

## L

It's been two days and two nights since my father stopped opening his eyes and closing them and winking just one of them with, like, a strange smile as if he were sharing some joke with me that didn't need words, for example if a very fat woman was going past outside or if the wind came and turned the men-in-suits-and-ties' umbrellas inside out, and he's stopped smoking, and putting on and taking off his sturdy boots, and he's also stopped getting up out of bed and going and standing next to the window looking out with his light-colored eyes, I've never known if they're blue or green, at the road, the cars, the people, the rubbish blowing about, well, he's stopped doing a lot of things, just about everything, to tell the truth, all he does now is stay lying down in his room, facing the ceiling but with his eyelids closed, a skinny father naked on the rather old bedspread, just making a silence and a smell of intestines and sweat or maybe not exactly that but not so very different from that. I, of course, didn't really know how to react to this change, but in the middle of all my confusion I did manage to decide that after two days and two nights had passed I would go out at nine o'clock in the morning, no matter what happened I would go out. It's nine o'clock in the morning, that's why I'm going out. I've got a watch that tells the time very clearly, it was my father who gave it to me, I don't know how he got hold of it, one day he turned up and he was wearing it. He wore it on his wrist for two years, then he got fed up and gave it to me. It's a digital watch, with straight numbers. The zero is an upright rectangle, the nine is a square with just one leg. It was made in Taiwan.

Our house, mine and my father's, is a little house, in ruins, but even so it has a roof, and its very own color that I haven't seen anywhere else. Not exactly a color, more a tone, a grayish-brown with patches of damp and dirt. It's, like, in the middle of nowhere, on waste ground that turns to mud when it rains, where the worst cars of the people who work in the buildings are parked, the biggest and the best cars go inside the buildings. It's a house, like, which just has tall blocks around it and a kind of expressway that passes close by. Everything, the buildings, the road, even a shopping center, everything is fairly close to the house, but not exactly on top of it, because around it there's really just

the waste ground that isn't really anything, that's why I say it's a house, like, in the middle of nowhere.

I carry on along the shoulder of the road to the big avenue with tall buildings. I want to see if I can find something to eat or drink but all I can see are pages from magazines with photographs of famous people. I'm not that desperate. I feel as if I have a drill in my stomach that's twisting and turning, but when I move, when I walk, it's better, as if the slow movement of the drill in my belly is hindered by my general movement. When I walk I take pains to move all of me. Not just my legs and one arm swinging at a time, no, I don't like that, that's ugly, no, whenever I walk, it's so strange, I make the most of each inch and move all of me. A kind of walk that begins in the pelvis and spreads out, upward and downward, like a kind of dance or almost, I don't know how this would look from a distance, how someone passing on the other side of the street would see me, would it look artistic, like dancing, or not really, not really? But the important thing is that this somehow helps me, it's a way to get about but also to clear my head, take exercise, although that doesn't interest me that much, and a way of not having to think about my body. That's what really matters. Now I stop.

On top of a pylon a mess of electrical things. All sorts of cables and whirling things that look as if they're some kind of sign. Behind, on high, a very blue sky and that thing so real, like, full of flashing and complicated mechanical stuff, human complications, objects mixed up together without rhyme or reason, objects I don't know what they're called but they might be called turbines, poles, wires, switchboards, like something worthwhile in its own right, like a sign. I look at that thing for fourteen minutes, I time it on my watch, and then I carry on. My belly hurts. Let's see if walking, like, I feel a bit better.

Cars go past, the colors almost always the same, white, black, dark blue, and red, and they make a noise but it's a noise that doesn't bother me at all because I am so used to it, so very used to it, I think I'd feel poorly and get a headache if it disappeared, a noise that is like a kind of noisy silence, something there right in the background that goes vroom without stopping, nonstop, without stopping. And the buildings have people who come out and go into them, and they're as high as the sky, and there are pictures reflected in them, for example other buildings or sky with clouds or flashes of brightness like little suns.

On the pavement people look at me when they're far away, but then they avert their gaze and when they come close they pretend they can't even see me, they

pretend I'm not even there, but the way they look down at the ground or in the other direction leaves no room for doubt about their lying. I try very hard to look at them, but it doesn't work. I try to look at them just for a laugh, because it doesn't actually help at all. Anyway, I have to say I don't know what I'm going to do or what I ought to do. That's one reason why I waited at home for two days and two nights before going out. My father's the one who left the house and went and sorted out things for us to eat or else things that could be exchanged or even money, which was quite unusual, almost completely impossible even, maybe it happened once, if at all. Once or twice, no more, certainly. But, anyway, I don't know how he did it. Probably, he was out there just waiting for the right moment, a lucky break, I don't know.

I have a white shirt and a purple jacket, one of those [ones] with big shoulders, oversized. Of course, the shirt is already a bit on the grubby side, with some stains, earth, like, or whatever, and the jacket is far too big on me and has two stains on the back, it already had them when my father brought it for me, but apart from that it's a nice outfit and even if I say so myself it actually suits me quite well. It's the trousers I have a problem with. The hems are coming down and so at times I tread on them and lose my balance a bit.

Which means I fell face down in the street.

And then to my great surprise who should I see when I get up but Marlena.

Marlena's a pretty woman, a bit fat and she doesn't have many teeth left now, but pretty, with her hair dyed blond and she always wears short, tight skirts. I know her because one day, on my twentieth birthday, my father turned up with her at home and said for the two of us to go to his room. In the bed where he's now lying down, like, making a silence and a strange smell she showed me how to take off all my clothes and put them back on again. When I'm on my own I never take them all off, because I get cold. Not even in the summer.

"What are you doing here, London?" she asks me. That's what she calls me, London.

"Well, I was walking along and . . . er . . . er."

"You went arse over tip," she says, and smiles a toothless smile with her eyes suddenly very wide open, and her eyebrows a single stroke sketching an arch across her forehead, and this embarrasses me a bit.

"Yes . . . huh."

"Your father, how is he? I haven't seen him for . . ."

"He's having a lie down."

“Fine. You don’t have any money, do you? Do you want to come with me, wander about a bit, take a turn, eh?”

“I don’t have any money,” I say. “I don’t have any money, but I would thank . . . think me . . . it would please me . . . yes, it would please me very much to take a turn with you, Marlana.”

“Oh, I can’t after all, I forgot I have to go to the shopping center, sorry.”

“No, it doesn’t matter, Marlana. Goodbye.”

I stand and watch her as she moves off, her legs fat but with the slenderest ankles, very slender, her fat backside inside the tight-fitting skirt, then I work up my courage and turn back to my path. As I watch her walk, like, in the distance my face has suddenly become slacker and longer, I feel my cheeks sagging inside, as if there is too much of them, loose flesh, and that this, whatever it is, immediately spreads through my arms, reaches my shoulders and hurls itself back down and when it reaches my hands it makes them heavy, with the weight of blood, full of blood, full of a desire for red blood under the skin and the nails, and at the same time there is a kind of slowed-down explosion in my chest, oh! in the hole of my chest, and my whole body is a broken body, fragmented, something like that.

Between the tower blocks and low houses, I walk for I don’t know how many miles for an hour and three minutes, I time it on my watch. The three is a capital E facing left. The façades have that good light when the day is nearly over but this changes into shadow and darkness and I look up and there are dark clouds closing in. Big clouds, very dark, very close to each other covering the blue color.

An old badly shaved man is watching me from the door of a tall building covered in scaffolding. He watches me even when I walk up, unlike all the others. When I go right up close to him, on the pavement, he shouts at me, “Hey! Hey! You’re Lopes’s boy, aren’t you?”

“Eh? . . .” Some people call my father Lopes. “. . . Yes, yes, actually.”

“What?” asks the old man.

“Yes, I’m the son.”

“Ah, I thought as much, I certainly thought as much! . . . You know, I’m a great friend of your father’s. A great friend. That is, we sometimes get together to play cards there in the park, up there, see?”

“Yes.”

“Right then, one day he showed me a photo of you. Did you know that? Yes, yes . . . one of those instant photos you take in a booth, you know? One of those



instant photos, you know? That was before your time, you probably don't know, right? But you're just the same, it's incredible, just the same as the devil in the photo. Those photographs, you know the ones? Instant photos, that's what they're called: instant photos, those photos normally completely ruin people's faces or at least, I don't know, they change them, the people in them almost never look the way they really are, do you understand? But not you, I can say that about you, Christ, not you, you look, you're just the same, it's the spitting image of you. Well, look here, your father showed me that photo of you, an instant photo, I don't know if you know what they are, probably not, now they almost don't exist anymore, now there are new techniques an' all, but anyway, I was saying, your father showed me that photo of you . . . now, when was it . . . it was, well anyway, today is Wednesday . . . we usually meet on Mondays . . . but not last Monday . . . nor the Monday before that . . . look, that makes it more than a fortnight . . . it must be more than a fortnight . . . perhaps more and, don't you see? I still recognized you, eh?"

"Right," I say.

"Did I or didn't I recognize you?"

"You did."

"Did I or didn't I recognize you? Eh?"

"Yes."

"Yes indeed," says the old man, and he falls silent looking at my face. In the direction of my face but through it, it seems. For a moment no one speaks. It's a bit embarrassing being, like, in the street with that old man looking me in the face without speaking.

"A coincidence . . ." I say.

He seems to wake up. "And your father, how is he?"

"He's . . . having a lie down."

"Great, great," he says, still half-absent, as if separated from the words, as if through me he had seen something terrible or important, and he turns to go back into the building. I watch him move away, closing the door of black glass behind him. I think, I didn't know my father had a photo of me, and I'd like to see myself in an instant photo.

Further ahead, I'm crossing a huge, deserted square, which is enormously unlucky, when it begins to rain, pelting down, hard and heavy, persistent, rain, rain, I repeat. I see a kiosk with a little roof which might help perhaps if I huddle beneath it, but I don't run. A man has a certain pride. No. I carry on with my

usual walk, without thinking, an artistic movement that goes downward and upward from the pelvis, etc. I don't know what anyone watching from a distance will make of me, but this is how I get about and there's nothing more to be said about it.

Now sheltered from the rain, underneath that little roof, looking at the square which is very white because of the water falling and also because it's so big and empty, like, at the same time, everything at the same time, I have contradictory feelings. I'm happy because I've got away from that awful rain but I also imagine Marlena and think about being with her so that she can show me again how to take off all my clothes and put them on again and then I have an urge to go out naked into the square and walk calmly, in my own way, to suffer the consequences beneath the rain that, well, let's say it doesn't stop and it goes thud, thud, thud on the cobblestones, on the houses, on absolutely everything there is, hard and heavy rain, persistent, rain, rain, I repeat.

But then again, it's obvious that I'm not going to do that.

My stomach hurts, that thing like a drill in my stomach twisting and turning, so I set off walking to see if I can shrug off that kind of image. I think about things that have nothing to do with it. And I walk along close to the buildings, under the balconies, the overhang of the entrances, the shop awnings to avoid the rain. I thought I loved the rain, but that was when I was inside the house and I had the window, the glass of the window, separating me from the water so to speak. I liked to see the almost invisible little lines that sometimes can only be seen if you squint your eyes like a Japanese, just a tiny little bit open, looking, like, or else against dark colors, dark things, I liked to see them bend and unbend with the wind and I liked the people with umbrellas, I really really like umbrellas, I don't know why, I think they're cheerful and mad and funny, then there's a gust of wind and they all turn inside out well I never, it's really, how do you say it, it makes you split your sides, you fall about laughing, you die laughing. When he saw something like that, that kind of thing, umbrellas blown inside out or dogs looking to both sides before crossing the road or fat women prancing along, my father would wink an eye and smile, like, he'd tilt his head ever so slightly and he'd look at me like someone saying "Did you get a load of that?" without actually saying a word.

Silence.

Suddenly it's nighttime and I'm standing, my stomach all twisted and burning, under the last awning before the waste land. I look up at the black sky and

see a light falling. A shooting star? An airplane? I don't give any importance to the thing in itself, so to speak, but rather to what it might, so to speak, represent, as a materialization, a conclusion, a closing, of whatever, no matter what it might be, had been opened, launched, because of the electrical mess on top of the pylon against the blue sky which I looked at for fourteen measured minutes appearing before me like some kind of sign, so to speak.

A sign, I think, and I break into a run, now, yes, no longer moving myself in that loose-jointed way, more than loose, incredibly free, but running, spot on, the way it's meant to be, like top athletes in a competition, head slightly down and my body thrusting forward, further and further forward, yes, I'm running as much as I can, my legs feel empty inside, sprinting in between the rain, I run and run and there's nothing to eat, I think, I'm giving up eating, I think, and I don't stop until I get inside the door of the house.

In the room my naked father, now a slightly different shade, no longer so characteristic, patches of damp and dirt that come from inside, lying on the bed on top of the bedspread. It doesn't smell too good. Even more original and difficult to explain than in the morning.

I begin to poke around his old bits and pieces, dropped in a corner, clothes, objects, bits of objects, an impeccable Panama hat. In a pocket I find: an instant photo. I look at the photograph and to begin with I don't like it, then I do. I put it in the window, propped against the glass, looking out at the rain falling in the night. From this side it's just a white rectangle with the letter L written on it.

Then I push my father a bit further toward the edge of the bed and I lie down beside him. I look at the ceiling and listen to the sounds in the street and in my head and the worms eating the woodwork and whatever else there is and, inside that terribly dense smell which was never, but never, my father's smell, I fall asleep.

Tomorrow I'll do exactly the same.

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