mission entrusted to me; she had told me that one day a woman would come and take me far away from there; she had been there with me when the woman stopped to fill her tank; I need a positive response.

“After Esther’s intense questioning, I sense that I am beginning to win her confidence; she warns me that what she wants to do is completely illegal. She explains that she is a journalist and wants to write an article about the American bases being built in a

neighboring country in preparation for a war that is about to begin. Her application for a visa has been turned down and so we will have to travel on foot, crossing the border at points where there are no guards. Her contacts have given her a map and shown her where it is safe to cross, but she says she will reveal none of this until we are far from Almaty. If I want to go with her, I must be at the hotel in two days' time at eleven o'clock in the morning. She promises me only a week's wages, unaware that I have a permanent job, earn enough to help out my mother and my grandparents, and that my boss trusts me despite having been witness to several of the convulsive attacks—what he calls my "epileptic fits"—that always accompany my contacts with the unknown world.

"Before saying goodbye, the woman tells me her name—Esther—and warns me that if I go to the police to report her, she will be arrested and deported. She also says that there are moments in life when we need to trust blindly in intuition, which is what she is doing now. I tell her not to worry. I feel tempted to say something about the voice and the presence, but decide against it. I go home, talk to my mother, and tell her I've found a new job as an interpreter, which is better paid but will involve me going away for a while. She doesn't seem in the least concerned; everything around me is developing as if it had long been planned and we were all just waiting for the right moment.

"I sleep badly and the following day I arrive earlier than usual at the garage. I tell my boss that I'm sorry, but I've found a new job. He says that, sooner or later, they'll find out about my illness, that it's very risky giving up steady employment for something less certain, but, just as happened with my mother, he makes no real fuss about letting me go, as if the voice were manipulating the minds of all the people I have to talk to that day, facilitating things, helping me take the first step.

"When Esther and I meet at the hotel, I tell her: 'If we're caught, you'll just be deported but I'll get put in prison, possibly for many years. Since I'm running the greater risk, you really ought to trust me.' She seems to understand what I'm saying. We walk for two days; a group of men are waiting for her on the other side of the frontier; she goes off with them and returns shortly afterward, frustrated and angry. The war is about to start, all the roads are being guarded, and it's impossible to go any farther without being arrested as a spy.

"We start the journey back. The usually self-confident Esther seems suddenly sad and confused. To distract her, I recite some lines written by the poet who used to live close to my village, at the same time thinking that in forty-eight hours this whole experience will be over. However, I prefer to trust in the voice. I must do everything I can to prevent Esther leaving as suddenly as she came; perhaps I should show her that I have always been waiting for her, that she is important to me.

"That night, after rolling out our sleeping bags near some rocks, I reach out and touch her hand. She gently pulls back, saying that she's married. I realize that I have made a foolish blunder; then, since I now have nothing to lose, I tell her about the visions I had as a child, about my mission to spread love throughout the world, about the doctor's diagnosis of epilepsy.

“To my surprise, she understands exactly what I’m talking about. She tells me a little about her life. She says that she loves her husband and that he loves her, but that, with the passing of time, something important has been lost, and she prefers now to be far away from him, rather than watch her marriage slowly disintegrate. She had everything in life, and yet she was unhappy; although she could easily go through the rest of her life pretending that this unhappiness didn’t exist, she was terrified of falling into a depression from which she might never emerge.

“That is why she decided to give up everything and go in search of adventure, in search of things that leave her no time to think about a love that is dying. However, the more she looked, the more confused she became, the more alone she felt. She feels she has completely lost her way, and the experience we have just had seems to be telling her that she is on the wrong track and should go back to her daily routine.

“I suggest trying a less closely guarded trail, say that I know smugglers in Almaty who could help us, but she seems to have no energy, no will to go on.

“At that moment, the voice tells me to bless Esther and to dedicate her to the earth. Without really knowing what I am doing, I get up, open my backpack, dip my fingers in the small bottle of oil we have taken with us for cooking, place my hand on her head and pray in silence, asking, at the end, that she continue her search, because it is important for all of us. The voice is telling me—and I repeat the words out loud to her—that if just one person changes, the whole human race is changed. She puts her arms around me, and I can feel the earth blessing her, and we stay like that together for several hours.

“Afterward, I ask if she believes what I told her about the voice. She says that she both does and doesn’t. She believes that we all have a power that we never use and that I have clearly come into contact with that power through my epileptic fits, but this is something we can find out about together. She has been thinking of interviewing a nomad who lives to the north of Almaty and who is said by everyone to have magical powers. I am welcome to accompany her. When she tells me the man’s name, I realize that I know his grandson and that this could greatly facilitate matters.

“We drive through Almaty, stopping only to fill the tank with gas and buy some food, then we drive on in the direction of a tiny village near an artificial lake constructed by the Soviet regime. I find out where the nomad is staying, but despite telling one of his assistants that I know the man’s grandson, we still have to wait many hours, for there is a large crowd wanting the advice of this man they consider to be a saint.

“At last, we are ushered in. By acting as interpreter at that interview and by reading and rereading Esther’s article when it was published, I learn several things I needed to know.

“Esther asks why people are sad.

“‘That’s simple,’ says the old man. ‘They are the prisoners of their personal history. Everyone believes that the main aim in life is to follow a plan. They never ask if that plan

is theirs or if it was created by another person. They accumulate experiences, memories, things, other people's ideas, and it is more than they can possibly cope with. And that is why they forget their dreams.'

"Esther remarks that many people say to her, 'You're lucky, you know what you want from life, whereas I don't even know what I want to do.'

"'Of course they know,' replies the nomad. 'How many people do you know who say: I've never done what I wanted, but then, that's life. If they say they haven't done what they wanted, then, at some point, they must have known what it was that they did want. As for life, it's just a story that other people tell us about the world and about how we should behave in the world.'

"'Even worse are those people who say: I'm happy because I'm sacrificing my life for those I love.'

"'And do you think that the people who love us want to see us suffering for their sakes? Do you think that love is a source of suffering?'

"'To be honest, yes.'

"'Well, it shouldn't be.'

"'If I forget the story other people have told me, I'll also forget a lot of very important things life has taught me. What was the point of struggling to learn so much? What was the point of struggling to gain experience, so as to be able to deal with my career, my husband, my various crises?'

"'Accumulated knowledge is useful when it comes to cooking or living within your means or wrapping up warm in winter or respecting certain limits or knowing where particular bus and train lines go. Do you believe that your past loves have taught you to love better?'

"'They've taught me to know what I want.'

"'I didn't ask that. Have your past loves taught you to love your husband better?'

"'No, on the contrary. In order to surrender myself to him, I had to forget all the scars left by other men. Is that what you mean?'

"'In order for the true energy of love to penetrate your soul, your soul must be as if you had just been born. Why are people unhappy? Because they want to imprison that energy, which is impossible. Forgetting your personal history means leaving that channel clear, allowing that energy to manifest itself each day in whatever way it chooses, allowing yourself to be guided by it.'

“‘That’s all very romantic, but very difficult too, because that energy gets blocked by all kinds of things: commitments, children, your social situation…’

“‘…and, after a while, by despair, fear, loneliness, and your attempts to control the uncontrollable. According to the tradition of the steppes—which is known as the Tengri—in order to live fully, it is necessary to be in constant movement; only then can each day be different from the last. When they passed through cities, the nomads would think: The poor people who live here, for them everything is always the same. The people in the cities probably looked at the nomads and thought: Poor things, they have nowhere to live. The nomads had no past, only the present, and that is why they were always happy, until the Communist governors made them stop traveling and forced them to live on collective farms. From then on, little by little, they came to believe that the story society told them was true. Consequently, they have lost all their strength.’

“‘No one nowadays can spend their whole life traveling.’

“‘Not physically, no, but they can on a spiritual plane. Going farther and farther, distancing yourself from your personal history, from what you were forced to become.’

“‘How does one go about abandoning the story one was told?’

“‘By repeating it out loud in meticulous detail. And as we tell our story, we say goodbye to what we were and, as you’ll see if you try, we create space for a new, unknown world. We repeat the old story over and over until it is no longer important to us.’

“‘Is that all?’

“‘There is just one other thing: as those spaces grow, it is important to fill them up quickly, even if only provisionally, so as not to be left with a feeling of emptiness.’

“‘How?’

“‘With different stories, with experiences we never dared to have or didn’t want to have. That is how we change. That is how love grows. And when love grows, we grow with it.’

“‘Does that mean we might lose things that are important?’

“‘Never. The important things always stay; what we lose are the things we thought were important but which are, in fact, useless, like the false power we use to control the energy of love.’

“The old man tells her that her time is up and that he has other people to see. Despite my pleas he proves inflexible, but tells Esther that if she ever comes back, he will teach her more.”

“Esther is only staying in Almaty for another week, but promises to return. During that time, I tell her my story over and over and she tells me hers, and we see that the old man is right: something is leaving us, we are lighter, although we could not really say that we are any happier.

“The old man had given us another piece of advice: fill that space up quickly. Before she leaves, she asks if I would like to go to France so that we can continue this process of forgetting. She has no one with whom she can share all this; she can’t talk to her husband; she doesn’t trust the people she works with; she needs someone from outside, from far away, who has, up until then, had nothing to do with her personal history.

“I say that I would like to do that and only then mention what the voice had prophesied. I also tell her that I don’t know French and that my only work experience so far has been tending sheep and working in a garage.

“At the airport, she asks me to take an intensive course in French. I ask her why she wants me to go to France. She repeats what she has said and admits she’s afraid of the space opening up around her as she erases her personal history; she’s afraid that everything will rush back in more intensely than before, and then there will be no way of freeing herself from her past. She tells me not to worry about buying a ticket or getting a visa; she will take care of everything. Before going through passport control, she looks at me, smiles, and says that, although she may not have known it, she had been waiting for me as well. The days we had spent together had been the happiest she had known in the last three years.

“I start working at night, as a bouncer at a striptease joint, and during the day I devote myself to learning French. Oddly enough, the attacks diminish, but the presence also goes away. I tell my mother that I’ve been invited to go abroad, and she tells me not to be so naive, I’ll never hear from the woman again.

“A year later, Esther returns to Almaty. The expected war has begun, and someone else has written an article about the secret American bases, but Esther’s interview with the old man had been a great success and now she has been asked to write a long article on the disappearance of the nomads. ‘Apart from that,’ she said, ‘it’s been ages since I told my story to anyone and I’m starting to get depressed.’

“I help put her in touch with the few tribes who still travel, with the Tengri tradition, and with local shamans. I am now fluent in French, and over supper she gives me various forms from the consulate to fill in, gets me a visa, buys me a ticket, and I come to Paris. We both notice that, as we empty our minds of old stories, a new space opens up, a mysterious feeling of joy slips in, our intuitions grow sharper, we become braver, take more risks, do things which might be right or which might be wrong, we can’t be sure, but we do them anyway. The days seem longer and more intense.

“When I arrive in Paris, I ask where I’m going to work, but she has already made plans: she has persuaded the owner of a bar to allow me to appear there once a week, telling him

that I specialize in an exotic kind of performance art from Kazakhstan which consists of encouraging people to talk about their lives and to empty their minds.

"At first, it is very difficult to get the sparse audience to join in, but the drunks enjoy it and word spreads. 'Come and tell your old story and discover a new one,' says the small handwritten notice in the window, and people, thirsty for novelty, start to come.

"One night, I experience something strange: it is not me on the small improvised stage in one corner of the bar, it is the presence. And instead of telling stories from my own country and then moving on to suggest that they tell their stories, I merely say what the voice tells me to. Afterward, one of the spectators is crying and speaks about his marriage in intimate detail to the other strangers there.

"The same thing happens the following week—the voice speaks for me, asking people to tell stories not about love, but about the lack of love, and the energy in the air is so different that the normally discreet French begin discussing their personal lives in public. I am also managing to control my attacks better; if, when I'm on stage, I start to see the lights or feel that warm wind, I immediately go into a trance, lose consciousness, and no one notices. I only have 'epileptic fits' at moments when I am under great nervous strain.

"Other people join the group. Three young men the same age as me, who had nothing to do but travel the world—the nomads of the Western world; and a couple of musicians from Kazakhstan, who have heard about their fellow countryman's 'success,' ask if they can join the show, since they are unable to find work elsewhere. We include percussion instruments in the performance. The bar is becoming too small, and we find a room in the restaurant where we currently appear; but now we are starting to outgrow that space too, because when people tell their stories, they feel braver; when they dance, they are touched by the energy and begin to change radically; love—which, in theory, should be threatened by all these changes—becomes stronger, and they recommend our meetings to their friends.

"Esther continues traveling in order to write her articles, but always comes to the meetings when she is in Paris. One night, she tells me that our work at the restaurant is no longer enough; it only reaches those people who have the money to go there. We need to work with the young. Where will we find them, I ask? They drift, travel, abandon everything, and dress as beggars or characters out of sci-fi movies.

"She says that beggars have no personal history, so why don't we go to them and see what we can learn. And that is how I came to meet all of you.

"These are the things I have experienced. You have never asked me who I am or what I do, because you're not interested. But today, because we have a famous writer in our midst, I decided to tell you."

"But you're talking about your past," said the woman in the clashing hat and coat. "Even though the old nomad…"

“What’s a nomad?” someone asks.

“People like us,” she responds, proud to know the meaning of the word. “People who are free and manage to live with only what they can carry.”

I correct her:

“That’s not quite true. They’re not poor.”

“What do you know about poverty?” The tall, aggressive man, who now has even more vodka in his veins, looks straight at me. “Do you really think that poverty has to do with having no money? Do you think we’re miserable wretches just because we go around begging money from rich writers and guilt-ridden couples, from tourists who think how terribly squalid Paris has become or from idealistic young people who think they can save the world? You’re the one who’s poor—you have no control over your time, you can’t do what you want, you’re forced to follow rules you didn’t invent and which you don’t understand…”

Mikhail again interrupted the conversation and asked the woman:

“What did you actually want to know?”

“I wanted to know why you’re telling us your story when the old nomad said you should forget it.”

“It’s not my story anymore: whenever I speak about the past now, I feel as if I were talking about something that has nothing to do with me. All that remains in the present are the voice, the presence, and the importance of fulfilling my mission. I don’t regret the difficulties I experienced; I think they helped me to become the person I am today. I feel the way a warrior must feel after years of training: he doesn’t remember the details of everything he learned, but he knows how to strike when the time is right.”

“And why did you and that journalist keep coming to visit us?”

“To take nourishment. As the old nomad from the steppes said, the world we know today is merely a story someone has told to us, but it is not the true story. The other story includes special gifts and powers and the ability to go beyond what we know. I have lived with the presence ever since I was a child and, for a time, was even capable of seeing her, but Esther showed me that I was not alone. She introduced me to other people with special gifts, people who could bend forks by sheer force of will, or carry out surgery using rusty penknives and without anaesthesia, so that the patient could get up after the operation and leave.

“I am still learning to develop my unknown potential, but I need allies, people like you who have no personal history.”

I felt like telling my story to these strangers too, in order to begin the process of freeing myself from the past, but it was late and I had to get up early the next day to see the doctor and have him remove the orthopedic collar.

I asked Mikhail if he wanted a lift, but he said no, he needed to walk a little, because he felt Esther's absence particularly acutely that night. We left the group and headed for a street where I would be able to find a taxi.

"I think that woman was right," I said. "If you tell a story, then that means you're still not really free of it."

"I am free, but, as I'm sure you'll understand, therein lies the secret; there are always some stories that are 'interrupted,' and they are the stories that remain nearest to the surface and so still occupy the present; only when we close that story or chapter can we begin the next one."

I remembered reading something similar on the Internet; it was attributed to me, although I didn't write it:

That is why it is so important to let certain things go. To release them. To cut loose. People need to understand that no one is playing with marked cards; sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. Don't expect to get anything back, don't expect recognition for your efforts, don't expect your genius to be discovered or your love to be understood. Complete the circle. Not out of pride, inability, or arrogance, but simply because whatever it is no longer fits in your life. Close the door, change the record, clean the house, get rid of the dust. Stop being who you were and become who you are.

But I had better find out what Mikhail means.

"What are 'interrupted stories'?"

"Esther isn't here. She reached a point where she could go no further in the process of emptying herself of unhappiness and allowing joy to flow in. Why? Because her story, like that of millions of other people, is bound up with the energy of love. It can't evolve on its own: she must either stop loving or wait until her beloved comes to her.

"In failed marriages, when one person stops walking, the other is forced to do the same. And while he or she is waiting, other lovers appear, or there is charitable work to get involved in, there are the children to worry about, there are long hours at the office, etc. It

would be much easier to talk openly about things, to insist, to yell: 'Let's move on, we're dying of tedium, anxiety, fear.'"

"Are you telling me that Esther can't continue with the process of freeing herself from sadness because of me?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I don't believe that one person can blame another, under any circumstances. All I said was that she has a choice between stopping loving you or making you come to her."

"That's what she's doing."

"I know, but, if it were up to me, we would only go to her when the voice allows us to."

Right, this should be the last you see of the orthopedic collar. I certainly hope so anyway. But, please, avoid making any sudden movements. Your muscles need to get used to working on their own again. By the way, what happened to the girl who made those predictions?"

"What girl? What predictions?"

"Didn't you tell me at the hospital that someone had claimed to hear a voice warning that something was going to happen to you?"

"Oh, it wasn't a girl. And you said you were going to find out about epilepsy for me."

"Yes, I got in touch with a specialist and asked him if he knew of any such cases. His answer surprised me a bit, but let me just remind you that medicine has its mysteries. Do you remember the story I told you about the boy who goes out to buy five apples and returns with two?"

"Yes, and how he might have lost them or given them away, or else they might have turned out to be more expensive than expected, etc. Don't worry, I know there are no absolute answers. But, first, did Joan of Arc suffer from epilepsy?"

"Oddly enough, my friend mentioned her during our conversation. Joan of Arc started hearing voices when she was thirteen. Her statements reveal that she saw lights, which is one of the symptoms of an attack. According to the neurologist, Dr. Lydia Bayne, the warrior-saint's ecstatic experiences were caused by what we now call musicogenic epilepsy, which is provoked by hearing a particular kind of sound or music: in Joan's case, it was the sound of bells. Were you there when the boy had a fit?"

“Yes.”

“Was there any music playing?”

“I can’t remember. But even if there was, the clatter of cutlery and the buzz of conversation would have drowned it out.”

“Did he seem tense?”

“Yes, very.”

“That’s another thing that can provoke an attack. Epilepsy has been around for longer than you might think. In Mesopotamia, there are remarkably accurate descriptions of what they called ‘the falling sickness,’ which was followed by convulsions. Ancient people believed that it was caused by demons invading a person’s body; only much later on did the Greek Hippocrates relate these convulsions to some dysfunction of the brain. Even so, epileptics are still the victims of prejudice.”

“I’m sure. I was absolutely terrified when it happened.”

“You mentioned the word prophecy, and so I asked my friend to concentrate his researches in that area. According to him, most scientists agree that, although a lot of famous people have suffered from epilepsy, the disease itself does not confer greater or lesser powers on anyone. Nevertheless, the more famous epileptics did succeed in persuading other people to see their fits as having a mystical aura.”

“Give me an example of some famous epileptics.”

“Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Dante…I didn’t make a full list, since what you were interested in was the boy’s prophecy. What’s his name, by the way?”

“You don’t know him, and since you’ve nearly always got another appointment to go to, perhaps you’d better just finish your explanation.”

“All right. Medical scientists who study the Bible are sure that the apostle Paul was an epileptic. They base this on the fact that, on the road to Damascus, he saw a brilliant light near him which caused him to fall to the ground, leaving him temporarily blind and unable to eat or drink for some days. In medical terms, this is known as ‘temporal lobe epilepsy.’”

“I don’t think the church would agree.”

“I’m not even sure that I agree, but that’s what the medical literature says. Other epileptics develop their self-destructive side, as was the case with van Gogh. He described his convulsions as ‘the storm within.’ In Saint-Rémy, where he was a patient, one of the nurses saw him having a convulsive seizure.”

“At least he managed in his paintings to transform his self-destruction into a reconstruction of the world.”

“Some people suspect that Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland* in order to describe his own experiences of epilepsy. The story at the beginning of the book, when Alice falls down a black hole, is an experience familiar to most epileptics. During her journey through Wonderland, Alice often sees things flying and she herself feels very light—another very precise description of the effects of an epileptic attack.”

“So it would seem epileptics have a propensity for art.”

“Not at all, it’s just that because artists tend to become famous, art and epilepsy become linked in people’s minds. Literature is full of examples of writers with a suspected or confirmed diagnosis of epilepsy: Molière, Edgar Allan Poe, Flaubert…. Dostoevsky had his first attack when he was nine years old, and said that it brought him moments when he felt utterly at peace with the world as well as moments of terrible depression. Don’t take all of this too seriously, and don’t go thinking that you might develop epilepsy because of your accident. I haven’t come across a single case of epilepsy being caused by colliding with a motorbike.”

“As I said, this is someone I actually know.”

“Does the boy with the predictions really exist or did you invent all this simply because you think you might have passed out when you stepped off the pavement?”

“On the contrary, I hate knowing about illnesses. Whenever I read a medical book, I immediately start to get all the symptoms.”

“Let me tell you something, but please don’t take it the wrong way. I think this accident did you a lot of good. You seem calmer, less obsessed. A brush with death always helps us to live our lives better; that’s what your wife told me when she gave me a bit of bloodstained fabric, which I always carry with me, even though, as a doctor, I see death, close to, every day.”

“Did she say why she gave you the cloth?”

“She was very generous in her description of my work. She said that I was capable of combining technique with intuition, discipline with love. She told me that a soldier, before he died, had asked her to take his blood-soaked shirt, cut it into pieces, and share those pieces among people who were genuinely trying to reveal the world as it is. I imagine you, with all your books, must also have a bit of this shirt.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Do you know why?”

"I do, or, rather, I'm beginning to find out."

"And since I'm not only your doctor, but your friend, may I give you some advice? If this epileptic boy did tell you that he can foresee the future, then he knows nothing about medicine."

Zagreb, Croatia. 6:30 a.m.

Marie and I are sitting by a frozen fountain. It appears that, this year, spring has decided not to happen; indeed, it looks as if we will jump straight from winter into summer. In the middle of the fountain stands a column with a statue on top.

I have spent the entire afternoon giving interviews and cannot bear to say another word about my new book. The journalists all ask the usual questions: Has my wife read the book (I don't know)? Do I feel I've been unfairly treated by the critics (what?)? Has *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* shocked my readers at all, given that I reveal a great deal about my personal life (a writer can only write about his own life)? Will the book be made into a film (I repeat for the *n*th time that the film happens in the reader's mind and that I have forbidden the sale of film rights on any of my books)? What do I think about love? Why did I choose to write about love? How can one be happy in love, love, love, love?…

Once the interviews are over, there's the publisher's supper—it's part of the ritual. The table is packed with local worthies who keep interrupting me just as I'm about to put my fork in my mouth, and usually ask the same thing: "Where do you find your inspiration?" I try to eat, but I must also be pleasant, I must chat, fulfill my role as celebrity, tell a few interesting stories, make a good impression. I know that the publisher is a real hero, because he can never tell whether a book will sell or not; he could be selling bananas or soap instead; it would certainly be easier: they're not vain, they don't have inflated egos, they don't complain if they don't like the publicity campaign or if their book doesn't appear in a particular bookshop.

After supper, it's the usual routine: they want to show me their city's monuments, historic places, fashionable bars. There is always a guide who knows absolutely everything and fills my head with information, and I have to look as if I'm really listening and ask the occasional question just to show interest. I know nearly all the monuments, museums, and historic places of all the many cities I have visited to promote my work—and I can't remember any of them. What I do remember are the unexpected things, the meetings with readers, the bars, perhaps a street I happened to walk down, where I turned a corner and came upon something wonderful.

One day, I'm going to write a travel guide containing only maps and addresses of hotels, and with the rest of the pages blank. That way people will have to make their own itinerary, to discover for themselves restaurants, monuments, and all the magnificent things that every city has, but which are never mentioned because "the history we have been taught" does not include them under the heading Things You Must See.

I've been to Zagreb before. And this fountain doesn't appear in any of the local tourist guides, but it is far more important to me than anything else I saw here—because it is pretty, because I discovered it by chance, and because it is linked to a story in my life. Many years ago, when I was a young man traveling the world in search of adventure, I sat in this very spot with a Croatian painter who had traveled with me for much of the journey. I was heading off into Turkey and he was going home. We said goodbye here, drank two bottles of wine between us, and talked about everything that had happened while we had been together, about religion, women, music, the price of hotels, drugs. We talked about everything except love, because although there were people we loved, there was no need to talk about it.

After the painter had returned to his house, I met a young woman and we spent three days together and loved each other with great intensity because we both knew that it would not last very long. She helped me to understand the soul of those people and I never forgot her, just as I never forgot the fountain or saying goodbye to my traveling companion.

This was why—after the interviews, the autographs, the supper, the visits to monuments and historic places—I pestered my publishers into bringing me to this fountain. They asked me where it was, and I had no idea, just as I had no idea that Zagreb had so many fountains. After nearly an hour of searching, we finally managed to locate it. I asked for a bottle of wine, we said goodbye to everyone, and Marie and I sat down together in silence, our arms about each other, drinking wine and waiting for the sun to come up.

"You seem to get happier and happier by the day," she says, resting her head on my shoulder.

"That's because I'm trying to forget who I am. Or rather, I don't need to carry the weight of my whole history on my shoulders."

I tell her about Mikhail's conversation with the nomad.

"It's rather like that with actors," she says. "With each new role, we have to stop being who we are in order to become the character. We tend to end up confused and neurotic. Is it such a good idea to abandon your personal history, do you think?"

"Didn't you say I seemed better?"

"Less egotistical, yes. Although it amused me the way you wouldn't let us rest until you found this fountain, but that goes against what you've just said, since the fountain is part of your past."

“For me, it’s a symbol. But I don’t carry this fountain around with me, I don’t think about it all the time, I don’t take photos of it to show my friends, I don’t long for the painter or for the young woman I fell in love with. It’s really good to come back here again, but if I hadn’t come back, it wouldn’t make any difference to that initial experience.”

“I see what you’re saying.”

“I’m glad.”

“And I’m sad, because it makes me think that you’re about to leave. I’ve known you would ever since we first met, but it’s still difficult, because I’ve got used to being with you.”

“That’s the problem, we do get used to things.”

“It’s human too.”

“That’s why the woman I married became the Zahir. Until I had that accident, I had convinced myself that I could only be happy with her, not because I loved her more than anything and anyone in the world, but because I thought only she could understand me; she knew my likes, my eccentricities, my way of seeing the world. I was grateful for what she had done for me, and I thought she should be grateful for what I had done for her. I was used to seeing the world through her eyes. Do you remember that story about the two firemen who emerge from the fire and one has his face all blackened by smoke?”

She sat up straight. I noticed that her eyes were full of tears.

“Well, that is what the world was like for me,” I went on. “A reflection of Esther’s beauty. Is that love? Or is that dependency?”

“I don’t know. I think love and dependency go hand in hand.”

“Possibly. But let’s suppose that instead of writing *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew,* which is really just a letter to a woman who is far away, I had chosen a different plot, for example, a husband and wife who have been together for ten years. They used to make love every day, now they only make love once a week, but that doesn’t really matter because there is also solidarity, mutual support, companionship. He feels sad when he has to have supper alone because she is working late. She hates it when he has to go away, but accepts that it is part of his job. They feel that something is missing, but they are both grown-ups, they are both mature people, and they know how important it is to keep their relationship stable, even if only for the children’s sake. They devote more and more time to work and to the children, they think less and less about their marriage. Everything appears to be going really well, and there’s certainly no other man or woman in their lives.

“Yet they sense that something is wrong. They can’t quite put their finger on the problem. As time passes, they grow more and more dependent on each other; they are getting older; any opportunities to make a new life are vanishing fast. They try to keep busy doing reading or embroidery, watching television, seeing friends, but there is always the conversation over supper or after supper. He is easily irritated, she is more silent than usual. They can see that they are growing further and further apart, but cannot understand why. They reach the conclusion that this is what marriage is like, but won’t talk to their friends about it; they are the image of the happy couple who support each other and share the same interests. She takes a lover, so does he, but it’s never anything serious, of course. What is important, necessary, essential, is to act as if nothing is happening, because it’s too late to change.”

“I know that story, although I’ve never experienced it myself. And I think we spend our lives being trained to put up with situations like that.”

I take off my coat and climb onto the edge of the fountain. She asks me what I’m doing.

“I’m going to walk over to that column in the middle of the fountain.”

“You’re mad. It’s spring now, the ice will be getting really thin.”

“I need to walk over to the column.”

I place one foot on the surface, the whole sheet of ice moves, but does not crack. With one eye on the rising sun, I make a kind of wager with God: if I manage to reach the column and come back without the ice cracking, that will be a sign that I am on the right path, and that his hand is showing me where I should go.

“You’ll fall in the water.”

“So? The worst that can happen is that I’ll get a bit cold, but the hotel isn’t far away and I won’t have to suffer for long.”

I put my other foot on the ice: I am now in the fountain. The ice breaks away from the edges and a little water laps onto the surface of the ice, but the ice does not break. I set off toward the column. It’s only about four meters there and back, and all I risk is getting a very cold bath. However, I mustn’t think about what might happen: I’ve taken the first step and I must continue to the end.

I reach the column, touch it with my hand, hear everything around me creaking, but I’m still on the ice. My first instinct is to run back, but something tells me that if I do that, my steps will become heavier, firmer, and I’ll fall into the water. I must walk back slowly, at the same pace.

The sun is rising ahead of me; it dazzles me slightly. I can see only Marie’s silhouette and the shapes of the buildings and the trees. The sheet of ice keeps shifting, water spills over

onto the surface, but I know—with absolute certainty—that I will reach the edge. I am in communion with the day, with my choices. I know the limits of the frozen water; I know how to deal with it, how to ask for its help, to keep me from falling. I begin to enter a kind of trance, a euphoric state; I am a child again, doing something that is wrong, forbidden, but which gives me enormous pleasure. Wonderful! Crazy pacts with God, along the lines of "If I manage to do this, then so and so will happen," signs provoked not by anything that comes from outside, but by instinct, by my capacity to forget the old rules and create new situations.

I am grateful for having met Mikhail, the epileptic who thinks he can hear voices. I went to his meeting at the restaurant in search of my wife and discovered that I was turning into a pale reflection of myself. Is Esther still important? I think so, for it was her love that changed my life once and which is transforming me now. My history had grown old and was becoming ever heavier to carry, and far too serious for me ever to take risks like walking on ice, making a wager with God, forcing a sign to appear. I had forgotten that one has to continue walking the road to Santiago, to discard any unnecessary baggage, to keep only what you need in order to live each day, and to allow the energy of love to flow freely, from the outside in and from the inside out.

Another cracking sound, and a fault line appears across the surface, but I know I will make it, because I am light, so light that I could even walk on a cloud and not fall to earth. I am not carrying with me the weight of fame, of stories I have told, of itineraries to follow. I am so transparent that the sun's rays can penetrate my body and illumine my soul. I see that there are still many dark areas inside me, but with perseverance and courage they will gradually be washed away.

Another step, and I remember the envelope on my desk at home. Soon I will open it and, instead of walking on ice, I will set off along the path that leads me to Esther. I will do so not because I want her by my side, for she is free to remain where she is. It is not because I dream day and night of the Zahir; that loving, destructive obsession seems to have vanished. It is not because I am used to my past as it was and passionately want to go back to it.

Another step, more sounds of cracking, but safety and the edge of the fountain are close.

I will open the envelope and go and find her because—as Mikhail, the epileptic, the seer, the guru of the Armenian restaurant, says—this story needs to reach its end. When everything has been told and retold countless times, when the places I have visited, the things I have experienced, the steps I have taken because of her are all transformed into distant memories, nothing will remain but pure love. I won't feel as if I owe anything, I won't feel that I need her because only she can understand me, because I'm used to her, because she knows my vices and my virtues, knows that I like to have a slice of toast before I go to bed and to watch the international news when I wake up, that I have to go for a walk every morning, or that she knows about my collection of books on archery, about the hours spent in front of the computer screen, writing, about how annoyed I get when the maid keeps calling me to tell me the food is on the table.

All that will disappear. What remains will be the love that moves the heavens, the stars, people, flowers, insects, the love that obliges us all to walk across the ice despite the danger, that fills us with joy and with fear, and gives meaning to everything.

I touch the edge of the fountain, a hand reaches out to me, I grab hold of it, and Marie helps to steady me as I step down.

"I'm proud of you. I would never do anything like that."

"Not so long ago, I wouldn't have either; it seems so childish, irresponsible, unnecessary, pointless. But I am being reborn and I need to take new risks."

"The morning light is obviously good for you; you're talking like a wise man."

"No wise man would do what I've just done."

I have to write an important article for a magazine that is one of my major creditors in the Favor Bank. I have hundreds, thousands of ideas in my head, but I don't know which of them merits my effort, my concentration, my blood.

It is not the first time this has happened, but I feel as if I have said everything of importance that I need to say. I feel as if I'm losing my memory and forgetting who I am.

I go over to the window and look out at the street. I try to convince myself that I am professionally fulfilled and have nothing more to prove, that I can justifiably withdraw to a house in the mountains and spend the rest of my life reading, walking, and talking about food and the weather. I tell myself over and over that I have achieved what almost no other writer has achieved—my books have been translated into nearly every written language in the world. Why worry about a mere magazine article, however important the magazine itself might be? Because of the Favor Bank. So I really do need to write something, but what have I got to say to people? Should I tell them that they need to forget all the stories that have been told to them and take more risks?

They'll all say, "I'm an independent being, thank you very much. I'll do as I please."

Should I tell them that they must allow the energy of love to flow more freely?

They'll say, "I feel love already. In fact, I feel more and more love," as if love could be measured the way we measure the distance between two railway tracks, the height of buildings, or the amount of yeast needed to make a loaf of bread.

I return to my desk. The envelope Mikhail left for me is open. I now know where Esther is; I just need to know how to get there. I phone him and tell him about my walk across the ice. He is impressed. I ask him what he's doing tonight, and he says he's going out with his girlfriend, Lucrecia. I suggest taking them both to supper. No, not tonight, but, if I like, I could go out with him and his friends next week.

I tell him that next week I'm giving a talk in the United States. There's no hurry, he says, we can wait two weeks.

"You must have heard a voice telling you to walk on the ice," he says.

"No, I heard no voice."

"So why did you do it?"

"Because I felt it needed to be done."

"That's just another way of hearing the voice."

"I made a bet. If I could cross the ice, that meant I was ready. And I think I am."

"Then the voice gave you the sign you needed."

"Did the voice say anything to you about it?"

"No, it didn't have to. When we were on the banks of the Seine and I said that the voice would tell us when the time had come, I knew that it would also tell you."

"As I said, I didn't hear a voice."

"That's what you think. That's what everyone thinks. And yet, judging by what the presence tells me, everyone hears voices all the time. They are what help us to know when we are face to face with a sign, you see."

I decide not to argue. I just need some practical details: where to hire a car, how long the journey takes, how to find the house, because otherwise all I have, apart from the map, are a series of vague indications—follow the lakeshore, look for a company sign, turn right, etc. Perhaps he knows someone who can help me.

We arrange our next meeting. Mikhail asks me to dress as discreetly as possible—the "tribe" is going for a walkabout in Paris.

I ask him who this tribe is. "They're the people who work with me at the restaurant," he replies, without going into detail. I ask him if he wants me to bring him anything from the States, and he asks for a particular remedy for heartburn. There are, I think, more interesting things I could bring, but I make a note of his request.

And the article?

I go back to the desk, think about what I'm going to write, look again at the open envelope, and conclude that I was not surprised by what I found inside. After a few meetings with Mikhail, it was pretty much what I had expected.

Esther is living in the steppes, in a small village in Central Asia; more precisely, in a village in Kazakhstan.

I am no longer in a hurry. I continue reviewing my own story, which I tell to Marie in obsessive detail; she has decided to do the same, and I am surprised by some of the things she tells me, but the process seems to be working; she is more confident, less anxious.

I don't know why I so want to find Esther, now that my love for her has illumined my life, taught me new things, which is quite enough really. But I remember what Mikhail said: "The story needs to reach its end," and I decide to go on. I know that I will discover the moment when the ice of our marriage cracked, and how we carried on walking through the chill water as if nothing had happened. I know that I will discover this before I reach that village, in order to close the circle or make it larger still.

The article! Has Esther become the Zahir again, thus preventing me from concentrating on anything else?

No, when I need to do something urgent, something that requires creative energy, this is my working method: I get into a state of near hysteria, decide to abandon the task altogether, and then the article appears. I've tried doing things differently, preparing everything carefully, but my imagination only works when it's under enormous pressure. I must respect the Favor Bank, I must write three pages about—guess what!—the problems of male-female relationships. Me, of all people! But the editors believe that the man who wrote *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* must know the human soul well.

I try to log on to the Internet, but it's not working. It's never been the same since I destroyed the connection. I called various technicians, but when they finally turned up, they could find nothing wrong with the computer. They asked me what I was complaining about, spent half an hour doing tests, changed the configuration, and assured me that the problem lay not with me but with the server. I allowed myself to be convinced that everything was, in fact, fine, and I felt ridiculous for having asked for help. Two or three hours later, the computer and the connection would both crash. Now, after months of physical and psychological wear and tear, I simply accept that technology is stronger and more powerful than me: it works when it wants to, and when it doesn't, it's best to sit down and read the paper or go for a walk, and just wait until the cables and the telephone links are in a better mood and the computer decides to work again. I am not, I have discovered, my computer's master: it has a life of its own.

I try a few more times, but I know from experience that it's best just to give up. The Internet, the biggest library in the world, has closed its doors to me for the moment. What about reading a few magazines in search of inspiration? I pick up one that has just arrived in the post and read a strange interview with a woman who has recently published a book about—guess what?—love. The subject seems to be pursuing me everywhere.

The journalist asks if the only way a human being can find happiness is by finding his or her beloved. The woman says no.

The idea that love leads to happiness is a modern invention, dating from the end of the seventeenth century. Ever since then, people have been taught to believe that love should last forever and that marriage is the best place in which to exercise that love. In the past, there was less optimism about the longevity of passion. *Romeo and Juliet* isn't a happy story, it's a tragedy. In the last few decades, expectations about marriage as the road to personal fulfilment have grown considerably, as have disappointment and dissatisfaction.

It's quite a brave thing to say, but no good for my article, mainly because I don't agree with her at all. I search my shelves for a book that has nothing to do with male-female relationships: *Magical Practices in North Mexico.* Since obsession will not help me to write my article, I need to refresh my mind, to relax.

I start leafing through it and suddenly I read something that surprises me:

The *acomodador* or giving-up point: there is always an event in our lives that is responsible for us failing to progress: a trauma, a particularly bitter defeat, a disappointment in love, even a victory that we did not quite understand, can make cowards of us and prevent us from moving on. As part of the process of increasing his hidden powers, the shaman must first free himself from that giving-up point and, to do so, he must review his whole life and find out where it occurred.

The *acomodador.* This fit in with my experience of learning archery—the only sport I enjoyed—for the teacher of archery says that no shot can ever be repeated, and there is no point trying to learn from good or bad shots. What matters is repeating it hundreds and thousands of times, until we have freed ourselves from the idea of hitting the target and have ourselves become the arrow, the bow, the target. At that moment, the energy of the "thing" (my teacher of *kyudo*—the form of Japanese archery I practiced—never used the word "God") guides our movements and then we begin to release the arrow not when we want to, but when the "thing" believes that the moment has come.

The *acomodador.* Another part of my personal history resurfaces. If only Marie were here! I need to talk about myself, about my childhood, to tell her how, when I was little, I was always fighting and beating up the other children because I was the oldest in the class. One day, my cousin gave me a thrashing, and I was convinced from then on that I would never ever win another fight, and since then I have avoided any physical confrontation, even though this has often meant me behaving like a coward and being humiliated in front of girlfriends and friends alike.

The *acomodador.* For two years, I tried to learn how to play the guitar. To begin with, I made rapid progress, but then reached a point where I could progress no further, because I discovered that other people were learning faster than I was, which made me feel mediocre; and so as not to have to feel ashamed, I decided that I was no longer interested in learning. The same thing happened with snooker, football, bicycle racing. I learned enough to do everything reasonably well, but there was always a point where I got stuck.

Why?

Because according to the story we are told, there always comes a moment in our lives when we reach "our limit." I often recalled my struggle to deny my destiny as a writer and how Esther had always refused to allow the *acomodador* to lay down rules for my dream. The paragraph I had just read fit in with the idea of forgetting one's personal history and being left only with the instinct that develops out of the various difficulties and tragedies one has experienced. This is what the shamans of Mexico did and what the nomads on the steppes of Central Asia preached.

The *acomodador:* there is always an event in our lives that is responsible for us failing to progress.

It described exactly what happens in marriages in general and what had happened in my relationship with Esther in particular.

I could now write my article for that magazine. I went over to the computer and within half an hour I had written a first draft and was happy with the result. I wrote a story in the form of a dialogue, as if it were fiction, but which was, in fact, a conversation I had had in a hotel room in Amsterdam, after a day spent promoting my books and after the usual publishers' supper and the statutory tour of the sights, etc.

In my article, the names of the characters and the situation in which they find themselves are omitted. In real life, Esther is in her nightdress and is looking out at the canal outside our window. She has not yet become a war correspondent, her eyes are still bright with joy, she loves her work, travels with me whenever she can, and life is still one big adventure. I am lying on the bed in silence; my mind is far away, worrying about the next day's appointments.

Last week, I interviewed a man who's an expert in police interrogations. He told me that they get most of their information by using a technique they call 'cold-hot.' They always start with a very aggressive policeman who says he has no intention of sticking to the rules, who shouts and thumps the table. When he has scared the prisoner nearly witless, the 'good cop' comes in and tells his colleague to stop, offers the prisoner a cigarette, pretends to be his friend, and gets the information he wants."

"Yes, I've heard about that."

"Then he told me about something else that really frightened me. In 1971, a group of researchers at Stanford University, in California, decided to create a simulated prison in order to study the psychology of interrogations. They selected twenty-four student volunteers and divided them into 'guards' and 'criminals.'

"After just one week, they had to stop the experiment. The 'guards'—girls and boys with normal decent values, from nice families—had become real monsters. The use of torture had become routine and the sexual abuse of 'prisoners' was seen as normal. The students who took part in the project, both 'guards' and 'criminals,' suffered major trauma and needed long-term medical help, and the experiment was never repeated."

"Interesting."

"What do you mean 'interesting'? I'm talking about something of real importance: man's capacity to do evil whenever he's given the chance. I'm talking about my work, about the things I've learned!"

"That's what I found interesting. Why are you getting so angry?"

"Angry? How could I possibly get angry with someone who isn't paying the slightest bit of attention to what I'm saying? How can I possibly be angry with someone who isn't even provoking me, who's just lying there, staring into space?"

"How much did you have to drink tonight?"

"You don't even know the answer to that, do you? I've been by your side all evening, and you've no idea whether I've had anything to drink or not! You only spoke to me when you wanted me to confirm something you had said or when you needed me to tell some flattering story about you!"

"Look, I've been working all day and I'm exhausted. Why don't you come to bed and sleep? We can talk in the morning."

"Because I've been doing this for weeks and months, for the last two years in fact! I try to have a conversation, but you're always tired, so we say, all right, we'll go to sleep and

talk tomorrow. But tomorrow there are always other things to do, another day of work and publishers' suppers, so we say, all right, we'll go to sleep and talk tomorrow. That's how I'm spending my life, waiting for the day when I can have you by my side again, until I've had my fill; that's all I ask, to create a world where I can always find refuge if I need it: not so far away that I can't be seen to be having an independent life, and not so close that it looks as if I'm invading your universe."

"What do you want me to do? Stop working? Give up everything we've struggled so hard to achieve and go off on a cruise to the Caribbean? Don't you understand that I enjoy what I'm doing and haven't the slightest intention of changing my life?"

"In your books, you talk about the importance of love, the need for adventure, the joy of fighting for your dreams. And who do I have before me now? Someone who doesn't read what he writes. Someone who confuses love with convenience, adventure with taking unnecessary risks, joy with obligation. Where is the man I married, who used to listen to what I was saying?"

"Where is the woman I married?"

"You mean the one who always gave you support, encouragement, and affection? Her body is here, looking out at the Singel Canal in Amsterdam, and she will, I believe, stay with you for the rest of her life. But that woman's soul is standing at the door ready to leave."

"But why?"

"Because of those three wretched words: We'll talk tomorrow. Isn't that enough? If not, just consider that the woman you married was excited about life, full of ideas and joy and desires, and is now rapidly turning into a housewife."

"That's ridiculous."

"Of course it is! It's nonsense! A trifle, especially considering that we have everything we could possibly want. We're very fortunate, we have money, we never discuss any little flings we might have, we never have jealous rages. Besides, there are millions of children in the world starving to death, there are wars, diseases, hurricanes, tragedies happening every second. So what can I possibly have to complain about?"

"Do you think we should have a baby?"

"That's how all the couples I know resolve their problems—by having a baby! You're the one who has always prized your freedom and put off having children for later on. Have you really changed your mind?"

"I think the time is right."

“Well, in my opinion, you couldn’t be more wrong! I don’t want your child. I want a child by the man I knew, who had dreams, who was always by my side! If I ever do become pregnant it will be by someone who understands me, keeps me company, listens to me, who truly desires me!”

“You *have* been drinking. Look, I promise, we’ll talk tomorrow, but, please, come to bed now, I’m tired.”

“All right, we’ll talk tomorrow. And if my soul, which is standing at the door, does decide to leave, I doubt it will affect our lives very much.”

“Your soul won’t leave.”

“You used to know my soul very well, but you haven’t spoken to it for years, you don’t know how much it has changed, how *desperately* it’s begging you to listen. Even to banal topics of conversation, like experiments at American universities.”

“If your soul has changed so much, how come you’re the same?”

“Out of cowardice. Because I genuinely think that tomorrow we *will* talk. Because of everything we’ve built together and which I don’t want to see destroyed. Or for that worst of all possible reasons, because I’ve simply given up.”

“That’s just what you’ve been accusing me of doing.”

“You’re right. I looked at you, thinking it was you I was looking at, but the truth is I was looking at myself. Tonight I’m going to pray with all my might and all my faith and ask God not to let me spend the rest of my days like this.”

I hear the applause, the theater is packed. I’m about to do the one thing that always gives me sleepless nights, I’m about to give a lecture.

The master of ceremonies begins by saying that there’s no need to introduce me, which is a bit much really, since that’s what he’s there for and he isn’t taking into account the possibility that there might be lots of people in the audience who have simply been invited along by friends. Despite what he says, however, he ends up giving a few biographical details and talking about my qualities as a writer, the prizes I’ve won, and the millions of books I’ve sold. He thanks the sponsors, turns to me, and the floor is mine.

I thank him too. I tell the audience that the most important things I have to say are in my books, but that I feel I have an obligation to my public to reveal the man who lies behind

those words and paragraphs. I explain that our human condition makes us tend to share only the best of ourselves, because we are always searching for love and approval. My books, however, will only ever be the mountaintop visible in the clouds or an island in the ocean: the light falls on it, everything seems to be in its place, but beneath the surface lies the unknown, the darkness, the incessant search for self.

I describe how difficult it was to write *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew,* and that there are many parts of the book which I myself am only beginning to understand now, as I reread it, as if the created thing were always greater and more generous than its creator.

I say that there is nothing more boring than reading interviews or going to lectures by authors who insist on explaining the characters in their books: if a book isn't self-explanatory, then the book isn't worth reading. When a writer appears in public, he should attempt to show the audience his universe, not try to explain his books; and in this spirit, I begin talking about something more personal.

"Some time ago, I was in Geneva for a series of interviews. At the end of a day's work, and because a woman friend I was supposed to have supper with canceled at the last minute, I set off for a stroll around the city. It was a particularly lovely night, the streets were deserted, the bars and restaurants still full of life, and everything seemed utterly calm, orderly, pretty, and yet suddenly…suddenly I realized that I was utterly alone.

"Needless to say, I had been alone on other occasions during the year. Needless to say, my girlfriend was only two hours away by plane. Needless to say, after a busy day, what could be better than a stroll through the narrow streets and lanes of the old city, without having to talk to anyone, simply enjoying the beauty around me. And yet the feeling that surfaced was one of oppressive, distressing loneliness—not having someone with whom I could share the city, the walk, the things I'd like to say.

"I got out my cell phone; after all, I had a reasonable number of friends in the city, but it was too late to phone anyone. I considered going into one of the bars and ordering a drink; someone was bound to recognize me and invite me to join them. But I resisted the temptation and tried to get through that moment, discovering, in the process, that there is nothing worse than the feeling that no one cares whether we exist or not, that no one is interested in what we have to say about life, and that the world can continue turning without our awkward presence.

"I began to imagine how many millions of people were, at that moment, feeling utterly useless and wretched—however rich, charming, and delightful they might be—because they were alone that night, as they were yesterday, and as they might well be tomorrow. Students with no one to go out with, older people sitting in front of the TV as if it were their sole salvation, businessmen in their hotel rooms, wondering if what they were doing made any sense, women who spent the afternoon carefully applying their makeup and doing their hair in order to go to a bar only to pretend that they're not looking for company; all they want is confirmation that they're still attractive; the men ogle them and chat them up, but the women reject them all disdainfully, because they feel inferior and

are afraid the men will find out that they're single mothers or lowly clerks with nothing to say about what's going on in the world because they work from dawn to dusk to scrape a living and have no time to read the newspapers. People who look at themselves in the mirror and think themselves ugly, believing that being beautiful is what really matters, and spend their time reading magazines in which everyone is pretty, rich, and famous. Husbands and wives who wish they could talk over supper as they used to, but there are always other things demanding their attention, more important things, and the conversation can always wait for a tomorrow that never comes.

"That day, I had lunch with a friend who had just got divorced and she said to me: 'Now I can enjoy the freedom I've always dreamed of having.' But that's a lie. No one wants that kind of freedom: we all want commitment, we all want someone to be beside us to enjoy the beauties of Geneva, to discuss books, interviews, films, or even to share a sandwich with because there isn't enough money to buy one each. Better to eat half a sandwich than a whole one. Better to be interrupted by the man who wants to get straight back home because there's a big game on TV tonight or by the woman who stops outside a shop window and interrupts what we were saying about the cathedral tower, far better that than to have the whole of Geneva to yourself with all the time and quiet in the world to visit it.

"Better to go hungry than to be alone. Because when you're alone—and I'm talking here about an enforced solitude not of our choosing—it's as if you were no longer part of the human race.

"A lovely hotel awaited me on the other side of the river, with its luxurious rooms, its attentive employees, its five-star service. And that only made me feel worse, because I should have felt contented, satisfied with all I had achieved.

"On the way back, I passed other people in the same situation and noticed that they fell into two categories: those who looked arrogant, because they wanted to pretend they had chosen to be alone on that lovely night, and those who looked sad and ashamed of their solitary state.

"I'm telling you all this because the other day I remembered being in a hotel room in Amsterdam with a woman who was talking to me about her life. I'm telling you all this because, although in Ecclesiastes it says there is a time to rend and a time to sew, sometimes the time to rend leaves deep scars. Being with someone else and making that person feel as if they were of no importance in our life is far worse than feeling alone and miserable in the streets of Geneva."

There was a long moment of silence before the applause.

I arrived in a gloomy part of Paris, which was nevertheless said to have the most vibrant cultural life of the whole city. It took me a while to recognize the scruffy group of people before me as the same ones who appeared on Thursdays in the Armenian restaurant immaculately dressed in white.

“Why are you all wearing fancy dress? Is this some kind of tribute to a movie?”

“It’s not fancy dress,” replied Mikhail. “Don’t you change your clothes to go to a gala supper? Would you wear a jacket and tie to play golf?”

“All right, let me put the question another way: Why have you decided to dress like young homeless people?”

“Because, at this moment, we are young homeless people, or, rather, four young homeless people and two homeless adults.”

“Let me put the question a third way, then: Why are you dressed like that?”

“In the restaurant, we feed our body and talk about the Energy to people with something to lose. Among the beggars, we feed our soul and talk to those who have nothing to lose. Now, we come to the most important part of our work: meeting the members of the invisible movement that is renewing the world, people who live each day as if it were their last, while the old live each day as if it were their first.”

He was talking about something I had already noticed and which seemed to be growing by the day: this was how young people dressed, in grubby, but highly imaginative outfits, based on military uniforms or sci-fi movies. They all went in for body piercing too and sported highly individual haircuts. Often, the groups were accompanied by threatening-looking Alsatian dogs. I once asked a friend why these people always had a dog with them and he told me—although I don’t know if it’s true—that the police couldn’t arrest the owners because they had nowhere to put the dogs.

A bottle of vodka began doing the rounds; we had drunk vodka when we were with the beggars and I wondered if this had to do with Mikhail’s origins. I took a sip, imagining what people would say if they saw me there.

I decided they would say, “He’s probably doing research for his next book,” and felt more relaxed.

“I’m ready now to go and find Esther, but I need some more information, because I know nothing about your country.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“What?”

That wasn’t in my plans at all. My journey was a return to everything I had lost in myself, and would end somewhere in the Central Asian steppes. It was something intimate and personal, something that did not require witnesses.

“As long as you pay for my ticket, of course. I need to go back to Kazakhstan. I miss my country.”

“I thought you had work to do here. Don’t you have to be at the restaurant on Thursdays for the performances.”

“You keep calling it a performance. I’ve told you before, it’s a meeting, a way of reviving what we have lost, the tradition of conversation. But don’t worry. Anastásia here,” and he pointed to a girl wearing a nose stud, “is already developing her gift. She can take care of everything while I’m away.”

“He’s jealous,” said Alma, the woman who played the instrument that looked like a cymbal and who told stories at the end of each meeting.

“Understandable, really,” said another boy, who was dressed in a leather outfit adorned with metal studs, safety pins, and buckles made to look like razor blades. “Mikhail is younger, better-looking, and more in touch with the Energy.”

“He’s also less famous, less rich, and less in touch with those in power,” said Anastásia. “From the female point of view, things are pretty evenly balanced, so I reckon they’re both going with what they’ve got.”

Everyone laughed and the bottle went the rounds again. I was the only one who didn’t see the joke. I was surprising myself, though; it had been many years since I had sat on a pavement in Paris, and this pleased me.

“The tribe is bigger than you think. They’re everywhere, from the Eiffel Tower down as far as the town of Tarbes where I was staying recently. But I can’t honestly say I understand what it’s all about.”

“They can be found farther south than Tarbes, and they follow routes every bit as interesting as the road to Santiago. They set off from somewhere in France or somewhere else in Europe, swearing that they’re going to be part of a society that exists outside of society. They’re afraid of going back home and getting a job and getting married—they’ll fight against all that for as long as they can. There are rich and poor among them, but they’re not that interested in money. They look completely different, and yet when people walk past them, they usually pretend not to see them because they’re afraid.”

“Do they have to look so aggressive?”

“Yes, because the passion to destroy is a creative passion. If they weren’t aggressive, the boutiques would immediately fill up with clothes like these; publishers would soon be producing magazines about the new movement ‘sweeping the world with its revolutionary attitudes’; TV programs would have a strand devoted to the tribe; sociologists would write learned articles; psychiatrists would counsel the families of tribe members, and it would lose all its impact. So the less they know about us, the better: our attack is really a defense.”

“Actually, I only came tonight so that I could ask you for some information, but, who knows, perhaps spending the night with you will turn out to be just the kind of rich and novel experience to move me on from a personal history that no longer allows for new experiences. As for the journey to Kazakhstan, I’ve no intention of taking anyone with me. If I can’t get help from you, the Favor Bank will provide me with all the necessary contacts. I’m going away in two days’ time and I’m a guest at an important supper tomorrow night, but after that, I’m free for two weeks.”

Mikhail appeared to hesitate.

“It’s up to you. You’ve got the map, the name of the village, and it shouldn’t be hard to find the house where she’s staying. I’m sure the Favor Bank can help get you as far as Almaty, but I doubt it will get you much farther than that, because the rules of the steppes are different. Besides, I reckon I’ve made a few deposits in your account at the Favor Bank too. It’s time to reclaim them. I miss my mother.”

He was right.

“We’ve got to start work,” said Alma’s husband.

“Why do you want to go with me, Mikhail? Is it really just because you miss your mother?”

He didn’t reply. The man started playing the drum and Alma was clanging the cymbal, while the others begged for money from passersby. Why did he want to go with me? And how would I be able to draw on the Favor Bank in the steppes, if I knew absolutely no one? I could get a visa from the Kazakhstan embassy, hire a car and a guide from the French consulate in Almaty—what else did I need?

I stood there observing the group, not knowing quite what to do. It wasn’t the right moment to discuss the trip, and I had work to do and a girlfriend waiting for me at home. Why didn’t I just leave now?

I didn’t leave because I was feeling free, doing things I hadn’t done for years, opening up a space in my soul for new experiences, driving the *acomodador* out of my life, experiencing things that might not interest me very much, but which were at least different.

The vodka ran out and was replaced by rum. I hate rum, but since that was all there was, it was best to adapt to the circumstances. The two musicians continued to play and whenever anyone was brave enough to come near, one of the girls would hold out her hand and ask if they had any spare change. The person approached would normally quicken their pace, but would always receive a "Thanks, have a nice evening." One person, seeing that he had been offered thanks rather than abuse, turned back and gave us some money.

After watching this scene for more than ten minutes, without anyone in the group addressing a single word to me, I went into a bar, bought two bottles of vodka, came back, and poured the rum into the gutter. Anastásia seemed pleased by my gesture and so I tried to start a conversation.

"Can you explain why you all use body piercing?"

"Why do other people wear jewels or high heels or low-cut dresses even in winter?"

"That's not an answer."

"We use body piercing because we're the new barbarians sacking Rome. We don't wear uniforms and so we need something to identify us as one of the invading tribes."

She made it sound as if they were part of a important historical movement, but for the people going home, they were just a group of unemployed young people with nowhere to sleep, cluttering up the streets of Paris, bothering the tourists who were so good for the local economy, and driving to despair the mothers and fathers who had brought them into the world and now had no control over them.

I had been like that once, when the hippie movement was at its height—the huge rock concerts, the big hair, the garish clothes, the Viking symbol, the peace sign. As Mikhail said, the whole hippie thing had turned into just another consumer product and had vanished, destroying its icons.

A man came down the street. The boy in leather and safety pins went over to him with his hand outstretched. He asked for money. However, instead of hurrying on or muttering something like "I haven't any change," the man stopped and looked at us and said very loudly:

"I wake up every morning with a debt of approximately 100,000 euros, because of my house, because of the economic situation in Europe, because of my wife's expensive tastes. In other words, I'm worse off than you are and with far more on my mind! How about you giving *me* a bit of change to help me decrease my debt just a little?"

Lucrecia—whom Mikhail claimed was his girlfriend—produced a fifty-euro note and gave it to the man.

“Buy yourself some caviar. You need a bit of joy in your miserable life.”

The man thanked her and walked off, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be given fifty euros by a beggar. The Italian girl had had a fifty-euro note in her bag and here we were begging in the street!

“Let’s go somewhere else,” said the boy in leather.

“Where?” asked Mikhail.

“We could see if we can find the others. North or south?”

Anastásia chose west. After all, she was, according to Mikhail, developing her gift.

We passed by the Tour Saint-Jacques where, centuries before, pilgrims heading for Santiago de Compostela used to gather. We passed Notre-Dame, where there were a few more “new barbarians.” The vodka had run out and so I went to buy two more bottles, even though I wasn’t sure that everyone in the group was over eighteen. No one thanked me; they seemed to think it was perfectly normal.

I started to feel a little drunk and began eyeing one of the girls who had just joined us. Everyone talked very loudly, kicked a few litter bins—strange metal objects with a plastic bag dangling from them—and said absolutely nothing of any interest.

We crossed the Seine and were suddenly brought to a halt by one of those orange-and-white tapes that are used to mark off an area under construction. It prevented people from walking along the pavement, forcing them to step off the curb into the road and then rejoin the pavement five meters further on.

“It’s still here,” said one of the new arrivals.

“What’s still here?” I asked.

“Who’s he?”

“A friend of ours,” replied Lucrecia. “In fact, you’ve probably read one of his books.”

The newcomer recognized me, but showed neither surprise nor reverence; on the contrary, he asked if I could give him some money, a request I instantly refused.

“If you want to know why the tape is there, you’ll have to give me a euro. Everything in life has its price, as you know better than anyone. And information is one of the most expensive products in the world.”

No one in the group came to my aid, so I had to pay him a euro for his answer.

“The tape is here because we put it there. As you can see, there are no repairs going on at all, just a stupid orange-and-white tape blocking the stupid pavement. But no one asks what it’s doing there; they step off the pavement, walk along the road at the risk of being knocked down, and get back on farther up. By the way, I read somewhere that you’d had an accident. Is that true?”

“Yes, I did, and all because I stepped off the pavement.”

“Don’t worry, when people step off the pavement here, they’re always extra careful. It was one of the reasons we put the tape up, to make people more aware of what was going on around them.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said the girl I was attracted to. “It’s just a joke, so that we can laugh at the people who obey without even thinking about what they’re obeying. There’s no reason, it’s not important, and no one will get knocked down.”

More people joined the group. Now there were eleven of us and two Alsatian dogs. We were no longer begging, because no one dared go near this band of savages who seemed to enjoy the fear they aroused. The drink had run out again and they all looked at me and asked me to buy another bottle, as if I had a duty to keep them drunk. I realized that this was my passport to the pilgrimage, so I set off in search of a shop.

The girl I was interested in—and who was young enough to be my daughter—seemed to notice me looking at her and started talking to me. I knew it was simply a way of provoking me, but I joined in. She didn’t tell me anything about her personal life, she just asked me how many cats and how many lampposts there were on the back of a ten-dollar bill.

“Cats and lampposts?”

“You don’t know, do you? You don’t give any real value to money at all. Well, for your information, there are four cats and eleven lampposts.”

Four cats and eleven lampposts. I promised myself that I would check this out the next time I saw a ten-dollar bill.

“Do any of you take drugs?”

“Some, but mainly it’s just alcohol. Not much at all, in fact, it’s not our style. Drugs are more for people of your generation, aren’t they? My mother, for example, drugs herself on cooking for the family, compulsively tidying the house, and suffering over me. When something goes wrong with my dad’s business, she suffers. Can you believe that? She suffers over me, my father, my brothers and sisters, everything. I was wasting so much energy pretending to be happy all the time, I thought it was best just to leave home.”

Another personal history.

“Like your wife,” said a young man with fair hair and an eyebrow ring. “She left home too, didn’t she? Was that because she had to pretend to be happy all the time?”

So she had been here too. Had she given some of these young people a piece of that bloodstained shirt?

“She suffered too,” laughed Lucrecia. “But as far as we know, she’s not suffering anymore. That’s what I call courage!”

“What was my wife doing here?”

“She came with the Mongolian guy, the one with all the strange ideas about love that we’re only just beginning to understand. And she used to ask questions and tell us her story. One day, she stopped doing both. She said she was tired of complaining. We suggested that she give up everything and come with us, because we were planning a trip to North Africa. She thanked us, but said she had other plans and would be heading off in the opposite direction.”

“Didn’t you read his latest book?” asked Anastásia.

“No, I didn’t fancy it. People told me it was too romantic. Now when are we going to get some more booze?”

People made way for us as if we were samurai riding into a village, bandits arriving in a frontier town, barbarians entering Rome. The tribe didn’t make any aggressive gestures, the aggression was all in the clothes, the body piercing, the loud conversations, the sheer oddness. We finally found a minimart: to my great discomfort and alarm, they all went in and started rummaging around on the shelves.

I didn’t know any of them, apart from Mikhail, and even then I didn’t know if what he had told me about himself was true. What if they stole something? What if one of them was armed? As the oldest member of the group, was I responsible for their actions?

The man at the cash register kept glancing up at the security mirror suspended from the ceiling in the tiny shop. The group, knowing that he was worried, spread out, gesturing to each other, and the tension grew. To cut things short, I picked up three bottles of vodka and walked quickly over to the cash register.

A woman buying cigarettes said that, in her day, Paris had been full of bohemians and artists, not threatening bands of homeless people. She suggested that the cashier call the police.

“I’ve got a feeling something bad is going to happen any minute now,” she muttered.

The cashier was terrified by this invasion of his little world, the fruit of years of work and many loans, where perhaps his son worked in the morning, his wife in the afternoon, and he at night. He nodded to the woman, and I realized that he had already called the police.

I hate getting involved in things that are none of my business, but I also hate being a coward. Every time it happens, I lose all self-respect for a week.

“Don’t worry…” I began.

It was too late.

Two policemen came in and the owner beckoned them over, but the young people disguised as extraterrestrials paid no attention—it was all part of standing up to representatives of the established order. It must have happened to them many times before. They knew they hadn’t committed any crime (apart from crimes against fashion, but that could all change with next season’s haute couture). They must have been afraid, but they didn’t show it and continued talking loudly.

“I saw a comedian the other day. He said that stupid people should have the word ‘stupid’ written on their identity card,” said Anastásia to no one in particular. “That way, we’d know who we were talking to.”

“Yeah, stupid people are a real danger to society,” said the girl with the angelic face and vampire clothing, who, shortly before, had been talking to me about the number of lampposts and cats to be found on the back of a ten-dollar bill. “They should be tested once a year and have a license for walking the streets, like drivers do to drive.”

The policemen, who couldn’t have been very much older than the tribe, said nothing.

“Do you know what I’d like to do,” it was Mikhail’s voice, but I couldn’t see him because he was concealed behind a shelf. “I’d like to change the labels on everything in this shop. People would be completely lost. They wouldn’t know whether things should be eaten hot or cold, boiled or fried. If they don’t read the instructions, they don’t know how to prepare a meal. They’ve lost all their culinary instincts.”

Everyone who had spoken up until then had done so in perfect Parisian French. Only Mikhail had a foreign accent.

“May I see your passport,” said one of the policemen.

“He’s with me.”

The words emerged naturally, even though I knew what it could mean—another scandal. The policeman looked at me.

“I wasn’t talking to you, but since you’re obviously with this lot, I hope you’ve got some kind of document to prove who you are, and a good reason for being surrounded by people half your age and buying vodka.”

I could refuse to show my papers. I wasn’t legally obliged to have them with me. But I was thinking about Mikhail. One of the policemen was standing next to him now. Did he really have permission to stay in France? What did I know about him apart from the stories he had told me about his visions and his epilepsy? What if the tension of the moment provoked an attack?

I stuck my hand in my pocket and took out my driver’s license.

“So you’re…”

“I am.”

“I thought it was you. I’ve read one of your books. But that doesn’t put you above the law.”

The fact that he had read one of my books threw me completely. Here was this shaven-headed young man in a uniform, albeit a very different one from that worn by the tribes in order to tell each other apart. Perhaps he too had once dreamed of having the freedom to be different, of subtly challenging authority, although never disrespectfully enough to end up in jail. He probably had a father who had never offered him any alternative, a family who needed his financial support, or perhaps he was just afraid of going beyond his own familiar world.

I said gently:

“No, I’m not above the law. In fact, no one here has broken the law. Unless the gentleman at the cash register or the lady buying cigarettes would like to make some specific complaint.”

When I turned around, the woman who had mentioned the artists and bohemians of her day, that prophet of imminent doom, the embodiment of truth and good manners, had disappeared. She would doubtless tell her neighbors the next day that, thanks to her, an attempted robbery had been averted.

“I’ve no complaints,” said the man behind the register. “I got worried because they were talking so loudly, but it looks like they weren’t actually doing any harm.”

“Is the vodka for you, sir?”

I nodded. They knew that everyone there was drunk, but they didn’t want to make a big deal out of a harmless situation.

“A world without stupid people would be complete chaos!” said the boy wearing leather and metal studs. “Instead of all the unemployed people we have today, there would be too many jobs and no one to do the work!”

“Shut up!”

My voice sounded authoritative, decisive.

“Just stop talking, all of you!”

To my surprise, silence fell. My heart was beating furiously, but I continued talking to the policemen as if I were the calmest person in the world.

“If they were really dangerous, they wouldn’t be talking like that.”

The policeman turned to the cashier:

“If you need us, we’ll be around.”

And before going out, he said to his colleague, so that his voice echoed around the whole shop, “I love stupid people. If it wasn’t for them, we might be having to tackle some real criminals.”

“You’re right,” said the other policeman. “Stupid people are a nice safe distraction.”

They gave their usual salute and left.

The only thing that occurred to me to do when we left the shop was to smash the bottles of vodka. I saved one of them, though, and it was passed rapidly from mouth to mouth. By the way they were drinking, I could see they were frightened, as frightened as I was. The only difference was that they had gone on the offensive when threatened.

“I don’t feel good,” said Mikhail to one of them. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t know what he meant by “Let’s go”: each to his own home or town or bridge? No one asked me if I wanted to go with them, so I simply followed after. Mikhail’s remark “I don’t feel good” unsettled me; that meant we wouldn’t have another chance that night to talk about the trip to Central Asia. Should I just leave? Or should I stick it out and see what “Let’s go” meant? I discovered that I was enjoying myself and that I’d like to try seducing the girl in the vampire outfit.

Onward, then.

I could always leave at the first sign of danger.

As we headed off—where, I didn't know—I was thinking about this whole experience. A tribe. A symbolic return to a time when men traveled in protective groups and required very little to survive. A tribe in the midst of another hostile tribe called society, crossing society's lands and using aggression as a defense against rejection. A group of people who had joined together to form an ideal society, about which I knew nothing beyond the body piercing and the clothes that they wore. What were their values? What did they think about life? How did they earn their money? Did they have dreams or was it enough just to wander the world? All this was much more interesting than the supper I had to go to the following evening, where I knew exactly what would happen. I was convinced that it must be the effect of the vodka, but I was feeling free, my personal history was growing ever more remote, there was only the present moment, instinct; the Zahir had disappeared….

The Zahir?

Yes, it had disappeared, but now I realized that the Zahir was more than a man obsessed with an object, with a vein in the marble of one of the twelve hundred columns in the mosque in Córdoba, as Borges puts it, or, as in my own painful case for the last two years, with a woman in Central Asia. The Zahir was a fixation on everything that had been passed from generation to generation; it left no question unanswered; it took up all the space; it never allowed us even to consider the possibility that things could change.

The all-powerful Zahir seemed to be born with every human being and to gain full strength in childhood, imposing rules that would thereafter always be respected:

People who are different are dangerous; they belong to another tribe; they want our lands and our women.

We must marry, have children, reproduce the species.

Love is only a small thing, enough for one person, and any suggestion that the heart might be larger than this is considered perverse.

When we marry, we are authorized to take possession of the other person, body and soul.

We must do jobs we detest because we are part of an organized society, and if everyone did what they wanted to do, the world would come to a standstill.

We must buy jewelry; it identifies us with our tribe, just as body piercing identifies those of a different tribe.

We must be amusing at all times and sneer at those who express their real feelings; it's dangerous for a tribe to allow its members to show their feelings.

We must at all costs avoid saying no because people prefer those who always say yes, and this allows us to survive in hostile territory.

What other people think is more important than what we feel.

Never make a fuss—it might attract the attention of an enemy tribe.

If you behave differently, you will be expelled from the tribe because you could infect others and destroy something that was extremely difficult to organize in the first place.

We must always consider the look of our new cave, and if we don't have a clear idea of our own, then we must call in a decorator who will do his best to show others what good taste we have.

We must eat three meals a day, even if we're not hungry, and when we fail to fit the current ideal of beauty we must fast, even if we're starving.

We must dress according to the dictates of fashion, make love whether we feel like it or not, kill in the name of our country, wish time away so that retirement comes more quickly, elect politicians, complain about the cost of living, change our hairstyle, criticize anyone who is different, go to a religious service on Sunday, Saturday, or Friday, depending on our religion, and there beg forgiveness for our sins and puff ourselves up with pride because *we* know the truth and despise the other tribe, who worships a false god.

Our children must follow in our footsteps; after all, we are older and know about the world.

We must have a university degree even if we never get a job in the area of knowledge we were forced to study.

We must study things that we will never use, but which someone told us were important to know: algebra, trigonometry, the code of Hammurabi.

We must never make our parents sad, even if this means giving up everything that makes us happy.

We must play music quietly, talk quietly, weep in private, because I am the all-powerful Zahir, who lays down the rules and determines the distance between railway tracks, the meaning of success, the best way to love, the importance of rewards.

We stop outside a relatively chic building in an expensive area. One of the group taps in the code at the front door and we all go up to the third floor. I thought we would find one of those understanding families who put up with their son's friends in order to keep him close to home and keep an eye on him. But when Lucrecia opened the door, everything was in darkness. As my eyes grew accustomed to the light from the street filtering in

through the windows, I saw a large empty living room. The only decoration was a fireplace that probably hadn't been used for years.

A fair-haired boy, who was nearly six feet tall and wore a long rain cape and a mohawk, went into the kitchen and returned with some lighted candles. We all sat around in a circle on the floor and, for the first time that night, I felt afraid: it was like being in a horror movie in which a satanic ritual is about to begin, and where the victim will be the stranger who was unwise enough to tag along.

Mikhail was looking pale and his eyes kept darting about, unable to fix on any one place, and that only increased my feeling of unease. He was on the point of having an epileptic fit. Would the people there know what to do in that situation? Wouldn't it be better just to leave now and not get involved in a potential tragedy?

That would perhaps be the most prudent thing to do, in keeping with a life in which I was a famous author who writes about spirituality and should therefore be setting an example. Yes, if I was being sensible, I would say to Lucrecia that, in case of an attack, she should place something in her boyfriend's mouth to stop his tongue rolling back and prevent him choking to death. She must know this already, but in the world of the followers of the social Zahir, we leave nothing to chance, we need to be at peace with our conscience.

That is how I would have acted before my accident, but now my personal history had become unimportant. It had stopped being history and was once more becoming a legend, a search, an adventure, a journey into and away from myself. I was once more in a time in which the things around me were changing and that is how I wanted it to be for the rest of my days. (I remembered one of my ideas for an epitaph: "He died while he was still alive.") I was carrying with me the experiences of my past, which allowed me to react with speed and precision, but I wasn't bothered about the lessons I had learned. Imagine a warrior in the middle of a fight, pausing to decide which move to make next? He would be dead in an instant.

And the warrior in me, using intuition and technique, decided that I needed to stay, to continue the night's experiences, even if it was late and I was tired and drunk and afraid that a worried or angry Marie might be waiting up for me. I sat down next to Mikhail so that I could act quickly if he had a fit.

I noticed that he seemed to be in control of his epileptic attack. He gradually grew calmer, and his eyes took on the same intensity as when he was the young man in white standing on the stage at the Armenian restaurant.

"We will start with the usual prayer," he said.

And the young people, who, up until then, had been aggressive, drunken misfits, closed their eyes and held hands in a large circle. Even the two Alsatian dogs sitting in one corner of the room seemed calmer.

“Dear Lady, when I look at the cars, the shop windows, the people oblivious to everyone else, when I look at all the buildings and the monuments, I see in them your absence. Make us capable of bringing you back.”

The group continued as one: “Dear Lady, we recognize your presence in the difficulties we are experiencing. Help us not to give up. Help us to think of you with tranquility and determination, even when it is hard to accept that we love you.”

I noticed that everyone there was wearing the same symbol

somewhere on their clothing. Sometimes it was in the form of a brooch, or a metal badge, or a piece of embroidery, or was even drawn on the fabric with a pen.

“I would like to dedicate tonight to the man sitting on my right. He sat down beside me because he wanted to protect me.”

How did he know that?

“He’s a good man. He knows that love transforms and he allows himself to be transformed by love. He still carries much of his personal history in his soul, but he is continually trying to free himself from it, which is why he stayed with us tonight. He is the husband of the woman we all know, the woman who left me a relic as proof of her friendship and as a talisman.”

Mikhail took out the piece of bloodstained cloth and put it down in front of him.

“This is part of the unknown soldier’s shirt. Before he died, he said to the woman: ‘Cut up my clothes and distribute the pieces among those who believe in death and who, for that reason, are capable of living as if today were their last day on earth. Tell those people that I have just seen the face of God; tell them not to be afraid, but not to grow complacent either. Seek the one truth, which is love. Live in accordance with its laws.’”

They all gazed reverently at the piece of cloth.

“We were born into a time of revolt. We pour all our enthusiasm into it, we risk our lives and our youth, and suddenly, we feel afraid, and that initial joy gives way to the real challenges: weariness, monotony, doubts about our own abilities. We notice that some of our friends have already given up. We are obliged to confront loneliness, to cope with sharp bends in the road, to suffer a few falls with no one near to help us, and we end up asking ourselves if it’s worth all that effort.”

Mikhail paused.

“It is. And we will carry on, knowing that our soul, even though it is eternal, is at this moment caught in the web of time, with all its opportunities and limitations. We will, as far as possible, free ourselves from this web. When this proves impossible and we return to the story we were told, we will nevertheless remember our battles and be ready to resume the struggle as soon as the conditions are right. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed the others.

“I need to talk to the Lady,” said the fair young man with the Mohawk.

“Not tonight. I’m tired.”

There was a general murmur of disappointment. Unlike those people at the Armenian restaurant, they knew Mikhail’s story and knew about the presence he felt by his side. He got up and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. I went with him.

I asked how they had come by that apartment, and he explained that in French law anyone can legally move into a building that is not being used by its owner. It was, in short, a squat.

I began to be troubled by the thought that Marie would be waiting up for me. Mikhail took my arm.

“You said today that you were going to the steppes. I’ll say this one more time: Please, take me with you. I need to go back to my country, even if only for a short time, but I haven’t any money. I miss my people, my mother, my friends. I could say, ‘The voice tells me that you will need me,’ but that wouldn’t be true: you could find Esther easily enough and without any help at all. But I need an infusion of energy from my homeland.”

“I can give you the money for a return ticket.”

“I know you can, but I’d like to be there with you, to go with you to the village where she’s living, to feel the wind on my face, to help you along the road that will lead you back to the woman you love. She was—and still is—very important to me. I learned so much from the changes she went through, from her determination, and I want to go on learning. Do you remember me talking once about ‘interrupted stories’? I would like to be by your side right up until the moment we reach her house. That way, I will have lived through to the end this period of your—and my—life. When we reach her house, I will leave you alone.”

I didn’t know what to say. I tried to talk about something else and asked about the people in the living room.

“They’re people who are afraid of ending up like your generation, a generation that dreamed it could revolutionize the world, but ended up giving in to ‘reality.’ We pretend to be strong because we’re weak. There are still only a few of us, very few, but I think

that's only a passing phase; people can't go on deceiving themselves forever. Now what's your answer to my question?"

"Mikhail, you know how much I want to free myself from my personal history. If you had asked me a while ago, I would have found it much more comfortable, more convenient even, to travel with you, since you know the country, the customs, and the possible dangers. Now, though, I feel that I should roll up Ariadne's thread into a ball and escape from the labyrinth I got myself into, and that I should do this alone. My life has changed; I feel as if I were ten or even twenty years younger, and that in itself is enough for me to want to set off in search of adventure."

"When will you leave?"

"As soon as I get my visa. In two or three days' time."

"May the Lady go with you. The voice is saying that it is the right moment. If you change your mind, let me know."

I walked past the group of people lying on the floor, ready to go to sleep. On the way home, it occurred to me that life was a much more joyful thing than I had thought it would be at my age: it's always possible to go back to being young and crazy again. I was so focused on the present moment that I was surprised when I saw that people didn't recoil from me as I passed, didn't fearfully lower their eyes. No one even noticed me, but I liked the idea. This city was once again the city about which Henry IV had said, when he was accused of betraying his Protestant religion by marrying a Catholic, "Paris is well worth a mass."

It was worth much more than that. I could see again the religious massacres, the bloodlettings, the kings, the queens, the museums, the castles, the tortured artists, the drunken writers, the philosophers who took their own lives, the soldiers who plotted to conquer the world, the traitors who, with a gesture, brought down a whole dynasty, the stories that had once been forgotten and were now remembered and retold.

For the first time in ages, I arrived home and did not immediately go over to the computer to find out if anyone had e-mailed me, if there was some pressing matter requiring urgent action: nothing was that urgent. I didn't go into the bedroom to see if Marie was asleep either, because I knew she would only be pretending to sleep.

I didn't turn on the TV to watch the late-night news, because the news was exactly the same news I used to listen to as a child: one country was threatening another country; someone had betrayed someone else; the economy was going badly; some grand passion had come to an end; Israel and Palestine had failed, after fifty long years, to reach an agreement; another bomb had exploded; a hurricane had left thousands of people homeless.

I remembered that the major networks that morning, having no terrorist attacks to report, had all chosen as their main item a rebellion in Haiti. What did I care about Haiti? What difference would that make to my life or to that of my wife, to the price of bread in Paris, to Mikhail's tribe? How could I have spent five minutes of my precious life listening to someone talking about the rebels and the president, watching the usual scenes of street protests being repeated over and over, and being reported as if it were a great event in the history of humanity—a rebellion in Haiti! And I had swallowed it whole! I had watched until the end! Stupid people really should be issued their own special identity cards because they are the ones who feed the collective stupidity.

I opened the window and let in the icy night air. I took off my clothes and told myself that I could withstand the cold. I stood there, not thinking anything, just aware of my feet on the floor, my eyes fixed on the Eiffel Tower, my ears hearing barking dogs, police sirens, and conversations I couldn't quite understand.

I was not I, I was nothing—and that seemed to me quite marvelous.

"You seem strange."

"What do you mean 'strange'?"

"You seem sad."

"I'm not sad. I'm happy."

"You see? Even your tone of voice is false: you're sad about me, but you don't dare say anything."

"Why should I be sad?"

"Because I came home late last night and I was drunk. You haven't even asked me where I went."

"I'm not interested."

"Why aren't you interested? I told you I was going out with Mikhail, didn't I?"

"Didn't you go out with him, then?"

"Yes, I did."

"So what's there to ask?"

“Don’t you think that when your boyfriend, whom you claim you love, comes home late, you should at least try to find out what happened?”

“All right, then, what happened?”

“Nothing. I went out with Mikhail and some of his friends.”

“Fine.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Of course I do.”

“I don’t think you love me anymore. You’re not jealous. You don’t care. Do I normally get back home at two in the morning?”

“Didn’t you say you were a free man?”

“And I am.”

“In that case, it’s normal that you should get back home at two in the morning and do whatever you want to do. If I were your mother, I’d be worried, but you’re a grown-up, aren’t you? You men should stop behaving as if you wanted the women in your life to treat you like children.”

“I don’t mean that kind of worried. I’m talking about jealousy.”

“Would you prefer it if I made a scene right now, over breakfast?”

“No, don’t do that, the neighbors will hear.”

“I don’t care about the neighbors. I won’t make a scene because I don’t feel like it. It’s been hard for me, but I’ve finally accepted what you told me in Zagreb, and I’m trying to get used to the idea. Meanwhile, if it makes you happy, I can always pretend to be jealous, angry, crazy, or whatever.”

“As I said, you seem strange. I’m beginning to think I’m not important in your life anymore.”

“And I’m beginning to think you’ve forgotten there’s a journalist waiting for you in the sitting room, who is quite possibly listening to our conversation.”

Ah, the journalist. I go on automatic pilot, because I know what questions he will ask. I know how the interview will begin ("Let's talk about your new novel. What's the main message?"), and I know how I will respond ("If I wanted to put across a message, I'd write a single sentence, not a book.").

I know he'll ask me what I feel about the critics, who are usually very hard on my work. I know that he will end by asking: "And have you already started writing a new book? What projects are you working on now?" To which I will respond: "That's a secret."

The interview begins as expected:

"Let's talk about your new book. What's the main message?"

"If I wanted to put across a message, I'd write a single sentence, not a book."

"And why do you write?"

"Because that's my way of sharing my feelings with others."

This phrase is also part of my automatic pilot script, but I stop and correct myself:

"Although that particular story could be told in a different way."

"In a different way? Do you mean you're not happy with *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew*?"

"No, on the contrary, I'm very pleased with the book, but I'm not so pleased with the answer I've just given you. Why do I write? The real answer is this: I write because I want to be loved."

The journalist eyed me suspiciously: What kind of confession was this?

"I write because when I was an adolescent, I was useless at football, I didn't have a car or much of an allowance, and I was pretty much of a weed."

I was making a huge effort to keep talking. The conversation with Marie had reminded me of a past that no longer made any sense; I needed to talk about my real personal history, in order to become free of it. I went on:

"I didn't wear trendy clothes either. That's all the girls in my class were interested in, and so they just ignored me. At night, when my friends were out with their girlfriends, I spent my free time creating a world in which I could be happy: my companions were writers and their books. One day, I wrote a poem for one of the girls in the street where I lived. A

friend found the poem in my room and stole it, and when we were all together, he showed it to the entire class. Everyone laughed. They thought it was ridiculous—I was in love!

"The only one who didn't laugh was the girl I wrote the poem for. The following evening, when we went to the theater, she managed to fix things so that she sat next to me, and she held my hand. We left the theater hand in hand. There was ugly, puny, untrendy me strolling along with the girl all the boys in the class fancied."

I paused. It was as if I were going back into the past, to the moment when her hand touched mine and changed my life.

"And all because of a poem," I went on. "A poem showed me that by writing and revealing my invisible world, I could compete on equal terms with the visible world of my classmates: physical strength, fashionable clothes, cars, being good at sports."

The journalist was slightly surprised, and I was even more surprised. He managed to compose himself, though, and asked:

"Why do you think the critics are so hard on your work?"

My automatic pilot would normally reply: "You just have to read the biography of any writer from the past who is now considered a classic—not that I'm comparing myself with them, you understand—to see how implacable their critics were then. The reason is simple: Critics are extremely insecure, they don't really know what's going on, they're democrats when it comes to politics, but fascists when it comes to culture. They believe that people are perfectly capable of choosing who governs them, but have no idea when it comes to choosing films, books, music."

I had abandoned my automatic pilot again, knowing full well that the journalist was unlikely to publish my response.

"Have you ever heard of the law of Jante?"

"No, I haven't," he said.

"Well, it's been in existence since the beginning of civilization, but it was only officially set down in 1933 by a Danish writer. In the small town of Jante, the powers that be came up with ten commandments telling people how they should behave, and it seems to exist not only in Jante, but everywhere else too. If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I'd say: 'Mediocrity and anonymity are the safest choice. If you opt for them, you'll never face any major problems in life. But if you try to be different…'"

"I'd like to know what these Jante commandments are," said the journalist, who seemed genuinely interested.

"I don't have them here, but I can summarize if you like."

I went over to my computer and printed out a condensed and edited version.

“You are nobody, never even dare to think that you know more than we do. You are of no importance, you can do nothing right, your work is of no significance, but as long as you never challenge us, you will live a happy life. Always take what we say seriously and never laugh at our opinions.”

The journalist folded up the piece of paper and put it in his pocket.

“You’re right. If you’re a nobody, if your work has no impact, then it deserves to be praised. If, however, you climb out of that state of mediocrity and are a success, then you’re defying the law and deserve to be punished.”

I was so pleased that he had reached this conclusion on his own.

“And it isn’t only the critics who say that,” I added. “More people, far more people than you might think, say exactly the same thing.”

Later that afternoon, I rang Mikhail’s cell phone number:

“Let’s travel to Kazakhstan together.”

He didn’t seem in the least surprised; he merely thanked me and asked what had made me change my mind.

“For two years, my life has consisted of nothing but the Zahir. Since I met you, I’ve been following a long-forgotten path, an abandoned railway track with grass growing between the rails, but which can still be used by trains. I haven’t yet reached the final station, so I have no way of stopping along the way.”

He asked me if I had managed to get a visa. I explained that the Favor Bank had once again come to my aid: a Russian friend had phoned his girlfriend, who was the director of a major newspaper company in Kazakhstan. She had phoned the ambassador in Paris, and the visa would be ready that afternoon.

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow. In order to buy the tickets, I just need to know your real name; the travel agent is on the other line now.”

“Before you hang up, I’d just like to say one thing: I really liked what you said about the distance between the tracks and what you said just now about the abandoned railway line,

but I don't think that's why you're asking me to come with you. I think it's because of something you wrote once, and which I know by heart. Your wife was always quoting these lines, and what they say is far more romantic than that business about the Favor Bank:

A warrior of light knows that he has much to be grateful for.

He was helped in his struggle by the angels; celestial forces placed each thing in its place, thus allowing him to give of his best. That is why, at sunset, he kneels and gives thanks for the Protective Cloak surrounding him.

His companions say: "He's so lucky!" But he knows that "luck" is knowing to look around him and to see where his friends are, because it was through their words that the angels were able to make themselves heard.

"I don't always remember what I wrote, but thank you for that. Now I just need your name to give to the travel agent."

It takes twenty minutes for the taxi company to answer the phone. An irritated voice tells me I'll have to wait another half an hour. Marie seems happy in her exuberantly sexy black dress, and I think of the Armenian restaurant and the man who admitted to feeling aroused by the thought that his wife was desired by other men. I know that all the women at the gala supper will be wearing outfits designed to make their breasts and curves the center of attention, and that their husbands or boyfriends, knowing that their wives or girlfriends are desired by other men, will think: "All right, have a good look, but keep your distance, because she's with me, she's mine. I'm better than you are, because I have something you'd all like to have."

I'm not going to be doing any business, I'm not going to be signing contracts or giving interviews; I am merely attending a ceremony, to repay a deposit made into my account at the Favor Bank. I will sit next to someone boring at supper, someone who will ask me where I find the inspiration for my books. Next to me, on the other side, a pair of breasts will perhaps be on show, possibly belonging to the wife of a friend, and I will constantly have to stop myself glancing down because, if I do, even for a second, she will tell her husband that I was coming on to her. While we wait for the taxi, I draw up a list of possible topics of conversation:

1. (a) Comments about people's appearance: "You're looking very elegant." "What a beautiful dress." "Your skin's looking fabulous." When they go back home, they'll say how badly dressed everyone was and how ill they looked.

2. (b) Recent holidays: “You must visit Aruba, it’s fantastic.” “There’s nothing like a summer night in Cancún, sipping a martini by the seashore.” In fact, no one enjoys themselves very much on these holidays, they just experience a sense of freedom for a few days and feel obliged to enjoy themselves because they spent all that money.
3. (c) More holidays, this time to places which they feel free to criticize: “I was in Rio de Janeiro recently—such a violent city.” “The poverty in the streets of Calcutta is really shocking.” They only went to these places in order to feel powerful while they were there and privileged when they came back to the mean reality of their little lives, where at least there is no poverty or violence.
4. (d) New therapies: “Just one week of drinking wheatgrass juice really improves the texture of your hair.” “I spent two days at a spa in Biarritz; the water there opens the pores and eliminates toxins.” The following week, they will discover that wheatgrass has absolutely no special properties and that any old hot water will open the pores and eliminate toxins.
5. (e) Other people: “I haven’t seen so-and-so in ages—what’s he up to?” “I understand that what’s-her-name is in financial difficulties and has had to sell her apartment.” They can talk about the people who weren’t invited to the party in question, they can criticize all they like, as long as they end by saying, with an innocent, pitying air: “Still, he/she’s a wonderful person.”
6. (f) A few little complaints about life, just to add savor to the evening: “I wish something new would happen in my life.” “I’m so worried about my children, they never listen to proper music or read proper literature.” They wait for comments from other people with the same problem and then feel less alone and leave the party happy.
7. (g) At intellectual gatherings, like the one this evening, we will discuss the Middle East conflict, the problem of Islamism, the latest exhibition, the latest philosophy guru, the fantastic book that no one has heard of, the fact that music isn’t what it used to be; we will offer our intelligent, sensible opinions, which run completely counter to our real feelings—because we all know how much we hate having to go to those exhibitions, read those unbearable books, or see those dreary films, just so that we will have something to talk about on nights like tonight.

The taxi arrives, and while we are being driven to the venue I add another very personal item to my list: I complain to Marie about how much I loathe these suppers. She reminds me—and it’s true—that I always enjoy myself in the end and have a really good time.

We enter one of Paris’s most elegant restaurants and head for a room reserved for the event—a presentation of a literary prize for which I was one of the judges. Everyone is standing around talking; some people say hello and others merely look at me and make some comment to each other; the organizer of the prize comes over to me and introduces me to the people who are there, always with the same irritating words: “You know who this gentleman is, of course.” Some people give a smile of recognition, others merely smile and don’t recognize me at all, but pretend to know who I am, because to admit

otherwise would be to accept that the world they're living in doesn't exist, and that they are failing to keep up with the things that matter.

I remember the tribe of the previous night and think: stupid people should all be marooned on a ship on the high seas and forced to attend parties night after night, being endlessly introduced to people for several months, until they finally manage to remember who is who.

I draw up a catalog of the kind of people who attend events like this. Ten percent are Members, the decision makers, who came out tonight because of some debt they owe to the Favor Bank, but who always have an eye open for anything that might be of benefit to their work—how to make money, where to invest. They can soon tell whether or not an event is going to prove profitable or not, and they are always the first to leave the party; they never waste their time.

Two percent are the Talents, who really do have a promising future; they have already managed to ford a few rivers, have just become aware of the existence of the Favor Bank and are all potential customers; they have important services to offer, but are not as yet in a position to make decisions. They are nice to everyone because they don't know who exactly they are talking to, and they are more open-minded than the Members, because, for them, any road might lead somewhere.

Three percent are what I call the Tupamaros—in homage to the former Uruguayan guerrilla group. They have managed to infiltrate this party and are mad for any kind of contact; they're not sure whether to stay or to go on to another party that is taking place at the same time; they are anxious; they want to show how talented they are, but they weren't invited, they haven't scaled the first mountains, and as soon as the other guests figure this out, they immediately withdraw any attention they have been paying them.

The last eighty-five percent are the Trays. I call them this because, just as no party can exist without that particular utensil, so no event can exist without these guests. The Trays don't really know what is going on, but they know it's important to be there; they are on the guest list drawn up by the promoters because the success of something like this also depends on the number of people who come. They are all ex-something-or-other-important—ex-bankers, ex-directors, the ex-husband of some famous woman, the ex-wife of some man now in a position of power. They are counts in a country where the monarchy no longer exists, princesses and marchionesses who live by renting out their castles. They go from one party to the next, from one supper to the next—don't they ever get sick of it, I wonder?

When I commented on this recently to Marie, she said that just as some people are addicted to work, so others are addicted to fun. Both groups are equally unhappy, convinced that they are missing something, but unable to give up their particular vice.

A pretty young blonde comes over while I'm talking to one of the organizers of a conference on cinema and literature and tells me how much she enjoyed *A Time to Rend*

and a Time to Sew. She's from one of the Baltic countries, she says, and works in film. She is immediately identified by the group as a Tupamaro, because while appearing to be interested in one thing (me), she is, in fact, interested in something else (the organizers of the conference). Despite having made this almost unforgivable gaffe, there is still a chance that she might be an inexperienced Talent. The organizer of the conference asks what she means by "working in film." The young woman explains that she writes film reviews for a newspaper and has published a book (About cinema? No, about her life—her short, dull life, I imagine).

She then commits the cardinal sin of jumping the gun and asking if she could be invited to this year's event. The organizer explains that the woman who publishes my books in that same Baltic country, an influential and hardworking woman (and very pretty too, I think to myself), has already been invited. They continue talking to me; the Tupamaro lingers for a few more minutes, not knowing what to say, then moves off.

Given that it's a literary prize, most of the guests tonight—Tupamaros, Talents, and Trays—belong to the world of the arts. The Members, on the other hand, are either sponsors or people connected with foundations that support museums, classical music concerts, and promising young artists. After various conversations about which of the candidates for the prize that night had applied most pressure in order to win, the master of ceremonies mounts the stage, asks everyone to take their places at the tables (we all sit down), makes a few jokes (it's part of the ritual, and we all laugh), and says that the winners will be announced between the entrée and the first course.

I am at the head table; this allows me to keep the Trays at a safe distance, and also means that I don't have to bother with any enthusiastic and self-interested Talents. I am seated between the female director of a car-manufacturing firm, which is sponsoring the party, and an heiress who has decided to invest in art. To my surprise, neither of them is wearing a dress with a provocative décolletage. The other guests at our table are the director of a perfumery; an Arab prince (who was doubtless passing through Paris and was pounced on by one of the promoters to add luster to the event); an Israeli banker who collects fourteenth-century manuscripts; the main organizer of tonight's event; the French consul to Monaco; and a blonde woman whose presence here I can't quite fathom, although I suspect she might be the organizer's next mistress.

I have to keep putting on my glasses and surreptitiously reading the names of the people on either side of me (I ought to be marooned on that imaginary ship and invited to this same party dozens of times until I have memorized the names of all the guests). Marie, as protocol demands, has been placed at another table; someone, at some point in history, decided that at formal suppers couples should always be seated separately, thus leaving it open to doubt whether the person beside us is married, single, or married but available. Or perhaps someone thought that if a couple were seated together, they would simply talk to each other; but, in that case, why go out—why take a taxi and go to the supper in the first place?

As foreseen in my list of possible conversational topics, we begin with cultural small talk—isn't that a marvelous exhibition, wasn't that an intelligent review…. I would like to concentrate on the entrée—caviar with salmon and egg—but I am constantly interrupted by the usual questions about how my new book is doing, where I find my inspiration, whether I'm working on a new project. Everyone seems very cultured, everyone manages to mention—as if by chance, of course—some famous person who also happens to be a close friend. Everyone can speak cogently about the current state of politics or about the problems facing culture.

"Why don't we talk about something else?"

The question slips out inadvertently. Everyone at the table goes quiet. After all, it is extremely rude to interrupt other people and worse still to draw attention to oneself. It seems, however, that last night's tour of the streets of Paris in the guise of a beggar has caused some irreparable damage, which means that I can no longer stand such conversations.

"We could talk about the *acomodador:* the moment in our lives when we decide to abandon our desires and make do, instead, with what we have."

No one seems very interested. I decide to change the subject.

"We could talk about the importance of forgetting the story we've been told and trying to live an entirely different story. Try doing something different every day—like talking to the person at the next table to you in a restaurant, visiting a hospital, putting your foot in a puddle, listening to what another person has to say, allowing the energy of love to flow freely, instead of putting it in a jug and standing it in a corner."

"Are you talking about adultery?" asks the director of the perfumery.

"No, I mean allowing yourself to be the instrument of love, not its master, being with someone because you really want to be, not because convention obliges you to be."

With great delicacy, and just a touch of irony, the French consul to Monaco assures me that all the people around our table are, of course, exercising that right and freedom. Everyone agrees, although no one believes that it's true.

"Sex!" cries the blonde woman whose role that evening no one has quite identified. "Why don't we talk about sex? It's much more interesting and much less complicated!"

At least her remark is spontaneous. One of the women sitting next to me gives a wry laugh, but I applaud.

"Sex is certainly more interesting, but I'm not sure it's a different topic of conversation. Besides, it's no longer forbidden to talk about sex."

“It’s also in extremely bad taste,” says one of my neighbors.

“May we know what *is* forbidden?” asks the organizer, who is starting to feel uncomfortable.

“Well, money, for example. All of us around this table have money, or pretend that we do. We assume we’ve been invited here because we’re rich, famous, and influential. But have any of us ever thought of using this kind of event to find out what everyone actually earns? Since we’re all so sure of ourselves, so important, why don’t we look at our world as it is and not as we imagine it to be?”

“What are you getting at?” asks the director of the car-manufacturing firm.

“It’s a long story. I could start by talking about Hans and Fritz sitting in a bar in Tokyo and go on to mention a Mongolian nomad who says we need to forget who we think we are in order to become who we really are.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“That’s my fault. I didn’t really explain. But let’s get down to the nitty-gritty: I’d like to know how much everyone here earns, what it means, in money terms, to be sitting at the head table.”

There is a momentary silence—my gamble is not paying off. The other people around the table are looking at me with startled eyes: asking about someone’s financial situation is a bigger taboo than sex, more frowned upon than asking about betrayals, corruption, or parliamentary intrigues.

However, the Arab prince—perhaps because he’s bored by all these receptions and banquets with their empty chatter, perhaps because that very day he has been told by his doctor that he is going to die, or perhaps for some other reason—decides to answer my question:

“I earn about twenty thousand euros a month, depending on the amount approved by the parliament in my country. That bears no relation to what I spend, though, because I have an unlimited so-called entertainment allowance. In other words, I am here courtesy of the embassy’s car and chauffeur; the clothes I’m wearing belong to the government; and tomorrow I will be traveling to another European country in a private jet, with the cost of pilot, fuel, and airport taxes deducted from that allowance.”

And he concludes:

“Apparent reality is not an exact science.”

If the prince can speak so frankly, and given that he is, hierarchically, the most important person at the table, the others cannot possibly embarrass him by remaining silent. They are going to have to participate in the game, the question, and the embarrassment.

“I don’t know exactly how much I earn,” says the organizer, one of the Favor Bank’s classic representatives, known to some as a lobbyist. “Somewhere in the region of ten thousand euros a month, but I, too, have an entertainment allowance from the various organizations I head. I can deduct everything—suppers, lunches, hotels, air tickets, sometimes even clothes—although I don’t have a private jet.”

The wine has run out; he signals to a waiter and our glasses are refilled. Now it was the turn of the director of the car-manufacturing firm, who, initially, had hated the idea of talking about money, but who now seems to be rather enjoying herself.

“I reckon I earn about the same, and have the same unlimited entertainment allowance.”

One by one, everyone confessed how much they earned. The banker was the richest of them all, with ten million euros a year, as well as shares in his bank that were constantly increasing in value.

When it came to the turn of the young blonde woman who had not been introduced to anyone, she refused to answer:

“That’s part of my secret garden. It’s nobody’s business but mine.”

“Of course it isn’t, but we’re just playing a game,” said the organizer.

The woman refused to join in, and by doing so, placed herself on a higher level than everyone else: after all, she was the only one in the group who had secrets. However, by placing herself on a higher level, she only succeeded in earning everyone else’s scorn. Afraid of feeling humiliated by her miserable salary, she had, by acting all mysterious, managed to humiliate everyone else, not realizing that most of the people there lived permanently poised on the edge of the abyss, utterly dependent on those entertainment allowances that could vanish overnight.

The question inevitably came around to me.

“It depends. In a year when I publish a new book, I could earn five million euros. If I don’t publish a book, then I earn about two million from royalties on existing titles.”

“You only asked the question so that you could say how much you earned,” said the young woman with the “secret garden.” “No one’s impressed.”

She had realized that she had made a wrong move earlier on and was now trying to correct the situation by going on the attack.

“On the contrary,” said the prince. “I would have expected a leading author like yourself to be far wealthier.”

A point to me. The blonde woman would not open her mouth again all night.

The conversation about money broke a series of taboos, given that how much people earn was the biggest of them all. The waiter began to appear more frequently, the bottles of wine began to be emptied with incredible speed, the emcee-cum-organizer rather tipsily mounted the stage, announced the winner, presented the prize, and immediately rejoined the conversation, which had carried on even though politeness demands that we keep quiet when someone else is talking. We discussed what we did with our money (this consisted mostly of buying “free time,” traveling, or practicing a sport).

I thought of changing tack and asking them what kind of funeral they would like—death was as big a taboo as money—but the atmosphere was so buoyant and everyone was so full of talk that I decided to say nothing.

“You’re all talking about money, but you don’t know what money is,” said the banker. “Why do people think that a bit of colored paper, a plastic card, or a coin made out of fifth-rate metal has any value? Worse still, did you know that your money, your millions of dollars, are nothing but electronic impulses?”

Of course we did.

“Once, wealth was what these ladies are wearing,” he went on. “Ornaments made from rare materials that were easy to transport, count, and share out. Pearls, nuggets of gold, precious stones. We all carried our wealth in a visible place. Such things were, in turn, exchanged for cattle or grain, because no one walks down the street carrying cattle or sacks of grain. The funny thing is that we still behave like some primitive tribe—we wear our ornaments to show how rich we are, even though we often have more ornaments than money.”

“It’s the tribal code,” I said. “In my day, young people wore their hair long, whereas nowadays they all go in for body piercing. It helps them identify like-minded people, even though it can’t buy anything.”

“Can our electronic impulses buy one extra hour of life? No. Can they buy back those loved ones who have departed? No. Can they buy love?”

“They can certainly buy love,” said the director of the car-manufacturing firm in an amused tone of voice.

Her eyes, however, betrayed a terrible sadness. I thought of Esther and of what I had said to the journalist in the interview I had given that morning. We rich, powerful, intelligent people knew that, deep down, we had acquired all these ornaments and credit cards only in order to find love and affection and to be with someone who loved us.

“Not always,” said the director of the perfumery, turning to look at me.

“No, you’re right, not always. After all, my wife left me, and I’m a wealthy man. But almost always. By the way, does anyone at this table know how many cats and how many lampposts there are on the back of a ten-dollar bill?”

No one knew and no one was interested. The comment about love had completely spoiled the jolly atmosphere, and we went back to talking about literary prizes, exhibitions, the latest film, and the play that was proving to be such an unexpected success.

How was it on your table?”

“Oh, the usual.”

“Well, I managed to spark an interesting discussion about money, but, alas, it ended in tragedy.”

“When do you leave?”

“I have to leave here at half past seven in the morning. Since you’re flying to Berlin, we could share a taxi.”

“Where are you going?”

“You know where I’m going. You haven’t asked me, but you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Just as you know that we’re saying goodbye at this very moment.”

“We could go back to the time when we first met: a man in emotional tatters over someone who had left him, and a woman madly in love with her neighbor. I could repeat what I said to you once: ‘I’m going to fight to the bitter end.’ Well, I fought and I lost, and now I’ll just have to lick my wounds and leave.”

“I fought and lost as well. I’m not trying to sew up what was rent. Like you, I want to fight to the bitter end.”

“I suffer every day, did you know that? I’ve been suffering for months now, trying to show you how much I love you, how things are only important when you’re by my side. But now, whether I suffer or not, I’ve decided that enough is enough. It’s over. I’m tired. After that night in Zagreb, I lowered my guard and said to myself: If the blow comes, it

comes. It can lay me out on the canvas, it can knock me out cold, but one day I'll recover."

"You'll find someone else."

"Of course I will: I'm young, pretty, intelligent, desirable, but will I experience all the things I experienced with you?"

"You'll experience different emotions and, you know, although you may not believe it, I loved you while we were together."

"I'm sure you did, but that doesn't make it any the less painful. We'll leave in separate taxis tomorrow. I hate goodbyes, especially at airports or train stations."

THE RETURN TO ITHACA

We'll sleep here tonight and, tomorrow, we'll continue on horseback. My car can't cope with the sand of the steppes."

We were in a kind of bunker, which looked like a relic from the Second World War. A man, with his wife and his granddaughter, welcomed us and showed us a simple, but spotlessly clean room.

Dos went on:

"And don't forget to choose a name."

"I don't think that's necessary," said Mikhail.

"Of course it is," insisted Dos. "I was with his wife recently. I know how she thinks, I know what she has learned, I know what she expects."

Dos's voice was simultaneously firm and gentle. Yes, I would choose a name, I would do exactly as he suggested; I would continue to discard my personal history and, instead, embark on my personal legend—even if only out of sheer tiredness.

I was exhausted. The previous night I had slept for two hours at most: my body had still not adjusted to the enormous time difference. I had arrived in Almaty at about eleven o'clock at night local time, when in France it was only six o'clock in the evening. Mikhail had left me at the hotel and I had dozed for a bit, then woken up in the small hours. I had looked out at the lights below and thought how in Paris it would just be time to go out to supper. I was hungry and asked room service if they could send me up

something to eat: “Of course we can, sir, but you really must try to sleep; if you don’t, your body will stay stuck on its European timetable.”

For me, the worst possible torture is not being able to sleep. I ate a sandwich and decided to go for a walk. I asked the receptionist my usual question: “Is it dangerous to go walking at this hour?” He told me it wasn’t, and so I set off down the empty streets, narrow alleyways, broad avenues; it was a city like any other, with its neon signs, the occasional passing police car, a beggar here, a prostitute there. I had to keep repeating out loud: “I’m in Kazakhstan!” If I didn’t, I would end up thinking I was merely in some unfamiliar quarter of Paris.

“I’m in Kazakhstan!” I said to the deserted city, and a voice replied:

“Of course you are.”

I jumped. A man was sitting close by, on a bench in a square at dead of night, with his backpack by his side. He got up and introduced himself as Jan, from Holland, adding:

“And I know why you’re here.”

Was he a friend of Mikhail’s? Or was I being followed by the secret police?

“Why am I here, then?”

“Like me, you’ve traveled from Istanbul, following the Silk Road.”

I gave a sigh of relief, and decided to continue the conversation.

“On foot? As I understand it, that means crossing the whole of Asia.”

“It’s something I needed to do. I was dissatisfied with my life. I’ve got money, a wife, children, I own a hosiery factory in Rotterdam. For a time, I knew what I was fighting for—my family’s stability. Now I’m not so sure. Everything that once made me happy just bores me, leaves me cold. For the sake of my marriage, the love of my children, and my enthusiasm for my work, I decided to take two months off just for myself, and to take a long look at my life. And it’s working.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing these last few months. Are there a lot of pilgrims like you?”

“Lots of them. Loads. It can be dangerous, because the political situation in some of these countries is very tricky indeed, and they hate Westerners. But we get by. I think that, as a pilgrim, you’ll always be treated with respect, as long as you can prove you’re not a spy. But I gather from what you say that you have different reasons for being here. What brings you to Almaty?”

“The same thing as you. I came to reach the end of a particular road. Couldn’t you sleep either?”

“I’ve just woken up. The earlier I set out, the more chance I have of getting to the next town; if not, I’ll have to spend the night in the freezing cold steppes, with that constant wind blowing.”

“Have a good journey, then.”

“No, stay a while. I need to talk, to share my experiences. Most of the other pilgrims don’t speak English.”

And he started telling me about his life, while I tried to remember what I knew about the Silk Road, the old commercial route that connected Europe with the countries of the East. The traditional route started in Beirut, passed through Antioch and went all the way to the shores of the Yangtse in China; but in Central Asia it became a kind of web, with roads heading off in all directions, which allowed for the establishment of trading posts, which, in time, became towns, which were later destroyed in battles between rival tribes, rebuilt by the inhabitants, destroyed, and rebuilt again. Although almost everything passed along that route—gold, strange animals, ivory, seeds, political ideas, refugees from civil wars, armed bandits, private armies to protect the caravans—silk was the rarest and most coveted item. It was thanks to one of these branch roads that Buddhism traveled from China to India.

“I left Antioch with about two hundred dollars in my pocket,” said the Dutchman, having described mountains, landscapes, exotic tribes, and endless problems in various countries with police patrols. “I needed to find out if I was capable of becoming myself again. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I was forced to beg, to ask for money. To my surprise, people are much more generous than I had imagined.”

Beg? I studied his backpack and his clothes to see if I could spot the symbol of the tribe—Mikhail’s tribe—but I couldn’t find it.

“Have you ever been to an Armenian restaurant in Paris?”

“I’ve been to lots of Armenian restaurants, but never in Paris.”

“Do you know someone called Mikhail?”

“It’s a pretty common name in these parts. If I did know a Mikhail, I can’t remember, so I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“No, I don’t need your help. I’m just surprised by certain coincidences. It seems there are a lot of people, all over the world, who are becoming aware of the same thing and acting in a very similar way.”

“The first thing you feel, when you set out on a journey like this, is that you’ll never arrive. Then you feel insecure, abandoned, and spend all your time thinking about giving up. But if you can last a week, then you’ll make it to the end.”

“I’ve been wandering like a pilgrim through the streets of one city, and yesterday I arrived in a different one. May I bless you?”

He gave me a strange look.

“I’m not traveling for religious reasons. Are you a priest?”

“No, I’m not a priest, but I feel that I should bless you. Some things aren’t logical, as you know.”

The Dutchman called Jan, whom I would never see again, bowed his head and closed his eyes. I placed my hands on his shoulders and, in my native tongue—which he wouldn’t understand—I prayed that he would reach his destination safely and leave behind him on the Silk Road both his sadness and his sense that life was meaningless; I prayed, too, that he would return to his family with shining eyes and with his soul washed clean.

He thanked me, took up his backpack, and headed off in the direction of China. I went back to the hotel thinking that I had never, in my whole life, blessed anyone before. But I had responded to an impulse, and the impulse was right; my prayer would be answered.

The following day, Mikhail turned up with his friend, Dos, who would accompany us. Dos had a car, knew my wife, and knew the steppes, and he, too, wanted to be there when I reached the village where Esther was living.

I considered remonstrating with them—first, it was Mikhail, now it was his friend, and by the time we finally reached the village, there would be a huge crowd following me, applauding and weeping, waiting to see what would happen. But I was too tired to say anything. The next day, I would remind Mikhail of the promise he had made, not to allow any witnesses to that moment.

We got into the car and, for some time, followed the Silk Road. They asked me if I knew what it was and I told them that I had met a Silk Road pilgrim the previous night, and they said that such journeys were becoming more and more commonplace and could soon bring benefits to the country’s tourist industry.

Two hours later, we left the main road and continued along a minor road as far as the bunker where we are now, eating fish and listening to the soft wind that blows across the steppes.

“Esther was very important for me,” Dos explains, showing me a photo of one of his paintings, which includes one of those pieces of bloodstained cloth. “I used to dream of leaving here, like Oleg…”

“You’d better call me Mikhail, otherwise he’ll get confused.”

“I used to dream of leaving here, like lots of people my age. Then one day, Oleg—or, rather, Mikhail—phoned me. He said that his benefactress had decided to come and live in the steppes for a while and he wanted me to help her. I agreed, thinking that here was my chance and that perhaps I could extract the same favors from her: a visa, a plane ticket, and a job in France. She asked me to go with her to some remote village that she knew from an earlier visit.

“I didn’t ask her why, I simply did as she requested. On the way, she insisted on going to the house of a nomad she had visited years before. To my surprise, it was my grandfather she wanted to see! She was received with the hospitality that is typical of the people who live in this infinite space. My grandfather told her that, although she thought she was sad, her soul was, in fact, happy and free, and love’s energy had begun to flow again. He assured her that this would have an effect upon the whole world, including her husband. My grandfather taught her many things about the culture of the steppes, and asked me to teach her the rest. In the end, he decided that she could keep her name, even though this was contrary to tradition.

“And while she learned from my grandfather, I learned from her, and realized that I didn’t need to go far away, as Mikhail had done: my mission was to be in this empty space—the steppes—and to understand its colors and transform them into paintings.”

“I don’t quite understand what you mean about teaching my wife. I thought your grandfather said that we should forget everything.”

“I’ll show you tomorrow,” said Dos.

And the following day, he did show me and there was no need for words. I saw the endless steppes, which, although they appeared to be nothing but desert, were, in fact, full of life, full of creatures hidden in the low scrub. I saw the flat horizon, the vast empty space, heard the sound of horses’ hooves, the quiet wind, and then, all around us, nothing, absolutely nothing. It was as if the world had chosen this place to display, at once, its vastness, its simplicity, and its complexity. It was as if we could—and should—become like the steppes—empty, infinite, and, at the same time, full of life.

I looked up at the blue sky, took off my dark glasses, and allowed myself to be filled by that light, by the feeling of being simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. We rode on in silence, stopping now and then to let the horses drink from streams that only someone who knew the place would have been able to find. Occasionally, we would see other horsemen in the distance or shepherds with their flocks, framed by the plain and by the sky.

Where was I going? I hadn't the slightest idea and I didn't care. The woman I was looking for was somewhere in that infinite space. I could touch her soul, hear the song she was singing as she wove her carpets. Now I understood why she had chosen this place: there was nothing, absolutely nothing to distract her attention; it was the emptiness she had so yearned for. The wind would gradually blow her pain away. Could she ever have imagined that one day I would be here, on horseback, riding to meet her?

A sense of paradise descends from the skies. And I am aware that I am living through an unforgettable moment in my life; it is the kind of awareness we often have precisely when the magic moment has passed. I am entirely here, without past, without future, entirely focused on the morning, on the music of the horses' hooves, on the gentleness of the wind caressing my body, on the unexpected grace of contemplating sky, earth, men. I feel a sense of adoration and ecstasy. I am thankful for being alive. I pray quietly, listening to the voice of nature, and understanding that the invisible world always manifests itself in the visible world.

I ask the sky some questions, the same questions I used to ask my mother when I was a child:

Why do we love certain people and hate others?

Where do we go after we die?

Why are we born if, in the end, we die?

What does God mean?

The steppes respond with the constant sound of the wind. And that is enough: knowing that the fundamental questions of life will never be answered, and that we can, nevertheless, still go forward.

Mountains loomed on the horizon, and Dos asked us to stop. I saw that there was a stream nearby.

“We’ll camp here.”

We removed the saddlebags from the horses and put up the tent. Mikhail started digging a hole in the ground.

“This is how the nomads used to do it; we dig a hole, fill the bottom with stones, put more stones all around the edge, and that way we have a place to light a fire without the wind bothering us.”

To the south, between the mountains and us, a cloud of dust appeared, which I realized at once was caused by galloping horses. I pointed this out to my two friends, who jumped to their feet. I could see that they were tense. Then they exchanged a few words in Russian and relaxed. Dos went back to putting up the tent and Mikhail set about lighting the fire.

“Would you mind telling me what’s going on?” I said.

“It may look as if we’re surrounded by empty space, but it can’t have escaped your notice that we’ve already seen all kinds of things: shepherds, rivers, tortoises, foxes, and horsemen. It feels as if we had a clear view all around us, so where do these people come from? Where are their houses? Where do they keep their flocks?

“That sense of emptiness is an illusion: we are constantly watching and being watched. To a stranger who cannot read the signs of the steppes, everything is under control and the only thing he can see are the horses and the riders. To those of us who were brought up here, we can also see the yurts, the circular houses that blend in with the landscape. We know how to read what’s going on by observing how horsemen are moving and in which direction they’re heading. In the olden days, the survival of the tribe depended on that ability, because there were enemies, invaders, smugglers.

“And now the bad news: they’ve found out that we’re riding toward the village at the foot of those mountains and are sending people to kill the shaman who sees visions of children as well as the man who has come to disturb the peace of the foreign woman.”

He gave a loud laugh.

“Just wait a moment and you’ll understand.”

The riders were approaching, and I was soon able to see what was going on.

“It looks very odd to me—a woman being pursued by a man.”

“It is odd, but it’s also part of our lives.”

The woman rode past us, wielding a long whip, and, by way of a greeting, gave a shout and a smile directed at Dos, then started galloping around and around the place where we

were setting up camp. The smiling, sweating man pursuing her gave us a brief greeting too, all the while trying to keep up with the woman.

“Nina shouldn’t be so cruel,” said Mikhail. “There’s no need for all this.”

“It’s precisely because there’s no need for it that she can afford to be cruel,” replied Dos. “She just has to be beautiful and have a good horse.”

“But she does this to everyone.”

“I unseated her once,” said Dos proudly.

“The fact that you’re speaking English means that you want me to understand.”

The woman was laughing and riding ever faster; her laughter filled the steppes with joy.

“It’s a form of flirtation. It’s called Kyz Kuu, or ‘Bring the girl down.’ And we’ve all taken part in it at some time in our childhood or youth.”

The man pursuing her was getting closer and closer, but we could see that his horse couldn’t take much more.

“Later on, we’ll talk a bit about Tengri, the culture of the steppes,” Dos went on. “But now that you’re seeing this, let me just explain something very important. Here, in this land, the woman is in charge. She comes first. In the event of a divorce, she receives half the dowry back even if she’s the one who wants the divorce. Whenever a man sees a woman wearing a white turban, that means she’s a mother and we, as men, must place our hand on our heart and bow our head as a sign of respect.”

“But what’s that got to do with ‘Bring the girl down’?”

“In the village at the foot of the mountains, a group of men on horseback would have gathered around this girl; her name is Nina and she’s the most desirable girl in the area. They would have begun playing the game of Kyz Kuu, which was thought up in ancient times, when the women of the steppes, known as amazons, were also warriors.

At the time, no one would have dreamt of consulting the family if they wanted to get married: the suitors and the girl would simply get together in a particular place, all on horseback. She would ride around the men, laughing, provoking them, whipping them. Then the bravest of the men would start chasing her. If the girl was able to keep out of his grasp for a set period of time, then the man would have to call on the earth to cover him forever, because he would be considered a bad horseman—the warrior’s greatest shame.

If he got close, despite her whip, and pulled her to the ground, then he was a real man and was allowed to kiss her and to marry her. Obviously, then just as now, the girls knew who they should escape from and who they should let themselves be caught by.”

Nina was clearly just having a bit of fun. She had got ahead of the man again and was riding back to the village.

“She only came to show off. She knows we’re on our way and will take the news back to the village.”

“I have two questions. The first might seem stupid: Do you still choose your brides like that?”

Dos said that, nowadays, it was just a game. In the West, people got all dressed up and went to bars or fashionable clubs, whereas in the steppes, Kyz Kuu was the favored game of seduction. Nina had already humiliated quite a number of young men, and had allowed herself to be unseated by a few as well—exactly as happens in all the best discotheques.

“The second question will seem even more idiotic: Is the village at the foot of the mountains where my wife is living?”

Dos nodded.

“If we’re only two hours away, why don’t we sleep there? It’ll be a while yet before it gets dark.”

“You’re right, we are only two hours away, and there are two reasons why we’re stopping here for the night. First, even if Nina hadn’t come out here, someone would already have seen us and would have gone to tell Esther that we were coming. This way, she can decide whether or not she wants to see us, or if she would prefer to go to another village for a few days. If she did that, we wouldn’t follow her.”

My heart contracted.

“Even after all I’ve been through to get here?”

“If that’s how you feel, then you have understood nothing. What makes you think that your efforts should be rewarded with the submission, gratitude, and recognition of the person you love? You came here because this was the road you must follow, not in order to buy your wife’s love.”

However unfair his words might seem, he was right. I asked him about the second reason.

“You still haven’t chosen your name.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Mikhail said again. “He doesn’t understand our culture, and he’s not part of it.”

“It’s important to me,” said Dos. “My grandfather said that I must protect and help the foreign woman, just as she protected and helped me. I owe Esther the peace of my eyes, and I want her eyes to be at peace too.

“He will have to choose a name. He will have to forget forever his history of pain and suffering, and accept that he is a new person who has just been reborn and that, from now on, he will be reborn every day. If he doesn’t do that, and if they ever do live together again, he will expect her to pay him back for all the pain she once caused him.”

“I chose a name last night,” I said.

“Wait until this evening to tell me.”

As soon as the sun began to sink low on the horizon, we went to an area on the steppes that was full of vast sand dunes. I became aware of a different sound, a kind of resonance, an intense vibration. Mikhail said that it was one of the few places in the world where the dunes sing.

“When I was in Paris and I talked to people about this, they only believed me because an American said that he had experienced the same thing in North Africa; there are only thirty places like it in the world. Nowadays, of course, scientists can explain everything. It seems that because of the place’s unique formation, the wind penetrates the actual grains of sand and creates this sound. For the ancients, though, this was one of the magical places in the steppes, and it is a great honor that Dos should have chosen it for your name-changing.”

We started climbing one of the dunes, and as we proceeded the noise grew more intense and the wind stronger. When we reached the top, we could see the mountains standing out clearly to the south and the gigantic plain stretching out all around us.

“Turn toward the west and take off your clothes,” Dos said.

I did as he ordered, without asking why. I started to feel cold, but they seemed unconcerned about my well-being. Mikhail knelt down and appeared to be praying. Dos looked up at the sky, at the earth, at me, then placed his hands on my shoulders, just as I had done to the Dutchman, though without knowing why.

“In the name of the Lady, I dedicate you. I dedicate you to the earth, which belongs to the Lady. In the name of the horse, I dedicate you. I dedicate you to the world, and pray that the world helps you on your journey. In the name of the steppes, which are infinite, I dedicate you. I dedicate you to the infinite Wisdom, and pray that your horizon may always be wider than you can see. You have chosen your name and will speak it now for the first time.”

“In the name of the infinite steppes, I choose a name,” I replied, without asking if I was doing as the ritual demanded, merely allowing myself to be guided by the noise of the wind in the dunes. “Many centuries ago, a poet described the wanderings of a man called Ulysses on his way back to an island called Ithaca, where his beloved awaits him. He confronts many perils, from storms to the temptations of comfort. At one point, in a cave, he encounters a monster with only one eye.

“The monster asks him his name. ‘Nobody,’ says Ulysses. They fight and he manages to pierce the monster’s one eye with his sword and then seals the mouth of the cave with a rock. The monster’s companions hear his cries and rush to help him. Seeing that there is a rock covering the mouth of the cave, they ask who is with him. ‘Nobody! Nobody!’ replies the monster. His companions leave, since there is clearly no threat to the community, and Ulysses can then continue on his journey back to the woman who waits for him.”

“So your name is Ulysses?”

“My name is Nobody.”

I am trembling all over, as if my skin were being pierced by hundreds of needles.

“Focus on the cold, until you stop trembling. Let the cold fill your every thought, until there is no space for anything else, until it becomes your companion and your friend. Do not try to control it. Do not think about the sun, that will only make it worse, because you will know then that something else—heat—exists and then the cold will feel that it is not loved or desired.”

My muscles were furiously stretching and contracting in order to produce energy and keep my organism alive. However, I did as Dos ordered, because I trusted him, trusted in his calm, his tenderness, and his authority. I let the needles pierce my skin, allowed my muscles to struggle, my teeth to chatter, all the while repeating to myself: “Don’t fight; the cold is your friend.” My muscles refused to obey, and I remained like that for almost fifteen minutes, until my muscles eventually gave in and stopped shaking, and I entered a state of torpor. I tried to sit down, but Mikhail grabbed hold of me and held me up, while Dos spoke to me. His words seemed to come from a long way off, from a place where the steppes meet the sky.

“Welcome, nomad who crosses the steppes. Welcome to the place where we always say that the sky is blue even when it is gray, because we know that the color is still there above the clouds. Welcome to the land of the Tengri. Welcome to me, for I am here to receive you and to honor you for your search.”

Mikhail sat down on the ground and asked me to drink something that immediately warmed my blood. Dos helped me to get dressed, and we made our way back down the dunes that continued to talk among themselves; we made our way back to our improvised

campsite. Before Dos and Mikhail had even started cooking, I had fallen into a deep sleep.

What's happening? Isn't it light yet?"

"It's been light for ages. It's just a sandstorm, don't worry. Put your dark glasses on to protect your eyes."

"Where's Dos?"

"He's gone back to Almaty, but he was very moved by the ceremony yesterday evening. He didn't really need to do that. It was a bit of a waste of time for you really and a great opportunity to catch pneumonia. I hope you realize that it was just his way of showing you how welcome you are. Here, take the oil."

"I overslept."

"It's only a two-hour ride to the village. We'll be there before the sun is at its highest point."

"I need a bath. I need to change my clothes."

"That's impossible. You're in the middle of the steppes. Put the oil in the pan, but first offer it up to the Lady. Apart from salt, it's our most valuable commodity."

"What is Tengri?"

"The word means 'sky worship'; it's a kind of religion without religion. Everyone has passed through here—Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims, different sects with their beliefs and superstitions. The nomads became converts to avoid being killed, but they continued and continue to profess the idea that the Divinity is everywhere all the time. You can't take the Divinity out of nature and put it in a book or between four walls. I've felt so much better since coming back to the steppes, as if I had been in real need of nourishment. Thank you for letting me come with you."

"Thank you for introducing me to Dos. Yesterday, during that dedication ceremony, I sensed that he was someone special."

"He learned from his grandfather, who learned from his father, who learned from his father, and so on. The nomadic way of life, and the absence of a written language until the end of the nineteenth century, meant that they had to develop the tradition of the *akyn,* the person who must remember everything and pass on the stories. Dos is an *akyn.* When

I say ‘learn,’ though, I hope you don’t take that to mean ‘accumulate knowledge.’ The stories have nothing to do with dates and names and facts. They are legends about heroes and heroines, animals and battles, about the symbols of man’s essential self, not just his deeds. They’re not stories about the vanquishers or the vanquished, but about people who travel the world, contemplate the steppes, and allow themselves to be filled by the energy of love. Pour the oil in more slowly, otherwise it will spit.”

“I felt blessed.”

“I’d like to feel that too. Yesterday, I went to visit my mother in Almaty. She asked if I was well and if I was earning money. I lied and said I was fine, that I was putting on a successful theater production in Paris. I’m going back to my own people today, and it’s as if I had left yesterday, and as if during all the time I’ve spent abroad, I had done nothing of any importance. I talk to beggars, wander the streets with the tribe, organize the meetings at the restaurant, and what have I achieved? Nothing. I’m not like Dos, who learned from his grandfather. I only have the presence to guide me and sometimes I think that perhaps it *is* just a hallucination; perhaps my visions really are just epileptic fits, and nothing more.”

“A minute ago you were thanking me for bringing you with me, and now it seems to have brought you nothing but sadness. Make up your mind what you’re feeling.”

“I feel both things at once, I don’t have to choose. I can travel back and forth between the oppositions inside me, between my contradictions.”

“I want to tell you something, Mikhail. I too have traveled back and forth between many contradictions since I first met you. I began by hating you, then I accepted you, and as I’ve followed in your footsteps, that acceptance has become respect. You’re still young, and the powerlessness you feel is perfectly normal. I don’t know how many people your work has touched so far, but I can tell you one thing: you changed my life.”

“You were only interested in finding your wife.”

“I still am, but that didn’t just make me travel across the Kazakhstan steppes: it made me travel through the whole of my past life. I saw where I went wrong, I saw where I stopped, I saw the moment when I lost Esther, the moment that the Mexican Indians call the *acomodador*—the giving-up point. I experienced things I never imagined I would experience at my age. And all because you were by my side, guiding me, even though you might not have been aware that you were. And do you know something else? I believe that you do hear voices and that you did have visions when you were a child. I have always believed in many things, and now I believe even more.”

“You’re not the same man I first met.”

“No, I’m not. I hope Esther will be pleased.”

“Are you?”

“Of course.”

“Then that’s all that matters. Let’s have something to eat, wait until the storm eases, and then set off.”

“Let’s face the storm.”

“No, it’s all right. Well, we can if you want, but the storm isn’t a sign, it’s just one of the consequences of the destruction of the Aral Sea.”

The furious wind is abating, and the horses seem to be galloping faster. We enter a kind of valley, and the landscape changes completely. The infinite horizon is replaced by tall, bare cliffs. I look to the right and see a bush full of ribbons.

“It was here! It was here that you saw…”

“No, my tree was destroyed.”

“So what’s this, then?”

“A place where something very important must have happened.”

He dismounts, opens his saddlebag, takes out a knife, and cuts a strip off the sleeve of his shirt, then ties this to one of the branches. His eyes change; he may be feeling the presence beside him, but I prefer not to ask.

I follow his example. I ask for protection and help. I, too, feel a presence by my side: my dream, my long journey back to the woman I love.

We remount. He doesn’t tell me what he asked for, and nor do I. Five minutes later, we see a small village of white houses. A man is waiting for us; he comes over to Mikhail and speaks to him in Russian. They talk for a while, then the man goes away.

“What did he want?”

“He wanted me to go to his house to cure his daughter. Nina must have told him I was arriving today, and the older people still remember my visions.”

He seems uncertain. There is no one else around; it must be a time when everyone is working, or perhaps eating. We were crossing the main road, which seemed to lead to a white building surrounded by a garden.

"Remember what I told you this morning, Mikhail. You might well just be an epileptic who refuses to accept the diagnosis and who has allowed his unconscious to build a whole story around it, but it could also be that you have a mission in the world: to teach people to forget their personal history and to be more open to love as pure, divine energy."

"I don't understand you. All the months we've known each other, you've talked of nothing but this moment—finding Esther. And suddenly, ever since this morning, you seem more concerned about me than anything else. Perhaps Dos's ritual last night had some effect."

"Oh, I'm sure it did."

What I meant to say was: I'm terrified. I want to think about anything except what is about to happen in the next few minutes. Today, I am the most generous person on the face of this earth, because I am close to my objective and afraid of what awaits me. My reaction is to try and help others, to show God that I'm a good person and that I deserve this blessing that I have pursued so long and hard.

Mikhail dismounted and asked me to do the same.

"I'm going to the house of the man whose daughter is ill. I'll take care of your horse while you talk to Esther."

He pointed to the small white building in the middle of the trees.

"Over there."

I struggled to keep control of myself.

"What does she do?"

"As I told you before, she's learning to make carpets and, in exchange, she teaches French. By the way, although the carpets may look simple, they are, in fact, very complicated—just like the steppes. The dyes come from plants that have to be picked at precisely the right time; otherwise the color won't be right. Then the wool is spread out on the ground, mixed with hot water, and the threads are made while the wool is still wet; and then, after many days, when the sun has dried them, the work of weaving begins. The final details are done by children. Adult hands are too big for the smallest, most delicate bits of embroidery."

He paused.

“And no jokes about it being child’s play. It’s a tradition that deserves respect.”

“How is she?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to her for about six months.”

“Mikhail, these carpets are another sign.”

“The carpets?”

“Do you remember yesterday, when Dos asked me to choose my name, I told you the story of a warrior who returns to an island in search of his beloved? The island is called Ithaca and the woman is called Penelope. What do you think Penelope has been doing since Ulysses left? Weaving! She has been weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes, as a way of putting off her suitors. Only when she finishes the shroud will she remarry. While she waits for Ulysses to return, she unpicks her work every night and begins again the following day.

“Her suitors want her to choose one of them, but she dreams of the return of the man she loves. Finally, when she has grown weary of waiting, Ulysses returns.”

“Except that the name of this village isn’t Ithaca and Esther’s name isn’t Penelope.”

Mikhail had clearly not understood the story, and I didn’t feel like explaining that it was just an example.

I handed him the reins of my horse and then walked the hundred meters that separated me from the woman who had been my wife, had then become the Zahir, and who was once more the beloved whom all men dream of finding when they return from war or from work.

I am filthy. My clothes and my face are caked with sand, my body drenched in sweat, even though it’s very cold.

I worry about my appearance, the most superficial thing in the world, as if I had made this long journey to my personal Ithaca merely in order to show off my new clothes. As I walk the remaining hundred meters, I must make an effort to think of all the important things that have happened during her—or was it my?—absence.

What should I say when we meet? I have often pondered this and come up with such phrases as: “I’ve waited a long time for this moment,” or “I know now that I was wrong,” or “I came here to tell you that I love you,” or even “You’re lovelier than ever.”

I decide just to say hello. As if she had never left. As if only a day had passed, not two years, nine months, eleven days, and eleven hours.

And she needs to understand that I have changed as I’ve traveled through the same places she traveled through, places about which I knew nothing or in which I had simply never been interested. I had seen the scrap of bloodstained cloth in the hand of a beggar, in the hands of young people and adults in a Paris restaurant, in the hand of a painter, a doctor, and a young man who claimed to see visions and hear voices. While I was following in her footsteps, I had gotten to know the woman I had married and had rediscovered, too, the meaning of my own life, which had been through so many changes and was now about to change again.

Despite being married all those years, I had never really known my wife. I had created a love story like the ones I’d seen in the movies, read about in books and magazines, watched on TV. In my story, love was something that grew until it reached a certain size and, from then on, it was just a matter of keeping it alive, like a plant, watering it now and again and removing any dead leaves. Love was also a synonym for tenderness, security, prestige, comfort, success. Love could be translated into smiles, into words like “I love you” or “I feel so happy when you come home.”

But things were more complicated than I thought. I could be madly in love with Esther while I was crossing the road, and yet, by the time I had reached the other side, I could be feeling trapped and wretched at having committed myself to someone, and longing to be able to set off once more in search of adventure. And then I would think: “I don’t love her anymore.” And when love returned with the same intensity as before, I would doubt it and say to myself: “I must have just gotten used to it.”

Perhaps Esther had had the same thoughts and had said to herself: “Don’t be silly, we’re happy, we can spend the rest of our lives like this.” After all, she had read the same stories, seen the same films, watched the same TV series, and although none of them said that love was anything more than a happy ending, why give herself a hard time about it? If she repeated every morning that she was happy with her life, then she would doubtless end up believing it herself and making everyone around us believe it too.

However, she thought differently and acted differently. She tried to show me, but I couldn’t see. I had to lose her in order to understand that the taste of things recovered is the sweetest honey we will ever know. Now I was there, walking down a street in a tiny, cold, sleepy village, once again following a road because of her. The first and most important thread that bound me—“All love stories are the same”—had broken when I was knocked down by that motorbike.

In the hospital, love had spoken to me: “I am everything and I am nothing. I am the wind, and I cannot enter windows and doors that are shut.”

And I said to love: “But I *am* open to you.”

And love said to me: “The wind is made of air. There is air inside your house, but everything is shut up. The furniture will get covered in dust, the damp will ruin the paintings and stain the walls. You will continue to breathe, you will know a small part of me, but I am not a part, I am Everything, and you will never know that.”

I saw that the furniture was covered in dust, that the paintings were being corroded by damp, and I had no alternative but to open the windows and doors. When I did that, the wind swept everything away. I wanted to cling to my memories, to protect what I thought I had worked hard to achieve, but everything had disappeared and I was as empty as the steppes.

As empty as the steppes: I understood now why Esther had decided to come here. It was precisely because everything was empty that the wind brought with it new things, noises I had never heard, people with whom I had never spoken. I recovered my old enthusiasm, because I had freed myself from my personal history; I had destroyed the *acomodador* and discovered that I was a man capable of blessing others, just as the nomads and shamans of the steppes blessed their fellows. I had discovered that I was much better and much more capable than I myself had thought; age only slows down those who never had the courage to walk at their own pace.

One day, because of a woman, I made a long pilgrimage in order to find my dream. Many years later, the same woman had made me set off again, this time to find the man who had gotten lost along the way.

Now I am thinking about everything except important things: I am mentally humming a tune, I wonder why there aren’t any cars parked here, I notice that my shoe is rubbing, and that my wristwatch is still on European time.

And all because a woman, my wife, my guide, and the love of my life, is now only a few steps away; anything to fend off the reality I have so longed for and which I am so afraid to face.

I sit down on the front steps of the house and smoke a cigarette. I think about going back to France. I’ve reached my goal, why go on?

I get up. My legs are trembling. Instead of setting off on the return journey, I clean off as much sand from my clothes and my face as I can, grasp the door handle, and go in.

Although I know that I may have lost forever the woman I love, I must try to enjoy all the graces that God has given me today. Grace cannot be hoarded. There are no banks where

it can be deposited to be used when I feel more at peace with myself. If I do not make full use of these blessings, I will lose them forever.

God knows that we are all artists of life. One day, he gives us a hammer with which to make sculptures, another day he gives us brushes and paints with which to make a picture, or paper and a pencil to write with. But you cannot make a painting with a hammer, or a sculpture with a paintbrush. Therefore, however difficult it may be, I must accept today's small blessings, even if they seem like curses because I am suffering and it's a beautiful day, the sun is shining, and the children are singing in the street. This is the only way I will manage to leave my pain behind and rebuild my life.

The room was flooded with light. She looked up when I came in and smiled, then continued reading *A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew* to the women and children sitting on the floor, with colorful fabrics all around them. Whenever Esther paused, they would repeat the words, keeping their eyes on their work.

I felt a lump in my throat, I struggled not to cry, and then I felt nothing. I just stood studying the scene, hearing my words on her lips, surrounded by colors and light and by people entirely focused on what they were doing.

In the words of a Persian sage: Love is a disease no one wants to get rid of. Those who catch it never try to get better, and those who suffer do not wish to be cured.

Esther closed the book. The women and children looked up and saw me.

"I'm going for a stroll with a friend of mine who has just arrived," she told the group. "Class is over for today."

They all laughed and bowed. She came over and kissed my cheek, linked arms with me, and we went outside.

"Hello," I said.

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

I embraced her, rested my head on her shoulder, and began to cry. She stroked my hair, and by the way she touched me I began to understand what I did not want to understand, I began to accept what I did not want to accept.

“I’ve waited for you in so many ways,” she said, when she saw that my tears were abating. “Like a desperate wife who knows that her husband has never understood her life, and that he will never come to her, and so she has no option but to get on a plane and go back, only to leave again after the next crisis, then go back and leave and go back….”

The wind had dropped; the trees were listening to what she was saying.

“I waited as Penelope waited for Ulysses, as Romeo waited for Juliet, as Beatrice waited for Dante. The empty steppes were full of memories of you, of the times we had spent together, of the countries we had visited, of our joys and our battles. Then I looked back at the trail left by my footprints and I couldn’t see you.

“I suffered greatly. I realized that I had set off on a path of no return and that when one does that, one can only go forward. I went to the nomad I had met before and asked him to teach me to forget my personal history, to open me up to the love that is present everywhere. With him I began to learn about the Tengri tradition. One day, I glanced to one side and saw that same love reflected in someone else’s eyes, in the eyes of a painter called Dos.”

I said nothing.

“I was still very bruised. I couldn’t believe it was possible to love again. He didn’t say much; he taught me to speak Russian and told me that in the steppes they use the word ‘blue’ to describe the sky even when it’s gray, because they know that, above the clouds, the sky is always blue. He took me by the hand and helped me to go through those clouds. He taught me to love myself rather than to love him. He showed me that my heart was at the service of myself and of God, and not at the service of others.

“He said that my past would always go with me, but that the more I freed myself from facts and concentrated on emotions, the more I would come to realize that in the present there is always a space as vast as the steppes waiting to be filled up with more love and with more of life’s joy.

“Finally, he explained to me that suffering occurs when we want other people to love us in the way we imagine we want to be loved, and not in the way that love should manifest itself—free and untrammeled, guiding us with its force and driving us on.”

I looked up at her.

“And do you love him?”

“I did.”

“Do you still love him?”

“What do you think? If I did love another man and was told that you were about to arrive, do you think I would still be here?”

“No, I don’t. I think you’ve been waiting all morning for the door to open.”

“Why ask silly questions, then?”

Out of insecurity, I thought. But it was wonderful that she had tried to find love again.

“I’m pregnant.”

For a second, it was as if the world had fallen in on me.

“By Dos?”

“No. It was someone who stayed for a while and then left again.”

I laughed, even though my heart was breaking.

“Well, I suppose there’s not much else to do here in this one-horse town,” I said.

“Hardly a one-horse town,” she replied, laughing too.

“But perhaps it’s time you came back to Paris. Your newspaper phoned me asking if I knew where to find you. They wanted you to report on a NATO patrol in Afghanistan, but you’ll have to say no.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re pregnant! You don’t want the baby being exposed to all the negative energy of a war, surely.”

“The baby? You don’t think a baby’s going to stop me working, do you? Besides, why should you worry? You didn’t do anything to contribute.”

“Didn’t contribute? It’s thanks to me that you came here in the first place. Or doesn’t that count?”

She took a piece of bloodstained cloth from the pocket of her white dress and gave it to me, her eyes full of tears.

“This is for you. I’ve missed our arguments.”

And then, after a pause, she added:

“Ask Mikhail to get another horse.”

I placed my hands on her shoulders and blessed her just as I had been blessed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote *The Zahir* between January and June 2004, while I was making my own pilgrimage through this world. Parts of the book were written in Paris and St-Martin in France, in Madrid and Barcelona in Spain, in Amsterdam, on a road in Belgium, in Almaty and on the Kazakhstan steppes.

I would like to thank my French publishers, Anne and Alain Carrière, who undertook to check all the information about French law mentioned in the book.

I first read about the Favor Bank in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe. The story that Esther tells about Fritz and Hans is based on a story in *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. The mystic quoted by Marie on the importance of remaining vigilant is Kenan Rifai. Most of what the "tribe" in Paris say was told to me by young people who belong to such groups. Some of them post their ideas on the Internet, but it's impossible to pinpoint an author.

The lines that the main character learned as a child and remembers when he is in the hospital ("When the Unwanted Guest arrives…") are from the poem *Consoada* by the Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira. Some of Marie's remarks following the chapter when the main character goes to the station to meet the American actor are based on a conversation with the Swedish actress Agneta Sjodin. The concept of forgetting one's personal history, which is part of many initiation traditions, is clearly set out in *Journey to Ixtlan* by Carlos Castaneda. The law of Jante was developed by the Danish writer Aksel Sandemose in his novel *A Fugitive Crossing His Tracks.*

Two people who do me the great honor of being my friends, Dmitry Voskoboynikov and Evgenia Dotsuk, made my visit to Kazakhstan possible.

In Almaty, I met Imangali Tasmagambetov, author of the book *The Centaurs of the Great Steppe* and an expert on Kazakh culture, who provided me with much important information about the political and cultural situation in Kazakhstan, both past and present. I would also like to thank the president of the Kazakhstan Republic, Nursultan Nazarbaev, for making me so welcome, and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate him for putting a stop to nuclear tests in his country, even though all the necessary technology is there, and for deciding instead to destroy Kazakhstan's entire nuclear arsenal.

Lastly, I owe many of my magical experiences on the steppes to my three very patient companions: Kaisar Alimkulov, Dos (Dosbol Kasymov), an extremely talented painter, on whom I based the character of the same name who appears at the end of the book, and Marie Nimirovskaya, who, initially, was just my interpreter but soon became my friend.