

STILL THE SAME MAN



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JON BILBAO

*Translated from the Spanish by  
Sophie Hughes*

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A man doesn't alter because you find out more about him. He's still the same man.

GRAHAM GREENE, *The Third Man*



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# PART I

## Road



The animals were hiding, or perhaps they sensed what was coming and had fled inland looking for refuge. Since arriving in Mexico, Joanes had only seen birds—raucous and all pervasive—and the large-footed geckos that loitered around the hotel swimming pool. Not one sign of the anacondas, jaguars, or monkeys that he'd hoped to find showing off for him from the tops of knotty branches.

Nor was the vegetation how he'd imagined it; by no means did the picture correspond to his idea of the jungle. There were no trees blocking the light of the sun, no vines, no orchids flowering from the crevices in the tree trunks. Instead, what he found was a thick, unvarying mass of vegetation covered in dust from the highway traffic and no more than fifteen or twenty feet in height—a tangle of stunted trees and creepers that looked more like overgrown weeds than tropical jungle.

He was driving south on the highway that stretches along the eastern coast of Yucatán and connects the towns along the Riviera Maya. With the window rolled down and his elbow resting on top of it, he divided his attention between the road and the sky. He studied the bank of clouds over to the east above the island of Cozumel, looking for any change in them, clouds identical to those

he'd seen over the last few days—greenish at the bottom, innocuous-looking, and in no way suggestive of an advancing hurricane.

Two hours earlier, his father-in-law had pounded on the door to the room where Joanes, his wife, and his daughter were packing their suitcases.

“Let’s grab a sauna,” he said when Joanes opened the door. “We’ll loosen up a bit and forget all about this damn hurricane.”

It was more an order than an invitation. This was how his father-in-law asked for things.

“Do we have time?”

On the edge of the conversation, Joanes’s wife went on folding and putting away their clothes, and his father-in-law directed his comments exclusively to Joanes. He knew he was trapped.

“Sure we do!” his father-in-law burst out. His rotund figure, six feet in height and weighing two hundred and sixty pounds, filled the doorway. “Let’s take a sauna. Then we’ll file onto those damn busses and get out of here.”

The busses were going to transfer the hotel guests to new lodgings in Valladolid, further inland on the peninsula, where they’d stay until the hurricane had passed.

“I still have to get my things together,” said Joanes.

But his father-in-law wasn’t going to let him get away. He answered as if he hadn’t heard him.

“Move your ass! I already greased the sauna guy’s palm. He’s scrambling, too, and I had a hard time convincing him to heat up the sauna so late.”

The sauna was, in fact, a typical Mexican *temazcal* sweat lodge. Right next to the pool, there was a small,

dome-shaped adobe construction that looked like an igloo or a bread oven. You entered by a door so tiny you had to crawl in on all fours, so tiny the father-in-law's great carcass almost got stuck in it. From outside, Joanes spent a moment staring at that fat, tanned, waxed ass, only partially covered by its yellow Speedo, fighting its way through the door, then he averted his gaze. With considerable effort, huffing and puffing, pleas for help, and reproaches directed at the *temazcalero* who was inside preparing the fire, his father-in-law finally squeezed through the door.

Inside, the roof was little more than three feet high. Joanes and his father-in-law settled themselves as best they could on the bench skirting the circular wall. On the ground, the *temazcalero* stoked the wood fire before placing a few porous stones over the burning logs. Once they were well and truly piping, he poured an infusion of aromatic herbs over them, releasing an eruption of steam.

"You done?" asked Joanes's father-in-law.

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave us to it."

"I'm supposed to control the steam, sir."

"Forget about it. Leave us in private."

"But it's part of the custom," insisted the *temazcalero*.

"So I have to pay you to take a hike, too, do I? Get out of here. I'll tell you when we're done."

The *temazcalero* balked and then slipped out through the tiny door. Once they were alone, Joanes's father-in-law smiled and placed a moist hand on his son-in-law's shoulder.

"How's all that going?"

Joanes, sweating and with his head bent and his elbows resting on his knees, looked up.

"How's what going?"

“Your thing. The deal you’ve got going on.”

Joanes looked at him through the cloud of steam. He had absolutely no desire to answer.

“My daughter told me everything,” his father-in-law explained.

Joanes could guess what had happened. His father-in-law would have employed his usual interrogation strategy—a well-shaken cocktail of paternal concern, inquisitorial interest, petulance, and overbearingness. And she’d have been left no option but to sling the beast a hunk of meat to appease him. What with her father having supported them financially over the past several years, she had no choice. And what’s more, he had covered the cost of this trip, a trip that neither Joanes, his wife, nor their daughter had wanted to take.

Joanes’s father-in-law was a painter. His work was sufficiently well recognized that two of his paintings formed part of the Saatchi collection. Oil paintings in earthen tones were his forte; he plastered the canvas with ochre hues, reds and browns, uniformly colored areas, then played with the texture by mixing gravel and bits of bark and small twigs in with the paint. On top of all of this, he would fix a few small, felt squares and rectangles of black, gray, or white. The result, when you looked at it from far enough away, evoked aerial photographs of devastated or deserted landscapes where the rectangles looked like the outlines of edifices lost in the earthy immensity. The color of the felt cuttings, the number of them, and the way in which they were distributed on the canvas defined the different phases of his work.

Six months earlier, the celebrated painter and widower of ten years had surprised the family with the announcement of his sudden engagement to be married.

He'd met a girl in the tanning salon where he went twice a week. She worked there. At the end of each session, she would go into the individual rooms with disinfectant spray and a roll of paper towels and clean the sun bed for the next customer. She was twenty years his junior, didn't have a clue about painting, had a subscription to a personalized online horoscope site, and held a lifelong dream of getting married in Cancún with the turquoise blue of the Caribbean as a backdrop.

"What can you do," his father-in-law had said, shrugging his shoulders. "The girl has a whim."

A few days later, he'd called to let them know that they'd chosen a date for the wedding and that he'd reserved flights and hotel rooms for everyone. It was going to be an intimate affair. Immediate family only. He'd pay for everything. The wedding was set for the end of August, when it would be summer vacation for both his granddaughter and his daughter, who taught philosophy of science at a university. Last but not least, he took it as a given that his son-in-law could put any obligations to his floundering air conditioning business on hold for a few days.

The ceremony and subsequent reception had been a succession of kitsch scenes all teeth-grindingly tasteless for anyone with the slightest aesthetic sensibility. The *pièce de résistance* had been the arrival of the cake, which came down from the ceiling on a platform, accompanied by a carefully choreographed laser show.

The hurricane alert came that very night. The newlyweds had arranged for themselves and their guests to stay on in Cancún for a few days, but under the new circumstances had decided to change that plan. They hadn't, however, counted on the crush of tourists, all of them desperate to fly out, sending the airport into a total

meltdown. There'd been no way to move up their return flight.

Joanes wiped the sweat from his brow, putting off answering. His father-in-law seemed to have expanded in the heat, his butt cheeks spilling over the brick bench.

"We still haven't signed the contract," he said.

His father-in-law said nothing and waited for details.

"There are still a few points to clear up."

"My daughter says that everything that needed to be cleared up already has been."

"Not exactly."

"What's the problem?"

Joanes held in a sigh.

"It's a complicated deal."

"Lucrative, too, according to my daughter."

Joanes nodded. A brief, understated gesture, barely visible in the pungent steam.

"I'd like you to be a little more specific," his father-in-law asked.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it for now."

"You think I don't know that? But I'm concerned about the well-being of my daughter and granddaughter, so tell me something I want to hear."

"You don't need to be concerned about your daughter or granddaughter."

"Don't tell me what should or should not concern me, sonny."

"So let it concern you all you want, just let me take care of them."

The father-in-law leaned in toward him.

"Sonny, *you* can't afford for *me* to not take care of them. When are you going to sign the contract?"

"It's in their hands."

"Soon?"



“Soon.”

“That’s more like it. Now, clarify ‘soon.’”

“Weeks. Or days. It might have already been wrapped up if I hadn’t had to come to your wedding.”

The father-in-law took this blow without so much as batting an eyelid.

“Weeks or days,” he said, chewing over the words. “Do you need me to throw you a bone till then? I can whip you up a couple of paintings. It won’t take me long. At this stage in the game, I can do them with my eyes closed.”

That was how his father-in-law helped them—with paintings that they then sold. He would show up at their house unannounced, rest the canvas ceremoniously against the back of the sofa, and wait for the family’s response, in particular that of his son-in-law. Expressing an opinion on modern art was, for Joanes, like having to speak in some unknown foreign language. His incomprehension couldn’t be blamed solely on his limited artistic knowledge, rather it was rooted in the very depths of his being. It didn’t help that all his father-in-law’s works looked the same to him, nor did his incredulity and irritation at the price fetched for a few depressing, monotonous paintings that crumbled away like the façade of an old building and left his sofa covered in gravel and spongy, paint-soaked wood chips. Under the delighted gaze of his father-in-law, Joanes did his best to say something that wouldn’t come across as altogether dumb and could also pass for a thank you.

“No problem,” his father-in-law would respond, patting him on the back. Then he would kiss his daughter and granddaughter and leave again, triumphant.

A few days later he would call to find out how much they’d sold the painting for, and without fail, no matter what

the amount, he would find it insultingly low. Then he'd rant and rave, insisting he didn't know why he bothered trying to help when they were determined to undersell his work, whose value they either failed to acknowledge or were incapable of appreciating. Finally, he would vow never to give them another painting.

Until a few months later, when he'd turn up at their house, a new canvas in hand.

"Thanks," said Joanes, "but there's no need."

"You sure?"

Joanes nodded and looked away from his father-in-law, who now had torrents of sweat pouring from his shoulders and belly.

The sound of hurried steps and voices could be heard on the other side of the adobe wall. The hotel staff and guests were making their final preparations for the evacuation. The hurricane, named Gerald by the Miami Meteorology Service, was approaching Mexico, picking up energy from the mild Caribbean waters. If their predictions were right, the hurricane would hit the Yucatán peninsula near the island of Cozumel. By this point it would be a Category 2 on the Saffir-Simpson scale. It was expected that after hitting land, it would then shift northeast, sweeping the coastline before heading off into the Gulf of Mexico. The Civil Guard declared an orange alert; the hurricane would reach land within the next 24 hours, by tomorrow afternoon.

"How are your girls?" his father-in-law asked. "Nervous?"

"More like mad because they can't go home. And your wife?"

"She's spent the afternoon glued to her computer, chatting with her astrologer. She thinks the hurricane is a bad omen for our marriage."

Joanes refrained from commenting.

“I’ve spoken to the receptionist,” said the father-in-law. From what it looks like, this hotel they’re sending us to doesn’t exactly have rooms to spare. We’re going to have to share.”

“Who?”

“The five of us. Two double beds and a cot for the girl,” he added.

Joanes wiped more sweat from his face.

“It’ll only be for a few days,” he said, speaking more to himself than to his father-in-law, who guffawed then cleared his throat and spat on the stones that were topping the fire. His spittle evaporated into steam.

“I doubt it very much, sonny. The receptionist told me that the hotels along the coast are basically uninhabitable after a hurricane. And the last two times, the Cancún airport was out of service for quite a while. A whole bunch of tourists were trapped in the evacuation hotels for weeks. And they were the lucky guys. Others were forced to stay in schools, garages, warehouses . . .”

Joanes couldn’t listen to any more. He crawled outside without so much as a goodbye. His father-in-law asked him where in the hell he thought he was going and demanded he come back inside, but Joanes didn’t pay him any attention.

He stood leaning against the adobe dome. After the steam bath, even the suffocating air outside seemed cool. Inside the oven, his father-in-law, who couldn’t get through the tiny door by himself, shouted for help. Two maintenance men looked at Joanes. One of them asked if everything was all right, and he nodded. They were working next to the pool. The water had been drained to a third of its usual depth and sun loungers and other waterproof furniture had been tossed into it. It would all

be better protected from the wind and the rain there than in any other place.

His wife and daughter were quarrelling and didn't even notice when he entered the room. His wife was waving a piece of paper in front of the girl's face. It was a document from the hotel outlining the safety measures they were supposed to take.

"It says here that in the event of a hurricane, you have to dress in white."

"Mom, I refuse to wear anything white. It's a matter of principles. You know this," said the girl unequivocally. "I don't even own anything white. Not even panties."

"I can lend you something of mine."

The girl's bangs fell over her eyes. She flicked them aside in a theatrical gesture of boredom. Her hair was black and shone like a beetle's armor. She was wearing a T-shirt (also black), denim cut-offs (her only concession to the tropical climate), and some fuchsia Converse sneakers decorated with hand-drawn, black flies. She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. The request was completely non-negotiable.

Realizing this, her mother huffed and turned, and that's when she noticed her husband.

"Back already? Did the sauna help you unwind a little?"

"Not exactly."

"Dad, you're soaked," said the girl, with a look of repulsion. "Don't you wanna, like, take a shower or something?"

"Sure do," he said, and went into the bathroom. He emerged a few minutes later, patting himself dry with a towel he then flung into a corner. He put on the first polo shirt he came across in his heap of clothes and grabbed his wallet, his satellite cell phone, and the car keys.

“Where are you going?” asked his wife. “The busses are coming to pick us up in a couple of hours.”

“I need to get some air. Throw the rest of my things together, will you please?”

And before leaving, he added, “I’ll be back in time.”

A minute later, he was on the road.

He was driving along a monotonous, straight stretch of road when his phone rang. Before answering he made a mental calculation of the time in Spain. Just after eleven at night.

“We have to talk,” said a deep, male voice.

It was the same voice that, over the last several months, had become as familiar to him as his wife and daughter’s. The voice seemed astonishingly close. He noted the graveness in it, which unnerved him. This wasn’t the time for graveness. Each and every point in the agreement had been clearly laid out, had been revised, reconsidered, re-written, and revised again.

He felt his back tense up. He drove with one hand on the wheel and his eyes fixed on the horizon where all the highway lanes converged in a single vanishing point.

“All right, let’s talk. Is there a problem?”

The second the question slipped out, he regretted it, as if the mere mention of a problem were enough to invoke one.

“There is, in fact,” said the voice. “Something’s come up.”

“I thought everything had been agreed on.”

“I mean *someone* has come up.”

A long pause.

“His price and conditions are pretty interesting. I’ve just received an offer.”

Another pause.

“You see, kid, I like your numbers, but I’d be lying if I said that these guys haven’t impressed me.”

“Who’s the offer from?”

“You know it would be wrong to tell you.”

“And you know that I can find out without your help.”

“So find out.”

Another pause. Joanes took a deep breath.

“What are they offering?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you that, either.”

“Oh, come on . . .”

“More or less the same as you, but for a better price.”

Joanes swore under his breath. He didn’t have any margin left for further discounts. If he lowered the price, he’d lose money.

“Well then?” he said, gathering all the strength he could. “What happens now?”

“You seem trustworthy, kid, you really do,” came the voice at the other end of the line, “but we’re going to have to review your offer.”

“What do you want to review? There’s nothing to review. And anyhow, I’m in Mexico. They’re evacuating us because of the hurricane. You must have heard about it on the news.”

The voice spoke again, and this time the graveness had an added dose of testiness to it—the last thing the man wanted to hear about were other people’s problems; he had more than enough of his own.

“Listen up, our decision is now between your offer and the one I’ve just received. And, to be honest, the balance is tipping toward the latter. We want to settle the matter

as soon as possible. We're meeting tomorrow to make a decision."

"Who are you meeting with? I thought it was up to you."

"It's never up to one person alone. Less still when there's so much money in the mix."

"Well that's the impression you've always given me."

"Wait for our call tomorrow," said the voice, now curt. "We'll let you know what we decide."

"Call me before the meeting," Joanes said. "I'll review my offer tonight. Improve it."

"In all honesty, I don't think it'll make any difference."

"You owe it to me."

"I don't owe you a thing. Don't be under any false illusions."

"You'll call?"

"I'm not promising."

"So then I'll call you. I'll find a way to drop the price."

"No. I'll call you," said the voice before hanging up.

He switched on his emergency blinkers and pulled over to the shoulder, a ramshackle strip of road full of rubble and trash and barely a foot and a half wide, which was all the distance that existed between the road and the nearby undergrowth. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. He thought about what would happen if his offer was rejected. It wasn't just months of negotiations at stake but the entire future of his company.

He stayed there for a long time, not caring that his family was waiting for him to go to the shelter. Double-trailer trucks and pickups filled with laborers drove past, just inches from the car. Not even their honking made him open his eyes.



“Don’t panic,” he said out loud. “You’re going to work it out. Go back to the hotel.”

And he repeated, “Don’t panic.”

And again, “Don’t panic.”

He checked to make sure there weren’t any vehicles approaching and made a U-turn, driving right over the median, when a figure appeared from the undergrowth and hurled itself onto the highway in front of the car. For a second he thought it was a kid, a black kid. It appeared at the edge his field of vision then stumbled onto the highway, walking strangely, swaying with its arms up in the air, as if trying to catch someone’s attention to get them to stop. But Joanes was too close, and the car was going too fast. The bumper hit the figure hard, slamming it forward and sending it rolling several yards over the asphalt.

Joanes slammed on the brakes and looked in shock at the sorry figure. The fact that it was covered in hair did little to calm him down. It wasn’t a kid but a monkey.

He got out of the car and walked toward it cautiously. It was a chimpanzee. He asked himself what in God’s name a chimpanzee was doing there. He thought they only existed in equatorial Africa. It began to sidle off, and Joanes stopped in his tracks.

The monkey got to its feet slowly, threw a pained look at Joanes, and hobbled off the highway. It disappeared back into the thicket from which it had emerged.

He had no idea what to do. A few vehicles drove by, but they didn’t pay him any attention. Nobody had witnessed the accident.

He decided to go after the chimpanzee.

He imagined it would leave some sort of trail—footprints, a path crushed through the vegetation or something—but as soon as he entered the undergrowth,

it was impossible to make out anything. He went on anyhow, battling his way through the low branches and vines, changing tack every now and then and retracing his steps various times. He shooed away some iguanas resting among the roots of the trees; they moved off, making a crunching sound in the leaves. He only found the monkey because it hadn't had the strength to get far. Joanes pushed aside a curtain of hanging vines and was suddenly face to face with it.

It was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree and cradling the arm the car had hit. It was a female, and she was wearing a collar with a metal jump ring hanging off it. When she saw Joanes, she held out her other hand to him pitifully, opening and closing her fingers, entreating him to come closer. Her chest rose and fell in a painful motion. Joanes hesitated. He knew chimpanzees to be capable of a degree of ferocity totally at odds with their cuddly image. But this one didn't seem to be in a state to hurt anyone, and the collar suggested that she was used to human company.

Joanes knelt down and took her hand. With her eyes half closed, the chimpanzee looked at him and moved her lips as if she wanted to say something or give him a kiss. She seemed well advanced in age. Her forehead was bald, and the hair on her shoulders and back was gray, as were the hairs on her chin and the ends of her fingers. More than pain, her eyes—deep-set and wrinkly—revealed immense exhaustion.

The chimpanzee held Joanes's hand to her chest, as if she wanted to feel him closer, and he didn't resist. The animal held on to his hand as her breathing slowed. Not long after, she closed her eyes, and her head fell to one side.

Even so, Joanes didn't let go of her. He remained still for a moment until he, too, closed his eyes and bowed

his head. Holding on to the body of the chimpanzee, surrounded by that thickset jungle where nobody could see or hear him, he broke down in tears. He let the tears flood out, until his throat hurt from so much crying. In between sobs, he coughed, spluttered, and spat out curses and insults, many of them directed at himself.

Afterward, he slowly freed his hand from the chimp's. He inspected the collar, hoping to find some sort of identification. There wasn't any. The monkey had a bracelet on her right wrist, a little trinket made of pink and blue plastic beads. The kind of charm a little girl might wear.

He was wiping away his tears when the phone rang. He cleared his throat and took a deep breath before answering.

"Where are you?" asked his wife, clearly anxious. "The busses are here."

"I've had a little accident."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's no big deal."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you later."

"But you're OK."

"Absolutely."

"And what about the evacuation?"

"You two go on ahead with your dad and the others."

"And you?"

"I'm staying."

There was a pause, then she said she didn't understand.

"I'm staying," he repeated. "I'll catch up later. On my own. I'll see you in Valladolid."

"Today? You'll come today?"

He told her no, that he'd spend the night in the hotel and leave the following morning, once he'd gotten some rest. Before his wife had a chance to object, he added that the wind wasn't going to hit until the afternoon. If he set off at sunrise, he'd have more than enough time to get there.

"You should really think about this."

"I told you, I'm staying."

There was another pause, and then she said, "Fine. Just be careful."

In the background, Joanes could hear his father-in-law grumbling away.

"What's your dad's problem now?"

"He wants to know what time you're going to arrive."

"Gee, it's nice to hear he's concerned about me for once."

"Yes, well. I'll call you tonight, from Valladolid."

"Did you turn in my computer for the hotel staff to keep safe?"

"I was going to do it now."

"Leave it in the room. Since I'm staying, I'll use it to go over some things."

"Is there some kind of problem?" she asked.

And lowering her voice, she added, "Is it work?"

"No. I just want to go over a couple of things, for my own peace of mind."

"Are you sure you're OK?"

"Of course! We'll talk later, when things are calmer."

He went back to the car to look for something he could dig a grave with. On opening the trunk, he realized why his father-in-law had been so concerned. His golf clubs were inside. Clearly, he'd wanted to put them in a safe

place before leaving for the evacuation hotel, where, in order to speed up the relocation process, nobody was allowed to take any large pieces of luggage.

He picked the club used for getting out of sand bunkers. It had a smooth, iron head fashioned at a sharp angle, about forty degrees, to the shaft. He returned to the chimpanzee. In that same spot, he began to dig the grave, using the exorbitant golf club alternately as a shovel and a pick. The earth was spongy, damp, and perfumed, and bright black like caviar. But it was also intertwined with roots he had to work around or, if they were small, break up with his hands or by hitting them with the club. He spent hours digging a grave big and deep enough.

He carefully laid the body down, in a posture he deemed somewhat dignified. He used his hands to push the dirt back on top of it. He would have liked to cover the tomb with stones, so that no vermin could pull the body out. But there were no stones around other than bits of highway rubble, which were too small and, in some inexplicable way, didn't seem appropriate. And so he called it a day.

Dragging the club along behind him, Joanes returned to the car. He was soaked in sweat and caked in dirt from head to toe, and his hands were covered in cuts and scrapes. He wanted to scream away his frustration and rage. He felt like pounding the car with the club, the car rented with his father-in-law's money, the car with which he'd hit that poor animal. He wanted to dent the hood. To smash the windshield to smithereens.

Instead, he simply stood contemplating the club with contempt and let it slide through his fingers. It landed in among the plastic bottles, cigarette butts, and sun-bleached bits of paper that littered the shoulder of the highway.